Does Existence Make Things Better?

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A central question in population ethics is whether existence, in itself and other things equal, makes things better. (I assume here that the sort of existence that raises the question of betterness is the existence that is worth having – that we are not in a case where we are tempted to say that it would have been better for the person had that person never existed at all – and that the sort of betterness that the question asks about is moral betterness.) This is a claim that we should want to deny, indeed that it seems we are compelled to deny. At the same time, it’s a claim that various arguments seem to push us to accept. (A) Theories that decide whether one world X is morally better than another world Y by comparing total wellbeing in X against total wellbeing in Y, where wellbeing itself is a measure of how precious the particular existence is to the one who exists, imply that existence makes things better, and such theories have highly attractive features. (B) We can see that, in at least some cases, existence seems to make “things” morally better. Thus (1) that a person has been given a better *chance* of existence may make the otherwise wrong choice that makes the person worse off permissible (the “better chance case”). That the *choice* is made better than it otherwise would have been may tell us nothing, of course, about the betterness of the *world* in which that choice was made. Even so, worlds come to us with all their details in place, including the probability that a given outcome will arise under a given choice. If the better chance makes the choice better – permissible when it would otherwise be wrong – then (arguably) that same better chance makes the world in which that choice is made morally better. And (2) that a person has been given the worth-having existence, in a case where it would have been permissible never to bring that person into existence at all, may make the otherwise wrong choice to make the person avoidably worse off permissible (the “mixed existence” or “tradeoff to exist” case). (C) The mere addition principle (if X contains a person p who does not exist at all in Y, p’s existence in X is worth having and X and Y otherwise have their morally relevant features in common, then X isn’t worse than Y) seems intuitively compelling. It, however, can easily be shown that, if we accept that existence doesn’t make things better, we shall have to accept as well that existence can make things worse. And if we accept that latter claim, we must reject the (intuitively compelling) mere addition principle. I will explore the enumerated arguments and others, with the overall aim of showing that we can sensibly accept that existence doesn’t, in itself and other things equal, make things better.