

An Evaluation of Jesper Ryberg and Torbjörn Tännsjö's Solutions to the  
Repugnant Conclusion

# Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. The Repugnant Conclusion.....	2
3. Definitions and Method.....	4
3.1 Baseline: Normal Privileged Life.....	4
3.2 Definition of “repugnance”.....	5
3.3 Definition of “worth living”.....	6
3.4 Methodology.....	7
4. Main theories.....	8
4.1 Torbjörn Tännsjö.....	8
4.2 Jesper Ryberg.....	11
5. Objections.....	12
5.1 Different Conceptions of Lives’ Value.....	13
5.1.1 Tännsjö’s Straightforward Disagreement.....	13
5.1.2 Ryberg’s Explanation.....	17
5.1.1.1 Summary First Objection.....	18
5.2 The Origin of Repugnance.....	19
5.2.1 Tännsjö and the Contrasting Intuition.....	20
5.2.2 Ryberg and the Exchange of Quality for Quantity.....	22
5.2.3 The Issue of Framing.....	24
5.2.1.1 Summary Second Objection.....	26
6. Conclusion.....	26
Bibliography.....	28

## 1. Introduction

One of the more problematic paradoxes in population ethics is that of the Repugnant Conclusion. It was first formulated by Derek Parfit in his 1984 work *Reasons and Persons*. Parfit describes the problem as, “For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living” (Parfit, 1984, p.388).

There have been many attempts to solve the problem of the Repugnant Conclusion<sup>1</sup>. Most focus on trying to avoid the conclusion that the larger population is better than the smaller one. However, there are a few philosophers who instead choose to argue that the conclusion is in fact not repugnant at all. Two of those philosophers are Jesper Ryberg and Torbjörn Tännsjö. They each argue that the reason most find the conclusion repugnant, is that there is a crucial misunderstanding of what a lives barely worth living are like. They both argue that lives barely worth living are the same as normal privileged lives, which are quite good. If you accept that lives barely worth living are therefore also quite good, then the conclusion is not repugnant any more. Thus, the Repugnant Conclusion not a problem any more, according to both Ryberg and Tännsjö (Ryberg and Tännsjö, 2004).

My research question in this essay is: *Does the idea that lives barely worth living are the same as normal privileged lives make the repugnant conclusion not repugnant?* To answer this question I will present and evaluate both Ryberg and Tännsjö’s arguments for why this is the case. I will present Rydberg’s argument from his article “The Repugnant Conclusion and Worthwhile Living”. I will present Tännsjö’s argument from his article “Why We Ought to Accept the Repugnant Conclusion”.

Regarding the structure of the essay, I will begin in section two by introducing the problem of the Repugnant Conclusion as presented by Parfit. In section three I will discuss and define a few of the basic expressions used in the debate. In section four, I will introduce the theory presented by Tännsjö and the theory presented by Ryberg. In section five, I will address two objections to their theories. I will also discuss and evaluate the responses made by both Ryberg and Tännsjö to these

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<sup>1</sup> I will refer to the problem itself as the Repugnant Conclusion with capital letters. When using lower case letters, the repugnant conclusion, I am referring to the conclusion of the problem, not the problem itself.

objections and finally judge whether the objections are successful. In section six I will present my answer to my research question and make a few concluding remarks about Ryberg and Tännsjö's theories.

When it comes to the value discussed in the articles, both Ryberg's article and Tännsjö's article use a hedonistic theory. They discuss value in terms of happiness/unhappiness and sometimes welfare in terms of happiness. To make things simple I will adopt the hedonistic value theory in the rest of the essay. (Ryberg and Tännsjö, 2004)

## 2. The Repugnant Conclusion

Derek Parfit presents a problem for population ethics called the "Repugnant Conclusion". A basic formulation of the problem is as follows, "Compared with the existence of very many people—say, ten billion—all of whom have a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger number of people whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though these people would have lives that are barely worth living." (Parfit, 2004, p.10).

To see what led Parfit to discover this problem, we start with a comparison between two possible worlds A and B. Consider Figure 1, where the height of the blocks show the total amount of welfare of the population of the world, and the width shows the size of the population of the world. Additionally Parfit assumes that there is no inequality in either world and that the population in both worlds live lives well worth living. Comparing the two potential worlds the A-world has a smaller population but a higher quality of life, and the B-world has a bigger population with a lower quality of life than world A.

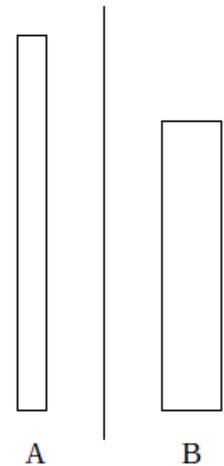


Fig.1

There are different ways of evaluating these worlds and decide which is better. One way of looking at it is that in world B everyone is worse off in some way, and therefore world B is worse than world A. This reasoning is the result of the following

*Hedonistic Average Principle:* If other things are equal, it is better if people's lives, on average, contain more happiness (Parfit, 2004, p.8).

The Repugnant Conclusion is not a result of using the Average Principle to make a comparison between the worlds. The Average Principle is based on the idea that the quality of a life is what is most important. Another idea some people have, is that it is good, to allow an extra person to live if their life would be worth living. This consideration might outweigh the fact that in another world the population has a higher welfare level. On this view, the average welfare is not what is important but instead the total amount of welfare in the worlds. This reasoning is the result of the following

*Hedonistic Total Principle:* “If other things are equal, it is better if there is a greater total sum of happiness” (Parfit, 2004, p.8).

When we apply this principle to Figure 1, world B is better than world A. Additionally it is when we apply the Total Principle to the comparison that the repugnant conclusion follows. To see that this is the case, consider Figure 2. Just as world B was better than world A, similarly world C is better than world B, and so on until we get to world Z. World Z has an enormous population with lives that are just above the level where their lives would stop being worth living. In other words, they live lives that are barely worth living.

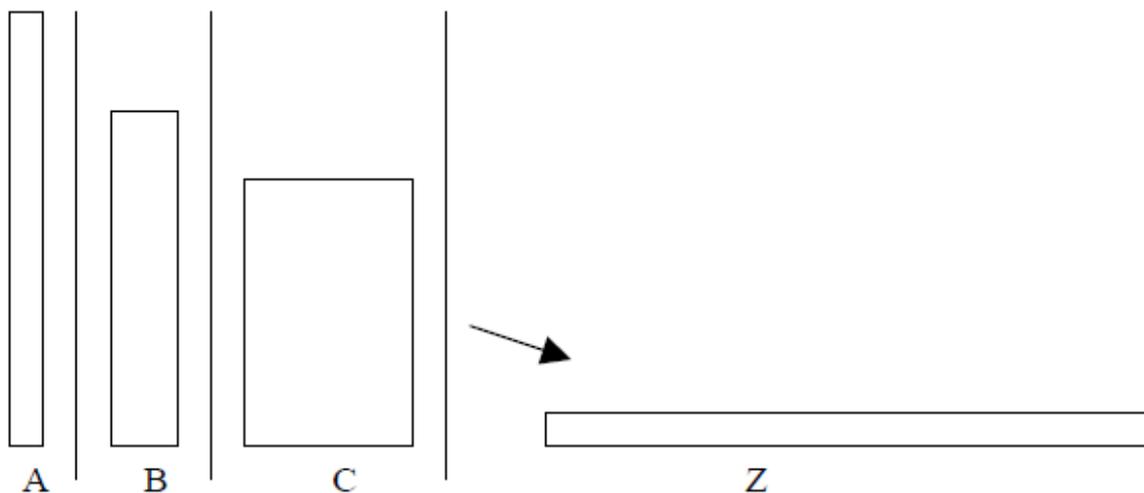


Fig. 2

In general, lives are barely worth living because the happiness in the lives only just outweighs the unhappiness in the lives. There are many different kinds of lives that could be used to describe Z. Parfit chooses two explanations to illustrate lives barely worth living: “either because [l]ife’s ecstasies make its agonies seem just worth enduring, or because it is painless but drab [...] all they have [for happiness] is Muzak and potatoes.” (Parfit, 2004, p.9)

According to the Total Principle world Z is better than world A (and B and C etc.) because it has a higher amount of total welfare. However, this does not coincide with most people's intuition about Figure 2. To say that world Z is better than world A is to most people incorrect. In fact, the common intuition is that world Z is significantly worse than world A. Thus the repugnance of the Repugnant Conclusion is created by the conclusion that world Z is better than world A.

### **3. Definitions and Method**

Before introducing the theories evaluated in this essay, I will go through some basic expressions used in this essay and the relevant articles. The expressions used in the debate are not hard to understand. Despite this, I think it is important to agree on definitions beforehand to avoid ambiguity. A large part of the debate regarding the Repugnant Conclusion relies on intuition and imagination. These tools are in themselves not very precise and often vary between people. Considering the impreciseness of our imagination and intuition, it seems important minimize any other impreciseness. Therefore, we should agree on definitions on three key expressions: normal privileged lives, lives worth living, and repugnant.

#### *3.1 Baseline: Normal Privileged Life*

Both Ryberg and Tännsjö's theories deal with the value of a life. In a discussion about the value of a life it is easy to revert to what is familiar – one's own life. The conception of "one's own life" is seldom similar between different people and thus inserts some bias. Instead, it is better to have a common baseline from where we can begin the discussion. A baseline can also help when thinking about lives barely worth living, as this consideration is often comparative. Both Ryberg and Tännsjö in each of their articles briefly comment on what their baseline is. Ryberg calls it a "normal privileged life" commenting that it is, "a life of the sort led, say, by the typical reader of this article" (Ryberg, 2004, p.241). Tännsjö describes the "we" used in his discussion as: "affluent Western people who do not need to worry about proper schooling for their children, old age, or health care" (Tännsjö, 2002, p.346).

Ryberg's explanation of a normal privileged life is too imprecise. Each reader might have a different idea of what the "typical" reader of his article is like. This encourages self-insertion in the discussion. Instead, I will use Tännsjö's description, as it is more detailed and precise. Most have an idea of what the typical affluent Western person's life is like. This idea is relatively similar between

people, at least to the extent where it can be useful. It also encourages a level of detachment between the reader and the lives considered in the article. However, I will use Ryberg's shorthand in this essay for clarity.

*Normal Privileged Life*: affluent Western people who do not need to worry about proper schooling for their children, old age, or health care.

### 3.2 Definition of “repugnance”

One of the most central words in the debate is of course “repugnant”. Yet it is easy to overlook the word as something obvious. Neither Parfit nor Ryberg put forth a definition of the word in their articles. Tännsjö does have a definition in his article, but I will put that to the side for the moment. First, I want to discuss the common usage of the word.

I would argue that to most people repugnant is a word connected to emotions. We *feel* that something is repugnant. At times, this feeling can lead us to make a value judgement about something as well. This feeling of repugnance is something we can attribute to attitudes or actions but also to things such as food. This lines up with one of the possible definitions presented for the word in the Merriam-Webster dictionary: “exciting distaste or aversion” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2019). While this certainly does describe the intuition people have regarding the repugnant conclusion, I do not think it is a useful definition.

The reason I do not think it is suitable, is that expressing this kind of repugnance to something does not really say anything concrete. Feelings are irrelevant to the moral status of something. For example, if someone eats their cat that might seem repugnant to you. It is not however necessarily a wrongful action. Furthermore, this definition does not really capture what makes the Repugnant Conclusion a critical problem in population ethics. Parfit sees the problem as a decisive problem for an ethical theory. It is not merely that people *dislike* the conclusion; it is that it is incompatible with an acceptable ethical theory.

The second definition of repugnant from Merriam-Webster is “incompatible, inconsistent” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2019). This seems closer to how Parfit is using the word when discussing the Repugnant Conclusion. Tännsjö also seems to believe that something along these lines is a fair definition of the word and its usage in the discussion. His definition of repugnant is “obviously false” (Tännsjö, 2002, p.339). He uses this definition because he interprets Parfit as implying that

“if a moral principle which strikes us as quite plausible in its own right has been shown to lead to this conclusion, it should, only for this reason, be read out of court.” (Tännsjö, 2002, p.339).

Ryberg seemingly agrees with Tännsjö in this interpretation. He writes that some participants in the debate accept Parfit’s framework. Parfit’s framework sees avoiding the repugnant conclusion as a necessary condition for adequacy for a moral theory (Ryberg, 2004, p.239). Thereby he implies that Parfit does see the repugnant conclusion as obviously false. I concur with their interpretation of Parfit’s writing. Parfit sees the Repugnant Conclusion as an obstacle that is necessary to overcome, before being able to justify a moral theory. For the rest of the essay I will use Tännsjö’s definition of repugnant.

*Repugnant*: obviously false.

### 3.3 Definition of “worth living”

The discussion in this essay is on the topic of lives worth living. When reading the articles examined in this essay, I feel there are two ways people seem to interpret lives “worth” living. The first way is based on a more colloquial use of the expression. Something along the lines of: if there were a choice between living the life or non-existence, I would choose to live the life. Some formulations used by Parfit also enable this interpretation of the word. Such as when Parfit writes that Z has a population: “all of whom have lives that are not much above the level where they would cease to be worth living.” (Parfit, 2004, p.9). When saying that a life ceases to be worth living, it sounds as if you are saying that it is no longer worth being alive.

Ryberg argues that this is how some people interpret the idea of lives worth living when discussing the Repugnant Conclusion. The problem is that humans value existence very highly, and have a strong preference for existence over non-existence. It is probable that the threshold for choosing non-existence is below a level where you have a negative amount of total welfare. In other words, even if you live a life with a neutral or negative total amount of welfare you would still choose existence over non-existence. If that is the case, choosing existence over non-existence is not a correct way of determining that a life is “worth” living (Ryberg, 2004, p.245).

Additionally the colloquial usage does not conform to the actual usage of the expression in the literature about the Repugnant Conclusion. The proper interpretation of a life “worth” living would

be something in line with “a life that has positive value”. Thinking about the problem of the Repugnant Conclusion this is obvious. If lives barely worth living could have negative or neutral value, world Z would not be better than world A. Lives in Z-world need to have a positive value, no matter how small, otherwise the repugnant conclusion would not follow. Given this interpretation of worth, you can define the three relevant expressions as follow:

*Life worth living*: the total amount of welfare in the life is positive.

*Life not worth living*: the total amount of welfare in the life is negative.

*Life neither worth living nor not worth living*: the total amount of welfare in the life is neutral.

### 3.4 Methodology

An important aspect when discussing the worth of lives is how you can reach a conclusion about the value lives have. What method is used to know what lives barely worth living are like? Looking first at Parfit he simply asserts what lives in Z-world are like, and does not mention how he came to his conclusion. Reading Tännsjö’s article he states: “My *impression*... [my italics]” (Tännsjö, 2002, p.345). Ryberg states, “my judgement [of lives barely worth living] is highly *impressionistic*. [my italics]” (Ryberg, 2004, p.342). Both acknowledge that their evaluations of a life’s value is simply based on their conceptions of what human lives are like. I think it is a fair assumption, despite him not discussing it, that Parfit also uses his conception to judge what lives barely worth living are like. This kind of evaluation is highly subjective.

However, while neither Parfit nor Tännsjö delve much further into the issue of methodology, Ryberg does offer some additional remarks. He acknowledges that this way of evaluating the value of human lives is a weakness. Nevertheless, he goes on to point out that we have very few options. There are at present no reliable tools to measure happiness and unhappiness beyond subjective assessments. Using conceptions is the only method available at this point. In this essay, I will tentatively accept this position. However, it will lead to some problems discussed in the section five of this essay, in regard to the first objection to Ryberg and Tännsjö’s theories (Ryberg, 2004, p.242).

## 4. Main theories

After discussing the preliminaries in the previous section, I will now introduce the arguments regarding the nature of the lives in world Z. The Repugnant Conclusion is so called because most people who are faced with the problem would disagree with the conclusion that world Z is better than world A. Most would even go so far as to label the conclusion “repugnant”. This is something Parfit takes as natural, and many other philosophers agree. It is probable that many readers of this essay would agree with the intuition. When it comes to solving this problem, most try to avoid the repugnant conclusion one way or another. Both Ryberg and Tännsjö choose a different approach. The first question they ask themselves and others is, what makes people judge that the conclusion is repugnant?

Both Ryberg and Tännsjö argue that the reason people believe that the conclusion is repugnant is due to a misunderstanding of what lives barely worth living is like. They both suggest that it is vital to have a correct understanding of what lives barely worth living are like. Without a correct understanding, it is impossible to evaluate, appropriately, world Z. It is also impossible to understand the difference between world A and world Z. Before evaluating the Repugnant Conclusion, people therefore need to understand what lives barely worth living are like. You also need to understand your own conception of lives worth living and why your conception might be wrong. At least that is what both Ryberg and Tännsjö argue. They both base their arguments on their ideas of what lives barely worth living are like.

### 4.1 Torbjörn Tännsjö

Tännsjö’s basic conception of lives is that “if only our basic needs are satisfied, then most of us are capable of living lives that, on balance, are worth experiencing” (Tännsjö, 2002, 345). Tännsjö suggests that when you successfully get above this level of welfare, this success is only momentary. Momentarily increased welfare is the result of things such as requited infatuation, successful creative attempts, proper administration of drugs or similar brief moments of bliss. It has little to do with material affluence. Sometimes you also get moments of misery, which temporarily push your welfare level down to a life not worth living. Over time this result in a life that most of the time is worth living, with momentary experiential peaks of bliss or troughs of misery (Tännsjö, 2002, p.345).

Given this perspective on a life worth living, how does this effect the Repugnant Conclusion? Well, as Tännsjö claims, it seems that many people living normal privileged lives believe that their lives are well worth living. This means that lives barely worth living must be, to their mind, significantly worse than their lives. Therefore, when they imagine world Z they imagine it looking “something like a vast concentration camp” (Tännsjö, 2002, p.345). If you apply Tännsjö’s conception of lives worth living to this imagined world Z, it becomes a rather faulty image. Given Tännsjö’s conception of life, it seems like a normal privileged life is just a life worth living and not a life well worth living. A normal privileged life has security in regard to all the basic necessities of life. Things such as health, care for their children and care in their old age are all secured. In the same vein, a life barely worth living cannot be much worse than a normal privileged life without becoming a life not worth living. Therefore, to imagine world Z as similar to a vast concentration camp is not even remotely correct based on Tännsjö’s conception.

In his article, Tännsjö uses a quote by John Mackie: “a level that is really marginally better than non-existence must already constitute a high degree of flourishing, and beyond this little improvement is possible” (Tännsjö, 2002, p.345). I think this is a good summation of Tännsjö’s argument. On Tännsjö’s view, it seems like there is no point in discussing lives well worth living or barely worth living in terms of quality, as they are the same. Instead, Tännsjö narrows the discussion down to three kinds of lives: a life worth living, a life not worth living, and a life neither worth living nor not worth living.

Applying this perspective to the Repugnant Conclusion, it seems like the welfare level of the population in world Z is that of the standard of a normal privileged life. Tännsjö argues that what makes people think the repugnant conclusion is repugnant is their (false) idea of what world Z is like. The Z-world is seen as a bad world, where people live bad lives. When you base your intuition about the Repugnant Conclusion on this idea, your thought process goes something like this: world A is good, world Z is bad. To say that world Z is better than world A is repugnant because it is the same as saying that the bad world is better than the good world. Below I have constructed version of an argument illustrating Tännsjö’s view of the normal way of reasoning about the Repugnant Conclusion.

P1) World A consists of normal privileged lives.

P2) Normal privileged lives are good.

P3) If (P1) and (P2) then world A is good.

- C1) World A is good.
- P4) World Z consists of lives barely worth living.
- P5) Lives barely worth living are significantly worse than normal privileged lives.
- P6) If (P2) and (P5) then lives barely worth living are bad lives.
- C2) Lives barely worth living are bad.
- P7) If (P4) and (C2) then world Z is bad.
- C3) World Z is bad.
- P8) If (C1) and (C3) then the repugnant conclusion is repugnant.
- C4) The repugnant conclusion is repugnant.

However, Tännsjö argues for another view. His conclusion is that world Z is not bad, and that the population in world Z does not live bad lives. Z-world lives are normal privileged lives. If you think that a normal privileged life is good, then the lives in world Z are as good. Since world Z consists of normal privileged lives world Z is good. Analogous to the previous thought process it would go something like this: world A is good, world Z is good. So to say that world Z is better than world A is not repugnant. It is the same as saying that the good world is better than the good world. To say this does not seem to be repugnant. Based on this view the repugnant conclusion is not repugnant any more. Below I have constructed version of Tännsjö's argument.

- P1) World A consists of normal privileged lives.
- P2) Normal privileged lives are good.
- P3) If (P1) and (P2) then world A is good.
- C1) World A is good.
- P4) World Z consists of lives barely worth living.
- P5) Lives barely worth living are the same as normal privileged lives.
- P6) If (P2) and (P5) then lives barely worth living are good lives.
- C2) Lives barely worth living are good.
- P7) If (P4) and (C2) then world Z is good.
- C3) World Z is good.
- P8) If (C1) and (C3) then the repugnant conclusion is not repugnant.
- C4) The repugnant conclusion is not repugnant.

## 4.2 Jesper Ryberg

The basic question Ryberg focuses on is “what is a life barely worth living like?” (Ryberg, 2004, p.240). Lives barely worth living have a minimal surplus of happiness. Like Parfit, Ryberg uses two illustrations of how to characterize such lives. They are lives that “might vary between a purely uniform life free of unhappiness but also devoid of all but a single marginally happy experience, and a roller-coaster life constantly fluctuating between ups and downs where the ecstasies barely outweigh the agonies” (Ryberg, 2004, p.240). Unlike Parfit, Ryberg does not choose one of the versions to base his discussion on. Instead, he leaves both version available for future use.

Ryberg suggests that the misunderstanding of what lives barely worth living are like emerges with the comparison between such a life and normal privileged lives. Generally, most people arrive at the conclusion that lives barely worth living is significantly worse than normal privileged lives. Based on this view of lives barely worth living, they then extrapolate world Z. Ryberg illustrates this through quotes by other authors.

Hudson imagines world Z population as “not doing anything interesting but merely struggling for bare subsistence” (Hudson, 1987, p.1349, cited by Ryberg, 2004, 241). Kavka sees a level above worth living yet “significantly deficient in one or more of the major respects that generally make human lives valuable and worth living” (Kavka, 1982, cited by Ryberg, 2004, 241). Parfit interprets Kavkas version as lives that are “gravely deficient in all of the features that can make life worth living” (Parfit, 1984, p.433 cited by Ryberg, 2004, 241). In all these descriptions, the assumed gap between normal privileged lives and lives barely worth living must be very significant. Otherwise, such descriptions of world Z would not be possible. Based on these descriptions you can ask two questions. Firstly, are these views fair characterisations of world Z? Secondly, is the underlying assumption a correct evaluation of the difference between normal privileged lives and lives barely worth living?

Ryberg is not convinced. The assumptions about lives barely worth living that creates such Z-worlds, seems to him false. In short, he disagrees with the assumptions that the kind of lives described by Hudson, Kavka or Parfit could end with a surplus of happiness. He thinks lives of the type described above are in fact lives *not* worth living. Instead, Ryberg’s conception is that lives barely worth living are not very different from normal privileged lives (Ryberg, 2004, p.242).

An important aspect of his conception of a life barely worth living is that Ryberg explicitly bases it on a day-to-day basis. The day-to-day welfare is the average welfare of a day in a person's life. It is from a day-to-day perspective that lives barely worth living and normal privileged lives are almost equally valuable. If you instead look at the total amount of welfare of lives, there is no guarantee that the sums will be similar. People can lead almost identical lives day-to-day yet have very different total amounts of welfare at the end of their lives.

Two features could create this difference. The first is due to the effect of adding together many small values. If you add a huge amount of minimal numbers, based on the small value difference from day-to-day life, the sum might become very big. This small value difference in daily life is not noticeable in daily life but impactful in the end. Secondly, Ryberg does not deny that people can live roller-coaster lives. Perhaps some people get more peaks and fewer troughs to negate those peaks. In the end, this would increase their total amount of welfare for their life. Therefore, even if the day-to-day lives of lives barely worth living and normal privileged lives are very similar in value, the total sum of the lives could turn out very different. Below I have constructed version of Ryberg's argument.

P1) World A consists of normal privileged lives.

P2) Normal privileged lives are good.

P3) If (P1) and (P2) then world A is good.

C1) World A is good.

P4) World Z consists of lives barely worth living.

P5) On a day-to-day basis, lives barely worth living are the same as normal privileged lives.

P6) If (P2) and (P5) then lives barely worth living are good lives.

C2) Lives barely worth living are good.

P7) If (P4) and (C2) then world Z is good.

C3) World Z is good.

P8) If (C1) and (C3) then the repugnant conclusion is not repugnant.

C4) The repugnant conclusion is not repugnant.

## 5. Objections

In this section, I will address two of the main objections to both Ryberg and Tännsjö's arguments. First, there is an objection against both Ryberg and Tännsjö's conceptions of lives barely worth

living. Those making this objection do not accept the idea that there is no significant difference between lives well worth living and lives barely worth living. Secondly, there is an objection that the source of the repugnance has nothing to do with what lives barely worth living are like. Instead, they believe that the repugnance comes from the comparative aspect of the problem. They think that what is repugnant is to say that world A is *worse* than world Z.

### 5.1 *Different Conceptions of Lives' Value*

The first objection to the arguments presented by both Ryberg and Tännsjö are against the fifth premise in their arguments:

Tännsjö: P5) Lives barely worth living are the same as normal privileged lives.

Ryberg: P5) On a day-to-day basis lives barely worth living are the same as normal privileged lives.

Those who do not share this conception present this objection. They agree with the original premise:

P5) Lives barely worth living are significantly worse than normal privileged lives.

Nils Holtug presents the objection as follows: “Firstly, I doubt Tännsjö’s claims about the value of our lives. For instance, it seems to me that my life could be significantly worse than it actually is and yet worth living” (Holtug, cited by Tännsjö, 2002, p.347). Holtug presumably lives a normal privileged life, a life many would judge to be well worth living. Thus, what follows from his objection is the original premise five. Since the cornerstone of both Ryberg and Tännsjö’s arguments are premise five, this is a very important objection.

#### 5.1.1 *Tännsjö’s Straightforward Disagreement*

Tännsjö responds to the objection by directly disagreeing with Holtug’s assessment. To explain why, he uses an example of losing a limb. Holtug might argue that such a loss would lower his life’s welfare, perhaps even significantly. Tännsjö, however, claims that while you might initially lose some welfare, this is only temporary until you have adapted to your new circumstances. After adapting, your life’s welfare will return to its previous level (Tännsjö, 2002, 247-248).

My first intuition regarding the example is that Tännsjö is correct. It is ableist to assume that a disability would make you unable to regain a previous welfare level. Additionally, as Tännsjö points out, most disabled people attest that while their lives are different after gaining a disability their lives are not worse. However, I do not think it is easy to avoid this problem, as Tännsjö believes. Just because *most* adapt well to drastic changes in their lives does not mean that all can. I can imagine someone losing a limb and subsequently never overcoming the loss. They carry the loss with them their whole lives. How would this effect the value of their lives? Initially it seems to be hard to argue that the person who never overcomes the loss of their limb could regain their previous welfare level. So is this a fatal problem for Tännsjö? I think not. There seems to be two replies available to Tännsjö in regard to the problem of people who never overcome the loss of their limb.

First, one reply available to Tännsjö would be to claim that just because you think you did not adapt to your new circumstances does not mean you did not. Tännsjö does not claim that your life can never have bad periods. You can experience things that puts your welfare level lower, so that you live a life not worth living. However, Tännsjö thinks this is only momentary. Therefore, the limbless person would in fact adapt, and regain their previous welfare level. They are mistaken to think otherwise. One explanation why the limbless person might believe differently is that they have an ableist bias. This bias might make them unable to evaluate their lives objectively. Because of their bias, they might believe that a disabled person could never live a life that is as valuable as an abled person does. This faulty idea would extend to their own new limbless lives. However, despite what they believe the loss of their limb does not create a permanent decrease in welfare level.

Additionally, it is very hard to look at your life objectively and judge your welfare level. Perhaps on a moment-to-moment basis their lives have the same welfare level as before the loss. Most of the time they do not even think about the loss any more. It is impossible to keep it in mind all the time. However, during the times they reflect over their new circumstances, they summon negative feelings that create a false conception that their whole lives are worse. From these momentary reflections, they extrapolate a total picture that is skewed negatively, underestimating their new lives.

Perhaps a better way of thinking about the examples is to take an outside perspective. Looking at this limbless person, do you think they have lost welfare? I would say that Tännsjö's view is accurate. Most of the time it would seem to me that they adapt and are as happy as before, but sometimes have bitter moments that eventually pass. If these moments of bitterness were constant

then I would honestly think they are living a life not worth living. Someone living a bitter life is unhappy, and seems unlikely to have a surplus of happiness at the end of their life.

This way of reasoning leads us to a possible second reply. You could assert that the limbless individual who never gets over the loss now lives a life not worth living. Their failure to adapt makes it so that their new welfare level remains negative. The loss in happiness removes enough happiness from their lives that they now lead lives not worth living. Though it is worth pointing out that they might not be living lives not worth living but rather lives that are neither worth living nor not worth living. They themselves might disagree and believe that they are still living lives worth living, but in fact, they are wrong.

I find the reply that people are mistaken in thinking that they have not adapted, slightly more persuasive than that their lives are not worth living any more. It is very hard to assess your own life accurately while you are in the middle of living it. It is also a facet of human nature that we are adaptable. Mostly we change our attitude in line with the change in our life. Both Ryberg and Tännsjö mention evolution as an explanation to some of our actions and biases. I think here as well you could make a speculative reference to evolution. It is in a species best interest that it changes according to the world, and does not remain stuck in the old way of thinking or doing things. Therefore, it makes sense that the newly limbless person might believe that they now live worse lives, yet be mistaken.

The second reply that their lives are no longer worth living I find difficult to accept as a common explanation. While there are cases where this might be true for the person who never gets over the loss, it is doubtful this applies to all of them. Perhaps the best response when talking about the individuals who never overcome their loss of limb is to refer to a mix of the replies. Some are mistaken in their belief that their lives are worse, and some now live lives not worth living.

So far, it seems like Tännsjö has two solid replies to the example of the limbless person who does not adapt. Either they are mistaken or their lives are not worth living. However, one problem I see with his answer is that it is based on an example he himself chose. Holtug talks about changes in his life that would make his life significantly worse yet worth living. While some think that the loss of a limb is significant, this attitude varies. So let us use another example. What would happen if your child dies? How does Tännsjö's explanation fare with such an example?

Certainly, no one would dispute that initially there would be a drastic drop in welfare level. What is in question is whether this decrease is permanent. Here I find it helpful to discuss things based on Ryberg's version of a life barely worth living. While Tännsjö does not explicitly discuss lives on day-to-day basis, reading between the lines this does seem to be compatible to his description of lives worth living. If you look at the totality of a life, it seems true that the loss of a child makes a significant impact on your welfare. However, what about day-to-day? While initially it does make a huge impact, life inevitably goes on and many people adapt even to such a loss.

In regard to this example, it is harder to come to a conclusion. To say that your life is as happy as before you lost your child seems impossible. On the grand scale of things, I would say that there is no way that your life could reach the same total amount of welfare as if the child had survived. The decrease in welfare during the experience was too deep and long. Additionally you will have continued temporary decreases of welfare during the rest of your life because of the loss. However, it is not impossible that your welfare can return to its previous day-to-day level. Your daily welfare can return to the same level as before you lost the child. If you do not adapt the two previous replies are still available. Perhaps you are mistaken in your evaluation of your new life or now your life is not worth living.

Personally, my intuition regarding this example is inconclusive. Adopting Tännsjö's view, the options are either that my day-to-day welfare level revert to the previous level of welfare or that my life becomes not worth living. That my life *cannot* reach a happiness surplus after the death of a child seems to me unlikely. I do get the intuition that my life would still be worth living. However, at the same time I do not know if I believe that my life could regain its former level of welfare. The problem with my thoughts regarding this example is that they are affected by the traumatic feelings associated with the thought of losing a child. Therefore, I feel that they are not very reliable. Additionally, as Tännsjö points out, it is hard to plot out the welfare of a life. My strongest conclusion regarding this example would be that while the total amount of welfare of my life in the end would suffer a significant decrease, the same is not guaranteed to happen to the day-to-day welfare level.

When it comes to Tännsjö's theory the important aspect is not whether the total amount of welfare varies significantly but rather what a life barely worth living looks like while living it. For his theory to be proven incorrect this significant variation must be reflected on a day-to-day level. Ryberg's explanation of how lives barely worth living could be the same as normal privileged lives

on a day-to-day basis clarifies why this is the case. The examples from this section, while being dramatic losses, does not conclusively show that there is a *significant* permanent decrease of daily welfare. It is this significant permanent decrease in daily welfare level that must be shown for there to be a strong effect of Holtug's objection.

### 5.1.2 Ryberg's Explanation

Ryberg's response is less about directly disagreeing with Holtug and more about discussing what could have led to Holtug's differing conception. This is a common theme in Ryberg's article; many of his arguments are about why our intuitions about the Repugnant Conclusion is unreliable even if we cannot prove them wrong. His basic response to Holtug's objection is that people underestimate what a life barely worth living is like and overestimate a normal privileged life. There are several interconnected reasons for this, but it is in short a result of human psychological make-up and way of thinking (Ryberg, 2004, p.245-247).

There are two steps to his possible reply to Holtug. The first step is in regard to the overestimation of a normal privileged life. Ryberg thinks that when people look at their normal privileged lives they are overestimating its value. They see the multitude of happy moments, and take it as proof that they have a life well worth living. However, this is a premature conclusion. It is entirely possible that they are living lives barely worth living like the roller-coaster version. Another thing to note is that when people look back on their lives they are exposed to a highly selective memory of that life. Humans generally tend to remember the happy occasions clearer than the unhappy ones. We also often rewrite past events that were slightly unhappy or neutral as happy. Rarely, if ever, do we rewrite happy events as unhappy. Because of this happiness bias Ryberg thinks that a normal privileged life is easily overestimated.

The second step is about the underestimation of the life barely worth living. When evaluating the welfare of other lives we tend to base the evaluation on our own preferences. We easily underestimate others' lives because we do not use *their* preferences to evaluate them. Similarly, when we consider living our own lives differently we disregard the fact that our preferences can change and think that if we led different lives we would not be as happy. This way of judging other lives creates a false perspective, and automatically makes all other lives not in line with our current preferences seem worse.

Ryberg's reply is thus that we have psychological mechanisms that create false images of the value of our lives and other's lives. Applying this to Holtug's objection, firstly, he could claim that Holtug is overestimating his current life. It might seem very good to him, but this is because the happiness bias and selective memories create an overestimation of his normal privileged life. Therefore, Holtug placing his life's welfare value high is a mistake. Secondly, Holtug falls into the trap of not taking into account that his preferences can change with his circumstances. When he asserts that he can imagine living a life worse than his present one yet still worth living, he is seeing the change in circumstances but not the possible accompanying change of preferences.

One benefit to Ryberg's reply is that it explains why Holtug might be incorrect in his assessment of his life. Compared to Tännsjö's direct denial that Holtug is wrong, this is a better way to approach the objection. This does not however mean that it is an unproblematic reply. What I find problematic with Ryberg's analysis is that he bases it on common sense psychology. The things he points out as psychological mechanisms makes sense to most of the public. Nevertheless, just because it makes sense it does not really mean that his view is correct.

Ryberg bases his argument on psychology, yet uses no empirical evidence or theories from psychology for his assertions. Features such as the happiness bias, memory distortion or the adaptability of the preferences of individuals are his foundation to argue against Holtug's objection. These are all areas that lie outside of the academic sphere of philosophy, and I am unclear about the current consensus regarding these phenomena. How strong is the happiness bias? Does it really have such a strong effect on our memories as he claims? Do people have such a high degree of preference adaptability that we change according to current circumstances? Ryberg's explanation makes me less affected by Holtug's objection. It gives a possible explanation to why Holtug might be wrong. The drawback is that for me, in so far Ryberg succeeds in his argument; it is at best a tentative acceptance until his assumptions are backed up with data from psychology instead of common sense analysis.

#### *5.1.1.1 Summary First Objection*

How reliable are conceptions and can we know which conception of lives worth living is correct? This question is an implicit part of the core of Holtug's objection to the theory that lives barely worth living are the same as normal privileged lives. Both Ryberg and Tännsjö believe that lives well worth living and lives barely worth living are almost identical. Holtug thinks there is a

significant difference. Others think that no one lives worth living. Who is correct and how can we know? In a way, this objection is at its core based on a methodological problem.

Both Ryberg and Tännsjö try to dismiss Holtug's view as incorrect. They do this by introducing a level of uncertainty to his judgement of his life. Tännsjö focuses on the temporary nature of losses and the adaptability of humans. Ryberg explains why Holtug's conception of his life and others is biased and misguided. As I mentioned before, none of them introduce any evidence for their arguments, so based solely on their argumentation it is not possible to judge whether they are correct. To judge who is correct in their conception you need to look to empirical evidence and research dealing with these welfare issues. At most, I can say that their replies to his complaints are persuasive. However, this I think will not be an assessment everyone will share, many would probably side with Holtug instead and think that both Ryberg and Tännsjö's arguments are wrong.

That Holtug might be correct does not stop Tännsjö from reaching his goal. His goal is not to conclusively prove that lives barely worth living are the same as normal privileged lives. While he thinks his theory is correct, it is not necessary to convince everyone that he is right. His goal is to show that the repugnant conclusion is not repugnant, as in *obviously* false. This goal can be achieved even if he cannot totally disprove Holtug. As long as Holtug's objection does not disprove Tännsjö's theory, Tännsjö's point is made.

If the source of the repugnance is the state of world Z, and it cannot be shown that world Z is obviously bad, then the repugnant conclusion cannot be obviously false. If it is possible that the arguments for believing that lives barely worth living are the same as normal privileged lives are correct, then world Z is not obviously bad, and neither is the repugnant conclusion repugnant. I think that both Ryberg and Tännsjö's arguments for their conceptions of a life barely worth living *are* strong enough that it is a possibility that they are correct. Therefore, insofar as the repugnance is tied to the state of world Z, both Ryberg and Tännsjö do show that the repugnant conclusion is not repugnant i.e. obviously false.

## 5.2 *The Origin of Repugnance*

The previous objection came from those who do not agree with either Ryberg or Tännsjö's conceptions of a life barely worth living. However, other objections do not care what lives barely worth living are like. Those who put forward this objection believe that the quality of lives barely

worth living is irrelevant to the repugnance of the repugnant conclusion. Instead of identifying the source of the repugnance as stemming from the state of world Z, they think the repugnance of the repugnant conclusion comes from the judgement of the relation between world A and world Z. In short, the repugnance comes from the claim that world A is *worse* than world Z.

Gustaf Arrhenius is one proponent of this view. He thinks both Ryberg and Tännsjö's arguments are pointless as they misinterpret the source of the repugnance. To illustrate his view he asks, "Which of the following two futures would be the best? In the first scenario, we have a massive expansion of the population size but all the people still have very low positive welfare. In the second scenario, the population size remains the same but we have a major increase in people's welfare such that everybody enjoys very high welfare. The answer seems obvious. (Arrhenius, 2000, p.47)". For Arrhenius the scenario where the population size remains the same but we have a major increase in people's welfare such that everybody enjoys very high welfare is *obviously* better. Following this way of thinking it is thus *repugnant* to claim that world Z is better than world A.

### 5.2.1 Tännsjö and the Contrasting Intuition

The objection that it is the better than-relation that is the source of the repugnance is one Tännsjö brings up in his article. He points to three features as being especially important to note before taking a stance to this objection. Firstly, that world Z consists of lives barely worth living that are in fact the same as normal privileged lives. This is something Arrhenius accepts even if only for the sake of argument, so this is not an issue. Secondly, the value of each of the compared worlds need to be relevant. This too seems like it should be an uncomplicated assumption. To deny that the values of the world matter would be pointless given the discussion at hand. One of the key elements in the discussion has to do with the values of the worlds compared, so their importance cannot be judged beforehand (Tännsjö, 2002, p.250).

Thirdly, the repugnance only occurs when we use worlds that has more than 10 billion inhabitants. Tännsjö points out that the size of the populations matter, and Parfit in his original presentation of the problem agrees. For example look at a relatively large population and then compare it to a slightly smaller population that is happier. If we judge the former to be better that might seem incorrect, but hardly repugnant. Tännsjö points out that it is the comparison with world Z specifically that gives rise to the repugnance. Given these three features Tännsjö feels that even if you focus on the comparative aspect the repugnant conclusion is not repugnant.

This response from Tännsjö is not very well articulated and I find it slightly unclear. The third feature especially does not have a clear purpose. Why does Tännsjö mention this feature? I think the important aspect of this feature is that world Z is in some way special. Tännsjö finds this important to point out. The reason he points to its size probably has to do with his view on large populations. Tännsjö argues in his article that large numbers mean very little to humans. Whether a population is made up of 1 billion people or 100 billion people makes little difference to us. However, number do matter, and our problem to grasp this makes it hard for us to appreciate the Z world. Additionally, he brings up the special status of world Z. What is it that makes it so that the better than-relation between world Z and world A is repugnant but the better than-relation between world A and world B is not repugnant?

It seems to me that Tännsjö is trying to argue that the Z world has a special feature compared to the other worlds. That feature is that the lives in world Z are lives barely worth living. Thus, Tännsjö's view is that the problem of the comparative aspect of the repugnant conclusion is the assumption that lives in world Z are bad and thus world Z is bad. To him Arrhenius objection would fall if he can argue that world Z is not bad. If world Z consists of normal privileged lives, it does not seem to be a bad world. If you compare world A and world Z and they are both good worlds, then to Tännsjö it is not repugnant to say that world Z is better. Tännsjö's stance on this is shown in premise eight of my construction of his argument:

P8) If (World A is good) and (World Z is good) then the repugnant conclusion is not repugnant.

The problem with this response I think is that it does not really approach the objection with an appropriate interpretation of the objection. Tännsjö's reply is unlikely to satisfy Arrhenius. The three features Tännsjö points to are not hidden or controversial, so if they could easily dismiss the objection it is likely that Arrhenius would have already considered it. To give a satisfying reply I think Tännsjö needs to elaborate his argument further.

Arrhenius specifically writes that even if Tännsjö is correct about the actual state of affairs currently in the world "nothing follows concerning the comparative value of a population with very high welfare and a population with very low positive welfare." (Arrhenius, 2000, p.46). Arrhenius agrees that world Z has positive welfare, and would probably open to accepting that world Z is good.

However, this does not mean that his objection is invalid in his eyes. Thus, he would disagree with premise eight.

Furthermore, I think Tännsjö's focus on world Z is not entirely justified. It is true that most of the discussion concerns world Z. However, I think that to say that the repugnance only occurs when one compares world A and world Z is untrue. For example, compare world A and world Y. Would people not claim that saying that world Y is better is repugnant. From which world exactly the repugnance occurs is hard to pin down. However, it is not created by some special quality of world Z. If it is not only the comparison to world Z that creates the repugnance, it is harder to claim that it is the fact that the lives in question are barely worth living which is the problem.

To Arrhenius the problem is that when making a comparison between a population with high positive welfare and a population with low positive welfare it seems obviously false to say that the former is *worse*. How could a population with high positive welfare be worse than one with low positive welfare? Tännsjö does not really answer this question, and therefore he does not properly respond to the objection. Even if world A and world Z are good worlds, what is it that enables world Z to be better? This is the core problem, and one that Tännsjö does not properly answer.

### 5.2.2 Ryberg and the Exchange of Quality for Quantity

To respond to the objection Ryberg's reply focuses on an implicit assumption of the objection. It is not an assumption Arrhenius explicitly states, however the assumption seems common in this kind of objection. The assumption is that we cannot make up a loss in quality of life through a gain in quantity of life, and to try to do so is morally unacceptable. This seems to be a part of what Arrhenius gets at when he brings up the objection. Arrhenius discusses the comparison between world A and world B. In world B everyone is worse off than in world A, yet world B is better than world A simply because there is more people in world B which creates a higher amount of welfare.

Ryberg does not agree with this assumption. To illustrate why he disagrees he asks us to answer a question. Which of the following populations is better? A population of people who are very well off or a slightly bigger population with lives almost equally good. If you follow Arrhenius view, it would be repugnant to claim that the second option is better. Arrhenius shows this line of thinking in his example scenarios and conclusion. Ryberg disagrees with assessment. The reason is that he

thinks there is an argument to be made that it is better to give more people an opportunity to live good lives.

Considering world A and world B, is it true that everyone is worse off in world B? In regard to the people existing in world A, the answer is yes. However, there is a group that did not exist in world A but do in world B. Non-existent individuals does not have welfare level. However, living in world B, they gain a positive welfare level, and thus these people are not worse off. It is something in line with this Ryberg is arguing. When the population increases, even if the average welfare is lowered, new lives are added with the chance to live lives worth living. Ryberg believes there is a case to be made for world B because it give more people the chance to live and live good lives.

Let us go back to the question posed by Arrhenius objection: how could population with high positive welfare be worse than one with low positive welfare? Ryberg gives a potential answer to this question. You can say that lives worth living are good, and more of a good thing is better. Therefore, if the lower welfare population has a bigger population then there is more of a good thing: worthwhile lives. When looking at the comparison between world A and world Z this adds another layer of complexity. World A is worse because it has a lower total amount of welfare as well as less people alive.

There seems to be a need for another reason why world Z is better than its total amount of happiness. Ryberg provides this by arguing for the value of extra lives worth living. However while it is not a bad argument it does not seem to fully solve the problem. Even if it is good with additional lives, it still seems contrary to say that world A is *worse*. If the conclusion was that world A and world Z are equal, perhaps the merit of added lives would be enough. However, to get to the point where you can say that world A is worse, the argument for the value of additional lives is not convincing enough.

That is the argument about the value of additional lives. Ryberg presents this as a response to why world Z could be seen as better. One problem I see with this response is that it does not support the importance of defining what lives barely worth living are like. For Ryberg it is important because if the lives in world Z are good, then there is less aversion to say that it is better. However, let us say both Ryberg and Tännsjö are incorrect. Perhaps lives barely worth living are a struggle, with the only happiness being “Muzak and potatoes”. World A would still be judged to be worse than world Z. The total amount of welfare of world Z would still be higher, and there would still be more lives

than world A, which is good according to Ryberg. However, if the type of lives in question does not affect the argument why do they matter? So in fact, both Ryberg and Tännsjö have two problems. First, they need to argue for why what lives barely worth living matter. Second they need to explain how world A can be worse than world Z.

I suppose there is one argument for why it matters what lives barely worth living are like. What if a life worth living has incredibly high standards, to the extent that no one alive today live lives worth living. This seems a bit unlikely, but some would argue it is true. Then when you speak of low positive welfare, low is not really low except in comparison to what is high. To illustrate my point, let us say that you have a billion dollars and your friend has a billion, billion dollars. Would it then be accurate to say that you have little money? I think not, less money but less is not little. According to this sceptic view, even a life barely worth living would consist of happiness so great that it is unimaginable. If this is the case then both world A and world Z has great happiness. Would it then be repugnant to hold that world Z is better?

In some way the objection would still hold, as it seems strange to say that, a world with very, very happy people is worse than a world with very happy people. However, this might be some kind of structural issue of language. When you instead looks at the content of the worlds there might be a possibility to see why the world with more people who are just very happy is in fact better and the world with few very, very happy people is worse. I am not totally convinced by this response but it is a possible reply.

### *5.2.3 The Issue of Framing*

The framing of a problem or question matters, and it often matters a lot. When you frame a problem, if you are not careful, it is very easy to lead people to your chosen conclusion. The objection presented by Arrhenius focuses on the comparative aspect of the repugnant conclusion, and deems the quality of the lives involved irrelevant. However, I think that even if it is correct that it is the comparison that creates the repugnance, the content of the worlds still matters. It still matters how you imagine the worlds involved. In the original formulation of the Repugnant Conclusion, world A could be assumed to be like the lives with the highest level of welfare living today. However, this is not necessarily the case. It might very well be that world A is above a level of happiness available to us today.

Assuming this is the case, imagine a world with people who are constantly, and only happy. I am not entirely sure it is possible to imagine such lives, but let us for the sake of argument try. World Z is a world with the barest surplus of happiness, consisting only of Muzak and potatoes. To say such a world is better seems very doubtful. There is also the option of using both Ryberg and Tännsjö's versions. Their world Z is a world consisting of people living normal privileged lives. Even here I do think Arrhenius has a point, many would find it repugnant that world Z is better than world A. To say that a world consisting only of happiness is *worse* than one with both happiness and sadness seems wrong.

However, let us recast world Z. Generally world Z is described using words such as monotone, drab, or consisting of lives of poor quality. All of these words have negative connotations. Both Ryberg and Tännsjö have argued that this is not necessarily true. So what if we change the words to tranquil, calm or peaceful? These words rather have a positive connotation. Let us then ask which world is better? One with a smaller population who are all extremely happy or a much bigger population who are all tranquil. I do not think it is inherently repugnant to prefer the second. Here you can see how the framing of the options have an effect on the answer to the question.

In the case of the Repugnant Conclusion, world A has an inherent advantage. We picture the best lives we could possibly lead. World Z on the other hand has no clear illustration, it is up to the one who posits the situation. Parfit asks us if we would choose an ecstatic century or a drab eternity. What framing is involved when asking that question? It is fact very hard to see that option two is something anyone would consider even for a second. However, what if we instead ask people to choose between an ecstatic century and a tranquil eternity. Now, at least option two is in the running. In fact, I think that quite a few people might prefer the second option. The longing for an eternal life is something many people experience. Additionally, many people and cultures do not prioritise ecstasy, but would prefer a tranquil life.

Putting the issue of framing in relation to Arrhenius objection: how could a population with high positive welfare be worse than a population with low positive welfare? If you only look at this as a numerical question, it is very hard to explain the reasons behind the conclusion that the lower welfare population is better. However, if you discuss what lives are like in the different populations, it might be possible to understand how it is plausible. However framing is not everything, so while this is an argument for why what lives barely worth living is like matter there needs to be a supplementary explanation to why world Z is better. Nevertheless, it is an important facet in

discussing the Repugnant Conclusion to avoid misguided intuitions and bias against or in favour of a certain world.

#### 5.2.1.1 Summary Second Objection

Is there a way to explain how a population with high positive welfare be worse than one with low positive welfare? Tännsjö's response to this problem is not very well developed. Furthermore, it seem to rest on a misinterpretation of Arrhenius view of the role of world Z. Because he does not respond directly or clearly to the objection, I do not find Tännsjö's reply persuasive. Ryberg takes another route in arguing that a decrease in quality of welfare can be traded for an increase in quantity of welfare. He argues for this based on the idea that it is valuable to add additional lives worth living. This is a more fruitful explanation, and provides one way to explain why world Z could be better than world A beyond total amount of welfare. However even Ryberg's explanation cannot sufficiently explain why world A is worse than world Z.

Additionally with this objection, a further problem is presented. Why does it matter what lives barely worth living are like? This is a problem for both Ryberg and Tännsjö as their theories rest on the assumption that what a life barely worth living is like matters. Perhaps Arrhenius is correct and the crucial aspect which creates the repugnance is the judgement that world A is worse than world Z. This does not seem impossible. Then both Ryberg and Tännsjö need to argue for why the kind of lives in the worlds matter. This does not seem to be self-evident. If they cannot argue for why lives barely worth living being normal privileged lives makes a difference, their attempts to solve the Repugnant Conclusion remain unconvincing.

## 6. Conclusion

The research question for this essay is: *Does the idea that lives barely worth living are the same as normal privileged lives make the repugnant conclusion not repugnant?* Before being able to answer the question, two other questions need to be answered. First, is it possible that lives barely worth living and normal privileged lives are the same? I would say that it is possible. While others, amongst them Holtug, disagree with both Ryberg and Tännsjö, I think that their theories about lives welfare levels seems possible, maybe even plausible. The only problem is that there is nothing conclusive to prove that they are correct. So at most, you can accept their arguments tentatively.

This however is enough to show that the repugnant conclusion is not obviously false, given that the state of affairs of world Z is the source, or part of the source to the repugnance.

This is the second question, does the state of affairs of world Z matter in deciding whether the repugnant conclusion is repugnant? Answering this question neither Ryberg nor Tännsjö are as successful. This has to do with the second objection I presented. While there is some attempt to explain how world Z could be better than world A, it is not convincing. Additionally, the responses do not properly show how the state of affairs in world Z has a crucial role in answering the objection. This means that it is unclear what the importance of what the lives in world Z is like is. If it turns out it does not matter much, then both Ryberg and Tännsjö's theories are pointless.

In conclusion, lives barely worth living might be the same as normal privileged lives. However, whether this possibility can remove the repugnance of the repugnant conclusion cannot be determined before it is shown that the state of affairs in world Z is crucial in creating the repugnance of the repugnant conclusion. So the answer to the research question in this essay is currently no. The idea that lives barely worth living are the same as normal privileged lives does not remove the repugnance of the repugnant conclusion.

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