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Should We Be Sorry That We Exist?

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We can morally compare possible alternative states of affairs, judging that various actual historical occurrences were bad, overall— the Holocaust, World War I, and slavery, for example.¹ We should be sorry that such events occurred. But the vast majority of people who now exist would not have existed were it not for those historical events. A "package deal" is involved here: those events, together with oneself; or, the absence of the historical calamity, and the absence of oneself. So, ought one to be sorry that one exists? There seems to be a strong case for saying that morally one must wish and prefer that certain historical events had not occurred, even if that would have meant that one would never have existed. After setting out this idea, I explore some arguments against it. I leave the issue of the possible implications, if it is accepted, to the discussion.

1. Preliminaries

The importance of the chanciness of a person's coming into existence has been recognized for some time (the philosophical classic here is Parfit 1984). Minor changes would have been sufficient to prevent your parents from having met; or even if they had met and had had a child, would have resulted in their having had a child at a different time—a child that would not have been you. There are possible worlds resembling our own, in which historical events occur slightly differently; one's parents do not meet in that world, or they meet but do not have children, or they have a different child instead of you. The breakage in the causal chain leading to one's birth could, of course, have occurred much earlier: a minor distraction preventing or delaying the meeting and copulation of either pair of one's grandparents, or one's great-

grandparents, or one's great-great-grandparents, or any other previous ancestors, would have been sufficient to preclude one's existence. The equivalent of the so called "butterfly effect" of chaos theory works overtime in history: each of us is a result of repeated propitious circumstances that could very easily have been otherwise; lucky winners in the lottery of existence who could very easily have lost out. The implications of this fragility have been extensively discussed in contemporary philosophy as they concern future generations (see, e.g., Sikora and Barry 1978; Ryberg and Tannsjo 2004; Roberts and Wasserman 2009); the implications concerning the past have been largely neglected, and the possibility that we ought to be sorry that we exist seems hardly to have been discussed.²

The claim that perhaps one ought to be sorry that one exists is not a priori. The argument depends on historical contingencies; and in this way it is in part empirical. There is no logical contradiction in my existing within a historical scenario that excludes the Holocaust, World War I, slavery, and other historical calamities (surely God could have created me irrespective of the activities or indeed existence of my ancestors). And even empirically, there might be individuals alive today to whom the argument does not apply: members of unknown primitive tribes, perhaps? But in accordance with the way the world works, it was not possible for us to exist without the large set of historical tragedies that preceded us. Without those tragedies, our parents/grandparents/great-grandparents . . . would not have procreated when they did, and hence we would not have existed. The causal conditions realistically required for our existence would have been prevented: the actual chain of events that brought us into existence would have been precluded, and an alternative path was not available.

Being sorry can take different forms. First we must distinguish between being sorry for and being sorry that (see Smilansky 2007: 60-66). One can be happy that one triumphed over one's opponent in, say, some sporting event, and yet at the same time be sorry for him that he lost. We will be focusing here on the idea of being sorry that, namely, on regret about states of affairs. Of course we ought to be sorry for the Holocaust victims, but ought we also to be sorry that the Holocaust occurred, given that, had it not occurred, we almost certainly would not have existed?

Being sorry can be essentially emotional, and then one can both be sorry that the Holocaust occurred and happy that one exists, and one need not choose one or the other. Since one can have contrary emotions, one is not required to choose one or the other; entertaining

both at the same time incurs no contradiction. People are frequently ambivalent, feeling simultaneously both glad and sorry even about one single thing, such as a relationship or their job, and even about a single aspect of that thing. Even if we consider a more rational, evaluative sense of being sorry, one can be sorry about one aspect of an event and not sorry about another. Here too there is no contradiction, because the contrasting judgment concerns different aspects. And, in a third way, one can also be sorry in the sense that one wishes that the virtually incompatible features (such as "no Holocaust" and "my existence") were not in fact virtually incompatible, so that, counterfactually, the good things could, realistically, exist together.

However, there is also a sense of being "sorry that" which is essentially evaluative and judgmental, is not merely about aspects, and confronts the need to choose: this is the sense that is at issue here. When we inquire whether one is sorry in this sense, we mean to ask whether one takes it to be preferable, overall, that a certain state of affairs had not existed, and (all considered) regrets that it does exist. A quick way of putting this question into focus would be to ask the following question: were it within one's power, would one choose to prevent the relevant state of affairs? This is clearly an important sense of being sorry: if you are sorry about something, it is natural to interpret this to mean that you prefer that it were otherwise, all considered; and, were it possible, would change things. When we ask whether one is glad, or regrets, that one married one's spouse or chose one's profession, for example, it is natural to understand this as the question whether, if given the choice again, one would choose in the same way. The sense of the word "sorry" that I am using is a strong and honest sense, which goes beyond expressing a sentiment and is willing to commit itself to accepting the implications. So in asking whether we should be sorry that we exist, we are asking whether we should prefer or wish the world to be in some state in which we do not exist.

The argument does not require anything metaphysically perplexing; for example, that we conceive of something like time-travel, whereby we actually bring about a state of affairs that results in our own non-existence. All we need to do is to wish that a past state of affairs had not occurred, when we also believe that that would have precluded our own coming into being. And this is something that we can certainly do.

It is also important to see that one can be sorry about existing without this implying that there is something bad about oneself; some badness-making feature. In particular, I am not speaking about agent-regret, regret about what one has done. One is sorry about existing only in

conjunction with the thought about the possible improved general state of affairs. Since we did not cause any historical calamity ourselves, our own mere not having come into existence would not serve any good purpose. It remains true, nevertheless, that we ought to regret calamities of the past that, realistically, were required for our existence. One simply accepts that there is moral reason to prefer a better state of affairs — where incidentally one does not exist — to actual reality, and is sorry that that state of affairs did not materialize.

People may have various reasons to be sorry that they exist, such as that their lives have been, on balance, very bad or severely unhappy. But we shall limit ourselves to the question whether one ought to prefer one's non-existence because of the moral desirability of a past without certain historical (or indeed natural) calamities, and assume that – apart for such considerations – one prefers, overall, to exist.

On a narrow interpretation of the moral, there are histories that are morally better (there is less wrongdoing) while there are histories that are non-morally better (they include fewer bad states of affairs, such as suffering, which can also be caused by natural calamities such as earthquakes). The difference between the morally or non-morally better, in these senses, will matter when we distinguish later between deontological and consequentialist positions, but my case does not depend on it.

Changes in history would have affected both the identity and the numbers of those who would have come to be born. I shall focus here on the former; namely (in Parfitian terminology) on "different people" questions rather than on "different number" questions. It is simpler to assume stability in numbers, and we can ask our question without concerning ourselves with the further difficulties that a change in number would create.

Finally, it might be doubted whether being sorry can be a matter for moral evaluation. We feel sorry or we do not, and the matter is beyond our control. And in any case, morality is about action and not feeling. But this is too quick. We can understand that we have moral reason to be pleased or sorry about certain occurrences, and we do have some ability to affect attitudes of this sort by criticizing them: someone who is envious of the success of his children, or who expresses joy when he hears about a lynching, is (if sane) open to moral criticism. Emotions can be morally inappropriate or unacceptable, and manifesting them can be a culpable fault. Moreover, at issue here is merely the basic sentiment that, on reflection, one is sorry that something such as slavery was the case. As we saw, this means that, morally, one prefers a

different possible state of affairs (namely, one without slavery). This is something that we can expect people to be capable of.

2. The case for being sorry

In the sense that we have just seen, there seems to be a strong case for saying that one ought to be sorry to have been caused to exist: morally, one must wish and prefer that certain historical events had not occurred, even if that would have meant that one would never have existed. One thus ought to "choose" a state of affairs such that one does not exist: one is sorry that the state of affairs that includes one's existence is the one that was actualized. Since one's existence depends causally on the prior existence of, let us say, the Holocaust, one ought to be sorry that one exists. To prefer and "choose" one's existence at the price of the Holocaust is morally unacceptable, and so one ought to be sorry that both occurred. One ought to lament the fact that a better state of affairs, which does not include the Holocaust and thus lacks one's existence, did not emerge.

Of course things could have been even worse: in many possible worlds the Holocaust (or other historical calamity) occurred and I do not exist. I do not have to be sorry that our actual world materialized as compared to those worlds. But the point is that (a) realistically, there is no world in which the Holocaust does not occur and yet I exist, for it is virtually certain that my existence would not have occurred but for the Holocaust, and (b) my existence cannot be a consideration that trumps a possible world in which the Holocaust does not occur. Take H to be the Holocaust, and P a person whose coming to be born depends on the occurrence of the Holocaust. If we are sorry that H occurs, and P's existence depends on H's occurrence, and we regard H's occurrence as much worse than P's non-existence, then we ought to be sorry that P exists. We ought to be sorry that P exists even if we are P.

Yet how can one know, be certain, that, if some event had not occurred (so that one's existence would also have been precluded), things would indeed have turned out better? The possibility of making specific claims would depend upon the particular case. During most periods of Stalin's life (although possibly not in the midst of World War II) his death would surely have been beneficial, saving millions from the Gulag and execution. While his possible replacements would have not been saints, they could hardly have been as ruthlessly and actively

evil. So sometimes we can know, with a very large degree of assurance, that things would not have turned out worse had a certain counterfactual (which includes our nonexistence) materialized.

There can be no absolute certainty here, because the future that remains unknown to us also matters here. This is the familiar problem often discussed in the context of utilitarianism, whereby anything which now appears bad could, just possibly, lead to the fabulously good in the distant future; and likewise the apparently good could produce very bad results at some far away point in time. But as we normally do in moral thinking, we can discount these distant and unlikely possibilities, and feel that at least sometimes we can declare that, say, some historical events would have been better avoided. But in any case, the historical details are not essential to the problem that I am examining.³

For, in addition to the possibility for making a specific historical case, it is possible to make a much broader claim. Here is a General Argument mandating being sorry that one exists: in the light of the chanciness of any of us coming into existence, almost any significant change in history would have had large repercussions for people's existence. History is full of calamities. But this means that, if one wants to "retain" one's own existence, and yet does not wish to accept the idea of large avoidable historical evils as the price of one's existence, then one must believe that the world in which one exists is, for practical purposes, the best of all possible worlds. In other words, one must believe that nothing important could have been improved at any point in history that is in any way casually related to factors that would then affect one's existence; namely, none of the relevant calamities of the past could have been avoided without making things worse, overall. But to believe such a thing would be highly irrational. One must believe that there could be major improvements in history that are inconsistent with one's existence, and one ought to wish that such improvements had been actualized. This is a general argument in favor of the claim that one must be sorry that one exists.

Can we not wish for a miracle, whereby the antecedent historical calamities do not occur, yet nevertheless we, miraculously, come into existence? If indeed it would take a miracle to block my argument, then I am not too worried. My claim is that, given what we know about how the real world works, one cannot expect to exist in an overall morally better world (a world

without many of the historical calamities); and yet one ought to be sorry that such a better, alternative world, and not the actual one where one exists, did not materialize.

But had the historical dice been thrown differently, they could have resulted in a worse outcome. Should we not, then, be happy that things did not end up worse? Looking at the whole of human history, we indeed have no way of estimating whether the actualities have been in the better or the worse portion of the possibilities. For all we know, the world in which both the Holocaust and ourselves occurred is better in terms of its goodness than the average possible world. But this does not affect my argument. Since history could easily have turned out better than it has we ought to wish that that had been the case, even if we realize that (if we now limit ourselves to the more realistic possibilities) such a change would have entailed our own individual nonexistence. A realistic but morally preferable course of history has no place for us, and we, existing now, ought to be sorry that that morally preferable world had not come into being instead of the actual reality.

There is a fair amount of moral leeway concerning what one may be sorry or happy about, and one is permitted to be not sorry even about some bad things (see Smilansky 2007). Yet when we talk about evil of such magnitude and malevolence as the Holocaust, surely the leeway vanishes: one cannot prefer the triumph of Nazi evil and the brutal death of millions to one's own not-having-been-born. Similarly, nearly all blacks (and many millions of whites) in the United States would not have been born were it not for slavery. Yet one can hardly believe that the untold suffering of the slaves has been redeemed by one's individual existence.

In an individual life, one may opt for the familiar over the objectively optimal. One can be happy that one lives one's particular life, with one's spouse, children, and friends, because one does not want to contemplate living without them. It does not matter that one could have had in one's life an alternative family that might have been better for one, and whom one would have loved equally if not more. One may still opt for the familiar actual, for the existence of those specific individuals. But morally, and on the historical scale, this is unacceptable. When we understand the magnitude of suffering and harm that could have been prevented with a better course for history, morally we cannot but prefer that things had gone differently. My argument does not depend on a strong claim such as that only the best possible world is morally acceptable. It suffices that we recognize that some major instances of evil and suffering could have been prevented, without making other things worse, overall – but that this better

alternative world would not have included us. We ought to regret that such an alternative was not the one actualized.

Utilitarians and similar consequentialists are obviously committed to this conclusion. "Improving" the past, in retrospect, is for them an obligation equivalent to optimizing the future. But the past is full of evils of such enormity that deontologists as well as virtue ethicists must reject it. This is not to say that holders of such positions are committed to the minimization of bad things in ways that consequentialists might, but merely that, when looking at very bad events in the world, and in particular events where people act against moral principles and without virtue, the typical deontologist and virtue ethicist will wish that this did not occur. Actual history is morally unacceptable, as compared to a better alternative. For the purpose of this argument, we do not have to know what the better alternative would have been like; it suffices that we can be sure (as surely we can) that, from the moral point of view, a better alternative is possible. Yet this amounts to a rejection of reality—of current people, of generations of people who lived before us, of the actual achievements of civilization. Arguably, the argument implies that we ought to be sorry that nearly everyone who has ever lived has ever existed. We should feel the same about our descendents.

3. The case for not being sorry

Wishing and "choosing" a world without the Holocaust and without many of us involves choosing between lives – preferring the lives of those who died in the Holocaust to our own existence. It could be argued that this is a choice we have no moral justification in making. What right have we to prefer the lives of some millions of people to the lives of (let us assume, for the sake of simplicity) a similar number of other people? And if we have no right to do so, we are certainly not morally obligated to do it. Once we, who came into being only because they died, already in fact exist, it seems as though it might at least be morally acceptable for us not to be sorry to exist. Moreover, if indeed very few if any currently living people would exist were it not for some set of historical calamities, then "we", the people who would not be born in the alternative (calamity-reduced) scenario, number in the billions.

Admittedly, from the perspective that goes back in time to before our existence, our status is different: the victims of the Holocaust were wronged, in a way in which we would not

be, had we not been born. But arguably this cannot be the only salient perspective, nor can it be morally conclusive, once we already exist. Before we exist, it seems very plausible that we had no right to exist (to be brought into existence) rather than not to exist. But once we exist asking us, hypothetically, to choose a historical path that precludes us, is arguably to ask us to give up our life which now, once we already exist, we have an interest in continuing, and a right to carry on in living.⁴

Impersonally, the prevention of the Holocaust, and the ensuing situation where other people come to be instead of ourselves, is morally better than the actual (Holocaust+us) state of affairs. But while I acknowledge the importance of the impersonal perspective, I favor a more pluralistic approach, which recognizes both personal and impersonal considerations. Part of what makes this topic interesting is that it is possible to make a strong case for the need to be sorry that one exists, even without assuming that morality must only be viewed impersonally. For as we have seen, it is possible to claim (as indeed I have claimed) that even when one takes a moral perspective that recognizes the force of personal claims, when all is considered, one ought to be sorry about one's individual existence.

It is crucial to recognize the importance of the numbers here. Recall that my initial discussion compared an enormous moral tragedy such as the Holocaust to a single person's not coming into existence. One cannot reasonably prefer one's existence if this comes at the price of the cruel murder of millions. One's prudential preference for the actual history is overridden by the moral preferability of an alternative history. Hence, one must prefer one's non-existence, and be sorry that things turned out otherwise. This seems to me true even once one already exists. One also has non-prudential obligations towards one's children, and wishing away one's own existence also results, in the thought experiment, in their non-existence. Yet this as well does not seem to me to be sufficient in order to override the moral obligation to prefer a past without calamities such as the Holocaust, World War I, or slavery. However, together with oneself (and one's children) there are many millions of others who would also not exist, except for those historical calamities. Perhaps the question, then, needs to be asked not of each one of us alone, or of his or her immediate family, but of all of us. Once we all exist already, is it not too demanding to require all of us to want to "give up" our existence, for the sake of (let us assume) saving a similar number of people unknown to us who lived in the past? Perhaps our perspective, as numerous already-existing persons, enables us to block the demand to acquiesce

in our paying the price of the undoing of the evils of the past. After all, even after acknowledging the distinction between being murdered and merely not being born, now that we are alive, "rolling back" history at our expense, for the sake of saving the victims of historical catastrophes, seems equivalent – for us – to our murder: we cease to exist.

In the light of the enormity of wrongness and badness involved in great historical calamities, it is difficult not to think that it would be greatly preferable were those calamities avoided, even at the price of those persons who would have not come to be, except for those calamities. If this thought is to be blocked, this will require, first, that we attach great importance to the fact of existing-already: to the rights of those who exist, and to their own perspective as people who are glad to exist. But even that is not enough, in view of the numbers on the "pro-regret" side of the argument (e.g. Holocaust victims): the large number of living people, whose existence would have been precluded had the Holocaust been prevented, is also crucial, and needs to be enlisted on the "no regret" side.

But can I coherently think that it would have been bad for me never to exist? If that would have been the actual outcome, there would never have been anyone for whom that could be bad. Yet I do not think that the proponent of the "no regret" position could be subdued so easily. Once one already exists, the salient question is whether one prefers not to have come into existence. And while the "pro-regret" case might be morally triumphant (this will be considered further in the next section), it cannot triumph merely by conceptually excluding the "no regret" option from consideration. Once one exists, it makes sense to ask oneself whether one prudentially wishes not to have been born; similarly, it makes sense to struggle with the sort of moral case for regret about one's existence that I have presented.

What about deontologists? Perhaps we can generalize here: if one person ought to be willing (in our thought experiment) to "give up" his or her existence in order to prevent historical calamities, and this applies to every person, then we all are obliged to do so. There might be a broadly deontological moral perspective that would require this sort of "sacrifice", and any person should see that that is his or her obligation. On the other hand, perhaps a deontological "no regret" case is possible. Once people already exist, perhaps the deontologist would want to say that we cannot wish for the unraveling of history, because this would be at the expense of the currently living (without concern for the numbers). That even one currently living person would not be born suffices (from the perspective where he or she already exists)

to block the idea of preventing the Holocaust, or abolishing slavery much before this was done. This currently living person must not be forced to pay the price, however high the payoff.

Perhaps an even stronger Kantian claim can be made, which would go beyond the ideas of strict constraints and the rejection of aggregation. This claim would be that morality is in no way about comparing alternative states of affairs but, essentially, is only about the first-person obligation not to wrong others. Since by existing I do not wrong others, I have no obligation whatsoever to prefer a better state of affairs, and certainly if that does not include me. But it seems to me that here it would be the radical Kantian who would get herself in trouble. The question whether one wishes a world without certain historical calamities such as the Holocaust or slavery can be forced on one. If the Kantian replies that her theory does not allow the thought that one might be expected to be ready not to exist, if only the Holocaust or slavery could have been prevented, then that seems to me to be a fault in the theory. Perhaps the "pro-sorrow" claim can be resisted, but this would need to be at the level of engagement with the price (namely, with the loss of the lives of the millions of the currently living, who would not be born), rather than by denying the moral weight of the grim choice itself.

In any case, the crucial matter for the "no regret" side is that those who would not be born except for the historical calamities, but were born since these calamities occurred, have moral standing, since they exist. It is this, and in addition the huge numbers of persons whose existence is at stake (because of the salience of consequentialist considerations in this context), which forms the main basis for the "no regret" case.⁵

If we accept the "no regret" position, we must not hide from ourselves its moral coarseness: whether as individuals or as a group, we are then saying that we do not wish that events such as the Holocaust, World War I, and slavery had not occurred – because then we would not have been born.

4. A paradoxical antinomy?

Two broad alternative interpretations of our situation seem to me tenable. The first simply claims that we should all be sorry that we exist (and indeed we should probably be sorry that anyone who ever existed had existed) - however absurd this may seem. This is a radical philosophical view of history, and of human life. The second interpretation posits an antinomy:

in addition to the "pro-regret" arguments leading to the conclusion that we must be sorry that we exist, there is a "no regret" one, whereby we are permitted not to be sorry about events such as slavery or the Holocaust, in the sense that we have been elucidating. Currently existing people are permitted to "veto" the thought of paying with their lives the price of improving history.⁶

I favor the "pro-regret" side. The idea that it is not obvious that we must be sorry (in the sense under discussion) about horrors such as slavery or the Holocaust, simply because our own (multi-person) existence depends on these appalling events, seems to me hideous. Morally, we ought to bite this bullet (even if it is a live hand grenade), and be sorry about our existence.

The prevention of the great evils of history, even if it would have been at our expense, must be morally good, overall. The enormity of physical suffering and emotional torment involved is such that one cannot resist the idea that it would have been preferable were history to have taken a better course, albeit at our expense. With these sorts of stakes, the impersonal perspective triumphs.⁷ And from the impersonal perspective, the possibility of our not coming (en masse) into existence is not morally equivalent to our "mass murder". Major evils are prevented, and impersonally there is no significant price: it is merely that a different set of people is born.

We can imagine ourselves looking back at someone placed on the verge of a great historical calamity, and being offered the option of pressing a button to stop it (at the expense of particular potential people, including ourselves). There is something hideous about wishing this person not to press the button, when we know that something like the Holocaust could, but would thereby not be, prevented. But wishing that that button would be pressed is equivalent to being sorry that we exist, in the relevant sense.

Moreover, the logic of the "no regret" argument seems to imply too much. It does not only permit us not to wish that (for example) the Holocaust had not occurred, if the prevention of the Holocaust would entail our collective non-existence, but it forbids us to do so. Indeed, given the chanciness of coming into existence, it follows that one cannot be sorry (in the sense under discussion) that anything seriously bad had ever occurred throughout history, because in a realistic alternative scenario – where that bad thing does not occur – numerous currently-living people would not come into existence. And so, the argument goes, their status as living people, and particularly when coupled with their numbers, gives them "veto power" on virtually any

significant improvement of the past, which will be at their expense. On the highly reasonable assumption that a great many currently existing people (if not the vast majority among them) would not want to "give up" their existence as the price of improving the historical past, one may never wish that the past had been better in any significant way. That seems morally unacceptable.

It may be useful to examine one specific way in which things could have developed. If Hitler had been assassinated in 1937, that would almost certainly have been impersonally good. But since he was not, then, given that so many millions of currently living people would not exist were he assassinated, we are not (according to the "no regret" view) permitted to wish that he had been assassinated, and be sorry that he was not. This view does not seem to me morally acceptable.

In fact, from the normative perspective the advocate of the "no regret" view is committed to the belief that our world is, for all practical purposes, the best possible world. It is so precious that no moral improvement in the past, however great, would be permissible, lest it interrupt the unfolding of our present world. Yet the only thing that makes our world the normatively best possible world is that it is the actual world, with the people that happen to be in it. This seems incredible.

So the supporter of the "no regret" view in fact seems committed to a position which has incredible and morally unacceptable implications. When these implications are combined with the salience of the impersonal view, which goes against it, the "no regret" view seems to be weaker than the "pro-regret" one. The idea that we must be sorry that we (and other persons) exist, for all its weight, seems to me to be a lesser price to pay.

Nevertheless, perhaps we confront a paradoxical antinomy here, and both alternatives are evenly balanced. Given the nature of the two sides, this would indeed present us with a moral monstrosity: either we must be sorry that we and our loved ones exist (and also that nearly everyone who ever lived existed); or we are not sorry (and are indeed forbidden to be sorry) about most of the calamities of history (such as slavery and the Holocaust).

Notes

1. Those who deny that morality has an impersonal component may deny the possibility of such judgments, since, if different people would exist in each of the alternative historical scenarios, then (for "personalists") there would be no basis for comparison. Because the historical calamity affects who is born, there may be no one who exists in both of the two alternative scenarios, and hence no one for whom we can say that one scenario is better than the other. I will be assuming that we can compare different states of affairs even if they include different people, and thus that we can evaluate whether it would have been morally better had certain historical calamities not occurred. In fact I take the impossibility, for "personalists", of making such moral judgments to be a reductio of their position, but this lies beyond the scope of this paper.

2. The notable exceptions have been within the discussion of the problem of evil. As Robert Merrihew Adams notes, the importance of the issue of one's attitude towards the causes of one's being born, in the light of the chanciness of individual existence, was already recognized by Leibniz (Adams 2009: 2). Yet curiously, this topic has hardly received any attention outside of the theological context. A few of the essays in Tabensky (2009) begin to correct this neglect. I discussed this issue briefly in Smilansky 2007: 61.

3. In fact we do not even need to know that things would not have turned out worse. It seems enough to claim that we should prefer some possible worlds in which both the Holocaust and we do not exist – we do not need to claim that we should prefer all such possible worlds. But here I have tackled the more ambitious target; which aims to stay close to the historical realities.

4. This recalls discussions of cases such as those of severely handicapped people. One may want to say that (a) impersonally, the birth of other, healthy people instead would have been preferable; and that (b) were those handicapped people aborted close to the time of conception, then on a plausible view of personhood this would not have wronged them (for no one who does not exist can be wronged). Nevertheless, once those people already exist and view their

lives as worth living, it becomes more difficult to say that it is regrettable that they exist. See, for example, McMahan (2005).

5. I will not address the possible claims that potential future people (people whose existence in the future depends upon our choices now) might have. My great-grandchildren of course also depend on my choice (in the thought experiment) to come into existence.

6. The "no regret" camp would potentially include not only currently living people but also people who would not have existed but for the given historical calamity, and have already died. It is of course too late to ask them for "permission" to improve the past (at the expense of their not coming into being). For the sake of simplicity I will limit my focus to the currently alive.

7. A related altruistic but not impersonal sort of argument can also be developed. Perhaps Blacks in the United States can be particularly sorry about slavery, in the sense that they in particular can be expected to prefer their individual non-existence in return for the early abolition of slavery; similarly, Jews would wish that the Holocaust in particular had not occurred even if that would have entailed their individual not-coming-into-existence; and so on. This would not imply that (hypothetically) one were impersonally always willing to give up one's existence for the sake of a suitable number of other people, but only (perhaps) for people in the past that one particularly identifies with or cares for. I will not develop this argumentative direction here.

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