

Risky Ethics

Week 4: Partial Aggregation

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Overview.

Anti-aggregative moral theories have counterintuitive implications when applied to cases in which we can either prevent one complaint of a given strength or many complaints of somewhat weaker strength. Partially aggregative theories have been developed to avoid these implications. The most famous partially aggregative account comes from Alex Voorhoeve, which he calls ‘Aggregate Relevant Complaints’ (2014). Despite their intuitive pull, partially aggregative theories face several problems. Across a series of papers, Joe Horton argues that partially aggregative moral theories are inconsistent when applied to cases of risk (2017; 2018; 2020). Patrick Wu responds to Joe Horton, demonstrating that his argument, in fact, has little to do with risk (2022).

Partial Aggregation

1. What is a partially aggregative moral theory? How does it differ from Scanlon’s contractualism? What are the motivations behind adopting a partially aggregative moral theory?
2. What does ‘relevance’ mean? How might we cash out the idea?
3. What decision rules can be applied to relevant complaints?
4. When applied to risk, do we make the relevance judgement before or after discounting a complaint? What reasons might we have for this decision?

Joe Horton’s *Reductio*

5. What are the three cases Horton discusses in ‘*Aggregation, Risk, and Reductio*’? What are the verdicts partially aggregative moral theories are supposed to give in these cases?
6. What reasons do we have to think Villain 3 is like Villain 1?
7. What reasons do we have to think Villain 3 is like Villain 2?
8. Why, when taken together, are these inconsistent?
9. What is the ‘sequences’ objection to Horton considers? What is his response? What disanalogies does he discuss between Villain 3 and Long Life?

My response

Horton's Reductio

1. (1) In Villain 1, an adequate partially aggregative theory would permit us to choose (2) over (1).
2. (2) In Villain 3*, the decision regarding each pair is morally analogous to the decision in Villain 1.
3. (3) *Sub-conclusion.* in Villain 3*, an adequate partially aggregative theory would permit us to choose (2) over (1) for each pair.
4. (4) In Villain 2*, an adequate partially aggregative theory would not permit us to choose (2) over (1).
5. (5) In Villain 3*, the decision how to treat all pairs is morally analogous to the decision in Villain 2*.
6. (6) *Sub-conclusion.* In Villain 3*, an adequate partially aggregative theory would not permit us to choose (2) over (1) for all pairs.
7. (7) *Conclusion.* In Villain 3*, an adequate partially aggregative theory would permit us to choose (2) over (1) for each pair and not permit us to choose (2) over (1) for all pairs.

Bomb. A group of villains have released an irritating gas into a high-rise building, the residents of which will experience painful, but non-fatal, symptoms if they are exposed to it for more than a few minutes. They are incapable of leaving the building, but you have a gas-mask and are able to go into the building to help individuals leave one at a time. The villains have also set up a bomb such that if more than twenty people have been detected leaving the building, it will explode, killing all those remaining in the building.

Three Options. You are presented with three options: (1) you can prevent one death; (2) you can prevent twenty one broken backs; (3) you can prevent two thousand three hundred migraines. Broken backs are relevant to death, and twenty broken legs outweigh a death. Migraines are relevant to broken backs, and one hundred migraines outweigh a broken back.

Patrick Wu's Response

1. What is the first argument of Horton's that Wu identifies? (p.512)
2. How do the second and third arguments differ from the first? (p.513)
3. What is the Diachronic Principle (p.514) and what role does it play in Wu's argument? What is the importance of the Islands case?
4. How does the Diachronic Principle 1 conflict with intuitions about supererogation?
5. How does the Diachronic Principle 2 violate prerogatives?
6. How does the Diachronic Principle 3 conflict with cyclical preferences?