

# Migration and Social Population Ethics

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## Abstract

This paper explores how societies should evaluate choices that affect the size or the composition of their populations through migration, a subject that we call “social population ethics.” We build a framework for theorizing about social population ethics, within which we advance two substantive claims. First, we propose a desideratum for any theory of social population ethics, according to which “mere migration” is neutral from a social perspective: societies should be indifferent to migration that makes no one better or worse off. Second, we show that natural extensions of this neutrality are inconsistent with plausible distributive principles. We call this result the “Mere Migration Paradox.” While we do not come down in favor of any one response to the Mere Migration Paradox, we take it to provide some reason to doubt the existence of distinctively intrasocial distributive principles, or else to favor a highly expansive view of what those principles require with respect to migration.

## 1 Introduction

A central question in political philosophy is whether special moral principles regulate how goods should be distributed within societies. Many people believe that the answer is “yes.” Perhaps, for example, the members of a society may give extra weight to each other’s interests: Americans may treat each other’s welfare

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as counting for more than that of Britons, just as Britons may be partial to each other as well (e.g., Beitz, 1999; Miller, 2007; Nussbaum, 1994; Pogge, 2002; Tan, 2003). Or perhaps economic inequality is especially bad when it divides people who inhabit the same social space (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Blake, 2001; Julius, 2006; Kolodny, 2023; Nussbaum, 2006; O'Neill, 2008; Rawls, 1999b; Risse, 2012; Scanlon, 2018; Scheffler, 2003; Schemmel, 2021; Wellman, 2000). However the thought is spelled out, the basic idea that social relations affect how goods should be distributed has proved very hard to shake. To be sure, there is a great philosophical tradition of skepticism about the moral significance of borders between particular societies (e.g., Arneson, 2016; Godwin, 1793; Sidgwick, 1891; Singer, 2004). But even philosophers who deny that nations or states much matter often affirm that our *global* society does (e.g., Beitz, 1999; J. Cohen and Sabel, 2006; Julius, 2006; Pogge, 1989; Tan, 2012; Valentini, 2011). For example, they would balk at the idea that the interests of intelligent life forms on distant planets should be just as urgent, to us, as the interests of fellow Earthlings, even if we could affect them just as easily.

If special distributive principles hold within societies, then those principles must take account of the following fact: societies make choices that both distribute goods among their members *and* determine who those members are. For an example of such a choice, consider the following scenario:

**Skilled Migration** Society *A* is deciding between two tax policies. *A* can impose either a high or low tax rate on labor income in excess of \$200,000 that is earned by its residents. If *A* imposes the high tax rate, some highly skilled people who currently live in *A* will move to *B* and no highly skilled people who currently live in *B* will move to *A*. If, however, *A* imposes the low tax rate, no highly skilled people who live in *A* will move to *B* and some highly skilled people who currently live in *B* will move to *A*.

Some of *A*'s reasons for choosing between the high and the low tax do not depend on whether particular people are members of *A*'s population. Plausibly, *A* has some reasons linked to beneficence or global justice that require it to account for everyone's interests in certain ways. Nonetheless, it is also plausible that *A* should differentiate between its members and non-members to some extent. If that is correct, choosing between the high and the low tax requires *A* to compare social

populations that contain different people and have different sizes. This choice involves what we call “social population ethics.”

Despite its practical significance and its proximity to core questions in moral and political philosophy, social population ethics has been remarkably neglected. The literature on population ethics focuses almost entirely on choices that affect which people are brought into existence—i.e., the *global* population. Meanwhile, the literature on global distributive justice—in which philosophers discuss the “scope” of distributive principles, meaning which groups of people are covered by those principles—tends to assume fixed populations. Social population ethics has fallen through the cracks between these two research programs.

This paper identifies the subject of social population ethics, develops a theoretical framework for the subject, and advances two substantive claims within it. Our substantive claims can be summarized as follows. First, we propose a desideratum for any theory of social population ethics, which we call “Robust Social Neutrality.” Roughly put, Robust Social Neutrality says that societies should be indifferent to migration that makes no one better or worse off. If no one’s welfare (resources, or holdings of whatever distribuendum we care about) is affected, there is no reason to prefer that any particular life plays out in one society rather than another. Second, we show that natural extensions of Robust Social Neutrality are inconsistent with plausible distributive principles. We call this result the “Mere Migration Paradox,” after Derek Parfit’s Mere Addition Paradox, though (as we explain) there are crucial differences between the two. We consider several responses to the Mere Migration Paradox; each, we find, is unsatisfying. We therefore consider the Mere Migration Paradox to be an unsolved problem.

Our discussion has several philosophical implications. First, the Mere Migration Paradox provides some reason to adopt a revisionary view about how societies should distribute goods. That is so because, in our view, two of the most plausible responses to the puzzle are to reject the existence of distinctively intrasocial distributive principles or, alternatively, to favor a highly expansive view of what those principles require with respect to migration. Second, and more broadly, our exploration of social population ethics raises important questions about the morally relevant similarities and differences between migration and procreation. We do not aspire to provide the last word on those questions, but rather to open up social population ethics as a subject that is ripe for further philosophical inves-

tigation.

## 2 Framework

This section builds a conceptual framework for theorizing about social population ethics. We introduce a set of primitives, build a handful of derivative concepts, and state a substantive moral assumption, which we call “Distributivism.” Distributivism focuses our attention on evaluating outcomes from the perspective of one society that is concerned with how well off its members might be, in a very broad sense.

The World. Each *outcome* is a complete possible state of the world. To bracket the difficult questions of global population ethics, we assume that the global population of individual people is fixed across all outcomes.

There is a fixed set of *societies*. It does not matter for our purposes what exactly makes something a society, as long as there is more than one society and special moral principles regulate the distribution of goods within societies. We consider nation-states to be paradigmatic examples of societies, though some societies might be smaller or larger than nation-states. A sub-unit within a national federation, such as the state of New York, might count as a society in the sense with which we are concerned, as might certain international unions, such as the European Union. Indeed, as we suggested in section 1, the entire Earth might count as a society if intelligent life exists on other planets and relations on Earth ground special distributive principles.

The *social population* of a society  $S$  in outcome  $x$  is the set of individuals who are members of  $S$  in  $x$ . We assume that the population of a society can be any subset of the global population. It does not matter for our purposes what exactly makes someone a member of a society, as long as membership can be either lost, gained, or both, so that a society can have different populations in different outcomes. Perhaps one can gain membership by becoming a permanent resident; perhaps one can lose it by emigrating and renouncing whatever citizenship one initially had.

Goodness for Individuals. The *value* of an outcome is the degree to which it is good or bad for a person. These degrees can be interpreted however one likes: for example, as welfare levels, holdings of primary goods, vectors of capabilities and

functionings, qualities of opportunities, or any other conception of the “currency” of distributive justice (Adler, 2012; G. A. Cohen, 1989; Dworkin, 2000; Nussbaum, 2012; Rawls, 1999a; Sen, 1992). We assume that some values are greater than others (represented by  $>$ ). We make no further assumptions about the structure of values. We sometimes use numbers to represent these values, for purely illustrative purposes and when discussing some particular views that require such a representation; however, as we make clear, our arguments do not presuppose that values can be represented in this way.

Each individual  $i$  in the global population has a *value function*,  $V_i$ , defined on the set of all outcomes. Each individual’s value function assigns a value to each outcome, which tells us how well off that individual is in that outcome, in terms of the relevant currency of distribution. An outcome  $x$ ’s *social distribution* for society  $S$  is a mapping that takes each individual  $i$  who is a member of  $S$ ’s social population in  $x$  and returns the value assigned by  $V_i$  to  $x$ . Social distributions simply ignore nonmembers.

Evaluation of Choices. Our question is how different outcomes should be evaluated from the perspective of a particular society. As a first pass, we understand this question to ask which outcomes a society ought to choose, insofar as it is concerned solely with its own members. This restriction of social concern to members of society is not meant to suggest that societies *should* be concerned only with their own members. Rather, it merely focuses our attention on whatever special moral principles apply within societies, as opposed to principles associated with other values, such as global justice or beneficence, or with what ought to be done all things considered.

There are various attributes of individuals that might be relevant to the evaluation of social distributions. We will focus here only on how well off each member is. To be sure, this consideration might not be the only one that is relevant to a society’s choice. It might matter whether people *own* various goods (e.g., Nozick, 1974; Otsuka, 2003). It might matter whether some people *deserve* to hold certain goods, because they are especially productive or virtuous or worthy in some other way (e.g., Feldman, 2016; Kagan, 2013; Miller, 1996). It might matter whether a distribution results from an *inherently fair decision-procedure*, a procedure whose fairness does not fully depend on its outputs. We set aside these considerations not because we assume that they do not matter, but rather because evaluating the

effect of social choices on the quality of its members' lives is both important and complex in itself.

We'll now introduce some concepts to make our question more precise. Each finite, nonempty subset of possible outcomes is a *menu* (following Sen, 1971). Given a society  $S$  and menu  $M$ , there is some nonempty subset of  $M$  such that  $S$  ought to choose one of the outcomes in that subset, insofar as it is concerned solely with its own members. This is called the *choice set*  $C_S(M)$ . To say that an outcome  $x$  is in  $S$ 's choice set of  $M$  means that  $S$  *may* choose  $x$  from  $M$ —i.e., that it's not the case that  $S$  ought not to choose  $x$ —again, restricting our attention only to intrasocial considerations. The society's *choice function*  $C_S$  takes any menu of outcomes and returns the choice set in that menu. The nonemptiness of the choice set captures the assumption that there is always a permissible option.

We now introduce a principle which ensures that a society's choice between outcomes depends only on the value of those outcomes for its members:

**Distributivism** For any menus  $M$  and  $M'$ , and any outcomes  $x$  in  $M$  and  $y$  in  $M'$ , if all of the same social distributions for society  $S$  are attainable in  $M$  and  $M'$ , and  $x$  and  $y$  share the same social distribution for  $S$ , then  $x$  is in  $C_S(M)$  if and only if  $y$  is in  $C_S(M')$ .

Distributivism has two important consequences for our purposes. First, it means that each society's choice between outcomes ignores individuals who are not members of that society in those particular outcomes. This rules out views on which each society should care about some exogenously determined group of individuals even in outcomes where those individuals are not members of that society (e.g., individuals who will actually be born within its borders, even if they had been born elsewhere). Second, Distributivism means that the choice function is only sensitive to the value of each member's holdings, ignoring all other features of the outcomes. Formally, this allows us to take each society's choice function  $C_S$  and define a (purely) *distributive choice function*  $C_S^*$  which is defined on the set of menus of social distributions rather than of outcomes (Nebel, 2024). Henceforth, we will consider the choice function of an arbitrary society and drop the subscript.

We emphasize again that Distributivism, along with the more general framework we have sketched here, is only concerned with distinctively intrasocial considerations, not with moral considerations more broadly or with what we ought

to do all things considered. For brevity, we generally omit this restriction, pronouncing a social distribution in the choice set as “permissible” or saying that we “should not choose” it. But this should always be understood as what we should or should not do *insofar as a society is concerned solely about its own members’ welfare*. With this restriction in place, Distributivism seems a plausible working assumption. We consider the possibility of rejecting it in section 6. Until then, we proceed on the assumption that Distributivism is true.

### 3 Migration and Neutrality

In the previous section, we introduced a framework that clarifies the subject of social population ethics. In this section, we argue for a claim about social population ethics. According to this claim, “mere” migration—migration that does not make anyone better or worse off—does not affect social welfare. More precisely, one social distribution  $v$  is related to another social distribution  $u$  by mere migration if and only if (i) every member in  $u$  is also a member in  $v$ , (ii) all of those individuals are equally well off in both distributions, and (iii)  $v$  contains some additional members who are not members in  $u$ . According to *Robust Social Neutrality*:

**Robust Social Neutrality** If two social distributions differ only via mere migration, then in a choice between those two distributions alone, it is permissible (as far as intrasocial considerations go) to choose either.

Robust Social Neutrality is highly intuitive. To see why, consider a case of mere migration. Suppose that Alice might join our society without affecting the quality of her or any other member’s life. (If you find it hard to imagine how migration might leave everyone unaffected, you might suppose that our society is considering whether to peacefully annex the territory in which Alice lives while leaving the territory’s current government intact.) Mere migration simply relocates a life from one society to another. And, to us, it seems that we lack any reason to prefer that Alice’s life occurs within *our* society rather than another one. That is why it would be a mistake to pay some cost, however small, to relocate her.

This claim—that adding new members is socially “neutral”—is analogous to a widespread but highly contested intuition in global population ethics, according to which the mere fact that someone would have a good life is not a moral reason to

bring her into existence (Narveson, 1967). This is one half of the much-discussed “procreation asymmetry”; the other is that the fact that someone would have a *bad* life provides a strong moral reason not to bring her into existence (Frick, 2020; McMahan, 1981; Roberts, 2011; Thomas, 2023).

There are two important differences between Robust Social Neutrality and the original intuition of neutrality. First, we find Robust Social Neutrality harder to reject than the intuition of procreative neutrality. We can at least see the appeal of rejecting the intuition of procreative neutrality; a good life, one might think, is a great gift. Nothing similar can be said against Robust Social Neutrality. Mere migration makes no difference to anyone. And the value of social welfare is supposed to encompass what a society should choose insofar as it is concerned for the fates of its members. It therefore seems completely wrongheaded to think that we ought to admit some people just because their lives are worthwhile.

Second, as just noted, those who defend the intuition of procreative neutrality believe that it holds only with respect to certain lives—ones which are “worth living”: while they affirm that we have no moral reason to bring someone into existence simply because their life would be worth living, they also affirm that we have a strong moral reason not to create lives that are not worth living. Robust Social Neutrality makes no such restriction. (Indeed, we have not assumed our set of values to have any structure such as “positive” and “negative.”) Just as we have no reason to relocate sufficiently good lives *to* our society simply because they are good, so too we have no reason to move sufficiently bad lives *away* from it simply because they are bad.

Robust Social Neutrality is practically significant because it rules out many approaches to social population ethics that are assumed in the economic literature on optimal taxation. On these approaches, the values are assumed to be representable by real numbers, and the distributive choice function  $C^*$  is represented as maximizing a *social welfare function*, which assigns a real number to each social distribution. (We assume throughout this section that we ought to maximize the value of this social welfare function, whatever it is.) For example, Janeba and Schulz (2023) assume the following social welfare function:

**Social Totalism** The social welfare of a distribution is the (possibly weighted) sum of the values for its members.

Social Totalism straightforwardly violates Robust Social Neutrality. If some people

with positive welfare join a society through mere migration, the sum of the value of its members' holdings increases. Per Social Totalism, then, mere migration can improve social welfare. (And a similar point holds, *mutatis mutandis*, with respect to negative welfare.) These implications violate Robust Social Neutrality.

The violation of Robust Social Neutrality is not just a problem for Social Totalism. It also afflicts

**Social Averagism** The social welfare of a distribution is the (possibly weighted) average of the values for its members.

Social Averagism is perhaps the most common social welfare function used in the literature on optimal taxation in open economies (see, e.g., Bierbrauer, Brett, and Weymark, 2013; Morelli, Yang, and Ye, 2012; Simula and Trannoy, 2012). Yet it too violates Robust Social Neutrality, since it recommends expanding the social population whenever new members would increase average well-being, and recommends against expansions that would decrease average well-being. This was first noted by Narveson (1967: p. 67), who used a social example even though his primary concern was global population:

Suppose that we live in a certain country, say, Fervia, and we are told by our king that something is about to happen which will greatly increase the general happiness of the Fervians: namely that a certain city on Mars, populated by extremely happy Martians will shortly become a part of Fervia. Since these new Fervians are very happy, the average happiness, hence the "general happiness" of the Fervians will be greatly increased. Balderdash. If you were a Fervian, would you be impressed by this reasoning? Obviously not. What has happened, of course, is simply that the base upon which the average was calculated has been shifted. When the Fervians are told that their happiness will be affected by something, they assume that the happiness of those presently understood by them as being Fervians will be increased.

While it is controversial whether or not Narveson's point is sound with respect to global populations, it seems highly compelling with respect to social populations. Mere annexation does not, by itself, increase social welfare even when it raises the

average welfare of society's members.<sup>1</sup>

Another commonly used social welfare function in the optimal taxation literature is

**Social Maximin** The social welfare of a distribution is the minimum value for its members.

Social Maximin is assumed, for example, by Dai, Gao, and Tian (2020), Lehmann, Simula, and Trannoy (2014), and Simula and Trannoy (2010). In our view, Social Maximin is not plausible for reasons that are independent of migration, since it implies complete indifference to the effects of our choices on members who are not the very worst off. This would be avoided by a variable-population analogue of the “leximin” rule, which first prioritizes the very worst-off individual, followed by the second-worst-off, and so on. The *critical-level leximin* rule compares social distributions by first taking the difference between their population sizes, adding that many members to the smaller population at some fixed “critical level,” and comparing the resulting distributions by the leximin rule (Blackorby, Bossert, and Donaldson, 2005: p. 169). Even if one were attracted to leximin in a fixed-population context, however, this rule violates Robust Social Neutrality in the variable-population context. It always recommends adding members above the critical level, and recommends against adding members below it.

## 4 The Mere Migration Paradox

In the previous section, we identified a desideratum for a theory of social population ethics, namely Robust Social Neutrality. Robust Social Neutrality asserts that mere migration—migration that does not affect anyone—does not affect social welfare. In reality, of course, migration almost always affects people, some for better, others for worse. In this section, we identify a problem that arises when we try to account for these effects while adhering to Robust Social Neutrality.

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<sup>1</sup>Social Averagism can lead to especially bizarre violations of Robust Social Neutrality. Suppose that there are only two societies, and someone can move from one society to the other in a way that affects no one (including themselves) for better or worse. It can happen that this would increase the average value in *both* societies. This is an instance of the “Will Rogers” phenomenon, named after the comedian who (allegedly) joked that “When the Okies left Oklahoma and moved to California, they raised the average intelligence level in both states” (Pearl, 2016).

We begin with a clarification about the scope of our analysis. Because we are interested in *social* (as opposed to global) welfare, we focus on how migration affects the members of a particular society. A complete normative theory of migration would have to consider the effects of migration on nonmembers as well. It is plausible to think that a society should, at a minimum, welcome new members if doing so would be good for at least some nonmembers and have no effect on any member. But this seems to be a requirement of general beneficence or global justice, not one that follows from a special principle that governs distribution *within* a society. We have already adopted a working assumption—Distributivism—which brackets this sort of consideration; we revisit the issue in section 6.

With that clarification in place, we now state two principles that seem to us highly compelling, provided that Robust Social Neutrality is true. The first concerns what might be called “benign migration” (after the “benign migration” principle of Huemer, 2008). Benign migration involves immigration that makes *all* members better off. If Robust Social Neutrality is true, it seems hard to deny that benign migration improves social welfare. Benign migration makes all members better off. Thus, from a social perspective, the only conceivable strike against benign migration is that it involves the addition of new members. But Robust Social Neutrality rules out giving any weight to the mere fact that a society contains new members. Thus, we expect anyone attracted to Robust Social Neutrality to accept the following principle:

**Binary Benign Migration** If all individuals who are members in distribution  $u$  are also members in  $v$ , and  $v$  is better for all of them than  $u$ , then we ought to choose  $v$  in a choice between the two (that is,  $C^*({u, v}) = {v}$ ).

For similar reasons, social welfare seems to be impaired by “malign” migration, which adds new members in a way that makes things worse for all the others. We would expect anyone attracted to Robust Social Neutrality to agree that malign migration is not *required*:

**Binary Malign Migration** If all individuals who are members in distribution  $u$  are also members in distribution  $v$ , and  $v$  is worse for all of them than  $u$ , then we are not required to choose  $v$  in a choice between the two (that is,  $C^*({u, v}) \neq {v}$ ).

Malign migration makes all members worse off. Thus, from a social perspective, the only conceivable virtue of malign migration is that it adds new members. But Robust Social Neutrality entails that such addition does not improve social welfare. Thus, if Robust Social Neutrality is true, Binary Malign Migration seems to be true as well.

These two principles say nothing about what to do in the presence of more than two options. Binary Benign Migration can easily be generalized by saying that if one distribution is related to another by benign migration, then our society should not (insofar as it is concerned solely with its own members) choose the one from any menu that contains the other. However, we can make do with an even weaker principle, which says that *either* it is wrong to choose  $u$ , *or* it is permissible to choose  $v$ :

**Generalized Benign Migration** For any menu  $M$  and distributions  $u$  and  $v$  in  $M$ : if all individuals who are members in  $u$  are also members in  $v$ , and  $v$  is better for all of them than  $u$ , then it is permissible to choose  $v$  from  $M$  if it is permissible to choose  $u$  from  $M$  (that is, if  $u$  is in  $C^*(M)$  then  $v$  is in  $C^*(M)$ ).

Binary Malign Migration can naturally be generalized by saying that if one distribution is related to another by malign migration, then we are not required to choose the one from any menu to which the other belongs:

**Generalized Malign Migration** For any menu  $M$  and distributions  $u$  and  $v$  in  $M$ : if all individuals who are members in distribution  $u$  are also members in distribution  $v$ , and  $v$  is worse for all of them than  $u$ , then we are not required to choose  $v$  from  $M$  (that is,  $C^*(M) \neq \{v\}$ ).

Binary Malign Migration is the special case of Generalized Malign Migration when  $M = \{u, v\}$ . By contrast, Generalized Benign Migration does not by itself entail Binary Benign Migration.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, we are still very far from a complete theory of social population ethics. Generalized Benign Migration and Generalized Malign Migration only tell us what to choose when the addition of a new member makes *all* other members better or worse off; they are silent with respect to patterns of migration that are

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<sup>2</sup>For analogous principles in the context of global population ethics and the Procreation Asymmetry, see Nebel (2025).

better for some members but worse for others. Nonetheless, even these relatively weak principles give rise to a problem. This is our “Mere Migration Paradox.”

The Mere Migration Paradox can be illustrated with a simple numerical example. Consider the three social distributions in Table 1. In  $u$ , there is a single member  $i$  at level 10. In  $u^+$ ,  $i$  is even better off, and the society contains an additional member  $j$  at level 1. Moving from  $u^+$  to  $v$  equalizes the value of their holdings at level 7.

	$i$	$j$
$u$	10	
$u^+$	11	1
$v$	7	7

Table 1: The Mere Migration Paradox

Compare  $u$  to  $u^+$ . Moving from  $u$  to  $u^+$  is an instance of benign migration, since all the members in  $u$  are better off in  $u^+$  and  $u^+$  contains one additional member. Thus, Generalized Benign Migration entails that we shouldn’t choose  $u$  unless  $u^+$  is permissible.

Now compare  $u^+$  to  $v$ . The society’s members are identical in both of these distributions. Additionally,  $v$  distributes holdings across these members much more equally than  $u^+$ , and the average (and therefore total) value of members’ holdings is greater in  $v$  than it is in  $u^+$ . Thus, any plausible theory of social welfare would entail we shouldn’t choose  $u^+$ . It would do so by the following principle (see Arrhenius, 2000; Ng, 1989; Stewart, 2022; Thomas, 2018):

**Non-Anti-Egalitarianism** For any menu of distributions  $M$ , and any distributions  $u$  and  $v$  in  $M$  with the same population, if the average (and therefore total) value of members’ holdings is greater in  $v$  than in  $u$ , and there is no inequality in  $v$ , then we shouldn’t choose  $u$  from  $M$ .

The motivation for Non-Anti-Egalitarianism, and for its name, is that even if (as we discuss below) inequality is not, in itself, a bad thing, it is certainly not a *good* thing. So there is no reason to choose an unequal distribution in the presence of a perfectly equal distribution that is unambiguously better by utilitarian lights.

Non-Anti-Egalitarianism implies that we shouldn’t choose  $u^+$  in Table 1, so we shouldn’t choose  $u$  either by Generalized Benign Migration. Thus, we ought to

choose  $v$ . But this violates Generalized Malign Migration, because moving from  $u$  to  $v$  is an instance of *malign* migration, since all the members in  $u$  are *worse* off in  $v$  and  $v$  contains one additional member. Hence, three seemingly plausible principles of social population ethics—Generalized Benign Migration, Generalized Malign Migration, and Non-Anti-Egalitarianism—are inconsistent, given the existence of distributions like the ones above.

In fact, the problem is more general than this. Non-Anti-Egalitarianism assumes that there is such a thing as the “average” and “total” value of a distribution. Our official framework does not include this assumption. But the principle can be considerably weakened in a way is still inconsistent with Generalized Benign Migration and Generalized Malign Migration. To formulate this principle, for any value  $v$  and social population  $I$ , let  $\mathbf{v}_I$  denote the constant distribution that assigns  $v$  to every member of  $I$ ; and for any distributions  $u$  and  $v$  with disjoint populations, let  $u \oplus v$  denote the concatenation of  $u$  and  $v$ , which maps each member  $i$  of  $u$ ’s population to  $u_i$  and each member  $j$  of  $v$ ’s population to  $v_j$ :

**Minimal Non-Elitism** There exist values  $a, b, c, d$  (where  $a > b > c > d$ ) and disjoint sets of individuals  $I$  and  $J$ , such that we shouldn’t choose  $\mathbf{a}_I \oplus \mathbf{d}_J$  from any menu that also includes  $\mathbf{c}_{I \cup J}$ .<sup>3</sup>

Minimal Non-Elitism, Generalized Benign Migration, and Generalized Malign Migration are inconsistent, given the auxiliary assumption that there are menus with the requisite distributions. For simplicity we make the most general assumption of this kind (though, strictly speaking, all we require is that *some menu* includes three distributions that satisfy the principles above):

**Unrestricted Domain** Every finite set of social distributions is in the domain of  $C^*$ .

Generalized Benign Migration, Generalized Malign Migration, Minimal Non-Elitism, and Unrestricted Domain are jointly inconsistent. Unrestricted Domain guarantees the existence of a menu  $M = \{u, u^+, v\}$  depicted in Table 2, where values  $a, b, c, d$  and sets of members  $I$  and  $J$  are as in Minimal Non-Elitism. Minimal Non-Elitism implies that we shouldn’t choose  $u^+$ . But we shouldn’t choose  $u$  either

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<sup>3</sup>This is a weaker, choice-functional variation on the “Non-Elitism” condition of Arrhenius (2011). A similar principle is the “Minimal Equity” condition of Deschamps and Gevers (1978).

by Generalized Benign Migration, since  $u^+$  is related to  $u$  by benign migration. Thus, we ought to choose  $v$ , which violates Generalized Malign Migration, since  $v$  is related to  $u$  by malign migration. We therefore have the following result:

**The Mere Migration Paradox.** *There is no distributive choice function that satisfies Generalized Benign Migration, Generalized Malign Migration, Minimal Non-Elitism, and Unrestricted Domain.*

	I	J
$u$	$b$	
$u^+$	$a$	$d$
$v$	$c$	$c$

Table 2: The Mere Migration Paradox

## 5 Responses to the Mere Migration Paradox

As its name suggests, our result is inspired by Parfit’s Mere Addition Paradox (Parfit, 1984). But our puzzle is not simply an analogue of Parfit’s, involving migration instead of procreation. There are crucial differences between our puzzle and Parfit’s. First, the Mere Addition Paradox centers on the “repugnant conclusion” that for any population of wonderful lives, there is a population of barely-worth-living lives whose existence would be better.<sup>4</sup> No analogue of the repugnant conclusion plays a role in our argument. Our puzzle is not that plausible principles lead to a repugnant conclusion, but that they are simply inconsistent.

Of course, someone who accepts Parfit’s repugnant conclusion may wish to accept an analogous conclusion for social distributions brought about via migration. Such a person would want to reject Robust Social Neutrality as well as Generalized Malign Migration. But, as we noted earlier, while we can see some appeal to affirming that there is a moral reason to create lives that are worth living, we see no reason to relocate lives when doing so does not affect anyone. Moreover, there are views on which the repugnant conclusion is repugnant for reasons which have

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<sup>4</sup>Some argue that this conclusion is not so repugnant after all (e.g., Huemer, 2008; Zuber et al., 2021).

nothing to do with the intuitive neutrality of bringing people into existence, and views which try to avoid the repugnant conclusion by appealing to such reasons (e.g., Nebel, 2022). Views of this kind seem to have little to offer in response to our puzzle.

Another important difference is that the Mere Migration Paradox is not about which outcomes or social distributions are better or worse. It therefore does not rely on any principles about the logic of betterness, such as transitivity or completeness. Responses to Parfit’s paradox which appeal to the failure of such principles (e.g., those of Parfit, 2011; Temkin, 1987) are simply not relevant to ours. The only structural principle we need is the assumption that the choice function always returns a nonempty set of options. While some theorists may be willing to countenance the existence of hard moral dilemmas in which we have no permissible options, it would strike us as a radical and extremely surprising result if the best response to our puzzle were to conclude that mere migration places us in such dilemmas. A further implication of this difference is that our puzzle cannot be avoided by denying the existence of any such thing as the goodness of outcomes (Foot, 1983; Thomson, 2008), or by distinguishing between goodness and what we ought to do (Boonin-Vail, 1996; Dancy, 2020).<sup>5</sup>

Despite these differences, certain responses to Parfit’s paradox have analogues for migration. In the remainder of this section, we explore some of these responses. While we are not entirely happy with any of them, we do not claim that they are all hopeless either. In calling our puzzle the “Mere Migration Paradox,” we do not mean to imply that the principles involved are anything close to irresistible; it is merely meant to emphasize the relation to Parfit’s well-known puzzle. While it is perfectly obvious that one of the principles must be false (after all, they are inconsistent), it is not obvious to us which one it is and why.

## 5.1 Social Inequality

Let’s first consider a response that rejects Binary Benign Migration. This principle might be rejected on broadly egalitarian grounds. When considering  $u^+$  in Table 1, for instance, we might observe that person  $j$  is much worse off than person  $i$ . We

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<sup>5</sup>This is also true of existing, underappreciated reformulations of Parfit’s paradox in choice-functional terms (Arrhenius, 2004; Stewart, 2022)—following, like us, Sen (2017)’s choice-functional version of Arrow’s impossibility theorem.

might think that, even in a choice between  $u$  and  $u^+$  alone, we can be required to choose  $u$  to prevent this inequality, even though it benefits member  $i$ .<sup>6</sup>

In our view, this social-egalitarian response does not hold up to scrutiny, at least within a framework that assumes Distributivism. There are two ways in which inequalities between members might be objectionable. The first is that they might be bad *for* at least some of those members (Kolodny, 2023; O'Neill, 2008; Scanlon, 2018; Schemmel, 2021; Wellman, 2000). Perhaps better-off members of society can convert their holdings into outsized political influence and therefore dominate the worse off (Anderson, 1999; Bartels, 2017; Gilens, 2012; Scanlon, 2018; Scheffler, 2003; Schemmel, 2021). Or perhaps knowing that other people are much better off might cause the worse off to feel anxious or inadequate or humiliated (Frank, 2011; Scanlon, 2018; Sen, 1992). These considerations, however, while perfectly real and important, are not germane to our puzzle, since they should already be taken into consideration when determining the value of each distribution for each member of society.

Alternatively, inequality between members might be especially objectionable even when it is not worse for anyone, simply because it is, in itself, unfair (cf. Beitz, 1999; Blake, 2001; J. Cohen and Sabel, 2006; Julius, 2006; Kolodny, 2023; Rawls, 1999b; Risse, 2012; Scanlon, 2018; Temkin, 1993). But, if that is so, then presumably we should avoid creating inequalities between members of a society in a way that benefits no one—i.e., through mere migration. This violates not only Binary Benign Migration, but also Robust Social Neutrality.

Now, perhaps this just shows that we should rethink our claim that Robust Social Neutrality is nonnegotiable for social population ethics. We think, instead, that it reveals a problem for the social-egalitarian response. We cannot justify denying visas to potential immigrants on the grounds that accepting them would be unfair *to them*, qua members of our society, if they'd be worse off than current members. To paraphrase Parfit, we cannot plausibly claim that additional people should not be admitted to our society merely because there are other people in our society who are better off than them. It is wrong to view them as *a blot on society* (cf. Parfit, 1986).

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<sup>6</sup>Parfit (1986) considers and rejects this sort of response for reasons explained below. Asheim and Zuber (2014) propose an egalitarian approach to population ethics which, if translated to the migration setting, would violate Binary Benign Migration.

This seems even clearer when considering *emigration*. Suppose that rather than adding members, we can remove them, by encouraging them to emigrate to other societies. On the view in question, we should encourage worse-off members of our society to leave—not because doing so would improve conditions for them or others, but simply because it would decrease the inequality between members. That is hard to believe. It seems totally backwards to say that we better honor people’s claims as members of our society merely by getting those people to leave our society.

A distinct egalitarian response accepts Binary Benign Migration but rejects Generalized Benign Migration. The former principle is restricted to binary choices between two options. The latter principle applies to choices from larger menus of options, such as the menu consisting of  $u$ ,  $u^+$ , and  $v$ . One might think that equality strikes against Generalized Benign Migration—but not Binary Benign Migration—because inequality is unfair only when it is possible to make the worse-off members of society better off (see Frick, 2022). On this view,  $u^+$  is not objectionable on egalitarian grounds when the only alternative is to exclude or expel  $j$  (i.e., to choose  $u$ ). But  $u^+$  is objectionable on egalitarian grounds when it is possible to make  $j$  just as well off as  $i$  (i.e., to choose  $v$ ). Thus, we are not required to choose  $u^+$  when choosing among  $u$ ,  $u^+$ , and  $v$ .

In our view, this response does not provide a fully satisfactory solution to the Mere Migration Paradox because it is possible to generate a similar puzzle with a kind of benign migration that does not introduce inequality.<sup>7</sup> Consider the following example:

	Person 1	Persons 2, ..., $n$
$u$	4	
$u^+$	5	5
$v$	4	10

Table 3: Egalitarian Migration

Compare  $u$  to  $u^+$ . Moving from  $u$  to  $u^+$  is a special kind of benign migration; it involves benefiting all existing members and adding new members whose lives

<sup>7</sup>See Nebel (2025) for the analogous point regarding procreation, drawing on cases and principles in Thomas, 2023: p. 475; Francis, 2022: ch. 3; Thornley, 2023: p. 522.

will be just as good as those of the existing members. Call this “egalitarian migration.” There can be no egalitarian objection to such migration because the resulting distribution is perfectly equal. Given that  $u^+$  is an option, and it differs from  $u$  only by egalitarian migration, it seems that we shouldn’t choose  $u$ .

Now compare  $u^+$  to  $v$ . These distributions share the same members. In  $v$ , arbitrarily many of them are made much better off than they are in  $u^+$ , whereas only one member is made slightly worse off. Plausibly, there should be some limit on our concern for equality: at least in some cases like this, we shouldn’t make everyone equally well off if we can make sufficiently many people sufficiently better off at sufficiently small cost to sufficiently few. The values in Table 3 are just one possible example. Surely there are *some* distributions like  $u^+$  and  $v$  in that table such that we shouldn’t choose  $u^+$  from a menu that includes  $v$ . But if we shouldn’t choose  $u$  or  $u^+$ , the only permissible option is  $v$ , which differs from  $u$  only through the adding members—that is, through mere migration. Per Robust Social Neutrality, we are not required to add members through mere migration. We’ve reached another contradiction.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, some would reject our claim that we shouldn’t choose  $u^+$ , on the grounds that a just society should—or, at least, can—give absolute priority to the worst off (Rawls, 1999a). While we ourselves do not share this view, it is noteworthy that an egalitarian solution to the Mere Migration Paradox can succeed only if a particularly strict form of egalitarianism is true—that is, only if it is permissible to sacrifice arbitrarily large gains for arbitrarily many people to avoid an arbitrarily small loss to a single person.

## 5.2 Counterfactual Complaints

A second response to the Mere Migration Paradox provides an alternative explanation of why Binary Benign Migration and Binary Malign Migration are true while Generalized Benign Migration and Generalized Malign Migration are false. This explanation is based on the notion of a *counterfactual complaint*—that is, a claim against being made worse off than one could have been otherwise. In distribution  $u^+$ , person  $j$  is not just worse off than  $i$ , but also worse off than she herself would have been under  $v$ . We might think that this gives  $j$  a complaint against

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<sup>8</sup>See again Nebel (2025) for the analogous puzzle in the context of procreation.

the choice of  $u^+$ , which can make it permissible to choose  $u$  but not  $u^+$ , contrary to Generalized Benign Migration. This response is compatible with Binary Benign Migration, since in the pairwise choice between  $u$  and  $u^+$  alone, no one has any complaint against  $u^+$ , whereas  $i$  has a complaint against  $u$ .<sup>9</sup>

In order to evaluate complaint-based views, we need to operationalize them. For sake of concreteness, we will start by considering a simple complaint-based view. On this view, a member has a complaint against choosing a distribution from some menu just in case that distribution would make her worse off than she would have been under some alternative in that menu in which she would still be a member. The size of her complaint is proportional to how much worse off she is than she would be under her best such alternative. And it is permissible to choose a social distribution just in case there is no alternative in the menu with a smaller sum of complaints.

On this view, the only permissible choice in Table 1 is  $u$ . Since  $j$  is 6 units better off in  $v$  than in  $u^+$ ,  $j$  has a strength 6 complaint against  $u^+$ . Since  $i$  is four units better off in  $v$  than she is in  $u^+$ ,  $i$  has a complaint of strength 4 against  $v$ . Meanwhile,  $i$  only has a complaint of strength 1 against  $u$  (and  $j$  has no membership-based complaint against  $u$ , because he is not a member of the society in  $u$ ). So  $u$  is the outcome that has the smallest sum of complaints against it. This view therefore implies that  $u$  is the only permissible option, contrary to Generalized Benign Migration.

This simple view, however, is implausibly averse to *improvable immigration* (based on Ross, 2015's problem of "improvable life avoidance"). It entails that we should, other things being equal, resist admitting new members of society simply because we have the option of making the newcomers even better off, even when this outside option would have disastrous consequences in other respects. Consider, for example, the case depicted in Table 4. In that case,  $u$  minimizes the sum of would-be members' complaints, so society shouldn't choose  $v$ , simply because doing so would make someone a member who would have been better off as a member in  $w$ . This seems to us to ascribe too much normative significance to the mere possibility that a member of our society could be made better off. It is perfectly fine for a society to admit new members, especially when doing so would benefit the original ones, even if they could have admitted them in a way that makes them

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<sup>9</sup>Complaint-based views in population ethics have been explored by Horton (2021), McDermott (2018), Otsuka (2018), Podgorski (2023), and Ross (2015), among others.

better off.

	$i$	$j$
$u$	7	
$v$	8	8
$w$	0	10

Table 4: Improvable Immigration Avoidance

Consider a more realistic analogue to this stylized case. Suppose that there is a large group of foreigners who are willing to immigrate to our society. And suppose that their immigration will make all current members of our society better off: some people will be reunited with family members, others will enjoy fruitful collaborations, and all those who might lose, in the short-term, will be compensated with transfers financed by our increased tax base. It seems obvious that admitting these immigrants would be a good thing, from the perspective of our society. But now imagine someone points out a third option: we could admit these immigrants and also tax all existing members with a vengeance, at the revenue-maximizing rates, and transfer all the resources raised to the new members. This would lead to a two-tier society, in which the new members are well off and the older members are poor. On the simple complaint-based view, the mere existence of this third option, however bad it might be, entails that we shouldn't admit this group of immigrants in the first place. And that seems wrong.

The problem of improvable immigration avoidance might motivate a more sophisticated complaint-based view. For example, we might consider a *two-stage* view, which works as follows. First, we rule out any distributions, such as  $w$  in Table 4, that violate Non-Anti-Egalitarianism, or some other fixed-population principle. Only then, in the second stage, do we consider complaints against the remaining distributions, and seek to minimize the sum of such complaints. This two-stage procedure might be motivated by the idea that a putative member's complaint is not reasonable if it the only way it can be satisfied is by bringing about a manifestly unjust distribution. Choice functions with this two-stage structure have been studied, in a more abstract context, by Manzini and Mariotti (2007) and Horan (2016), among others.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Of course, this is just one kind of two-stage view. For example, we could also consider a view

Unfortunately, this sort of view faces other problems. For example, in Table 5, the first stage of our two-stage view is silent, since there is no plausible way of ruling out  $u$  without also ruling out  $v$ . If both options survive the first stage, then a complaint arises then in the second stage, whereas no such complaint arises against  $w$ . (Horton, 2021 calls these “backfiring” complaints; see also McDermott, 2018.) Thus,  $w$  is deemed the only permissible option. But it seems absurd to think that, just because there would be multiple ways to admit certain individuals as members of our society, none of which would be best for *all* of them, we cannot admit them at all.

	$i$	$j$	$k$
$u$	9	10	
$v$	10	9	
$w$			1

Table 5: Backfiring Complaints

The recent literature in global population ethics has seen a number of sophisticated complaint-based views which are designed to avoid these problems (Horton, 2021; McDermott, 2018; Podgorski, 2023). Our sense is that these more complicated views face problems of their own (Thornley, 2023) or betray some aspects of the basic intuition behind complaint-based views. However, rather than discussing these various proposals in any detail, we note a more general problem that afflicts any view that satisfies Binary Benign Migration while rejecting Generalized Benign Migration. Any such view, at least on the face of it, gives rise to some form of dynamic inconsistency. Suppose for example that we begin with the three-option choice in Table 1, between  $u$ ,  $u^+$ , and  $v$ . If Generalized Benign Migration is false, then it is permissible to choose  $u$  in such a choice. However, suppose that bringing about  $u$  would first require some action—e.g., changing the tax code—which eliminates the possibility of  $v$  while preserving the possibility of  $u^+$ . After we have done that, we then face a binary choice between  $u$  and  $u^+$ . And, by Binary Benign Migration, we should not choose  $u$  in such a choice. As Thomas (2023) puts it, “a permissible option cannot be permissibly implemented” (p. 485). This seems bizarre.

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that applies Generalized Benign Migration and Generalized Malign Migration themselves, rather than complaint minimization, after applying some fixed-population principle (or before). These views would lead to quite different problems.

Of course, there are strategies available for handling this sort of problem.<sup>11</sup> However, we find the threat of dynamic inconsistency, along with the other problems for complaint-based views, to provide further reason to consider other possible solutions to our puzzle, which have more distinctive implications or attractions for migration.

### 5.3 Necessary Members

A third response explores a similar strategy but with respect to Non-Anti-Egalitarianism and Minimal Non-Elitism. These principles seem exceedingly plausible with respect to the binary choice between  $u^+$  to  $v$ . In that choice, the population is fixed, and it seems extremely compelling that we should exercise the option to both raise the average value of the distribution while simultaneously reducing inequality. Perhaps, though, one might wonder whether we can maintain *that* judgment while rejecting Non-Anti-Egalitarianism and Minimal Non-Elitism as stated, which also apply to the three-option choice between  $u$ ,  $u^+$ , and  $v$ .

Again, the challenge is to explain why these principles should be restricted only to pairwise comparisons. One possible explanation is that a social planner should do what is best for those individuals who would be members of her society in all of the options available in a given menu (see Singer 1976 for the analogous view about procreation). These are the *necessary* members in that menu. One possible motivation for this “necessitarian” view is that these are the only individuals whom the agent *knows* to be members of her society, at the time of choice. The agent cannot know this of people whose membership depends on their choices. This is because, plausibly, deliberation crowds out knowledge of one’s own choices. If you know that you will not bring about some outcome, then bringing about that outcome is not among the options over which you are deliberating.<sup>12</sup> Now, in global population ethics, there seems to be no good reason to focus only on these knowably existing people: we should also consider the welfare of people who would exist if we chose an option. But, in the social case, it might

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<sup>11</sup>One such strategy is developed in Nebel, 2025; see Thomas, 2023: n. 26, for difficulties with strategies of this kind.

<sup>12</sup>This does not commit us to the stronger view that deliberation crowds out all kinds of self-prediction, such as the assignment of non-extremal credences to one’s choosing various options (see Hájek, 2016; Rabinowicz, 2002).

seem reasonable for a social planner to focus her evaluation on the people whom she knows to be members at the time of her decision.

Nonetheless, we believe that the necessitarian view is ultimately mistaken. This is not simply because we are firmly committed to Non-Anti-Egalitarianism or at least Minimal Non-Elitism, but also because we reject this way of determining the relevant fixed population of members to whom we owe special consideration. It seems to us inexcusable to ignore the effects of choosing an option on people whom we know *would* be members if we chose that option, simply because we don't know that we *will* choose that option.

This seems especially clear in cases of emigration. Suppose that we can make health insurance vastly more expensive, but allow individuals to opt out, so that most members of our society will leave, but the few who are sufficiently healthy to remain uninsured are better off. (We assume that "leaving" our society in the relevant sense means losing membership.) It seems completely unfamiliar to evaluate this option, from a social perspective, by pretending that we owe special consideration only to those individuals who would stay in our society no matter what.

## 5.4 Permissive Views

We now want to consider a different way of looking at the Mere Migration Paradox. We said in section 4 that, insofar as we are committed to Robust Social Neutrality, we should also accept Binary Benign Migration. And we offered Generalized Benign Migration as a natural generalization of this principle. But perhaps we should rethink Binary Benign Migration, while holding onto Robust Social Neutrality. Perhaps societies have a prerogative to determine their own membership, and that this prerogative can make it permissible for agents of a society to forgo benefits to individuals whose membership is fixed, or even to make things worse for them.

One might motivate this sort of response by drawing an analogy to other kinds of associations. For example, families seem to have a prerogative to add new children in a wide range of circumstances, even when doing so would require sacrifices of the parents and existing children. Universities have a prerogative to increase their enrollment even when doing so would redirect resources from those who would have been students in any event. A general membership-determining

prerogative therefore might seem familiar.

This response, however, is unsatisfying in two respects. First, we believe that these analogies are unpersuasive. There are several features of small-scale associations that might explain why the members of those association are morally permitted to set back one another's interests, and these features do not characterize many societies. Parents often make decisions with each other's actual consent. Additionally, in relation to their children, they are in the unusual position of both exercising authority and having their own lives to lead. It is therefore plausible that they might permissibly choose to set back the interests of their children (to some extent) in order to pursue their own projects, such as raising another child. Meanwhile, students' opportunities to exit and enter universities are typically much more robust than subjects' opportunities to exit and enter societies. By contrast, in the civic context, it seems far less optional for a society's agent to refuse to confer a benefit on one of its members when that person wishes to obtain the benefit and conferring it comes at no cost at anyone else. And we can see no reason why policies that affect migration should provide an exception to that general principle. If it is wrong for our associates to deprive us by, say, constructing a needlessly wasteful road network, why wouldn't it be wrong for our associates to deprive us by refusing to admit new members?

Our second point is more concessive. Perhaps there is nothing wrong with a society deciding that it wishes to expand in ways that involve sacrifices for existing members, or deciding against expansions that would be advantageous for existing members. Even so, one might have been inclined to think that a society is, at the very least, permitted to do the opposite: to not expand in ways that involve sacrifices for existing members, or to expand in ways that are advantageous to them. The Mere Migration Paradox shows that this course of action entails violating Non-Anti-Egalitarianism and Minimal Non-Elitism. And these principles do not seem to be optional in the way that Binary Benign Migration and Binary Malign Migration might be. So the Mere Migration Paradox shows that adhering to Generalized Benign Migration comes at surprising cost. On pain of violating Non-Anti-Egalitarianism and Minimal Non-Elitism, a society must reject benign migration or welcome malign migration. That, we think, is an uncomfortable result.

## 6 Rejecting Distributivism

One final response to the Mere Migration Paradox is to reject an assumption we made at the outset—namely, Distributivism. We adopted Distributivism to clarify the question of how a society should choose insofar as it is concerned solely with its own members. But one might think that Distributivism fails to do that in a plausible way.

Distributivism implies that a society should not take any special concern about how its policies affect its members as they emigrate. For example, suppose that, in the status quo ( $x$ ), everyone in our society is equally well off. We can adopt some policy that will make some members better off, while leading other members to leave, in a way that makes them worse off (outcome  $y$ ). A version of this example is depicted in Table 6, where the value of  $y$  for person  $j$  is displayed in red to indicate that she isn't a member of our society in that outcome. If Distributivism is true, we can simply ignore  $j$  in outcome  $y$ . That, one might think, is a mistake. Perhaps the loss to  $j$  is relevant to the evaluation of our choice, in a way that it wouldn't be if  $j$  were a complete stranger from the outset.

	$i$	$j$
$x$	7	7
$y$	10	1

Table 6: Against Distributivism

We believe that this objection has considerable force. The question, however, is what we should accept in place of Distributivism and whether that alternative fully avoids the Mere Migration Paradox in a satisfactory way.

A first alternative to Distributivism treats emigration and immigration asymmetrically. It says that societies should take a special concern with the effect of emigration on current members who emigrate but not with the effect of immigration on future members who immigrate. We will understand this asymmetric treatment in terms of a “reference point” (cf. Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Kőszegi and Rabin, 2006), which we here take to be some outcome designated as the status quo. Societies should take a special concern with people who are or will be members in the reference point outcome but not with people who would be members in other

outcomes. For this reason, we will call this view “Reference-Dependent Distributivism.”

We’ll now formalize Reference-Dependent Distributivism. Each choice situation is a pair  $(M, r)$ , where  $M$  is a menu and  $r$  is a reference point, which is assumed to be an outcome contained in  $M$ . The choice function  $C$  takes a choice situation  $(M, r)$  and returns the set  $C(M, r)$  of acceptable choices when  $r$  is the reference point. For any outcomes  $x$  and  $r$ , we define  $x$ ’s  $r$ -distribution as the function which tells us the value of  $x$  for each individual who is a member of our society in  $r$ . (Importantly, these individuals may or may not be members in  $x$ .) Reference-Dependent Distributivism can be stated as follows:

**Reference-Dependent Distributivism** Take any two choice situations  $(M, r)$  and  $(M', r)$  with the same reference point, and any outcomes  $x$  in  $M$  and  $y$  in  $M'$ . If all of the same  $r$ -distributions for society  $S$  are attainable in  $M$  and  $M'$ , and  $x$  and  $y$  share the same  $r$ -distribution for  $S$ , then  $x$  is in  $C(M, r)$  if and only if  $y$  is in  $C(M', r)$ .

Reference-Dependent Distributivism is in one way more expansive than Distributivism because it permits societies to take a special concern with harms and benefits experienced through emigration. Nonetheless, we find Reference-Dependent Distributivism to be unsatisfying, because we can still formulate a version of the Mere Migration Paradox under Reference-Dependent Distributivism. Consider the menu of outcomes depicted in Table 7, where  $z$  is assumed to be the reference point and the value of an outcome for someone who isn’t a member of our society in that outcome is displayed in red. In  $z$ , person  $k$  is the only member. Outcomes  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $x^+$  have the same  $z$ -distribution, which is better for  $z$ ’s sole member than  $z$  itself. Reference-Dependent Distributivism would therefore seem to imply that any of  $x$ ,  $y$ , or  $x^+$  is permissible. But this seems very strange, since we know if we choose any of those outcomes, we will be doing what is worse for all of the people who will be members of our society given our choice. It seems to us wrongheaded to simply ignore individuals who *would* be members of our society if we did something simply because they *aren’t* members of our society in the status quo.

To further illustrate the counterintuitive implications of Reference-Dependent Distributivism, suppose that our society is deciding whether to welcome new mem-

	<i>i</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>k</i>
<i>y</i>	10	1	6
<i>x</i>	7	7	6
<i>x</i> <sup>+</sup>	11	1	6
<i>z</i>	12	12	5

Table 7: Against Reference-Dependent Distributivism (*z* is the reference point)

bers, and if so whether to extend some basic social service to them (such as health-care). In the status-quo reference point, those individuals would not be members of our society. So, according to Reference-Dependent Distributivism, we can ignore their interests, as far as intrasocial considerations are concerned. This means that even if there were no cost whatsoever to extending healthcare to immigrants, we would have no intrasocial reason to do so. We find this implausible. It seems to us objectionable, from an intrasocial perspective, to deny benefits to new members that would have no cost to anyone else.

We also have a more basic concern about Reference-Dependent Distributivism. The application of this principle requires us to identify, for each menu of options, a special option designated as the reference point, which we have understood to be the status quo. In some situations it may be clear what that is. But in many situations there may be no clear “status quo” or other reference point to serve this function. Or, even when there is, this outcome may be so unattractive that it seems bizarre for it play any significant normative role in social ethics. We leave it to those who are more optimistic about the prospects of Reference-Dependent Distributivism to paint a clearer picture of how reference points are assigned and why they matter in the way prescribed by Reference-Dependent Distributivism.

If Reference-Dependent Distributivism is too restrictive, perhaps one might favor broadening the scope of social concern even further. Perhaps we should choose between outcomes as if everyone who is a member in *some* of those outcomes is a member in *all* of those outcomes. We’ll call this view “Broad Distributivism.”

To state Broad Distributivism more precisely, we need to introduce a new distinction. Earlier, we defined an outcome’s social distribution as a function which tells us the value of that outcome for each person who is a member of our society in that distribution. Call that a *narrow* distribution. An outcome’s narrow distribution does not depend on the broader menu of alternatives. An outcome’s *broad*

distribution does depend on the menu. For any menu  $M$ , and any outcome  $x$  in  $M$ ,  $x$ 's broad distribution in  $M$  is the function which tells us how good  $x$  is for each individual  $i$  who is a member of our society in *some* (possibly different) outcome available in  $M$ . Then Broad Distributivism can be defined as follows:

**Broad Distributivism** If all of the same broad distributions for society  $S$  are attainable in  $M$  and  $M'$ , and  $x$  and  $y$  share the same broad distribution for  $S$  in  $M$  and  $M'$  respectively, then  $x$  is in  $C(M)$  if and only if  $y$  is in  $C(M')$ .

For an illustration of Broad Distributivism, compare three cases. The first case is depicted in Table 6 above. Broad Distributivism says that it's permissible to choose  $x$  from  $\{x, y\}$  if and only if it's permissible to choose  $x'$  from  $\{x', y\}$  in Table 8 below:

	$i$	$j$
$x'$	7	7
$y$	10	1

Table 8: Broad Distributivism

In other words, Broad Distributivism says that we should treat benefits and harms arising from emigration identically to those that befall people who remain members of our society. Now consider Table 6 but suppose that the status quo is  $y$ . In other words,  $j$  is not currently a member but stands to benefit greatly from immigrating. Broad Distributivism implies that this change to the status quo does not matter. The benefits of immigration should count in exactly the same way as benefits to current members.

As these cases suggest, Broad Distributivism is a revisionary view. We find it plausible that societies have reasons, linked to the values of beneficence or global justice, to welcome immigrants when doing so would improve the quality of their lives. But it seems quite revisionary to suggest that benefits that arise through immigration matter from a purely social perspective and count in exactly the same way as benefits to current members. According to Broad Distributivism, the principles governing the distribution of goods *within* a society can require us to devote resources towards bringing in new members in a way that benefits them, even at

the expense of all current members of our society. Perhaps that implication is correct, but it is strikingly at odds with how social welfare is invoked in debates about immigration. No one argues that putting “America first” requires welcoming as many refugees as possible so as to benefit the refugees themselves.

It’s worth clarifying the difference between the problematic implications of Reference-Dependent Distributivism and Broad Distributivism. Reference-Dependent Distributivism tells us to ignore benefits to would-be members of our society who are not members in the status quo (or whatever outcome is designated as the reference point). Broad Distributivism, meanwhile, tells us to count benefits to would-be members as if they already were members of our society, even if those benefits arise through the process of immigration. The former implication seems to be implausibly narrow; the latter seems to be implausibly expansive.

Of course, we have not considered every possible alternative to Distributivism. But the two alternatives which are most salient to us offer us a stark choice between two extreme attitudes towards immigration. Between these two options, we ourselves are more attracted to Broad Distributivism. But if one accepts Broad Distributivism, there may not be much left, from a practical point of view, to the thought that there are distinctive moral principles which govern the distribution of goods within societies.

Broad Distributivism draws a sharp distinction between people who can be members in some menu of options and people who can’t, and between no other classes of people whom we can make members. That may seem a flimsy line to draw. When making any kind of policy decision, it might occur to us that we *could* also or instead offer citizenship to every human being on Earth. If that’s sufficient for being a member of our society, then we are suddenly required to treat every human being as if they were already a member of our society, so that our distinctively intrasocial principles are coextensive with global justice or beneficence in that policy decision. This is true even if we would never realistically choose the universal citizenship option and it has no attractive features. If we are willing to go that far, perhaps we might as well just reject the initial assumption of our investigation, that there are distinctively intrasocial principles of distribution.

## 7 Conclusion

In this essay, we have explored the neglected subject of social population ethics. We first identified a desideratum for any theory of social population ethics, which we called Robust Social Neutrality. According to Robust Social Neutrality, mere migration—migration that does not affect anyone—does not affect social welfare. It seems to us non-negotiable—a fixed point—that there is no reason to relocate a person when doing so makes no difference to anyone. We then attempted to generalize Robust Social Neutrality to encompass patterns of migration that do make a society’s members better or worse off. When we did so, we found that seemingly plausible principles for choosing among social distributions are inconsistent. This is the Mere Migration Paradox.

We have not solved the Mere Migration Paradox. To the contrary, we have argued that several possible solutions to it are unsatisfying. In our view, the most comfortable solution to the Mere Migration Paradox would be some explanation of why Binary Benign Migration and Binary Malign Migration are true while at least one of Generalized Benign Migration or Generalized Malign Migration is false. We have not found a plausible account along these lines, but we have not exhausted all of the possibilities.

Alternatively, we might cut the Gordian knot. We might conclude that it was a mistake to think that special moral principles regulate how goods should be distributed within societies. The Mere Migration Paradox provides us with some reason to take this stark conclusion more seriously. And it also encourages us to think further about the questions of social population ethics.

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