

A Response to “Should the Numbers Count?”

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In this essay, I will outline the problem John Taurek addresses in “Should the Numbers Count?”, explain his specific response to the problem and what his argument is, and raise one objection to his claims. Taurek argues that in a situation where you can either prevent harm to one stranger or five strangers but you cannot prevent harm to all six, the thing to do is “give each person an equal chance of survival” (Taurek, 303). This claim is supported by his argument that when we have no connection to any of the strangers at risk of harm, it is imperative we give everyone equal concern by flipping a coin. I argue that by summing the claims of five individuals into one, Taurek’s coin flip overlooks the worth of the individual people at risk.

The ethical problem Taurek responds to concerns the limitations we might encounter when bestowing benefits or preventing harms to others. He centres his argument on tradeoff situations where we must choose between benefiting or protecting certain people from harm at the expense of others (Taurek, 293). Examples of this issue exist within iterations of Phillipa Foot’s trolley problem, where a trolley is headed towards 5 people tied down on one track who can be saved if the conductor switches to the other track, where only one person is tied down. The general consensus many philosophers have come to is that not only is it permitted, but one should choose to save the 5 people rather than the 1. Foot argues that in cases like this, we have a conflict of negative rights, which involve a person's right to not have harm done to them. In cases where there is a conflict like this, Foot argues that we must minimize the amount of negative rights violations committed and save 5 people rather than 1. Taurek questions if this is the correct way to go about tradeoff cases like this, where the 5 people are saved only because of their numerical superiority. In his paper, Taurek

rejects the claim that we have to make our decisions in these cases based on the number of people involved.

Taurek responds to this problem by coming up with a problem of his own, which I will refer to as “resources”. In resources, a small supply of a drug could be used in its entirety to cure 1 person, or could be used in fifths to cure 5 other people. In this example there are no special considerations. While common sense reasoning might point us to saving the greater number, Taurek claims that a group involved in a tradeoff situation should not be saved based on their numerical superiority alone. To argue this point, Taurek asks the reader to suppose the 1 is someone named David, who you know and like, while the other 5 are strangers. Taurek doesn't think it would be immoral to give all the medicine to David, and assumes most readers would agree. David is permissibly saved because of personal preference, so we must admit there are no moral requirements to save the larger number of people. Returning to his original argument where all are strangers, Taurek insists on giving each person an equal chance of survival by performing a coin flip (Taurek, 306). Taurek anticipates an objection which questions if he would still flip a coin if it was 1 versus 50, as the numbers must begin to matter at some point. He insists that the numbers do not matter because humans cannot have value attached to them in the way that objects can. If 6 objects are threatened, it would be logical to save 5 rather than 1 because of their combined value. In the case of humans who are all terrified of what will happen to them, no individual in the group of 5 believes that the loss of the other 4 adds up to a greater loss for them. Here, Taurek is asking us not to compare the loss of the 1 to the loss of the 5, but rather to see that each individual is standing to lose the same thing, their own life.

One thing I find worthy of objection in Taurek's argument is his grouping of individuals when rationalizing a coin flip. Taurek himself finds it odd to compare the value of objects to human lives, so why does he group them like objects? Taurek rhetorically asks, if the medicine is given to 1 after the coin flip, who of the 5 can say they were wronged? (303). I

argue that any individual in the 5 can say they were wronged because their individuality has been disregarded. I find it unjust to give one person a 50% chance of life while 5 others are to share the remaining 50%. their worth as an individual has been dismissed because the resource holder could not find an alternate way to allocate the resources and wanted to leave it up to a simple coin flip. Consideration of other solutions, such as a weighted lottery or contractualist argument, may be better suited for handling this situation in a way that respects individuality.

“Should the Numbers Count?” effectively challenges our common sense intuition that it is always better to save the greater number of people in tradeoff situations. Through a series of examples and thought provoking statements, Taurek attempts to show that we have no moral obligation to make numbers our deciding reason for choosing one group over another, and that other reasons such as personal preference are also permissible. Taurek suggests that in situations where we have no preference, a coin flip would be the most equal thing to do. While this proposition is interesting, I disagree with it due to its inherent grouping of 5 people into one claim, and suggest that other solutions be considered instead. Taurek’s work is admirable and my criticism should not be taken to overshadow his insights on tradeoff situations and the moral unimportance of numeric superiority within them.

Bibliography

Taurek, John M. "Should the Numbers Count?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1977, pp. 293–316. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2264945> . Accessed 12 Oct. 2023.