

PHI 202 | Study questions 3

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Readings:

Taurek, J. (1977). Should the Numbers Count?

Scanlon, T. (1998). *What We Owe to Each Other*. Chapter 5 (esp. §9). - postponed

Trade-offs and moral aggregation

(a) In some cases, we must choose between bestowing benefits on or preventing harms to one group and another group. For instance, we may have to choose between preventing harm to five people and preventing harm to one person. Or we may have the option of imposing a burden on one person to benefit very many people. What does utilitarianism tell us to do in such situations?

(b) Utilitarianism holds, among other things, that value is *agent-neutral*, that moral value is *additive*, and that the proper response to value is to *maximise* it. What is the importance of these commitments in situations like the ones described above? Which does Taurek want to reject?

Taurek's central cases

(a) What is the answer given by Taurek in the following three cases?

Stranger's Life: You have one dose of a drug that six strangers need to stay alive. The amount they need is different: one person needs the whole dose whereas the other five people require just one-fifth of the drug each. Should you give it to the one or the five?

Friend's Life: You have one dose of a drug that *your friend David* and five strangers need to stay alive. David needs the whole dose whereas the five strangers require just one-fifth of the drug each. Should you give to David or to the five?

One's Own Life: David has one dose of a drug that *he* and five strangers need to stay alive. David needs the whole dose whereas the five strangers require just one-fifth of the drug each. Should David use it himself or give it to the five?

(b) Very roughly, what role do these cases play in Taurek's argument?

Taurek's main argument

(a) Here is one way to reconstruct Taurek's argument:

- (1) In *Friend's Life*, it is permissible for you to save David rather than five strangers.
- (2) If it is permissible for you to save David rather than five strangers in *Friend's Life*, then it is permissible for you to save one stranger rather than five in *Stranger's Life*.
- (3) Thus, it is permissible for you to save one stranger rather than five in *Stranger's Life*.
- (4) If it is permissible to save one stranger rather than five in *Stranger's Life*, then the relative numbers are not itself significant in determining the right action.
- (5) Thus, the relative numbers are not itself significant in determining the right action.

(b) To turn this argument into an objection to utilitarianism, we would have to add a further premise or two. Can you think what they are?

Three arguments for the first premise

(a) The first argument offered by Taurek in support of the first premise is simply that it is intuitively true. Do you share Taurek's intuition? Are there any features of the case, perhaps only implicit, which could mislead our intuitions?

(b) The second argument appeals to the case *One's Own Life* described above. Johann Frick called it *the argument from legitimate partiality*. What is this argument, exactly? (Clue: pp. 299-301).

(c) The third argument turns on the claim that the outcome in which five people die would not be worse (or better) than the outcome in which David dies. What is this argument, exactly? (Note that the same argument is used to support a premise in the argument from legitimate partiality.)

Two arguments for the second premise

(a) Taurek considers and rejects a number of possible reasons why it would be permissible to save David in *Friend's Life* but not permissible to save the one in *Stranger's Life*. The first possible reason is that it would be *worse* to let David die than to let the five die (but it would not be worse to let the one stranger die than to let the five strangers die). What does Taurek say in response?

(b) The second possible reason is that you have *special obligations* to David (which are absent in *Stranger's Life*). What does Taurek say in response?

(c) Are there any other ways in which the fact that in *Friend's Life* you have the option of saving a friend and in *Stranger's Life* you are choosing between groups of strangers bear on the relative permissibility of your actions in these two cases?

Exploring the limits of the argument

(a) Consider a case in which you can either save one person from losing an arm or save five people from dying. Taurek's argument seems to imply that it is permissible for you to do the former. But this is counter-intuitive, so the argument must be flawed. Taurek considers this on p. 302. What does he say in response? Is it convincing?

(b) What if the stakes were lower? That is, suppose that you can either save one person from losing a finger or five people from losing an arm. Does it make a difference that no one faces the possibility of death?

(c) What if the numbers were higher? That is, suppose that you can save either one person from death or fifty people from death? Taurek considers this on p. 306. What does he say?

(d) Taurek spends a lot of time arguing how we should *not* tackle situations involving trade-offs. The utilitarian calculus, he thinks, is not the way to go. But he also gives a positive proposal: if you can either save one or save five, you should flip a coin. The thought here is that although you cannot distribute benefits equally between everyone, there is something that you can distribute equally: the chance of receiving a benefit. Is it the right thing to do in these circumstances?

(e) What if you occupied some role in the society? Taurek is willing to admit that although in *Stranger's Life* it would be permissible for you to save the one rather than the five, it would not be permissible for the Coast Guard captain to evacuate the one rather than the five. Why?