Utilitarianism and Aggregation

I. Rawls, from *A Theory of Justice.*

The striking feature of the utilitarian view of justice is that it does not matter, except indirectly, how [satisfaction] is distributed among individuals any more than it matters, except indirectly, how one [person] distributes their satisfactions over time. The correct distribution in either case is that which yields the maximum fulfillment. Society must allocate is means of satisfaction whatever these are, rights and duties, opportunities and privileges, and various forms of wealth, so as to achieve this maximum if it can. But in itself no distribution of satisfaction is better than another except that the more equal distribution is to be preferred to break ties. It is true that certain common sense precepts of justice, particularly those which concern the protection of liberties and rights, or which express the claims of desert, seem to contradict this contention. But from a utilitarian standpoint the explanation of these precepts and of their seemingly stringent character is that they are those precepts which experience shows should be strictly respected and departed from only under exceptional circumstances if the sum of advantages is to be maximized. Yet, as with all other precepts, those of justice are derivative from the one end of attaining the greatest balance of satisfaction. Thus there is no reason in principle why the greater gains of some should not compensate for the lesser losses of others; or more importantly, why the violation of the liberty of a few might not be made right by the greater good shared by the many. It simply happens that under most conditions, at least in a reasonably advanced stage of civilization, the greatest sum of advantages is not attained in this way. No doubt the strictness of common sense precepts of justice has a certain usefulness in limiting people’s propensities to injustice and to socially injurious actions, but the utilitarian believes that to affirm this strictness as a first principle of morals is a mistake. For just as it is rational for one person to maximize the fulfillment of their system of desires, it is right for a society to maximize the net balance of satisfaction taken over all of its members.

The most natural way, then, of arriving at utilitarianism (although not, of course, the only way of doing so) is to adopt for society as a whole the principle of rational choice for one person. [...] Utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons.

II. Hinrose, from “Aggregation and Non-Utilitarian Moral Theories”

According to some moral theories, the gains and losses of different individuals are combined and balanced in order to judge the rightness and wrongness of an act. I call this interpersonal aggregation, or aggregation for short. According to an aggregative moral theory, the disvalue of imposing heavy burdens on some limited number of people will always be justified by the fact that this brings benefits to others, no matter how small these benefits may be, as long as the recipients are sufficiently numerous. Many opponents of utilitarianism exclude any aggregative feature from their proposed moral theories. It is widely conceived that we are led to a version of utilitarianism whenever we allow aggregation.

Criticism of aggregation, however, appears to go too far. Suppose that we are faced with a choice between (a) saving five strangers and
letting one different stranger die and (b) saving the one stranger and letting the five strangers die. Suppose further that there is no morally relevant difference between these six strangers, and that none of them has any special claim to us. If we rule out aggregation, it seems that we must agree with John Taurek, who contends that we should flip a fair coin to choose (a) or (b). Taurek believes (i) we do not have a moral obligation to save the five strangers, (2) there is no impersonal perspective that compares the losses of five strangers’ lives and the loss of the one stranger’s life, and (3) that we should show an equal and positive respect to each person individually. When faced with a choice between sparing one valuable object and sparing five equally valuable objects, Taurek would spare five objects on the grounds that the combined value of five objects is strictly greater than the value of the single object. But a human life is quite different from an object, and there is something wrong if we save the five strangers on the same grounds. Then, Taurek holds that the coin-flipping best captures his belief, as it gives each person a 50 percent chance of being saved. If we saved the greater number, it would be pointed out that we aggregate the losses for different people into the losses for a group of people from the impersonal perspective, and hence that we are led to a version of allegedly evil utilitarianism. But Taurek’s coin-flipping proposal is intuitively implausible; this proposal implies that we should flip a coin even when the choice is between saving one stranger and saving one million strangers! [...]

At the very beginning of this paper, I offered an informal definition of aggregation. But it is not precise enough. More specifically, it is not clear what we mean by the gains and losses being ‘combined and balanced’. I can think of three interpretations. The first and narrowest one is that it means the adding-up of different people’s gains and losses, which classical and average utilitarianism employs; an act is right if and only if it maximizes the total sum of people’s gains and losses or the average thereof. If this interpretation is correct, criticism of aggregation rejects many egalitarian distributive principles that are represented by the weighted sum of people’s gains and losses.

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3 J. Taurek, ‘Should the Numbers Count?’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (1977), pp. 293–316. [Hinrose’s footnote]