Pluralist population ethics and the survival of humanity

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Introduction

The extinction of humanity is generally considered one of the worst things that could ever happen. Many philosophers have assumed that the bad of extinction can be explained entirely in terms of any horrors directly associated with this event (violent deaths, the despair of the last generation etc.), plus the loss of those individual lives that could otherwise have been lived. However, many of us reject the natalist view (implied by the total view) that it has value to create new happy people. For us, the disvalue of extinction must be explained some other way. Furthermore, the mere emptiness of a universe without humanity may seem and has seemed particularly bad even to natalists.

My thesis is that the survival of humanity has independent value, over and above the value of individual lives. As a consequence, since wellbeing also has value, population axiology must be pluralist rather than monist.

Axiological tools

On John Broome's definition (*Weighing Lives*), populations are distributions of wellbeing over time and over lives. As Broome points out (p. 44), this provides the tools for accommodating the value of human survival.

Does time matter?

There is widespread disregard for the dimension of time in population axiology. One example: "The first outcome is exactly like the second, except that all of the extra future people live in the same rather than in different centuries. ... how can this difference in timing make the first outcome very bad?" –Parfit, *Reasons & Persons*, p. 411.

Consider two populations with the same number of lives, with the same quality, but where these lives are distributed differently in time:

Few Large Generations (FLG): During a few hundred years, 100 billion people all live good lives.

Many Generations (MG): During several thousand years, the world population remains steadily at around one billion people, all living good lives.

Proposal: We have some reason to prefer MG over FLG. This is because the survival of humanity has independent value.

What survival? What value?

The survival of humanity arguably requires some substantial number of lives at any given time. Perhaps one thousand. Or there may be an interval over which the value increases. Perhaps one to ten thousand. A population has more value the longer it exists with at least that size.
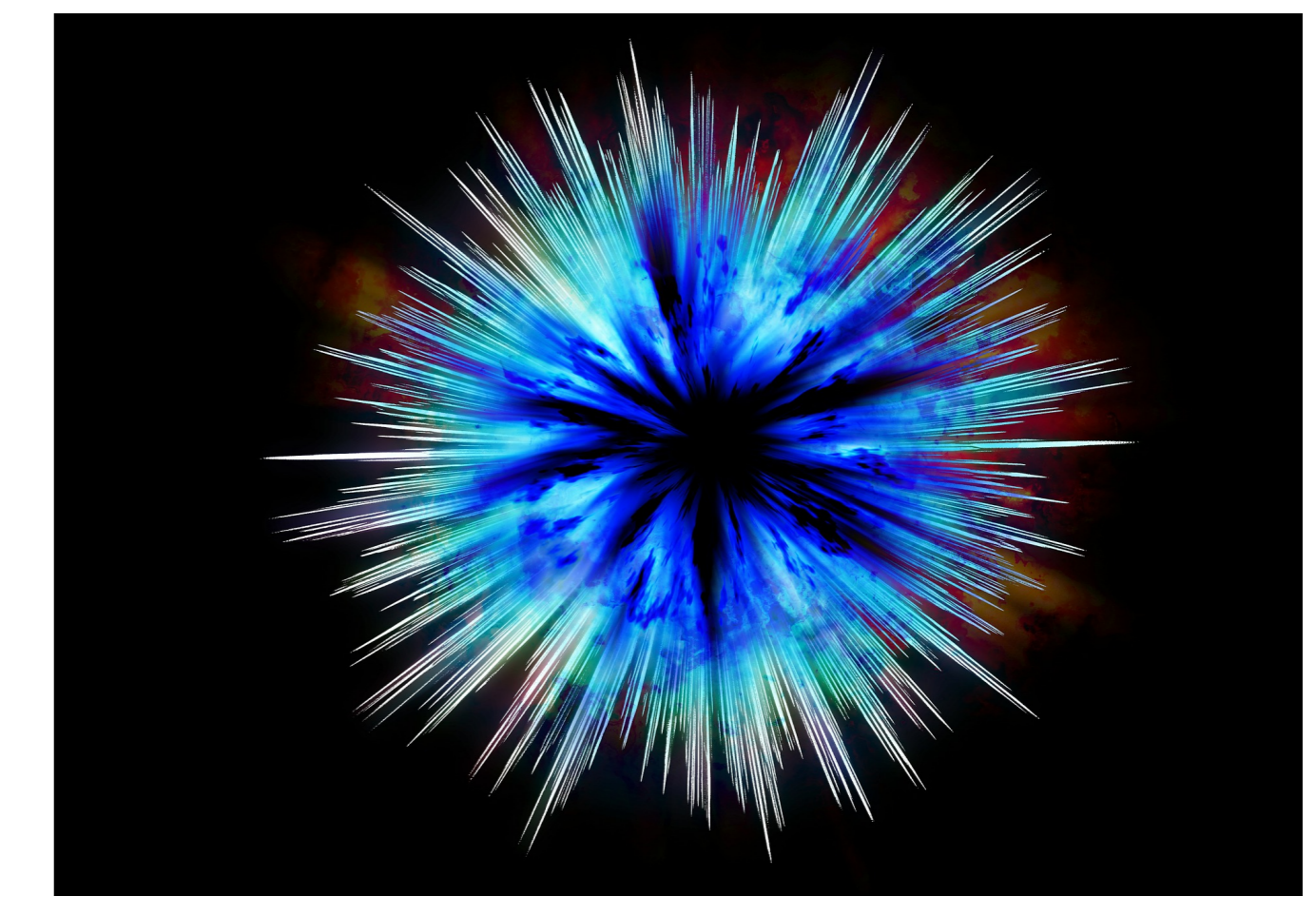
Monism versus pluralism

The monist presumption: "An animal species, after all, is nothing over and above the individual animals which make it up, and the value which it contributes to the world must therefore be some function of the values contributed by those individual animals." –Thomas Hurka, "Value and Population Size" p. 496 (cf. Broome, p. 197)

However, there is no reason why total population value should be some aggregate of the value of individual lives. In particular, this seems peculiar for the value of human survival. There is no apparent reason why this value should be reducible to some value inherent in individuals, just like there is no reason why the value (taste) of a cocktail should be reducible to the value (taste) of its ingredients.

Seemingly innocent methodological assumption: "Let the *contributive value* of a person P's life to a population X, containing P, be the difference between the value of X and the value of the population consisting of all the X-people except P." -Carlson, "Two Trilemmas", p. 291 (cf. Arrhenius manuscript)

This assumption runs together the value of wellbeing with other values, such as the value of human survival. If survival requires a minimum population of X lives at any given time, and some population contains X lives during some time, then, according to Carlson's definition, the contributive value of each life includes the entire value of human survival during that time. If instead the population size is X+1, then the value of human survival does not affect the contributive value of any life. Hence, total population value has no constant relationship with the sum of individual contributive value and so it is not clear that the latter is a useful concept. It seems, therefore, that the concept presupposes reducibility of population values to individual contributions.

Example distribution

Diagram: 4 lives with lifetime wellbeing and extension in time.

Variable value views

Hurka introduces Variable value views (VVVs) to accommodate the value of survival. On such views, "the value which an individual animal contributes to the world is not constant but varies with the number of other animals in his species." (p. 496) More specifically, the value decreases with growing population size.

Broome (p. 197) invokes Hurka's VVVs to explain the "value of humanity", which seems to be the some time existence of a sufficient number of human beings, rather than survival over time (such existence may be another independent population value). VVVs have also been explored by several other philosophers.

Hurka's concern is with population size "at a given time" (p. 500). He assumes that the total value of a population is calculated by summing time slice values "across times" (p. 501). This view presupposes, controversially, that lives have value at each time and that their time slice values sum to their total value. Many philosophers prefer to calculate population value across lives (e.g. Broome, chap 7; Arrhenius manuscript). On this view, however, it is not clear where in time to locate the value of a life such that it can be varied according to a VVV. Consider the example distribution in diagram. We might simply divide the value of a life across its duration, but this seems arbitrary, especially if events outside a person's lifetime can affect the value of her life.

Because of these complications, Variable value views are not well suited to accommodate the value of human survival.
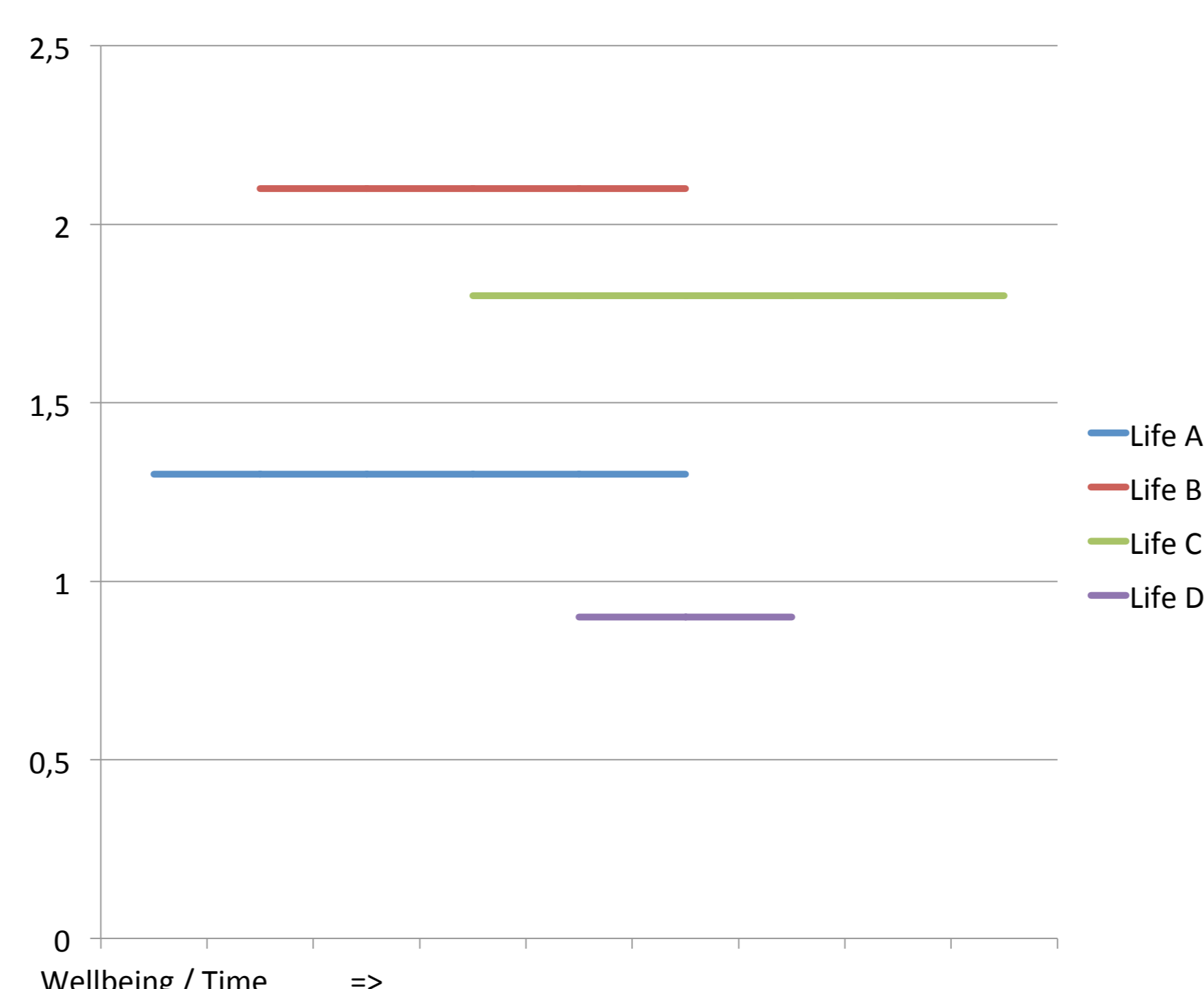
Conclusion

Existing population axiologies pay little attention to the independent value of the survival of humanity. Those that attempt to accommodate this value (such as Hurka) do so by tying it to the value of individual lives. This is problematic and may be a consequence of implicit population value monism.

We need novel axiologies to accommodate the value of, as Broome puts it in later work, "important things that belong to humanity as a whole" such as "the rich cultures of humanity, and other achievements of our civilization." (2012, p. 180) These axiologies should probably be pluralist.

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