How the numbers count

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1. Introduction

Boat case: Two boats, X and Y, got severely damaged in a storm and are both about to sink. There are five people on boat X, and there is one person on boat Y. A captain of a nearby ship is the only person around who is in a position to help, and she can do so without any significant cost or risk to herself. She can arrive at either of these boats on time, but not at both. There are no relevant differences between the individual persons on the sinking boats.

The boat case is an instance of a *Taurek case*, i.e. a type of trade-off case characterised by the following features:

(i)   more than two persons will lose their lives unless they are rescued by a certain agent;

(ii)   the agent can save different (non-overlapping) groups of these persons, but not all of them;

(iii) there are no morally relevant differences between the individual persons;

(iv)   no action that needs to be performed to save any of these groups imposes unacceptable burdens on the agent;

(v)   there are no further morally relevant factors apart from those implied by (i)–(iv).

What ought one to do in Taurek cases? Four proposals:

- One ought to save the greater number (cf. Parfit 1978, Kamm 1993, Rakowski 1993, Scanlon 1998).
- One ought to save one of the groups, but it is permissible to save either (cf. Taurek 1977, Dogget 2013).
- One ought to use a randomised procedure ("lottery") to determine whom to save (cf. Timmermann 2004, Saunders 2009).
- One sometimes ought to randomise and sometimes ought to save the greater number ("mixed-solution"; cf. Broome 1990, Hirose 2004).

Taurek cases are often said to raise the question of whether "numbers count". There are two different things we might mean by saying that numbers count:

- The *numerate view*: one ought to save the many.
- The *numbers-friendly view*: each person counts for one, therefore more count for more (cf. Parfit 1978: 301).

Aims of my talk:

- outline an argument for the view that one ought to save the many that involves one particular version of the numbers-friendly view.
- show how this version can avoid some popular objections that have been raised against other numbers-friendly approaches to Taurek cases.

2. The value-based aggregative account of why one ought to save the many

The *value-based aggregative account* of why one ought to save the many: one ought to do so because this leads to the best available outcome. In more detail:

- In Taurek cases, one ought to do what leads to the best available outcome.
- Each person's life has value, either because a person's life is valuable in itself, or because each life realises something else that is valuable, such as well-being.
- No further values matter in Taurek cases.
- With regard to these values, there is no difference between the lives of those individual persons that are involved in Taurek cases.
- These values allow for interpersonal aggregation.

Interpersonal value aggregation: If X and Y have value, then their value allows for aggregation if, and only if, a state of affairs in which both X and Y are realised is – other things being equal – more valuable than a state of affairs in which only X or only Y is realised. Value aggregation is *interpersonal* if and only if the aggregated values are instantiated or realised by different persons. It is *intrapersonal* if and only if the aggregated values are instantiated or realised by the same person.

Interpersonal value aggregation does not commit one to accepting that one ought to save the many. Consider Broome's defence of a mixed solution, according to which:

- well-being has positive value, and unfairness has negative value;
- anything but holding a lottery in Taurek cases will be unfair;
- the aggregated negative value of treating people unfairly can outweigh the aggregated positive value of well-being (cf. Broome 1990).

3. Objections to the value-based aggregative account

Five common objections to the value-based aggregative account:

1. *Semantic worries about "better":* the best sense we can make of the idea that an outcome is better than all others is that it is an outcome that results from the act that one ought to choose (Lübbe 2008).
2. *The value of persons vs. the value of objects*: proper appreciation of the value of persons requires one to regard the death of many persons as just as bad as the death of one – this is what distinguishes the value of *persons* from the value of *objects* (cf. Taurek 1977).
3. *Worries about the possibility of interpersonally aggregating well-being*: the assumption that if five persons have a certain level of well-being, there is *more* well-being than if only one person has this level of well-being does not make sense (cf. Taurek 1977).
4. *The separateness of persons objection*: accounts relying on interpersonal value-aggregation fail to properly respect the separateness of persons (cf. Timmermann 2004, Peterson 2013: ch. 4).
5. *The wrong sort of account:* if one morally ought to save the many, then this must have something to do with the fact that these persons each have a claim to be saved. The value-based aggregative account cannot show that saving the many is really part of what we owe to each other and hence something that we morally ought to do (cf. Scanlon 1998).

4. A different approach: moral reasons and how to balance them

An attractive approach to Taurek cases is expressed by the *tie-breaking* or *balancing-argument* for the view that one ought to save the many (cf. Kamm 1993: 99-122, Scanlon 1998: 229-241).

(P1)   Each person on boat X or on boat Y gives the agent a reason to save her, which is also a reason to do what is a necessary means to achieving this end.

(P2)   All of these reasons are equally strong.

(C1)   Thus, there are more reasons of the same strength in favour of heading for boat X than there are reasons of the very same strength in favour of heading for boat Y. [from (P1)-(P2)]

(P3)   If there are more reasons of the same strength in favour of ϕ-ing than there are in favour of ψ-ing, then there are, all things considered, stronger reasons in favour of ϕ-ing.

(P4)   There are no further reasons to be taken into consideration in deciding what to do apart from those mentioned in (P1).

(C2)   Thus, the reasons in favour of saving the greater number by heading for boat X are stronger than the reasons in favour of any other relevant alternative. [From (C1), (P3) and (P4)]

(C3)   Therefore, the captain has most moral reason to save the greater number by heading for boat X. [From (C2)].

(C4) Therefore, the captain morally ought to save the greater number by heading for boat X.

The balancing argument …

• is not committed to any particular understanding of the unqualified use of "better";
• does not assume that the value of persons allows for interpersonal aggregation;
• does not assume that the value of well-being allows for interpersonal aggregation;
• is compatible with the view that the reasons in Taurek cases are grounded in individual claims.

5. The balancing argument's commitment to interpersonal aggregation

Premise (P3) states that combinations of those reasons that matter in Taurek cases are stronger than their components. This can be regarded as a commitment to a sort of interpersonal aggregation. In order to make this notion more precise, I will use '$\succ$' to represent the *stronger than*-relation between reasons and make the simplifying assumption that the stronger than-relation takes sets of reasons (including singletons) as relata (cf. Schroeder 2007, 126-127).

Reasons aggregation (definition): Let M and N be sets of reasons in favour of ϕ-ing (or sets of reasons against ϕ-ing): M and N allow for aggregation if, and only if: (i) $M \cup N \succ M$ and (ii) $M \cup N \succ N$.

Aggregation of reasons is *interpersonal* if, and only if, it is aggregation of reasons that are given by different persons. Aggregation of reasons is *intrapersonal* if, and only if, it is aggregation of reasons that are given by the same person.

The balancing argument involves a commitment to interpersonal aggregation (cf. Otsuka 2000, Timmermann 2004). This is why it is a numbers-friendly view.

Options for criticising the balancing argument:

- Reject interpersonal aggregation for moral reasons.
- Reject (P1) and argue that the moral reasons in Taurek cases do not count in favour of *saving* the individual persons, but in favour of giving each person *a fair chance to be saved*.
- Reject (P4) and argue that in addition to those reasons counting in favour of saving the individual persons, there are also reasons counting against letting anyone die without a fair chance to be rescued. Given (P3), this can result in a mixed solution (cf. Gertken 2016).

6. Considerations in favour of interpersonal aggregation of moral reasons

The very idea of reasons-aggregation itself should not give rise to any worries. It should be uncontroversial that one can have sufficient or decisive reasons to φ without having any particular reason to φ that is *on its own* sufficient or decisive.

It is plausible that at least some moral reasons allow for *intrapersonal* aggregation. Suppose I have given two promises to a friend that I cannot keep both, and that both promises give me equally strong reasons to do what I have promised. If there is a significant difference in how each of the promised acts would affect my friend's happiness, this breaks the normative tie between my promise-based reasons. To make sense of this, we need not assume that the difference in well-being could outbalance the competing promise-based reason on its own.

Unless there is a *specific* objection to *interpersonal* aggregation of moral reasons, interpersonal and intrapersonal aggregation of moral reasons should both be accepted.

7. The separateness of persons objection

Some moral theories are criticised for failing to respect or take serious the separateness of persons. For such an objection to be successful, it has to establish …

- the view that there are separate persons;
- a description of how the criticised view does not regard the fact that there are separate persons as morally significant;
- an account of why not treating the fact that there are separate persons as morally significant in this particular way is problematic.

Classical utilitarianism: an action is right if, and only if, and because, its outcome realises at least as much interpersonally aggregated well-being as all alternatives. Classical utilitarianism sees no relevant moral difference between situations involving groups of persons and situations

involving single persons, as long as there is no difference in aggregated well-being. This is how classical utilitarianism does not regard the separateness of person as morally significant.

This is problematic because each person has certain rights, which constrain *other persons'* actions (cf. Nozick 1974: 32-33). Classical utilitarianism disregards all normative phenomena that essentially concern the relations between different persons.

Is there also a way in which proponents of interpersonal aggregation of moral reasons fail to regard the separateness of persons as significant? And if so, is it objectionable?

If we accept interpersonal aggregation of moral reasons, we accept a moral outlook according to which it does not matter *who the sources of our moral reasons are,* as far as the task of determining what we have most reason to do is concerned.

Type 1 Cases	Type 2 Cases
p is a reason for φ-ing (given by A)	p is a reason for φ-ing (given by A)
q is a reason for φ-ing (given by A)	q is a reason for φ-ing (given by C)
r is a reason for ψ-ing (given by B)	r is a reason for ψ-ing (given by B)

If we accept interpersonal aggregation of moral reasons, then in type 2 cases, we will only care about what the relevant reasons count in favour of and about how strong these reasons are. The sources of our moral reasons will be *disregarded in determining what we have most reason to do*. This is also why we will treat type 2 cases just like type 1 cases, despite the fact that our reasons for φ-ing are given by *different persons* in type 2 cases, and by the *same person* in type 1 cases.

The very same indifference is also involved in *interpersonal comparison* of moral reasons, i.e. in comparing moral reasons given by different persons in the course of determining what one has most reason to do.

Type 3 case	Type 4 case
p is a reason for φ-ing (given by A)	p is a reason for φ-ing (given by A)
q is a reason for ψ-ing (given by A)	q is a reason for ψ-ing (given by B)

If we compare moral reasons interpersonally in deliberation, we will be unconcerned about the sources of our moral reasons in type 4 cases. We will therefore not see any relevant difference between type 3 and type 4 cases, as far as the task of determining what we have most reason to do is concerned.

The same type of indifference towards the sources of our reasons is involved both in interpersonal comparison and in interpersonal aggregation of reasons. So if the separateness of

persons objection rules out interpersonal *aggregation* of moral reasons, it also rules out interpersonal *comparison* of moral reasons.

Any plausible ethical outlook must be consistent with the idea that the moral reasons that one has e.g. to save a child's life are stronger than the moral reasons that one has for sparing some person a mild headache, or the moral reasons one has for keeping a promise to meet a friend for dinner.

We should hence not accept the separateness of persons objection to interpersonal aggregation of moral reasons.

8. Conclusions

Interpersonal reasons aggregation is a way to conceive of how numbers count in ethics that is not subject to many well-known objections to value-based aggregative accounts. It is also an essential part of an attractive argument for the view that one ought to save the many – the balancing argument.

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