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Applying Idealized Desire Theory to The Existential Question

In this paper, I will address “the existential question,” whether it is better or worse for a person to exist than to not exist at all, presented and argued for by Gustaf Arrhenius and Wlodek Rabinowicz in their paper “The Value of Existence.” I will build upon Arrhenius and Rabinowicz’s claim by providing an additional factor, an idealized advising self from desire-satisfaction theory, which will strengthen the affirmation of the existential question. In the first part of my paper, I will present my argument in terms of a hypothetical scenario and explain the connection between idealized desire theory and the existential question. Next, I will provide two counterarguments to the existential question, the Person-Affecting Restriction and the Argument from Absurdity. I will explain Arrhenius and Rabinowicz’s usage of guardian angels in their argument for the affirmative to the existential question and why an idealized advisor is more effective than a guardian angel. Lastly, I will address counterarguments to my idealized desire theory addition to affirming the existential question. To start, I will provide an overview of the existential question and my addition to the existing dialogue.

I am arguing against philosophers who support the negative answer to the existential question, such as Derek Parfit and John Broome who argue that “if we take a person’s life to be better for her than nonexistence, then we would have to conclude that it would have been worse for her if she did not exist, which is absurd: Nothing would have been worse or better for a

person if she had not existed.”¹ I agree with Arrhenius and Rabinowicz that “one can plausibly claim that it is better or worse for a person to exist than not to exist without thereby implying any absurdities.”² I contend that in addition to Arrhenius and Rabinowicz’s argument, an idealized satisfaction theory can act as strong support for the affirmative answer to the existential question. Next, I will share a scenario that exemplifies this point.

The scenario is as follows: there exists a universe with multiple possible worlds. In the first world, World A, a man named Arthur suffers from a miserable life. In World A there is no happiness, no sliver of hope, and no positive well-being; it is an entirely miserable world. In World B, Arthur does not exist. My claim is that it is better for Arthur not to exist in World B than to exist in miserable World A, and idealized desire theory helps to support this claim. According to idealized desire theory posited by Peter Railton in “Facts and Values,” “something is intrinsically good for you just in case it satisfies a desire that your idealized self would want you to have.”³ By applying idealized desires to this scenario, Arthur’s idealized advisor self would want Arthur to want World B, and that is the basis upon which I back my claims. Railton states that an “individual’s good consists in what he would want himself to want, or to pursue, were he to contemplate his present situation from a standpoint fully and vividly informed about himself and his circumstances, and entirely free of cognitive error or lapses of instrumental rationality.”⁴ By having an idealized advising self who is omniscient, the advisor can weigh both a world where one is miserable and a world where one does not exist. Therefore, the combination

¹ Arrhenius, Gustaf, and Wlodek Rabinowicz. “The Value of Existence.” *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2015, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199959303.013.0023.

² Arrhenius, Gustaf, and Wlodek Rabinowicz. “The Value of Existence.” *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2015, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199959303.013.0023.

³ Nebel, Jake. “Railton on Ideal Desires.” *Philosophy* 443, University of Southern California. Received February 17, 2021. Course handout.

⁴ Railton, Peter. “Facts and Values.” *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1986, pp. 5–31. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/43153978. Accessed 10 May 2021.

of idealized desire theory and the existential question leads me to reject the counterarguments, Person-Affecting Restriction and the Argument from Absurdity.

The Person-Affecting Restriction states that a scenario can only be better (or worse) than another scenario if it is better (or worse) *for* someone. This makes claiming the affirmative to the existential question, that an existence could be better or worse for a person than nonexistence, difficult because in a case of nonexistence there is no someone for whom the other scenario is better (or worse) for. In the scenario stated above, in World A, Arthur has a miserable existence, and in World B Arthur does not exist. According to the Person-Affecting Restriction these two possible worlds are incomparable. The Person-Affecting Restriction suggests that since Arthur does not exist in World B, there is no one in World B for whom World A is better (or worse). Ethics professor David Heyd states that a view that existence is worse than non-existence “is inconsistent with a person-affecting theory as it presupposes the comparability of non-existence with life of a certain quality.”⁵ This inconsistency poses problems to the existential question. However, I believe that an impartial third-party being, such as one’s idealized advisor self, has the capability to compare two scenarios. Arthur’s idealized advising self exists outside of the realm of Arthur, making the advisor able to assess Arthur’s individual good no matter whether he exists or not.

The second counterargument to the existential question is the Argument from Absurdity, which states that it is unacceptable or absurd to conclude that a person’s life would have been better (or worse) for her if she did not exist. Broome agrees with this argument: “if she had never lived at all, there would have been no her for it to be worse for, so it could not have been worse

⁵ Heyd, David. “Procreation and Value: Can Ethics Deal with Futurity Problems?” *Philosophia* (Israel), 1988, 18 (July): 151–70.

for her.”⁶ However, Arrhenius and Rabinowicz are correct in pointing out the flaws of this argument based on Broome’s use of the subjunctive “would have been.” They explain that “nonexistence *is* worse for her than existence, but not that it *would have been worse* if she didn’t exist.”⁷ In my hypothetical scenario, I state that it *is* worse for Arthur to exist in World A instead of saying it *would be* worse for Arthur to exist in World A. Therefore, I reject the Argument from Absurdity because of its confusion between an actual existence (*is*) and an imagined existence (*would be*).

Arrhenius and Rabinowicz provide a “guardian angel” scenario in which a third-party impartial observer, a guardian angel, decides what is best -- to exist or not to exist -- for the person under consideration. They explain that “an outcome A is better for a person than another outcome B if and only if this is what her guardian angel would prefer for her sake.”⁸ Although Arrhenius and Rabinowicz’s guardian angel scenario is valid, my addition of the idealized advising self makes a stronger case in supporting the affirmative to the existential question. I contend that the idealized adviser is more sound than the guardian angel for two reasons:

1. A guardian angel’s task is to consider what is good for the person under consideration, while the idealized advising self considers what the person under consideration would want for themselves.
2. The guardian angel only looks at a numerical value of welfare when considering between two compared outcomes, while the idealized advising self is fully informed about oneself and all of one’s circumstances in each possible world.

⁶ Broome, John. *Ethics out of Economics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁷ Arrhenius, Gustaf, and Wlodek Rabinowicz. “The Value of Existence.” *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2015, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199959303.013.0023.

⁸ Arrhenius, Gustaf, and Wlodek Rabinowicz. “The Value of Existence.” *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2015, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199959303.013.0023.

Applying Reason One to my proposed scenario, Arthur's idealized advisor has his best interest in mind because the advisor wants what Arthur would want, while the guardian angel just considers what is good for Arthur. Arthur's idealized advisor is a perfect version of himself who has an innate understanding of his wants and desires. In contrast, the guardian angel is a separate person or entity who does not have the same depth of understanding of Arthur's wants. Therefore, Arthur's idealized advisor is more sound in decision-making than a guardian angel.

Applying Reason Two to my proposed scenario, Arthur's idealized advising self can decide whether some amount of negative welfare is better than nonexistence, while the guardian angel prefers nonexistence even if only a miniscule amount of negative welfare occurs in existence. Arrhenius and Rabinowicz describe the guardian angel's method: "if the guardian angel compares a state in which her charge has a life with negative welfare with a state in which that person does not exist at all, she prefers the latter."⁹ It is better to make the decision between existence and nonexistence on a situational basis rather than on a fixed welfare scale. For example, imagine an alternate scenario where in World A Arthur has -5 welfare and in World B Arthur does not exist. The guardian angel would prefer World B over World A since Arthur has a negative welfare in World A. The idealized advising self would weigh both worlds, taking a holistic approach rather than just looking at a negative number.

The counterarguments to my idealized desire theory addition to affirming the existential question is based on how the idealized advising self gets fully informed and if bias exists from witnessing every possible world. David Sobel in "Full Information Accounts of Well-Being"

⁹ Arrhenius, Gustaf, and Wlodek Rabinowicz. "The Value of Existence." *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2015, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199959303.013.0023.

argues “that such an informed viewpoint [the idealized advising self] is inadequate.”¹⁰ In my proposed scenario, the idealized advising self is omniscient and has always known everything about the person under consideration’s lives across all possible worlds. So, whether the idealized advising self uses the “report” model or “experiential” model to receive information is not important in these circumstances. Sobel also argues that since the idealized advising self has seen so many lives in possible worlds of the person under consideration that the advisor’s view of the worth may be skewed. He writes “a vivid presentation of some experiences which could be part of one’s life could prove so disturbing or alluring as to skew any further reflection about what option to choose.”¹¹ However, in this scenario, the idealized advising self will view each of the lives in possible worlds of the advisee’s like it is the first one the advisor has seen. So, no past memories or judgements will affect the advisor’s decisions. Since the idealized advisor knows everything and knows it all simultaneously, the advisor is equipped to provide the appropriate answer to the existential question in their advisee’s case.

In this paper, I have given the account of “the existential question” and how Arrhenius and Rabinowicz support its affirmation. I have also supported the affirmation of the existential question by providing an additional factor, an idealized advising self that considers whether it can be better or worse for a person to exist than not to exist at all. Through my scenario of Arthur in World A and World B and my rebuttals to counterarguments, I supported my claim that by using idealized desires from desire-satisfaction theory one can successfully argue that it is better or worse for a person to exist than not to exist at all. I also addressed Sobel’s main arguments against an idealized advisor and other counterarguments he may have. Since this is a relatively

¹⁰ Sobel, David. “Full Information Accounts of Well-Being.” *Ethics*, vol. 104, no. 4, 1994, pp. 784–810. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2382218. Accessed 10 May 2021.

¹¹ Sobel, David. “Full Information Accounts of Well-Being.” *Ethics*, vol. 104, no. 4, 1994, pp. 784–810. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2382218. Accessed 10 May 2021.

short paper, I did not address all matters completely. There still are issues with the idea of multiple worlds. I did not address how there can be a reality where one can exist or not exist in different possible worlds; I just assumed it to make my argument. I also assumed that an idealized advisor would be able to be omniscient without stating where they get their knowledge from, and that witnessing multiple worlds would not bias them. However, the ideas that these assumptions brought up should still be considered as valid.