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Each Counts for One

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After 50 years of debate, the ethics of aggregation has reached a curious stalemate, with both sides arguing that only their theory treats people as equals. I argue that, on the issue of equality, both sides are wrong. From the premise that "each counts for one," we cannot derive the conclusion that "more count for more" or its negation. The familiar arguments from equality to aggregation presuppose more than equality: the Kamm/Scanlon "Balancing Argument" rests on what social choice theorists call "(Positive) Responsiveness," Kamm's "Aggregation Argument" assumes that "equal" lives are fungible, and Hsieh et al. have it that spreading goods broadly best approximates equality. In each case, the crucial premise is not equality itself but a further idea that Taurek, I argue, can safely reject. I conclude with a conjecture: there is no theory-neutral argument that settles the question of whether the numbers count.

1. Introduction

Suppose you are choosing which of two groups to save. Does it intrinsically matter if one group is bigger? Do you have an obligation to save the many purely because there are more of them?

Most ethicists, like Derek Parfit (1978), say *yes:* the numbers should count. But some, like John Taurek (1977), say *no:* there is no need, perhaps even no reason, to save the many as such.[1] Both sides of the debate by now have amassed their own armories of arguments. Of all these, the most influential has been an appeal to equality. Derek Parfit ends his reply to Taurek:

> Why do we save the larger number? Because we *do* give equal weight to saving each. Each counts for one. That is why more count for more. (1978, p. 301, emphasis original)[2]

[1] Unlike Taurek, Elizabeth Anscombe (1967, 2005) and Veronique Munoz-Dardé (2005) believe that there can be an intelligible reason to save the many, even though you may save the few.

[2] When Parfit repeats the maxim in a reply to Scanlon, he prefaces it with "As utilitarians might say…" (2003, p. 378). The maxim certainly echoes what John Stuart Mill, in *Utilitarianism*, calls "Bentham's dictum, 'everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one'" (1861, chap. V, paragraph 35). Gerald Postema (2019, p. 99) traces this to a passage in Bentham's *Rationale of Judicial Evidence*: "every individual in the country tells for one; no individual for more than one" (1838, vol. vii, p. 334). Parfit's direct inspiration may have been Henry Sidgwick's principle of "pure equality—as given in Bentham's formula, 'everybody to count for one, and nobody for more than one'" (Sidgwick, 1907, p. 417).

To give equal weight to each, we must give more weight to the many. We find the same idea in classic work by Frances Kamm (1985b, p. 181; 1993, p. 114, 1998, p. 940, 2000, p. 221, 2005, p. 6, 2007, p. 33) and T.M. Scanlon (1998, p. 233). We find it in recent work by leading normative ethicists.[3] We even find it in bioethics and applied ethics.[4]

But there is something strange about this argument, since as Parfit and the others surely know, Taurek makes the same argument against *their* view. A policy of saving the many, Taurek claims, would not "reflect an equal concern for the survival of each" (1977, p. 316). Saving the many would be like saving people "in order of IQ or social importance"—it would be "incompatible with [a] desire to show equal concern for each person's survival" (1977, p. 315).

Clearly, at least one of these arguments must fail. But which? Does equality tell in favor of Parfit's view or Taurek's? I argue that the answer is *neither*. A theory does not need to count the numbers, or refuse to do so, in order to treat people as equals.

But if equality is immaterial to the debate, why do both sides think it gives them an edge? The problem, I think, is that both sides fail to distinguish *Anonymity* (the principle that no one counts for more) from *Responsiveness* (the principle that anyone's interests can break a tie). These concepts come to us from social choice theory, the study of how individual votes combine into collective choices (Arrow, 1963; Sen, 2017). Rather than voters and elections, Parfit and Taurek are concerned with how individuals' claims or interests determine moral permissions (section 2). But the two

[3] Kieran Setiya (2014, p. 272) claims that a stranger who gives "equal weight to the interests of all…would act so as to save the greater number, on the ground that more needs will then be met." Tom Dougherty (2013, p. 419) derives this view from a principle of rationality: if you value some ends equally, you should prefer to achieve more of them rather than fewer. Joseph Raz (2003, p. 351) runs a similar argument using "degrees of compliance" with reasons (an argument anticipated by Shelly Kagan (1988, p. 26)).

[4] Stephen Munzer applies Parfit's maxim to legal ethics: "As Derek Parfit has perceptively argued, we help the larger number *because* we give equal weight to helping each…" (1979: 444, emphasis original). In bioethics, the maxim has been cited as a guide to allocating scarce resources during a pandemic: "If everybody counts for one, and we all have the same value, then it seems intuitive to accept that the more people we can save the better. This insight is captured by Derek Parfit…" (Palacios-González et al., 2022, p. 37).

concepts are useful in either context. Taurek's principle of permissible rescues is less responsive than Parfit's (section 4), but they are both anonymous (section 3), and so they are equally egalitarian. Each can count for one even if the numbers do not count.[5]

2. Majority Rule and Anonymity

We have two moral principles: Parfit's principle requires you to save the many, and Taurek's "innumerate" principle allows you to save either the many or the few. Why think that only Parfit's principle respects the equal value of each person?

One idea is that Parfit's view is an ethical spin on Majority Rule, which treats each voter equally. Let's see if this idea makes sense, starting with some basics of social choice theory.

A *voting rule* is a function that converts the preferences of individual voters into a single ranking that represents the preferences of the whole society.[6] For example, suppose we have three voters—Al, Bob, and Cait—who are voting on whether they will all go on vacation to the Alps or to the Beach. The voters might have the following preferences over the two candidate options:

Al:	Alps > Beach.
Bob:	Beach > Alps
Cait:	Beach > Alps.

Given this information, a voting rule will tell us where their little society prefers to go.

[5] Michael Otsuka, drawing on Nagel (1979, pp. 113–15), briefly argues for this same conclusion: "A defender of Taurek's principle can show that he gives equal and positive weight to the moral significance of each person's life…" (2000, p. 290). Tyler Doggett argues that each person "makes the same difference" to what is permissible, on Taurek's view (2013, p. 307); Otsuka (2006, p. 114) argues that each makes *some* difference. (See also Brook and Schwimmer (1981, p. 330) on "the weak sense of 'impartiality'.") These writers deserve credit for the basic insight that equality does not require counting the numbers.

[6] My exposition will be informal. For a rigorous treatment of voting rules, see Sen (2017) or Gaertner (2009).

If you were Al, you might like the following rule: society prefers as Al prefers. This rule makes Al into a "dictator" who always gets his wishes (Arrow, 1963). That's a good deal for Al, but obviously the others can complain of being treated *unequally*. Al's preferences have all the influence over those of the group; Bob's and Cait's have none at all. A similar complaint could be made about an "oligarchic" rule that counted only Bob's and Cait's preferences.

Contrast this with *Majority Rule*, a paradigm of voter equality. Under Majority Rule, society prefers X to Y if and only if more people prefer X to Y than vice versa. Each person gets one vote. No one's vote counts for more than anybody else's.

Social choice theorists have a precise way to characterize this sort of equality among voters. Majority Rule treats voters as equals because it obeys the axiom of:

Anonymity

Merely changing *who* has which preferences cannot affect what society prefers.[7]

There is a nice way to visualize this axiom. Suppose you list out the voters alongside their preference orderings, as we did above. If our voting rule is anonymous, then swapping the names of two voters—while leaving everything else the same—never affects the output of the rule. For example, we can swap Al and Bob like so:

[7] This is one of Kenneth May's (1952) four necessary and sufficient conditions for (simple) Majority Rule, along with *Positive Responsiveness* (discussed below), *Neutrality* (no candidate gets special treatment), and *Decisiveness* (the rule always produces a decision, even if only a tie). Let me mention a nice way to visualize Neutrality. Given a neutral voting rule, if you swap the positions of two candidates within each voter's preferences, society's preferences will change accordingly. In our example, there is only one way to do this:

Al:	Beach > Alps.
Bob:	Alps > Beach.
Cait:	Alps > Beach.

Before the swap, Beach won by Majority Rule; now, the Alps win.

Bob: Alps > Beach.

Al: Beach > Alps

Cait: Beach > Alps.

Since Majority Rule is anonymous, it still says that society prefers a trip to the Beach. It doesn't matter *who* makes up the majority, as long as there exists *a* majority.

Circling back to ethics, Majority Rule is clearly analogous to Parfit's principle of counting the numbers (Nagel, 1979, p. 112; Kamm, 1993, pp. 115–16; Kumar, 2001, p. 168; Henning, forthcoming). The people in danger are playing the role of voters, with each preferring his or her own survival. Where Majority Rule awards victory to the option that most voters prefer, the principle of counting the numbers "awards" permissibility to the option that saves the most lives.

Of course, Parfit's views aren't *exactly* like Majority Rule. He doesn't think you have to save two strangers rather than saving your own child (1978: 287), or that you have to cure two people's headaches rather than saving one person from death (1978: 295). But the analogy does hold in a certain simple cases. If you are deciding which people to save, and (i) the stakes are the same for each person in danger, (ii) you aren't under "special obligations" to any of them, (iii) each of them prefers what's best for themselves, and (iv) other things are held equal, *then* Majority Rule coincides with the principle of counting the numbers.

To make the analogy explicit, suppose you can either save only Al or both Bob and Cait. Each of the three prefers that you save their group:

Al: Al Survives > Bob and Cait Survive.

Bob: Bob and Cait Survive > Al Survives.

Cait: Bob and Cait Survive > Al Survives.

Since more people prefer that you save the two, Parfit's principle says you have to save them. And just as Majority Rule treats voters equally in virtue of its being anonymous, counting the numbers seems to be a way of treating Al, Bob, and Cait as equals.

This suggests a simple, valid argument from equality to number-counting:

1. The moral principle of counting the numbers is like Majority Rule, which is anonymous.
2. Anonymous voting rules are egalitarian.
3. If a moral principle is like an egalitarian voting rule, then the principle is itself egalitarian.

So: Counting the numbers is egalitarian.

Not everyone will be convinced by this argument, but it strikes me as sound.[8]

Taurek, of course, would reject the conclusion. According to him, a policy of saving the many is like a policy of giving "first priority" to "medical researchers, high-powered managerial types, and people with IQs over 120" (1977, p. 314). Neither policy, he thinks, would "allow" the affected parties "to retain their sense of each having an equal claim" on the resource being used to save them (1977, p. 314); neither policy would "reflect a genuinely equal concern for the survival of each person" (1977, p. 315).

But Taurek just *asserts* this. Why should his opponent believe him?

Suppose we care only about the preferences of each person, and we adopt a principle of satisfying the preferences of the majority. How does this involve unequal concern for any individual?

[8] Here are two objections to premise 2—specifically, to the implication that Majority Rule is egalitarian. First, some say Majority Rule gives unequal voting power to each in a "persistent majority," since each enjoys a tighter "correlation" between his or her preference and the election's outcome (Abizadeh, 2021, p. 291). But this (intriguing) argument relies on controversial "a posteriori" measures of voting power (Ingham and Kolodny, 2023)—and besides, there are no persistent majorities in our one-off rescue cases. Second, Majority Rule doesn't give any priority to those with more at stake, arguably treating them unequally. But I'm not sure this counts as unequal treatment—and besides, we are focusing on cases where the stakes are equal for each.

Each person's preference counts for one. There only *appears* to be something unequal about this approach if we look at it through Taurek's lens, assuming that the numbers count for nothing. It is this hostility to counting, not equality itself, that underlies Taurek's objection. Against a number-counting opponent, the objection has no force.[9]

I conclude that counting the numbers is a way of treating people equally—even if it is not Taurek's preferred way—because it is like the anonymous method of Majority Rule. But that only shows that "each counts for one" is consistent with "more count for more." It doesn't show an entailment. The argument I presented is too weak, for Parfit's purposes, because it does not show that counting the numbers is any *more* egalitarian than Taurek's innumerate view. If Taurek's view is also like an anonymous voting rule—as I think it is—Parfit's advantage will vanish.

3. Unanimity Rule and Anonymity

What exactly is Taurek's view of permissible rescues?

Clearly, he thinks you may sometimes save the smaller group. In a choice between saving only Al or saving both Bob and Cait, he thinks you may save only Al, though you may also save Bob and Cait. But he does not say anything goes (Muñoz, 2022). Even if you have not signed any contracts, made any promises, or accrued any debts, you must save someone, if you can do so at little cost to yourself. Moreover, you may not let anyone die gratuitously. You may not save only Bob rather than saving him *and* Cait. Here, the objection is not that you could have saved two rather than one. It is that you could have saved an extra person at no extra cost to anyone.

Since Taurek and his opponents agree that it's wrong to save no one, and wrong to let

[9] Perhaps Taurek's point is just that the strength of a claim to be rescued should be *insensitive to indirect effects* (such as the medical research one might go on to do). But this isn't a factor in our cases, and it's consistent with counting the numbers upstream (see Kamm, 1993, p. 107; Hsieh et al., 2006). Kamm uses the direct/indirect distinction as part of her own response to Taurek's objection (1993, pp. 111–12).

anyone gratuitously die, let's set aside those possibilities (until section 5) and focus on the choice of which of two maximal groups of people to save. We are interested in what Taurek says about the choice between saving only Al and saving both Bob and Cait.

When it comes to choices like this (holding other factors equal), Taurek's view is like *Unanimity Rule*.[10] The key idea behind Unanimity Rule is that X is socially preferred to Y if and only if X is preferred to Y by every voter. Every individual has a veto, which means that no candidate can win if voters disagree. No coalition, however large, can outvote even one opponent. This is analogous to Taurek's view that the interests of no group, however numerous, can outweigh the like interests of another group, however puny. Morality does not require you to save the many. You may save the many if you wish, but you may also save the few.[11]

Unanimity Rule, for all its faults, has long been seen as an expression of equality.[12] It's easy to see why. It doesn't matter who is in the minority: they have just as much a veto as anybody else—another instance of Anonymity.

This suggests another version of our argument, this time linking equality to innumeracy:

1. Taurek's moral principle of not counting the numbers is like Unanimity Rule, which is anonymous.

[10] Quoth Nagel: "In a perfectly unanimous morality the only number that counts is one" (1979, p. 116).
[11] Some read Taurek as saying that you must or should flip a coin to decide which group to save (Regan, 1983, p. 298; Sanders, 1988, pp. 4, 11; Otsuka, 2000, p. 288; Hirose, 2001, p. 341, 2004, p. 62; Lawlor, 2006, pp. 150–51, 160; Meyer, 2006, p. 142; Hare, 2013, p. 32). But, as others have pointed out, Taurek doesn't say this (Kamm, 1993, pp. 76, 99; Doggett, 2009, p. 1n2; Hirose, 2014, p. 111; Setiya, 2014, pp. 272–73; Henning, 2015; Sung, 2022, pp. 278–80). Taurek says that he "would" flip a coin (1977, p. 306), if his only motive were "an equal concern for each person involved" (1977, p. 307). Taurek's view seems to be as follows. You may save the few, you may save the many, and neither of these better expresses equal concern. The best way express equal concern is to flip a coin, giving everyone the maximum equal chance of benefits—but you aren't morally required to do this, nor is it morally better than saving a group outright. My focus in the text is on Taurek's views about permissibility, not his remarks on randomizing—but see footnote 27, below.
[12] Among the objections to Unanimity Rule are: (1) it privileges the status quo, (2) it creates a tyranny of the minority, and (3) it leads to efficient outcomes only in "a society requiring no politics" (Rae, 1975, p. 1270).

2. Anonymous voting rules are egalitarian.
3. If a moral principle is like an egalitarian voting rule, then the principle is itself egalitarian.

So: Taurek's moral principle of not counting the numbers is egalitarian.

This is just as plausible as the earlier argument for counting the numbers. We have, at best, a tie.

4. Tiebreaking

Frances Kamm has a further argument—the "Balancing Argument."

She writes that there is "an interpretation of equal treatment of all concern" that

> requires that we count equally each individual's preference…. And we will not have succeeded in counting his preference for a certain state of affairs if the fact that he prefers it makes no difference in the process of deciding which state to bring about. His preferring will make no difference in this process of deciding if we would proceed in the same way whether or not he had this preference, even when recognition of his preference could help his cause. (1985b, p. 181; 1993, p. 114)

Kamm is saying, in effect, that Anonymity is not enough. Equality may also require that each person's preference "make a difference" to what we may decide.[13]

Of course, Kamm is not saying that each preference must *always* make a difference. Suppose we are deciding whether to send a rescue mission north, where it would save only David, or south, where it would save Elise and 50 others. Kamm thinks we must send the mission to the north. But

[13] Scanlon (1998, p. 232) makes the same point. Kenneth Walden agrees: "A strategy that grants equal moral consideration to people should not be numb to the presence or absence of people, but Taurek's strategy is exactly that" (2014, p. 233). See also Palacios-González et al. (2022, p. 37).

suppose we switch Elise's preference by imagining her in the north with David. Surely Kamm would not say that this makes a difference, so that we may send the mission north to save the two.

Kamm's view, more plausibly, is that switching preferences should make a difference when we start off from a *tie* (Doggett, 2013, p. 307). Now, as it happens, this principle nicely corresponds to another axiom used to characterize Majority Rule. This is the axiom of:

> *(Positive) Responsiveness*
>
> Suppose that, given voters' preferences, society is indifferent between X and Y (or prefers X). Then if one voter starts preferring X to Y—or stops preferring Y to X—and other voters' opinions are held equal, society will prefer X. (May, 1952, p. 682)[14]

Given Responsiveness, changing a single voter's preference will break a tie (in the direction of that voter's preference). Majority Rule is responsive. The analogous fact, in ethics, is that individual preferences "make a difference" to a tie if we count the numbers.

What about Unanimity Rule? Clearly, it's *not* responsive. In the choice between saving David in the north or Elise and the 50 others in the south, Unanimity Rule would say that we have a tie. But switching Elise's preference to the side of David does nothing to break this tie. There is still nothing close to unanimity in favor of either option (if anything, switching Elise's preference takes us further away from unanimity).

This suggests a second way to argue from "each counts for one" to "more count for more." We can say that a moral principle is egalitarian if and only if the analogous voting rule is anonymous *and* responsive. This time, the same argument cannot be run in support Taurek's view, since his view

[14] As May (1953) shows, his four axioms are independent: given any subset of the four, we can find a voting rule that satisfies precisely those in the subset. The important point here is that a rule can be Anonymous without being Responsive.

is analogous to Unanimity Rule, which is not responsive. If the argument works, then equality favors counting the numbers.

The problem, however, is that there is no clear link between equality and Responsiveness. Contrast this with equality and Anonymity, where the link is obvious—so much so that May (1952, p. 682) uses "anonymous" and "egalitarian" as synonyms.[15] Anonymity says that voting rules should not single out any individual as having a special kind of influence. It is precisely this kind of special treatment that we find in the grossest of inegalitarian rules—such as those that treat some individual as a dictator, or some class as an oligarchy.

On the other hand, there are plenty of non-responsive voting rules that nevertheless seem to treat all voters equally. Unanimity Rule itself may be the most famous example, as it gives every voter the same absolute veto power. Another example is Supermajority Rule, which awards victory to an option if and only if it is preferred by (say) two thirds of voters. This rule, too, seems egalitarian, despite not being responsive.[16]

Parfit was wrong to infer from "each counts for one" to "more counts for more." More people will not always "count for more" in a regime of Unanimity Rule, or even in Supermajority Rule, but it is still true that these rules give each voter an equal share of power. By analogy, on Taurek's moral view, the interests of the many will not outweigh those of the few, and therefore will not generate an obligation to save the many, but no one counts for more than any other. All that changes, in a switch from majority to Unanimity Rule, is *how* each individual counts. Unanimity Rule gives each an absolute veto. Majority Rule gives each a conditional veto: if the rest of the electorate is split, your vote can turn a loss into a tie, or even a victory (depending on whether the total

[15] May also says of Anonymity (emphasis his): "A more usual label is *equality*" (1952, p. 681).
[16] Suppose two voters prefer X and three prefer Y; a single convert from Y to X will not break the tie, given Supermajority Rule—though two converts would. Supermajority Rule is thus like moderate versions of Taurek's view (Pummer, 2022), on which numbers count only when there is a big enough difference.

number of voters is even or odd). But in either regime, no voter has more power than any other, since both rules are perfectly anonymous.

The link between equality and Responsiveness—between "each counts for one" and "the numbers should count"—would appear to be a sheer illusion. Even if Responsiveness is true, no one has shown that it follows from a commitment to equality. Indeed, Parfit and Scanlon do not even *argue* for such a connection.

Does anyone?

5. The Aggregation Argument

I know of only two further ways to argue from equality to number counting (and, therefore, to Responsiveness).[17] Let's start with Kamm's "Aggregation Argument."[18]

Suppose we are deciding between saving only Al, only Bob, or both Bob and Cait. Kamm first claims that it is better to save Bob and Cait than only Bob, since it's better for Cait and at least as good for everybody else. This follows from a principle known as:

(Strong) Pareto

[17] Let me also mention two important arguments that invoke equality but that, in my view, should not be interpreted as targeting Taurek. Erik Zhang's (2024) "argument from equal consideration," a souped-up version of the Balancing Argument, shows that we can derive a duty to save the many even given an "individualist" theory on which claims do not aggregate. But Zhang assumes that losses *do* aggregate, in the sense that two deaths are worse than one—which Taurek would obviously deny. Henning (forthcoming, pp. 9–10) argues that we should defer to the majority if we want to be impartial while letting individual votes be decisive (Responsiveness). But he does not even try to derive Responsiveness from impartiality. He just says that Responsiveness is "plausible" (forthcoming, p. 9). I find it plausible, too. But consider a Taurekian counterpoint: while responsive rules give people more tie*breaking* power, Unanimity Rule gives them more tie*making* power: anyone can turn a defeat into a tie by switching their vote. Why assume that breaking ties is more important than making ties?

[18] Kamm (1993, p. 85n15) attributes "much of" the argument to David Wasserman (see also her 2005, p. 4, 2007, p. 32); Graham (2017) has a complex version; Kavka (1979, pp. 291–92) has a precursor. Brook and Schwimmer (1981, p. 333) are the first to give the argument, though their wording suggests that someone else might have come up with the idea ("The following objection to our argument has been raised…"). Dick Brook has clarified that Schwimmer was probably the source (personal communication, May 23, 2024).

> If X is better for someone than Y, and X is at least as good as Y for everyone else, then X is better overall than Y.[19]

Next, Kamm argues that saving only Bob and saving only Al are equally good options.[20] This follows from a principle reminiscent of Anonymity, often called "Impartiality." I call it:

> *Outcome Anonymity*
>
> If an outcome X is the same as an outcome Y in terms of well-being, except that the identities of the people affected are permuted, then X and Y are equally good.

This says that merely changing *who* lives and dies cannot result in a change in *value*. This principle rules out all sorts of biases. For example, we cannot say that it is better for Al to be happy rather than Bob. It is no surprise that so many writers see Outcome Anonymity, or something like it, as a requirement of equal concern (Kamm, 1993, p.83, 2005, p.4; Hirose, 2001, p. 341; Blessenohl, 2020, p. 494; Broome, 2004, p. 135; Nebel, 2020, p. 2783).

(Just to be clear: Outcome Anonymity is *not* the same as our earlier principle of Anonymity, which we could have called "Voter Anonymity." There is a helpful way to visualize the difference. Suppose we list out people's welfare levels in various outcomes, like so:

[19] Kamm (2005, p. 4) and Hirose (2001) use "no worse than" instead of "at least as good as," which is arguably too strong. See Hedden and Muñoz (2024) on "Super-Strong Pareto."
[20] Some say, on Taurek's behalf, that it's worse to save only Bob, because only then does Cait die *gratuitously* (Friedman, 2002, chap. 2, 2009, p. 279n8; Wasserman and Strudler, 2003, p. 74; Otsuka, 2004, p. 420; Lübbe, 2008, p. 80; Rabinowicz, 2023). Muñoz (2022) argues that this move might be difficult to square with Taurek's other views, and that it cannot help with a more complicated five-option version of the Aggregation Argument.

	Al Survives	*Bob Survives*	*Bob and Cait Survive*
Al:	100	0	0
Bob:	0	100	100
Cait:	0	0	100

Anonymity says that society's preferences over these outcomes (and, analogously, morality's verdicts) don't change if we merely swap two names on the leftmost column. *Outcome Anonymity* says that two outcomes are equally good if the columns below them contain the same numbers, only with the order swapped. Hence: Al's survival and Bob's survival are equally good.)

Finally, Kamm infers that saving Bob and Cait must be better overall than saving only Al. This follows from a principle that Kamm (1993, p. 86) calls:

> *Substitution of Equivalents*
>
> If X and Y are equally good, and Z is better overall than X, then Z is better overall than Y.

The general idea here is that, if X and Y are equally good, then however X compares to some alternative Z, Y will compare to Z in the same way. (Suppose Fred and Gina are equally tall. If Helen is taller than Fred, won't she be taller than Gina, too?)

The Aggregation Argument was not originally meant to answer the question, "Why should there be any connection between equality and counting the numbers?" The argument is usually presented in response to a different question—namely, "Can we argue for counting the numbers without smuggling in any 'aggregative' premises?"[21]

[21] There has been much discussion of this question, both in the context of the Aggregation Argument and the earlier Kamm/Scanlon "Balancing Argument" (Otsuka, 2000; Kumar, 2001; Timmermann, 2004, p. 109n3; Meyer, 2006; Hirose, 2014; Gustafsson, 2017, 2021; Lee, 2017).

But Outcome Anonymity is typically supported by appeals to equality, and Hirose does present the Aggregation Argument as a path from equality to aggregation:

> In so far as the good of each person has the same moral importance, [Outcome Anonymity] and Pareto tell us to save the greater number without combining the goods of different people into an objective value. The numbers count if the goods are equally weighty; but the numbers do not necessarily count if the goods differ from one another. (2004, p. 70)

Is this a good argument?

It's enormously interesting, but I don't think it's persuasive. Taurek can and should reject Outcome Anonymity.

The problem is that Outcome Anonymity treats one person's loss as *equal in goodness* to a similar loss suffered by anybody else—where "equality" implies the lack of any relevant moral difference. If different losses are "equally good," in this very strong sense, then they are substitutable in moral comparisons, so that Pareto will ensure that the numbers count.

But this is not how Taurek thinks of equal goodness.[22] He does not think that one person's loss can be exchanged for another's without a trade-off. The loss of your arm may be as great as the loss of my arm, but one is a loss *to you*, and the other is a loss *to me*. To put it more prosaically, the losses are bad in different ways. They are bad along different dimensions.

Instead of equal goodness, perhaps Taurek should talk in terms of *parity*.[23] To say that one

[22] Is Taurek willing to compare people in value? At one point, he wonders what it "could mean" to say that one person is not "more valuable, period, than any one of [five others], or than all of them taken together" (1977, p. 300). But here I think he is merely expressing doubts about the idea that groups of people have value "taken together." Elsewhere, Taurek (2021, p. 313) expresses similar doubts about collective beauty, skill, and talent. See also Brook and Schwimmer (1981, pp. 326–27) on knowledge.

[23] The concept of parity is due to Ruth Chang (1997, 2002b, 2002a, 2016). As she sees it, two things are "on par" when (1) neither is better or worse, (2) they are not equally good, and yet (3) they can still be

person's loss is on par with another's is to say that, although neither loss is worse, the two are bad in relevantly different ways. The losses are therefore not *fungible* in value. As a result, they might compare differently to an alternative. In particular, saving Bob and Cait might not be better than saving Al, even though it's better than saving only Bob. Just because each counts for one, that does not mean that swapping one for another is a substitution of *equivalents*.[24]

Thanks to parity, the Aggregation Argument has no force against Taurek.[25] If Al's and Bob's deaths are on par, they morally differ, and it is easy to see why they might compare differently to the combined deaths of Bob and Cait. Compared to Al's death, the two deaths represent a trade-off; compared to only Bob's, they are a sheer loss.

Nor is the appeal to parity a desperate gimmick. Plenty of ethicists think of distinct lives as being on par rather than morally fungible (Gordon-Solmon and Pummer, 2022; Muñoz, 2022; Rabenberg, 2023). In fact, this is Kamm and Parfit's own view. For Parfit (2011, p. 132), there are only "imprecise truths about the relative strength…of our reasons" to help one group of strangers rather than another. For Kamm (forthcoming, p. 4), when we say that the lives of "different people" are on par, that "seems to be a specific denial that moral equals are substitutable."

Of course, as Kamm herself points out (forthcoming, p. 6), parity sometimes does work like equality. The differences between two items on par may be swamped by a more significant difference between them and a third option. For example, saving Ian's finger is on par with saving

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meaningfully compared in value. Instead of parity, some talk in terms of *incomparability* (De Sousa, 1974; Sinnott-Armstrong, 1985), *imprecise equality* (Parfit, 2016), or *incommensurability* (Andersson and Herlitz, 2022; Hedden and Muñoz 2024). For our purposes, any of these concepts will do.

[24] The basic idea of this objection is not novel (Muñoz, 2022, pp. 79–80; Pummer, 2022, p. 44; Rabinowicz, 2023, p. 370). Brook and Schwimmer (1981, p. 333–34) were the first to present the objection, and later Kamm would give her own version, phrased "somewhat cryptically" (1993, p. 87).

[25] Let me qualify this. If we could find a general argument for the transitivity and completeness of "better than or equal to" (and "may permissibly choose over"), then the Aggregation Argument would have some force. But then Taurek would not be the only one in trouble. Most of Taurek's *opponents* are also committed to failures of transitivity or completeness. See, for example, Kamm (1985a; 1996, chap. 11) and Parfit (1982, p. 131) on supererogation and Otsuka (2004) on Scanlon's contractualism. For a recent argument in favor of transitivity and completeness, see Gustafsson (2022) on money pumps.

Japa's finger, and yet neither is as good as saving Karl's life.

But this is just to say parity may *sometimes* act like equality. That does not mean that parity *always* or even *generally* acts like equality, and so there is no pressure for Taurek to say that we can substitute one life for another as required by the Aggregation Argument.

In sum, the Aggregation Argument shows that we should count the numbers only given that people's lives are "equal" in the sense of being fungible in value. Taurek should insist that people's lives are instead on par. Each person is unique, but none counts for more than any other.

6. Closer to Equality

For our final argument, we turn to Nien-Hê Hsieh, Alan Strudler and David Wasserman (HSW), who contend that saving more people gets us *closer* to equality.

Let's start with an example they call "Sarge."

> Your troops have come under heavy fire in two isolated outposts, but you have the logistical means to get the newly arrived armor to only one of the outposts. There is a single soldier in the first outpost, five in the second; any soldier who does not receive armor will die. (Hsieh, Strudler and Wasserman, 2006, p. 357)

How should you distribute the armor?

If you had enough to go around, you would have to distribute it equally. But there is not enough to go around. So, HSW think you should do the next best thing: "distribute the goods in a way that best approximates an equal distribution" (2006, p. 358).[26] And what best approximates equality? Not giving the armor to the few (2006, pp. 361–64). Not keeping the armor to yourself

[26] Of course, there will be exceptions. No need to give out one shoe to each person, etc.

(2006, pp. 359–61). And certainly not flipping a coin to give each soldier an equal chance of receiving the armor, or rolling a die to give each group a chance in proportion to its size.[27] The way to get closer to equality is through a "broader" distribution, so you should give the armor to the five.

But why think that saving five gets you closest to equality? Some familiar measures of equality would say that you are *just as far away* whether you give the armor to the one or to the five, and most measures would say that you achieve *perfect* equality if you give the armor to nobody, so that the soldiers are equally bereft.

Consider Larry Temkin's way of measuring inequality: we look at each pair of people in a group and sum up every absolute difference in wellbeing (1993, pp. 346–48). There are *no* wellbeing differences if every soldier has the same amount of armor. And there is the *same* sum of differences when only one has the armor as when five have the armor. If the one has the armor, there are five differences: one for each person worse off than the one. If the five have the armor, there are also five differences: one for each person better off than the one. Given Temkin's quite natural principle, HSW seem to be getting equality totally wrong.

But this objection misses the mark. HSW aren't trying to invoke some independent notion of equality that even Taurek is supposed to accept (2006, p. 361). For them, "equality" is part of a "complex" duty you owe to your soldiers—"a duty to rescue them equally" (2006, p. 360). This basically amounts to a duty to spread goods as broadly as you can (2006, pp. 366–67).

The real problem for HSW's argument is that their "duty of equal rescue," even if defensible,

[27] Against these probabilistic proposals, HSW argue that you owe the soldiers a good—the armor—and a chance at a good is not itself a good (see Wasserman, 1996). They also argue that giving proportional chances "does not even purport to give each needy soldier an equal share" (2006, p. 358n10) (though see Jens Timmermann (2004) on the "individualist lottery"). In my view, the question of whether equal chances are like equal shares is not really essential to the debate between Taurek and Parfit. The more interesting question is what to make of equal shares. Suppose you can either give half shares to 100 people or full shares to 99 of them. Taurek would say you *may* give everyone half shares. But the spirit of "equal rescue" seems to imply that you *must*. In this respect, HSW's approach may be even more extreme than Taurek's.

doesn't follow from the idea that people matter equally. A theory can count people as equals without any bias towards breadth.

Consider the totalist, who thinks all that matters is the total amount of global welfare. The totalist doesn't think it's better to spread out a fixed sum of wellbeing. But they still think each person counts for one; they simply express their concern for equality in their own way.

The same is true of Taurek. He thinks every person matters equally, which he expresses by saying that we may save anyone from death even if that means letting many others die.

Taurek, the totalist, and the "equal rescue" theorist all have places for equality in their theories. HSW, to their credit, do not even *try* to show otherwise.[28] They do not start from the neutral premise that each counts for one and use it against Taurek and the totalist. Instead, they start from the intuition that we have a certain equality-inflected duty of rescue, and they argue that *it* entails that we should count the numbers. This is an "egalitarian argument" (2006, p. 364), in the sense that it has to do with equality. But it cannot show that *only* number counters are egalitarians.

7. Conclusion

We have now seen four arguments from "each counts for one" to "more count for more."

We started with the analogy between counting numbers and Majority Rule. Majority Rule, in virtue of its anonymity, does indeed treat voters equally, and if a moral theory counts up people's

[28] There is one exception. HSW do argue that broad distributions best approximate equality (2006, p. 364). They start from the observation that giving all six soldiers armor would be "ideal, perfect equality." What's ideal about it? They note that a "distinguishing feature" of the distribution is its "breadth," and they infer that this makes the distribution "best." But Taurek can reply that saving six is best because it saves *each individual*, and that closeness is not measured by the numbers saved. (HSW may implicitly be thinking of a Euclidean distance function defined over a six-dimensional space, one dimension for each soldier's degree of benefit. If 1 represents receiving armor and 0 represents not receiving it, (1, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0) is indeed further from (1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1) than is (0, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1)—assuming Euclidean distance. But Taurek could instead define the distance between two vectors as the *maximum* distance along any dimension (Mendelson, 1990, p. 32). HSW might object that, on this proposal, you get no closer to equality by saving five soldiers rather than only one of those five. To avoid this conclusion, Taurek could dispute the more fundamental assumption that "closeness" can be measured by a real-valued distance function.)

(equally weighty) preferences to determine obligations in the same way that Majority Rule counts up votes to determine winners, that ethical theory will be treating people as equals. But Majority Rule is not the *only* anonymous rule. Unanimity Rule gives each voter the same absolute veto and the same power to achieve his or her preference conditional on everybody else preferring the same. Taurek's view, analogously, is that we do not have to save a group when doing so would forsake a single other. If Majority Rule respects equality because it's anonymous, Taurek can insist that the same is true of Unanimity Rule, thus evening the score.

Second was Kamm's Balancing Argument, which reveals that Taurek's view is not (positively) responsive: adding someone to one side might not break a moral tie. This feature of Taurek's view really does set it apart. But it does not make his view any less egalitarian. It is Anonymity, not Responsiveness, that is essential to equality.

Third, Kamm's Aggregation Argument turns on the assumption that, when people are equals, they are fungible. Taurek can reject this conception of equality and insist that different lives are "on a par," or good in different ways.

Finally, Hsieh, Strudler, and Wasserman argue that a duty of "equal rescue" requires us to spread scarce goods broadly by saving the many. But they do not even try to derive this duty from a more neutral ideal of equality. (And, as I remark in footnote 28, Taurek can deny that broad distributions are "closer to equality" by insisting on a non-Euclidean distance metric.)

These last three arguments share a limitation. Each rests on a conception of equality that builds in more than is essential for a theory to count people as equals. The Balancing Argument builds in Responsiveness; the Aggregation Argument, fungibility; the "equal rescue" argument, a preference for breadth. But there is no reason why Taurek's view *must have these extra components* in order to express an equal concern for each person, nor do these extra components clearly follow from any part of Taurek's view.

You might wonder: "Don't Taurek's critics already know this?" Some do. But many don't. At least, many do not *write* as if Taurek had a coherent conception of equality. They write as if equality were an uncontroversial value that should uncontroversially settle the debate.[29]

What "looks to be a dispute about the value of equality," Thomas Nagel once warned us, "can also be viewed as a dispute about *how* people should be treated equally" (1979, p. 111, emphasis original). We should have listened. Taurek and his critics have agreed all along that each counts for one. They disagree only about *how* each person is to count. And many of the arguments for counting in Parfit's way are simply unpersuasive.

This is not to say that we should *believe* Taurek. Like many, I find his view extreme, bordering on incredible. This makes it all the more remarkable that we have not been able to refute him using premises that he would feel pressure to accept. So let me end with a conjecture, inspired by the last paragraph of Taurek's (2021, p. 322) posthumous reply to Parfit. *There is no convincing argument from neutral premises for, or against, the view that the numbers should count*.[30] Equality is not some common-ground principle we can use to settle the debate. There may not be *any* such principle. The question of numbers might just be ethically fundamental.[31]

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[29] See especially the citations in footnotes 3 and 4. Although Dougherty and Raz put their arguments for aggregation in terms of equally desired ends and equally strong reasons—instead of equally fabulous values—my arguments apply to them just as well, *mutatis mutandis*.

[30] I say "conjecture" because some objections to Taurek may turn out to be successful. I have in mind Hare's (2013) argument from "morphing," Sung's (2022) argument from normative uncertainty, and money-pump arguments against parity in general (but as noted in footnote 25, money pumps may cut against Taurek's opponents, too). (One might also argue for number-counting on the grounds that rational people would choose it behind a veil of ignorance, supposing themselves more likely to be among the many than among the unlucky few. But this style of argument, besides being controversial in itself, seems to rule out a number of principles that even Taurek's critics accept, such as the doctrine of double-effect (as argued by Kamm 1993, pp. 119–21; 1998, p. 941).)

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