



Three Wishes

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Preamble: “Three Wishes” is an exercise in what could be called *interactive* philosophy. It challenges the reader to discern for herself what lessons we can take from the fable, rather than explicitly laying these out beforehand. Engaging in this intellectual exercise should prove fruitful as it compels one to reflect critically upon the interconnection between distinct laudable goals (e.g. health extension and the eradication of poverty) as well as appreciate the role that perceived feasibility constraints play in our determination of what the fundamental principles of distributive justice are and how they should be ordered.

Three philosophy students were walking along a beach debating topical issues in philosophy and world politics. Their discussions and debates ranged from global poverty and climate change to recent advances in the biomedical sciences. They stumbled across an old, rusty lamp that was partly buried in the sand. One of them picked up the lamp, cleaned it off and then ...

Genie: Good afternoon! I am a genie. Mind you, I’m not your regular kind of genie. My friends say I’m a bit “eccentric.” But hey, what do you expect after being cooped up in a lamp for so long! Anyways, I would like the three of you to come up with a list of three wishes. Since there are three of you, why don’t you come up with one wish each? But there are two conditions you must adhere to.

Condition #1: Your wish must be for something that explicitly benefits humanity in general, not any named individual. I can’t stand egoists who wish riches for themselves!

Condition #2: You cannot wish for something that you believe is impossible to achieve in the real world. So no flying pigs or bringing people back from the grave.

If you violate one of these two conditions, your wish will be invalidated. So, what shall it be?

Student #1: Well, it might be tough to get all three of us to agree on our wishes since we are philosophers and love to debate. And there are many worthy causes. But without a doubt I think the most important thing would be to **eradicate global poverty**. I spent three months as a visiting student in a developing

country last summer and I think it is tragic that so many people still live in severe poverty. So that is my wish.

Genie: Excellent! Very noble.

Student #2: My mother died of breast cancer at the age of 55. And I don't want anyone else to lose a loved one like I did. My wish is to **eradicate all human disease**.

Genie: Very good! Another noble choice.

Student #3: Given that poverty and disease would be eradicated, I need a few minutes to think about what my wish would be. I also recently lost a loved one. My grandfather was one of the most important persons in my life. Last summer, he fell and broke his hip. He never recovered from that injury, and after three months of pain and suffering he finally passed away. I wish I could see him alive again, playing baseball with me like he did when I was a kid. But I know the constraints on the wish mean I cannot wish for that. Let me think.... I know! I wish for **human senescence to be eliminated**.

Student #1: What do you mean?

Student #3: I wish that no person would ever have to suffer the physical and mental disadvantages that come with growing old.

Student #1: So you want everyone to live forever? To be immortal! That violates condition #2.

Student #3: My wish is not for immortality. I simply wish to remove the obstacles that aging itself imposes on our health prospects. People may still die if they are in accidents, etc. But the passage of time, in particular the damage it does to our cells, would not cause us to die or become frail.

Student #2: But that is not possible! It's simply a fact of the immutable human condition that we grow old. So your wish will be wasted since it violates condition #2.

Student #3: How do you know? Besides, do you think eliminating aging is any more impossible than eliminating disease, **ALL** human diseases? There are over two hundred forms of cancer alone. And the reason we develop disease has to do with our evolutionary legacies. I recall learning about this in my biology lecture.

Student #2: What, the class with Dr. Johnson ? You only went to the lectures because he looks like Karl Marx!

Student #3: No seriously, the reality is we are intrinsically vulnerable to disease. As a species we have evolved through a blind process, sometimes changing by accident, other times for adaptive reasons. And the legacies of our evolutionary history have brought the various limitations and trade-offs that make us susceptible to things like cancer. So if my wish violates condition #2, then so does yours. Curing all the thousands of diseases we are vulnerable to be sounds more fantastical than modifying our biology to be immune to aging.

Student #1: Can't you pick something else, like world peace or combating climate change?

Student #3: I don't think world peace will be a real problem in a world with no poverty. Remember what we learned about Marx.

Student #2: Oh no! Here we go with Marx.

Student #3: Serious conflicts like war arise because of what is going on in the *material conditions* of life. Without poverty there is no reason for prolonged, serious conflict.

Student #1: What about religion? That has caused many wars in human history.

Genie: Sigh... I had to get a group of philosophers! What did I do to deserve this?

Student #3: Yeah, I thought about the role of religion as well. Marxists believe that religious conflict is really ultimately about economics. So if we eradicate poverty we will probably eradicate the kind of religious fundamentalism that leads to war. Authoritarian religious regimes only take root in poor societies that have limited technologies and resources. So religion helps these societies keep the peace when such instability is present. Get rid of this vulnerability and you probably will not have these other problems.

Student #1: I can't believe you are invoking Marx to determine the future of humanity!

Student #3: Hey! It's my wish so I will wish for what I think is right. Now I'm a little unsure if it is actually possible to eliminate human senescence completely. So to be on the safe side I will revise my wish to retarding aging so that we maximize the number of healthy years it is possible for a person to have. I know that it is possible to slow the aging process down. Scientists have had some real success with this in laboratory experiments, just as they have with gene therapy experiments for cancer and other diseases. So my wish is no more impossible than the wish to eradicate disease.

Student #2: Perhaps, but at least my wish is laudable, and will contribute great benefits to the future of humanity.

Genie: Ok, it sounds like the three of you have pretty much made up your mind. So it is now time for me to inform you about the second stage of your task.

All three students: Huh?

Genie: I told you I was eccentric! I can't actually make any of your wishes come true myself, but what I can do is take your wishes to the United Nations where I am held in rather high esteem. I will present your list of wishes to the nations of the world and they will make these three wishes the world's top priorities. Everyone in the world will work hard to make them a reality.

All three students: Wow, cool!

Genie: However, you have one more thing to decide. And it concerns the *ordering* of your wishes. The first option is to order the three wishes serially. This means that the top wish, the one you think is most important, will be satisfied first. Once that goal has been achieved, efforts will be diverted to the second wish. And then once that goal is satisfied efforts will be directed to the third and final wish.

The second option is to permit compromises and tradeoffs to be made between your three wishes. In other words, the particular policies that the world's governments pursue (to combat poverty, disease and aging) will be influenced by a range of feasibility considerations, rather than the rigid priority rule of the first option. This second option permits a more flexible and provisional stance, basically leaving the question of what the best *means* to achieve these goals are to political leaders, policy experts, scientists, etc., to sort out rather than to you. So if these experts decide, for example, that fulfilling one of these goals might be

more cost-effective in the short-term, and thus better position them to tackle more challenging goals in the long-term, they will pursue such strategies. So those are the two options. The first is more rigid, the second more flexible and provisional. Please take some time to think it over and let me know your decision.

Student #1: Well, I think we can all agree that retarding aging is the last on the list. I think eliminating poverty should be first, and eliminating disease second.

Student #2: No, I think my wish to eradicate disease should be first. It is better to be alive than die of disease, even if you are alive and poor.

Student #1: I don't know about that, but poverty is a major cause of disease so if you eradicate poverty you are, at least to some extent, reducing susceptibility to disease. So if you eliminate poverty first, you will indirectly be furthering your wish anyways.

Student #2: Well, I would rather permit these kinds of tradeoffs to actually be made by policymakers rather than leaving it to chance. If what you say is correct we can just choose the second, more flexible, option and then governments can decide for themselves what is more feasible – tackling poverty or disease, or some mixed strategy. No doubt consideration must be given to the costs of pursuing each goal, the likely time-scale for succeeding and what the magnitude of the benefits of success will be (for both individuals and societies). Just imagine what the consequences of eradicating cancer would be! People would live longer, healthier lives. I recently read that in United States alone, cancer cost an estimated \$206 billion dollars in the year 2006, including \$128 billion for lost productivity and \$78 billion in direct medical costs.

Student #3: Hey, what about my wish to retard aging? That is also important you know.

Student #2: Important? You need to get your priorities right. There is no moral obligation to keep people alive for longer. Extending people's lives is not the same as *saving* their lives.

Student #3: But what is the difference? What you propose doing, by curing cancer, is to add extra years of health to people's lives.

Student #2: Yes, but these benefits are to the people who develop disease, not those who die from old age. Justice requires us to help those who are worse off.

Student #3: But who do you think typically, though I admit not exclusively, develops cancer? Who do you think is most vulnerable to chronic illness? The elderly! Age is a major risk factor for disease. And you mentioned the socio-economic costs of cancer. Consider what the costs of aging are. Every year millions of once skilled and productive contributors permanently leave the work force due to age and they consume a disproportionate share of finite medical resources. Simply expanding the healthspan of individuals, so that they have an extra ten or twenty years with the levels of health and vigor they typically have during their "prime" adult years, would bring enormous individual and societal benefits. And this is something that could actually be achieved in the not-so-distant future.

Besides, if you retard aging you help everyone, not just the "best off." It seems odd to call the elderly the better off, doesn't it? If you really think that then I assume you also think we should deny the elderly healthcare more generally. And that is obviously unfair. Besides, today's young are tomorrow's elderly. If you retard aging you expand the opportunity for healthy living for everyone, including future generations. There are no winners or losers. Every single person is better off living in a world with greater opportunities for healthy living.

Student #1: But what about the world's poor? Your wish doesn't help them.

Student #3: Granted, my wish alone will not solve all the world's problems. But we should not overlook the benefits it will also confer on the world's impoverished nations. I know you guys do not like Marx but I feel compelled to bring Marx up again. According to Marx, the real driving force in human history is labor power such as human knowledge and ingenuity. Now unfortunately we are naturally designed in such a way that, despite the vast amounts of knowledge, wisdom and expertise we develop in the course of our lifetime, aging eventually strips us of these goods. Historically it has been the case that every society is constantly and incrementally starting afresh as those with a life-time of experience and knowledge pass away and new people enter the world. And this imposes enormous transition costs. These new people must be taught and trained, etc. And eventually, once *they* have acquired skills and wisdom they too will pass... and so on.

Now imagine what society could accomplish with a healthy productive workforce that has been able to retain, for a much longer period of time, its health, knowledge, wisdom and expertise! Healthy, productive human beings are *the* most valuable resource for any society, rich or poor. So my wish helps everyone.

Student #2: I'm confused now. I mean, it sounds like I want what you want. Namely, to increase the opportunities for healthy living. I guess I see disease as the biggest obstacle to this goal.

Student #3: I agree that disease is a big obstacle, but it alone is not the only obstacle. Furthermore, age and disease are intimately linked. What we both want is to increase the amount of disease-free years people can enjoy. I do not think we can ever completely eliminate disease. So we risk losing your wish if we do not sort this out.

Student #2: Ok, maybe I could modify my wish so that my wish is for humanity to enjoy the greatest amount of healthy living it is possible to achieve.

Student #3: And that is the same thing I wish for! I think our disagreement was really about the finer details of how we can best achieve this goal. That is, through tackling each disease, one at a time, or through retarding aging. We ourselves are not in a position to resolve this difficult and complex issue. If we choose the second ordering option we can leave the empirical considerations, like what science can actually achieve and the costs and benefits of different strategies, to scientists and policymakers. Our contribution is to clarify what the ultimate goals, or "first principles," are. And one of those goals is to maximize the human healthspan.

Student #2: Agreed, so I change my wish from eradicating all human disease to maximizing the number of healthy years afforded to all people.

Genie: That means you still have a third wish to make, since you have collapsed the wish to eradicate disease and retard aging into this single wish to maximize the human healthspan.

Student #3: Well in that case, I wish we could have a sustainable environment for all future generations to enjoy!

Student #1: That's more like it! Now you have your priorities straight. So our three wishes are to eradicate poverty, maximize the human healthspan and have a sustainable environment. And we choose the second regulatory option. We will not rank these three goals. Reasonable compromises and tradeoffs

must and should be made when aspiring to fulfill all three goals. A world where these three goals are the top priorities is a world we would be proud to live in.

Genie: Well, I must admit I am impressed at how the three of you arrived at your wish list. You really thought things over and found some areas of genuine agreement. I guess all those philosophy courses you are taking really paid off.

Now let's see what the world's political leaders, policy analysts and scientists do with your wish list. I truly hope that the combination of your well-founded moral aspirations, coupled with their practical knowledge of how best to make progress on these laudable aims, will lead humanity to a brighter future. I wish you the best of luck!

All three students: Thanks!