

# Dissolving the Non-Identity Problem: The Continuity Imperative as a Pragmatic Alternative

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## Abstract

The Non-Identity Problem (NIP), popularized by Derek Parfit, has persisted as an ostensibly intractable puzzle in population ethics for over four decades. This paper argues that the problem's persistence reveals less about genuine moral paradox and more about the limitations of individualistic, person-affecting frameworks divorced from survival imperatives. I propose that NIP dissolves under a pragmatic, species-oriented ethic I term the Continuity Imperative (CI)—a framework that prioritizes infrastructure of possibility over identity-specific harm accounting, emphasizes best-effort stewardship rather than guaranteed outcomes, and recognizes future generations as resilient agents rather than passive recipients. By rejecting the person-affecting restriction and focusing on the momentum of human flourishing across generations, this approach bypasses the logical trap while providing actionable guidance for real-world issues like climate policy and technological development. Crucially, recent person-affecting proposals fail because they share a fatal assumption: that institutional, political, and social infrastructure enabling individual rights remains stable regardless of policy choices. In reality, depletion policies trigger cascading institutional degradation that destroys the very conditions under which rights can be protected. CI succeeds by evaluating policies not through hypothetical identity comparisons, but through their impact on systemic conditions enabling human flourishing.

**Keywords:** Non-Identity Problem, population ethics, intergenerational justice, person-affecting principles, future generations, existential risk

## 1. Introduction: The Persistence of a “Luxury Problem”

In Derek Parfit's influential work *Reasons and Persons* (1984), he introduced what has become one of modern ethics' most debated puzzles: the Non-Identity Problem. At its core lies a seemingly simple question that has generated thousands of pages of philosophical analysis: Can we wrong future people by making choices that affect their quality of life if those very choices determine which specific individuals come into existence?

Consider Parfit's classic example: A community faces a policy choice between sustainable development that would provide future generations with a high quality of life, versus resource depletion that would create immediate wealth but leave descendants with a significantly diminished (though still livable) world. The catch: because these policies would alter the entire social and economic landscape, different people would meet, marry, and conceive children under each scenario. The individuals born under the depletion policy would be entirely different from those born under the sustainable policy. Since existence itself depends on the policy choice, how can we say the depletion policy “harms” anyone? The people born into that depleted world wouldn't exist otherwise—their alternative isn't a better life, but no life at all.

This logical structure has proven remarkably resistant to resolution. Despite decades of sophisticated attempts—including appeals to comparative harm, threshold theories, wide person-affecting principles, and impersonal value—no solution has achieved consensus. The debate continues to generate new papers, symposia, and theoretical refinements.

I contend that this persistence is diagnostic. The Non-Identity Problem remains ‘unsolvable’ not because it reveals a deep truth about moral reality, but because it exposes a fundamental mismatch between the tools we’re using (individualistic, person-affecting moral frameworks) and the domain we’re applying them to (species-level, multigenerational flourishing). It is, in essence, a luxury problem—a logical artifact that could only preoccupy societies so safe, comfortable, and individualistic that they’ve lost sight of the existential imperatives that should ground our ethical thinking about the future.

This paper proposes that we should stop trying to “solve” NIP on its own terms and instead recognize it as a category error. The proper framework for thinking about our obligations to the future is not person-specific harm avoidance, but what I call the Continuity Imperative (CI)—a pragmatic, survival-oriented ethic that focuses on the trajectory of human flourishing rather than the identity mathematics of hypothetical individuals.

## 2. The Standard Formulation and Its Intuitive Pull

To understand why NIP has proven so tenacious, we must first appreciate its logical structure and why it conflicts with our moral intuitions. The problem typically presents as a trilemma, forcing us to choose between three seemingly plausible but jointly inconsistent propositions:

P1 (Person-Affecting Principle): An action is morally wrong only if it makes someone worse off than they otherwise would have been.

P2 (Non-Comparative Existence Claim): If an action is necessary for a person’s existence and that person’s life is worth living, then the action does not make that person worse off.

P3 (Moral Intuition): Some identity-affecting choices (like the depletion policy or conceiving a child with a preventable disability) are morally wrong.

These three propositions cannot all be true simultaneously. If we accept P1 and P2, we must reject P3—concluding that the depletion policy isn’t wrong because it doesn’t make anyone worse off. But this conclusion strikes most people as absurd. Surely we have *some* obligation not to knowingly create a depleted world for our descendants, regardless of whether those specific individuals would exist otherwise.

The traditional philosophical response has been to try rejecting either P1 or P2 while preserving our moral intuitions. Yet each path creates its own problems. Rejecting P1 requires embracing impersonal ethics (where we can do wrong without wronging anyone in particular), which many find counterintuitive. Rejecting P2 forces us to claim that some lives worth living are nonetheless “harms”—a position that risks sliding into anti-natalism or troubling judgments about which lives are ‘good enough’ to justify existence.

### 3. Why P2 Conceals a Value Judgment

Before proposing my alternative framework, I must address a critical weakness in the standard formulation: Premise 2 is not the neutral logical claim it pretends to be. The assertion that non-existence cannot be “better” for anyone rests on a specific metaphysical and value-laden assumption about comparative welfare.

The standard defense of P2 runs as follows: For X to be better or worse “for someone,” there must be a subject who benefits or suffers from X. Non-existence has no subject—no one who is deprived or relieved. Therefore, we cannot coherently say non-existence is “better” for the never-born person. A life worth living, by definition, is preferable to nothing.

This reasoning has intuitive appeal, but it masks a substantive value commitment. Consider cases of severe, guaranteed suffering—a child conceived with a condition that ensures constant agony with only brief moments of relief, yet not so terrible that the life is ‘not worth living’ by some minimal threshold. Is bringing such a person into existence truly not worse than the alternative?

Our ordinary language and moral intuitions suggest otherwise. When we say “rest in peace” at funerals, we acknowledge death as an end to suffering—a state preferable to continued hardship. When we face choices about whether to conceive a child with a severe disability, many would argue that non-conception is the more compassionate choice, not because the potential person has an interest in non-existence (they don’t exist to have interests), but because imposing guaranteed suffering on someone seems wrong independent of comparative welfare calculations.

The philosopher David Benatar has formalized this intuition through his asymmetry argument: the absence of pain is good (even if no one experiences it), while the absence of pleasure is not bad (because no one is deprived). While I don’t endorse Benatar’s broader anti-natalist conclusions, his critique exposes that P2’s neutrality is illusory. The claim that “existence with suffering beats non-existence” is itself a value judgment—one that prioritizes existence as an intrinsic good over the avoidance of imposed suffering.

Moreover, this value judgment has biological roots. We are evolved organisms with deep genetic imperatives to reproduce. The drive to create new life is not a neutral philosophical position but a biological fact that colors our intuitions. Those who override this imperative based on rational considerations (climate concerns, financial constraints, suffering avoidance) are not making a logical error—they are prioritizing different values over the evolutionary mandate.

This recognition matters because it exposes the entire NIP structure as value-dependent rather than logically necessary. The problem doesn’t reveal an inherent paradox in moral reasoning—it reveals a clash between different value frameworks (individualistic harm-avoidance vs. species-continuity, existence as intrinsic good vs. suffering-avoidance). Once we acknowledge this, we can stop searching for the logical ‘solution’ and instead ask: which value framework best serves our actual moral purposes?

## 4. The Continuity Imperative: A Pragmatic Alternative

Having identified NIP as a value-dependent framework conflict rather than a genuine paradox, I propose an alternative approach grounded in pragmatic, survival-oriented ethics. I call this the Continuity Imperative (CI), and it can be formalized as follows:

### 4.1 The Five Principles of the Continuity Imperative

P1 (Primary Duty): Our fundamental moral obligation is to maintain and enhance the trajectory of human flourishing across generations.

This principle shifts focus from individual identity to species momentum. Morality serves the continuation and improvement of conscious, flourishing life. Individual identities are tokens in a larger pattern; what matters is the quality and resilience of the pattern itself.

P2 (Dual Obligation): This duty manifests as (a) protecting the rights and well-being of currently living individuals, and (b) providing future generations with a high-possibility world—one rich in opportunities, resources, and capabilities.

We don't abandon individual rights; rather, we recognize them as the present-tense manifestation of our broader obligation. We protect the dignity and flourishing of those who exist now while simultaneously building infrastructure (technological, moral, institutional, environmental) for those who will exist later.

P3 (Identity Irrelevance): The specific identities of future people are irrelevant to our moral obligations. What matters is the quality of the world and opportunities available to whoever comes to exist.

This directly rejects the person-affecting restriction that generates NIP. We owe duties to “the office of the future human,” not to specific hypothetical individuals. Person A versus Person B is a distinction without moral difference when it comes to intergenerational obligations.

P4 (Best-Effort Standard): We fulfill our moral duty by making best-effort attempts to improve conditions based on available knowledge, without malicious intent to harm future people.

Morality is about the integrity of our efforts, not guaranteed outcomes. We cannot perfectly predict or control the future. What we can control is whether we act in good faith to advance flourishing, or whether we knowingly and unnecessarily degrade future conditions for short-term gain.

P5 (Agency Recognition): Future generations are not passive recipients but active agents who will inherit our foundation and continue the project of human flourishing using their own superior tools and knowledge.

This principle prevents paralysis by analysis. We don't need to guarantee a perfect world; we need to hand off a viable platform. Future people will face their own challenges with capabilities we cannot imagine. Our duty is to give them the strongest possible starting point, trusting their agency to continue the work.

## 4.2 How CI Dissolves the Non-Identity Problem

Under this framework, the depletion policy case becomes straightforward. The policy is wrong not because it harms Person A (who wouldn't exist otherwise), but because it degrades the infrastructure of possibility we're obligated to maintain. We have failed in our duty to provide a high-quality foundation for continuation, regardless of who specifically inherits that degraded foundation.

The genetic disability case is equally clear: If we can choose between conceiving a child with full capabilities versus reduced capabilities (blindness, severe disability), we should choose the path of greater capability—not because the disabled child would be “wronged” by existence, but because we're stewarding possibility. Sight is a tool that expands an individual's opportunity space; as stewards, we maximize capabilities where we can. This avoids the eugenics trap because we're not judging the *value* of different lives, but rather the *utility of tools* we provide.

## 4.3 How CI Relates to Existing Approaches

To position the Continuity Imperative within the broader landscape of intergenerational ethics, it's essential to distinguish CI from related but distinct frameworks that might appear similar at first glance.

### *CI and Impersonal Consequentialism*

CI shares impersonal consequentialism's rejection of strict person-affecting constraints—both accept that we can do wrong without wronging any specific individual. However, CI diverges in crucial ways. Classical utilitarianism focuses on maximizing total or average welfare aggregated across individuals; CI focuses on trajectory robustness and systemic capability. A utilitarian might accept the Repugnant Conclusion (vast populations with barely-worthwhile lives sum to greater total utility); CI rejects this via P1's emphasis on 'enhancing trajectory' and P2's demand for 'high-possibility worlds.' Quality and resilience matter more than quantity.

Moreover, CI explicitly incorporates best-effort standards (P4) and agency recognition (P5), which standard consequentialist frameworks lack. The duty isn't to maximize an abstract utility function but to faithfully steward the conditions enabling continuation. This makes CI more action-guiding in contexts of uncertainty and more compatible with recognizing limits to our predictive capacity.

### *CI and Jonas's Imperative of Responsibility*

Hans Jonas's “imperative of responsibility” shares CI's emphasis on species-continuity and ontological duty to preserve humanity's future. Both prioritize existence and possibility over identity-specific calculations. However, Jonas grounds his imperative in metaphysical claims

about Being and humanity’s cosmic significance—duties arising from our unique capacity for responsibility itself.

CI adopts a more pragmatic, naturalistic foundation. The duty to continue human flourishing follows from evolutionary imperatives, historical patterns of intergenerational success, and the practical demands of existential risk management. This doesn’t require metaphysical commitments about humanity’s cosmic purpose—only recognition that we are the inheritors of a 200,000-year project and have obligations to those who come next. CI is Jonas stripped of metaphysics but retaining practical force.

### *CI and Longtermism*

Effective altruism’s longtermist strand argues that positively influencing the long-term future is a key moral priority, often citing astronomical stakes (trillions of future lives potentially affected). CI aligns with longtermism’s temporal scope and concern for civilizational trajectory but differs in framing and emphasis.

Longtermists often engage in expected value calculations across vast timescales and population sizes, risking paralysis when uncertainties compound. CI’s best-effort standard (P4) and agency recognition (P5) provide pragmatic bounds: we owe good-faith stewardship of the infrastructure we can actually influence, trusting future generations to handle uncertainties we cannot resolve. Additionally, longtermism sometimes struggles with the person-affecting/impersonal tension that generates NIP; CI dissolves this by rejecting identity-sensitivity entirely in favor of systemic evaluation.

Where longtermism asks “How do we maximize expected value across all possible futures?”, CI asks “Are we maintaining trajectory and handing off robust capability?” This shift from optimization to stewardship makes CI more tractable for real-world policy while preserving concern for the long term.

### *CI and Wide Person-Affecting Principles*

Some philosophers propose “wide” person-affecting principles that avoid NIP by allowing obligations to possible people who will exist under various scenarios (e.g., Harney 2023). These frameworks attempt to preserve person-affecting intuitions while escaping the identity trap.

CI rejects this compromise. Wide person-affecting views still center individual welfare comparisons—they just expand the circle of relevant individuals. CI’s fundamental move is abandoning person-centered evaluation for population-level and systemic assessment. We’re not asking what we owe to possible Person A versus possible Person B; we’re asking whether the world’s capability structure degrades or enhances. This isn’t a technical refinement of person-affecting logic but a wholesale framework shift.

## *Why CI Succeeds Where These Approaches Struggle*

Each alternative framework addresses part of what CI captures, but none combines trajectory focus, systemic resilience emphasis, institutional stability critique, best-effort pragmatism, and agency recognition into a unified whole suited for civilizational-scale challenges. Impersonal consequentialism risks quantity-over-quality errors; Jonas requires controversial metaphysics; longtermism faces paralysis from uncertainty; wide person-affecting views remain trapped in identity-sensitivity. CI integrates the strengths while avoiding these pitfalls, producing a framework that is simultaneously philosophically defensible and practically actionable for the existential challenges we face.

### **5. The Historical Reality Check**

One of the most powerful arguments for CI comes not from abstract philosophy but from historical fact. Every generation of humans prior to our own lived in conditions of greater suffering, higher mortality, and lower technological capacity than we enjoy today. Yet each generation successfully handed off a slightly improved world to their successors.

Consider the logical implications of taking NIP seriously in historical context. By the logic of person-affecting harm, our ancestors in the medieval period ‘wronged’ us by conceiving children in that era rather than waiting for better conditions in the 21st century. They chose a policy (medieval subsistence agriculture) that led to us—people born into a world with antibiotics, democracy, and abundant food. If they had chosen differently (though they couldn’t have), entirely different people would exist in our place, living in conditions even better than ours.

But this conclusion is absurd. Our ancestors didn’t wrong us by existing in their time and doing their best to survive and improve. They fulfilled exactly the duty CI describes: they protected those alive, they gradually built better tools and institutions, and they handed off a world marginally better than the one they inherited. *The fact that we exist at all is evidence of their success, not their failure.*

This historical perspective exposes the core absurdity of identity-sensitive ethics. If we take seriously the idea that bringing someone into a “worse” world (compared to some hypothetical better alternative) constitutes a wrong, then nearly all past reproduction was wrong. The only way to avoid this conclusion is to adopt CI’s position: what matters is not the comparative identity question, but whether each generation makes a good-faith effort to improve the trajectory.

Moreover, this pattern of incremental improvement despite hardship demonstrates P5’s validity—future generations are agents, not victims. Our medieval ancestors couldn’t have predicted antibiotics or computers, but they created the foundations (universities, scientific method, stable institutions) that made those advances possible. Similarly, we cannot predict what tools our descendants will develop, but we can provide the strongest possible platform for their continuation of the project.

## 6. Addressing Standard Objections

### *The Negligence Objection*

Critics might argue: If we're only responsible for "best effort" and can trust future agency to fix problems, what prevents laziness and negligence? Couldn't any generation claim they did their best while actually prioritizing short-term comfort over long-term flourishing?

CI addresses this through P4's malice criterion. Negligence that knowingly degrades future conditions for unnecessary short-term gain violates best-effort duty. The depletion policy fails not because it changes *who* exists, but because it knowingly trades long-term flourishing for immediate benefit when better alternatives exist. The standard is: "Are we doing the best we can with available knowledge to advance flourishing, or are we consciously choosing degradation for convenience?" This is objective enough to be action-guiding without requiring perfect foresight.

### *The Repugnant Conclusion*

Parfit himself worried that impersonal approaches lead to the Repugnant Conclusion: a world with 100 billion people living lives barely worth living has more total flourishing than 5 billion people living ecstatic lives, so we should prefer the former. Doesn't CI fall into this trap?

No, because CI prioritizes *quality over quantity* through P2's emphasis on "high-possibility worlds" and P1's focus on "enhancing trajectory." A world with 100 billion people living marginal existences represents lower quality infrastructure and reduced capability per person—a degraded trajectory, not an enhanced one. The metric isn't raw population times minimal welfare, but the robustness and richness of the opportunity structure available to whoever exists.

Furthermore, CI avoids forcing a choice between the two scenarios by recognizing that population level follows from conditions, not vice versa. Our duty is to maintain high-quality conditions; population adjusts naturally. In practice, high-flourishing societies tend toward lower, sustainable populations with greater per-capita capability—exactly what CI recommends.

### *The Eugenics Worry*

If we're maximizing capabilities and possibilities, doesn't this justify troubling conclusions about which lives are worth creating? Doesn't this slide toward eugenics or discrimination against the disabled?

CI carefully avoids this by distinguishing between *opportunity infrastructure* and *individual worth*. The framework never claims disabled lives are less valuable—it claims we should provide the best tools we can when we have the choice. Once someone exists, P2(a) demands full protection of their rights and dignity regardless of capability level. The focus is prospective tool-provision, not retrospective judgment of existing lives.

Moreover, "best tools available" includes social infrastructure that supports diverse capabilities. A truly high-possibility world provides accessibility, accommodation, and opportunity for people

with varying abilities. Capability maximization at the population level is perfectly consistent with robust support for individuals across the capability spectrum.

## **6.1 The Institutional Stability Assumption**

The persistence of NIP in contemporary literature reflects not merely philosophical stubbornness, but a deeper structural blindness. Recent attempts to salvage person-affecting views—including Pummer’s (2024) suffering-focused approach, Frick’s (2020) conditional reasons framework, and various harm-based solutions (Gardner 2015; Brandt 2024)—all share a fatal assumption: that the institutional, political, and social infrastructure enabling individual rights remains stable regardless of which identity-affecting choices we make.

This assumption of institutional stability commits what we might call the “*ceteris paribus* fallacy”—the error of treating all else as equal when analyzing policy choices that fundamentally alter everything. When philosophers compare the depletion policy versus the conservation policy, they typically frame it as: “Under depletion, Person A exists with quality of life X. Under conservation, Person B exists with quality of life Y. Since Person A wouldn’t exist under conservation, we haven’t harmed them.” But this framing assumes that X and Y represent mere differences in individual welfare levels within otherwise equivalent institutional contexts.

This is catastrophically wrong.

## **6.2 The Cascade of Institutional Degradation**

Resource depletion doesn’t merely lower individual welfare levels—it triggers a cascade of systemic breakdown that destroys the very conditions under which individual rights can be meaningfully protected:

Stage 1: Resource Scarcity - Depletion policies create genuine scarcity of critical resources (clean water, arable land, energy, rare minerals). This isn’t just “less abundance”—it’s competition for survival necessities.

Stage 2: Reallocation to Conflict - Nations facing scarcity redirect resources from constructive activities (education, healthcare, scientific research, infrastructure development) toward security, military buildup, border enforcement, and resource competition. Tax revenue that could fund flourishing instead funds conflict preparation. If a depleted resource becomes critical for Country A, other countries may need to adjust by cracking down on access to that resource, or even go to war to secure more of it.

Stage 3: Differential Impact and Global Instability - While first-world nations feel these effects as economic stress and political tension, third-world nations experience existential threats. Regions already struggling with poverty face catastrophic deprivation. This creates mass migration pressure, further destabilizing both origin and destination nations. Nations that previously lacked a critical resource now have even less of it, causing increased regional problems and lowering standards of living even further.

Stage 4: Rights Erosion - Under conditions of scarcity and conflict, governing institutions come under severe pressure. History demonstrates this pattern repeatedly: resource scarcity enables authoritarian governments to consolidate power by controlling access to necessities. Rights that seem robust in abundance become luxuries no society can afford when survival is at stake. The Soviet Union's resource hoarding under tyranny is not an aberration—it's a predictable response to scarcity.

Stage 5: Corruption and Crime - Economic data consistently shows that crime and corruption rates correlate inversely with prosperity. Wealthy nations can afford rule of law; poor nations struggle against systemic corruption because the stakes of resource access become existential. When resources are scarce, the incentive to cheat, steal, and exploit overwhelms weak institutions. Quality of life is demonstrably higher in prosperous nations than in impoverished ones.

Stage 6: Self-Reinforcing Decline - Each stage amplifies the next. Institutional weakness enables more corruption, which degrades the economy further, which creates more scarcity, which justifies more authoritarian control, which erodes rights further. The cascade becomes a death spiral.

### **6.3 What Person-Affecting Views Miss: Populations, Not Persons**

This reveals the fundamental category error in person-affecting approaches. Philosophers analyzing NIP focus on comparing Person A (who exists under depletion) with Person B (who would exist under conservation). But this individualistic framing obscures what's actually at stake: we're not comparing two people; we're comparing two entirely different *worlds*—one where rights frameworks can exist and one where they cannot.

Under the conservation policy, we might have stable governance structures strong enough to protect individual rights for virtually everyone. Under the depletion policy, we might have authoritarian regimes rationing water and energy, mass poverty enabling rampant corruption, and border walls topped with guns to keep desperate migrants out. The person-affecting philosopher asks, "Is Person A harmed by living in the second world rather than not existing?" But this is the wrong question. The right question is: 'Have we created a world where no one can meaningfully exercise rights, versus a world where everyone has that opportunity?'

The moral evaluation must focus on populations and systems, not persons and comparisons. Recent person-affecting proposals—no matter how sophisticated their harm accounts or conditional reasons—remain trapped in this individualistic framing. Even Pummer's (2024) suffering-focused view, which recognizes requiring reasons to avoid creating lives containing suffering, still cashes out the analysis in terms of individual welfare levels rather than systemic conditions. Individual rights themselves are contingent—they depend on the institutions and conditions we maintain. If we degrade the world significantly, future people might not even have the legal and political frameworks that protect individual rights.

## 6.4 The Frick Case Study: Conditional Reasons Without Systemic Analysis

Consider Frick’s (2020) influential “conditional reasons” approach. Frick argues that we have conditional reasons—reasons that apply IF a person exists—to ensure their life goes well. This seems to capture our intuition that the depletion policy is wrong: conditional on those future people existing (whoever they are), we have reasons to ensure they live in better rather than worse conditions.

But Frick’s framework still operates within the person-affecting paradigm. It asks: “What do we owe to this person, given that they exist?” It doesn’t ask: “What do we owe to the institutional infrastructure that makes ‘owing things to persons’ meaningful?” His conditional reasons operate at the level of individual welfare, not systemic stability.

This matters because the depletion policy doesn’t just lower welfare levels—it potentially destroys the conditions under which conditional reasons can be acted upon. Imagine a world where resource wars have created failed states across multiple continents. Do we have “conditional reasons” to ensure individuals in those failed states have access to clean water and stable governance? Formally, yes. But the institutional capacity to act on those reasons—the governmental, legal, and economic infrastructure needed to actually deliver on our obligations—has been destroyed by the very policies we’re evaluating.

Frick’s framework can tell us what we ideally owe to future people, but it cannot capture how policy choices determine whether we’ll exist in a world capable of paying those debts. CI addresses this by focusing on maintaining the infrastructure that makes moral action possible, rather than calculating abstract debts to hypothetical individuals.

## 6.5 The Upward Spiral Alternative

The analysis cuts both ways. Just as depletion creates cascading institutional degradation, conservation creates cascading institutional enhancement:

*Abundance → Reduced Conflict → Investment in Constructive Activities → Rising Standards → Stronger Institutions → Better Rights Protections → More Innovation → Greater Abundance → Continuation of Cycle*

This is not mere optimism—it’s the demonstrable pattern of human development over the past three centuries. As we’ve increased resource availability through technological advance (agricultural productivity, energy sources, medical capacity), we’ve seen corresponding improvements in rights protections, reductions in violence, and strengthening of institutions globally. Species flourishing means the entirety of humanity increasing their quality of life across the board through a utilitarian approach applied to all humanity. Not all countries benefit equally, but they receive what is possible to give without diminishing the well-being of more prosperous nations. Even third-world nations now have access to technologies that create opportunities unimaginable decades ago. For example, despite Africa being less technically advanced than other regions, many Africans now have cell phones and internet access—technologies that didn’t exist

there just a few decades ago. Giving Africa older cell phone models doesn't harm nations with the latest technology.

CI recognizes this pattern as the proper focus of moral evaluation. We're not comparing hypothetical persons with different welfare levels; we're choosing between self-reinforcing upward versus downward spirals that affect entire populations and determine whether future generations inherit conditions conducive to flourishing or conducive to tyranny.

## **6.6 Why This Matters for Current NIP Literature**

The recent literature on NIP—spanning 2020-2024—continues to generate sophisticated refinements of person-affecting views, harm theories, and comparative frameworks. Yet none adequately address this institutional stability assumption. They operate as if we're choosing between otherwise identical worlds where only individual welfare levels differ. This might be defensible for small-scale cases (the genetic disability case), but it completely fails for civilization-scale choices like climate policy, resource management, or existential risk mitigation.

When Jingsi Teng (2024) discusses “long-term harms of climate change” in group-affecting terms, or when philosophers debate rights-based solutions (Feng 2024), they still frame the issue as: “Do future people have rights against us?” CI reframes this as: “Will future people exist in conditions where rights frameworks can meaningfully operate?” This shift from normative entitlements to systemic preconditions dissolves the identity puzzle while providing clear action guidance.

The institutional stability assumption reveals why NIP persists despite decades of effort: person-affecting views are trying to account for civilizational-scale trajectory questions using tools designed for individual-scale harm accounting. It's not that these tools are defective—it's that they're the wrong type for the task. CI succeeds by matching the tool to the task: evaluating policies not by hypothetical identity comparisons, but by their impact on the systemic conditions enabling human flourishing.

## **7. Practical Applications and Real-World Implications**

Unlike the endless theoretical debates surrounding NIP, CI provides clear, actionable guidance for pressing real-world challenges. Consider three domains where identity-affecting choices create apparent moral dilemmas:

### **7.1 Climate Policy**

Current climate policy debates often get tangled in NIP logic. Since aggressive emissions reductions would alter economic development patterns and thus change which future people exist, we seemingly can't ‘harm’ future people by choosing high-emissions paths—those specific individuals wouldn't exist under different policies.

CI cuts through this paralysis. Climate inaction degrades the infrastructure of possibility we're obligated to maintain. It knowingly reduces the opportunity space, resilience, and flourishing potential available to future generations—whoever they are. The policy fails P4's best-effort test

because we possess the knowledge and capability to choose lower-emissions paths without catastrophic sacrifice by current generations.

This framing motivates action without requiring us to identify specific future victims or prove comparative harm. It also appropriately balances present and future by recognizing that P2(a) protects current individuals from catastrophic sacrifice, while P2(b) demands we not unnecessarily degrade future conditions.

### *Climate Policy and the Institutional Cascade*

The institutional stability critique makes the climate case even more urgent. Standard NIP analyses treat climate policy as comparing welfare levels: “Person A exists in 2100 with climate chaos and quality of life X versus Person B who would exist in 2100 with stable climate and quality of life Y.”

But realistic climate modeling suggests far more systemic breakdown. Under high-emissions scenarios: resource scarcity (water, arable land) triggers regional conflicts and mass migration; stable nations face pressure to restrict immigration, potentially degrading civil liberties; failed states become more common as governments cannot provide basic services; global cooperation on shared challenges becomes nearly impossible; and authoritarian regimes gain advantage by rationing resources and controlling populations.

This isn’t person-affecting harm—it’s civilizational degradation. We’re not comparing individuals; we’re comparing a world where stable governance and rights protections can survive versus a world where they likely cannot. Person-affecting views cannot capture this distinction because they’re focused on counting persons and comparing welfare levels rather than evaluating systemic resilience.

CI provides clear guidance: aggressive emissions reduction isn’t required because we owe specific future individuals a stable climate; it’s required because we must maintain the institutional infrastructure that enables future flourishing. The identity of future people is irrelevant; the quality of the world they inherit is paramount.

## **7.2 Technological Development and AI Risk**

The development of transformative technologies like artificial intelligence raises identity-affecting questions. Different development timelines and safety approaches will lead to different future populations and societal structures. How should we think about our obligations?

CI focuses on trajectory rather than identity. Our duty is to develop technologies in ways that enhance rather than degrade long-term flourishing potential. Reckless AI development that risks existential catastrophe or permanent value lock-in violates P4—it knowingly accepts unnecessary risk to the continuation project. Conversely, overly cautious approaches that prevent beneficial development might violate P2(b) by unnecessarily limiting future opportunities.

The framework demands we balance: What approach best maintains the trajectory of flourishing? This is complex but tractable—unlike trying to compare the welfare of hypothetical people under different development scenarios.

### **7.3 Space Colonization and Species Survival**

Projects like Mars colonization or interstellar expansion directly embody CI's logic. Advocates like Elon Musk argue we must become a multi-planetary species to ensure long-term survival against existential risks (asteroid impacts, solar expansion, etc.). Critics object that the massive resources required could be better spent on current human welfare.

CI resolves this through P1's species-continuity imperative balanced against P2(a)'s protection of current individuals. Some resource allocation toward survival infrastructure is justified—we have duties to the long-term trajectory, not just present comfort. But this must be balanced: we can't impoverish current generations for speculative future benefits. The question becomes proportional: What level of investment in continuity projects is consistent with maintaining current flourishing?

Importantly, CI recognizes that different future people will exist depending on our choices (Earth-bound versus multi-planetary humanity), but this identity difference is morally irrelevant. What matters is whether we're maintaining the possibility of continued flourishing across realistic threat scenarios.

## **8. Why NIP Persists: A Diagnosis**

Having demonstrated how CI dissolves NIP and provides practical guidance, we must address the question: If the solution is this straightforward, why has NIP persisted as a serious problem for four decades?

I propose three interconnected explanations:

### **8.1 Individualism as Default Framework**

Western legal and moral systems are built on individualistic foundations—the harm principle, personal rights, specific victims and perpetrators. This framework works well for most ethical questions involving existing people. When someone steals your property or assaults you, we can identify the wronged party, calculate damages, and assign responsibility.

But this very success creates a blind spot. When philosophers encounter questions about future people, they instinctively reach for the same individualistic tools. The person-affecting restriction feels natural because it mirrors our successful ethical frameworks for present-focused questions. The problem is that these tools are simply the wrong type for questions about species-level trajectory and multigenerational flourishing.

It's like trying to repair a car engine with woodworking tools. The tools aren't defective—they're just mismatched to the task. NIP persists because we keep trying to force multigenerational ethics into an individualistic framework rather than recognizing we need different tools entirely.

## 8.2 The Luxury of Safety

NIP is fundamentally a luxury problem—it could only seem pressing in societies so safe and comfortable that existential concerns have faded from immediate consciousness. When survival is precarious (during famines, plagues, wars, or environmental collapse), questions about hypothetical identity mathematics become obviously absurd. The imperative is clear: survive, protect your community, hand off the best foundation you can, trust the next generation to continue.

Academic philosophy today largely operates in extremely safe, affluent conditions. Philosophers can spend careers analyzing abstract paradoxes because they face no immediate threats to species continuation. This isn't a criticism of individuals—it's an observation about how context shapes what problems seem important.

In contrast, people working on concrete existential risks (climate scientists, pandemic preparedness experts, nuclear security specialists, AI safety researchers) tend not to get tangled in NIP logic. They instinctively operate according to something like CI: protect current populations, maintain the trajectory of flourishing, prevent degradation of future possibility. The urgency of real threats clarifies priorities in ways that armchair philosophy obscures.

The institutional stability assumption itself reflects this luxury. Philosophers in stable societies with robust rights protections assume those conditions are default features of reality rather than hard-won, fragile achievements that require constant maintenance. Someone living through state collapse, resource wars, or authoritarian takeover immediately understands that rights frameworks are conditional on systemic stability. But academic philosophers, operating in the most stable societies in human history, can afford to treat rights as metaphysical primitives rather than institutional products.

This explains the disconnect between NIP literature and existential risk communities. Climate scientists, pandemic preparedness experts, and AI safety researchers instinctively operate according to CI principles: protect current populations, maintain systemic resilience, avoid catastrophic degradation of the conditions enabling civilization. They don't get tangled in identity mathematics because the urgency of systemic threats clarifies priorities. The luxury of safety enables the illusion that individual welfare comparisons are sufficient for evaluating civilizational-scale choices.

## 8.3 Value Pluralism and Irreducible Disagreement

Finally, NIP persists because it touches on genuinely irreducible value disagreements. As I argued in Section 3, the entire structure rests on contestable value commitments: Is existence intrinsically good? Does non-existence have neutral or negative value? Should ethics be person-affecting or impersonal? How much do we value individual autonomy versus collective flourishing?

These aren't questions that pure logic can settle. Different people with different background values will reach different conclusions, and no argument can force consensus. The problem persists not

because we haven't found the right logical solution, but because we're trying to solve a value dispute with logical tools.

However—and this is crucial—the fact that we can't achieve universal agreement doesn't mean all positions are equally defensible. CI doesn't claim to be value-neutral or objectively proven. It claims to be *pragmatically superior* for beings like us facing the actual challenges we face. It aligns with our evolutionary heritage, our historical pattern of intergenerational success, and the practical demands of existential risk management. That's sufficient justification even without logical necessity.

## 9. Conclusion: From Paradox to Practice

The Non-Identity Problem has consumed enormous philosophical energy over four decades without achieving consensus. I have argued this persistence is diagnostic: NIP is a category error arising from applying individualistic moral frameworks to questions concerning species-level flourishing and systemic trajectory.

The Continuity Imperative dissolves this puzzle by shifting the evaluative frame. Rather than navigating identity-sensitive harm calculations, CI asks: Are we maintaining the conditions that enable human flourishing to continue? This reframing yields clear guidance where person-affecting views offer only paralysis. Recent sophisticated proposals—Frick's conditional reasons (2020), Pummer's suffering-focused approach (2024)—still assume institutional stability, treating policy choices as welfare adjustments within equivalent contexts. The cascade analysis reveals this assumption's falsity: depletion policies don't just lower individual welfare; they destroy the systemic preconditions for rights, governance, and moral agency itself.

CI's pragmatic superiority emerges from three sources: evolutionary alignment (species-continuity imperatives), historical validation (every prior generation operated according to similar principles), and existential necessity (climate, AI, and other civilizational risks demand trajectory-focused rather than identity-focused ethics). This is not value-neutrality but honest acknowledgment of the stakes.

Looking forward, three implications deserve attention. First, how should governance institutions embed CI principles? Climate policy, technological regulation, and resource management currently lack frameworks that explicitly prioritize systemic resilience over hypothetical identity comparisons. Second, how does CI dialogue with emerging longtermist and existential risk frameworks? Many practitioners already implicitly adopt CI-like reasoning; formalizing this connection could strengthen both theoretical and practical work. Third, if NIP dissolves under pressure from survival-oriented reframing, what other "unsolvable" philosophical puzzles might be artifacts of mismatched methodology? The meta-lesson—that some paradoxes reveal not deep truths but tool-task mismatches—may apply more broadly than population ethics alone.

We face genuine civilizational challenges requiring immediate action: climate disruption, transformative AI, resource constraints, potential existential catastrophes. What we need is not more sophisticated identity mathematics but practical wisdom our ancestors demonstrated—protect those alive now, build the strongest foundation possible, hand it off with integrity, trust

future agency to continue the project. The Non-Identity Problem becomes irrelevant once we recognize that survival and flourishing, not perfect moral accounting, constitute ethics' first imperative.

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