INQUIRY
https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2431855

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Strategic collective action and the proportionality of reasons to expected benefits

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ABSTRACT

We argue that, in order to explain the relative strengths of our reasons to contribute to different collective endeavours, approaches to the ethics of collective action must understand the strengths of our reasons to make a given contribution as proportional to its *expected benefits*, or its chances of bringing about benefits in proportion to their magnitudes. The view that most clearly meets this *proportionality requirement* is the *expected consequences approach*, which identifies our reasons to perform an act with its expected benefits. We contend that views other than the expected consequences approach must similarly proportion the expected degrees of what they take to be reason-giving features of a contribution – such as its virtuousness, appropriate expression, support by considerations of fairness, or helping without making a difference – to the contribution's expected benefits. The proportionality requirement explains why we should spend more time participating in strategic social, political, and labour movement activities, while avoiding unproductive conflicts and merely performative activities. We conclude that the proportionality requirement, and the ability of views other than the expected consequences approach to meet it, are important for thinking and communicating about the ethics of collective action in ways that are simultaneously most compelling and most strategic.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 2 August 2024; Accepted 16 November 2024

KEYWORDS Ethics of collective action; expected consequences; voting; ethical consumption; political action; labour organising

1. Introduction: the comparative requirement and expected consequences

In *collective action cases*, sufficient individual contributions will together bring about a beneficial outcome, but each individual contribution

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seems unlikely to make a difference to this outcome.[1] The philosophical literature on the ethics of collective action has focused almost exclusively on the problem of explaining why in such cases we have moral reasons or duties to contribute to beneficial outcomes that are strong enough to outweigh reasons of self-interest to avoid contributing. The real world applications on which it has focused include voting for superior candidates (typically in US presidential general elections), reducing or eliminating one's consumption of animal products, and otherwise reducing one's carbon or ecological footprint.[2]

As important as it is to realise that we have decisive moral reasons to vote in general elections and make lifestyle changes, we think that the most important questions in the ethics of collective action concern how to contribute to collective endeavours that are likely to be most effective in creating maximally rapid social change.[3] For this we need a defensible way of weighing our moral reasons to contribute to a particular collective endeavour, not only against self-interested reasons against contributing, but against moral reasons to contribute to other collective endeavours. Call this *the Comparative Requirement*.

The approach to the ethics of collective action that is most clearly able to meet this requirement is.

> *The Expected Consequences Approach:* all else held equal, the reasons to perform an act are constituted by its *expected benefits*, or the benefits it may bring about in proportion to (i) their magnitude and (ii) their likelihood of occurring if the act is performed.[4]

[1]For simplicity we include omissions or refrainings in our talk of 'acts' and 'contributions', and count the harms that would be done by performing the omitted acts as benefits of the omissions.

[2]See e.g. Singer 1980; 2023; Parfit 1986; Norcross 2004; 2020a; Edlin, Gelman, and Kaplan 2008; Kagan 2011; Hiller 2011; Nefsky 2012; 2015; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2021; 2023; Gelman, Silver, and Edlin 2012; Morgan-Knapp and Goodman 2015; Broome 2018; McMullen and Halteman 2019; Barnett 2020; Wieland and van Oeveren 2020; Nye 2021; Wieland 2022; Asker 2023.

[3]Indeed, there is evidence that people most often fail to vote and fail to make lifestyle changes, not because they accept certain philosophical theories about the ethics of collective action, but because in this era of political reaction and climate breakdown, in which significant improvements can seem politically impossible, they cannot see how their efforts can be part of a meaningful response to the problems we face. To see this, it is important for people to think about how to strategically take action that can most effectively confront these problems. See e.g. McAlevey 2016; Bushell et al. 2017; Volpe 2021; 2023; Kankyoku et al. 2021; Chibber 2022; Chater and Loewenstein 2022.

[4]Again, for simplicity we include omissions or refrainings in our talk of 'acts' and 'contributions', and count the harms that would be done by performing the omitted acts as benefits of the omissions (so this characterization implicitly includes weighing acts' expected harms against performing them). Proponents of this approach include Singer 1980; 2023; Norcross 2004; 2020a; Edlin, Gelman, and Kaplan 2008; Kagan 2011; Hiller 2011; Morgan-Knapp and Goodman 2015; Broome 2018; McMullen and Halteman 2019; Barnett 2020 and Nye 2021. While often conflated with the particular versions endorsed by consequentialists and utilitarians, this broad approach simply (1) takes the extremely plausible moral principles of non-maleficence and beneficence that, all else held equal, we have moral reasons not to inflict harm on others and to confer benefits on others that are proportional to the degree of harm and benefit, and (2) adds to them the extremely plausible idea that, under

In cases like voting in a general election and refraining from consuming harmful products, although our individual contributions can have very small chances of making a difference and bringing about benefits, it is often the case that, if they do make such a difference, the benefits will be enormous. Consequently, their expected benefits are often substantial and decisively outweigh the costs to us of contributing.[5]

Moreover, this approach explains why we should use more of our time doing things like helping to organise unions; lobby or pressure decision-makers for progressive labour, social, and environmental policies; and participate in get-out-the-vote efforts for candidates who support such policies in tight elections – and why we should spend less time doing things like arguing with people from hostile echo-chambers on social media. The former collective endeavours are vastly more likely to achieve their objectives, and, once achieved, their objectives are likely to have vastly more beneficial impacts.[6]

In this paper we argue that other approaches to the ethics of collective action are unable to meet the comparative requirement without further development. In particular, we contend that meeting the comparative requirement requires accepting the

> *Proportionality Requirement*: All else held equal, the strengths of our reasons to contribute to a collective endeavour are *proportional* to our contribution's expected benefits.

The distinctive contributions this paper makes to the existing literature are (i) arguing that meeting the comparative requirement requires meeting the proportionality requirement, and (ii) showing that views other than the expected consequences approach can and should meet the proportionality requirement by proportioning the expected degrees of what they take to be reason-giving features of a contribution – such

conditions of uncertainty, we should, all else held equal, assign greater weight to a possible harmful or beneficial upshot of our conduct the more likely our conduct is to bring it about. It is broadly consistent not only with consequentialism but with non-consequentialist views like Rossian Pluralism, which can involve constraints on harming according to which reasons of non-maleficence are in themselves stronger than reasons of beneficence, and special obligations according to which reasons of beneficence are intensified by special relationships (see e.g. Nye 2021).

[5]See sources cited in note 4. Responses to challenges to this claim are mentioned in section 6.

[6]On the efficacy of organising, lobbying, pressuring, and working on electoral campaigns, see McAlevey 2016; Chibber 2022; Engler and Engler 2016; Fitch, Goldschmidt, and Cooper 2017; and Green and Gerber 2019. On the limited efficacy of arguing with people in rival echo chambers on social media, see e.g. Suler 2015; Pew Research Centre 2020; and Barberá 2020. While the literature on the ethics of collective action seems to have almost completely overlooked this fact, the expected consequences approach is actually flexible enough to apply under conditions where it is impossible to assign precise probabilities and degrees of harm or benefit, as in the foregoing example (see Nye 2021).

as its virtuousness, appropriate expression, support by considerations of fairness, or helping without making a difference – to the contribution's expected benefits.

Our argument proceeds as follows. In section 2 we review Juila Nefsky's (2015, 2017, 2018, 2023) argument that our most powerful moral reasons to contribute to beneficial outcomes are present only when our contributions have a chance of helping, or playing a non-superfluous causal role, in bringing them about. In Section 3 we argue that, for related reasons, in order to meet the comparative requirement, an account of our moral reasons to contribute to a beneficial outcome must proportion them to both (i) the expected benefits of the outcome, and (ii) our contribution's expected degree of helping to bring it about.

In section 4 we review Nefsky's (2017) helping approach, and draw upon a distinction in the literature on contributory causation between *dependence measures* of helping to bring about an outcome, which track one's chances of making a difference to it, and *production measures* which do not. We argue that Nefsky's own version of the helping approach is best understood as employing a constrained production measure. We contend in sections 4 and 5 that this version fails to meet the comparative requirement, and that the helping approach should instead adopt a dependence measure of helping, thereby meeting the proportionality requirement.

We conclude in section 6 by briefly considering the concerns raised by Nefsky and other authors that the proportionality requirement portrays our reasons to contribute to beneficial outcomes as either too weak or too strong. We briefly explain why (i) we think there are compelling responses to both horns of this dilemma in the literature, and (ii) as Asker (2023) has recently argued, Nefsky's own account faces a similar dilemma which admits of similar solutions.

We suspect that many audiences will find it more compelling that we should contribute to beneficial outcomes in light of such considerations as virtue, expressive reasons, fairness, participation, and non-difference-making contributory causation than a simple appeal to one's chances of making a difference to the outcome. By meeting our proposed proportionality requirement, we contend that these other ways of thinking and communicating about the ethics of collective action can be simultaneously most compelling and most strategic.

2. Nefsky on the importance of non-superfluous causal contributions

Nefsky (2015, 2023) distinguishes between 'instrumental' and 'non-instrumental' approaches to explaining our reasons to contribute to beneficial outcomes in collective action cases. *Instrumental approaches,* like the expected consequences approach, hold that these reasons are constituted by the non-superfluous causal role that our contributions can play in bringing them about. *Non-instrumental approaches* hold that our reasons to contribute exist independently of our contributions' chances of playing any such causal role.[7] Paradigmatic examples of non-instrumental approaches hold that we should contribute because it is virtuous, not vicious, appropriately expressive of fitting concerns, required to do our fair share, or how we can be part of a group that brings about beneficial outcomes – even if our contribution is certain to be causally irrelevant or superfluous to whether such outcomes occur.[8]

Nefsky (2017, p. 2756) is open to the idea that there could be *some* non-instrumental reason to contribute to beneficial outcomes in collective action cases.[9] But we think that she argues very convincingly that our strongest, 'the main,' 'or, if you prefer … important and central' reasons to contribute must be instrumental in character.

In essence, Nefsky (2015, 2017, 2018, 2023) argues that any purely non-instrumental approach faces either

[7]We here follow Nefsky's categorization of 'instrumental' and 'non-instrumental' approaches. Samuel Lee (2022, 74) uses a broader characterization of 'instrumental' approaches, as including any approach that takes our reasons to contribute to beneficial outcomes to obtain in virtue of our contributions' being a means to the ends of the outcomes, or the outcomes being consequences of our contributions. The approach that Lee defends is that our reasons to contribute to beneficial outcomes are determined by the fact that our acts can be among their causes, which can remain true even when our causal contributions are superfluous. His account is thus instrumental in his sense but not in Nefsky's and our sense. That said, the difference between Lee's categorization and that of Nefsky may be less significant than it at first appears, since Lee is primarily interested in accounts of when we have reasons of any strength to contribute to collective endeavours, while Nefsky is primarily interested in accounts of our strongest reasons to contribute to collective endeavours. Lee (2022, pp. 101–105) in fact concedes that something like the causal non-superfluousness of a contribution may be critical to giving us strong as opposed to very weak moral reasons to make it. For this reason, there may also be little if any disagreement between Lee's approach and the proportionality requirement that we defend here.

[8]Nefsky argues that on reflection accounts that explain our reasons in terms of virtue, vice, expressing appropriate concerns, fairness, and participation are more plausible if they are *not* taken to be non-instrumental. But accounts of our reasons in collective action cases that are at least potentially non-instrumental in this way include those of Hill 1979; Adams 1999; Goldman 1999; Cullity 2000; Kutz 2000; Sandler 2010; Wieland and van Oeveren 2020; Schwenkenbecher 2020; and Wieland 2022.

[9]Nefsky (2023, pp. 13–15) may be getting at a similar idea in her discussion of a distinct project of explaining our reasons in what she calls 'closed cases,' where 'the outcome is, for some reason, already settled in the relevant respects.'

> *The Superfluity Problem:* the feature of our contributions that the non-instrumental approach identifies as a strong reason to contribute only appears to be so because we are implicitly assuming that it involves our conduct's playing a non-superfluous causal role in bringing about the beneficial outcome. In cases where our conduct is certain to play no such role, the feature either fails to obtain, or it becomes implausible that it is a strong moral reason to contribute; or
>
> *The Disconnect Problem:* the non-instrumental approach provides no plausible explanation of why we have much stronger moral reason to contribute to beneficial outcomes in certain ways than we have to do other things, which, it seems, we have much weaker (if any) moral reason to do.[10]

To illustrate the superfluity problem, Nefsky considers cases like the following:

> *Vending Machine* (Nefsky 2023, p. 7). Three people, A, B, and C come across two starving hikers with no money who urgently need food. The only food around is in a completely tamper-proof vending machine that has granola bars for $4 a piece. This strange vending machine accepts all coins and bills, but it does not give change. After inserting money, one presses a button, and the machine dispenses the number of granola bars bought by the amount of money inserted (So if a $10 bill is inserted and the button is pressed, 2 granola bars are dispensed, just as if only $8 had been inserted prior to pushing the button). A has only a $5 bill, B has only a $10 bill, and C has only a quarter. There is no one else around.

In this case, it seems that A and B have strong moral reasons to contribute their $5 and $10 bills prior to their pressing the button. But it seems very clear that, because C's adding their quarter would be completely superfluous to the number of granola bars purchased and the alleviation of the hikers' hunger, C has little if any reason to contribute their quarter.[11]

For any non-instrumental approach, it seems that it must either:

[10] This terminology is drawn from Nefsky 2023. Our presentation of 'the superfluity problem' combines both (i) what Nefsky there characterizes as the original superfluity problem (2023, p. 4), according to which the presence of the feature that the account identifies as a strong moral reason presupposes the possibility that our act will play a non-superfluous causal role in bringing about the beneficial outcome, and (ii) the 'Superfluity Problem 2.0' according to which the feature that the account identifies as a strong moral reason may well be present in the absence of the possibility of our act playing such a non-superfluous causal role, but its plausibility as a strong moral reason depends upon the implicit assumption that our act can play such a role (2023, pp. 7–11). We have also generalized our characterization of these problems to cover all non-instrumental approaches from the particular context of Nefsky's (2023) discussion of Wieland and van Oeveren's (2020) particular participation-based non-instrumental proposal.

[11] Perhaps C has some reason to contribute their quarter as a symbolic gesture of support, but this reason would be relatively weak, and not much stronger than C's reason to perform other symbolic gestures, as discussed below.

(1) hold that the allegedly non-instrumental feature that it identifies as a strong moral reason to contribute is present for A and B *but not* for C – in which case the presence of the allegedly non-instrumental feature in fact depends upon whether a contribution plays a non-superfluous causal role in bringing about a beneficial outcome, or
(2) hold that the non-instrumental feature that it identifies as a strong moral reason to contribute is present for *both* A and B *and* for C in Vending Machine – in which case the implausibility of the conclusion that C has strong moral reason to contribute shows that the feature is not in fact a strong moral reason to contribute.

As Nefsky has argued, (1) is true of most accounts proposing plausible reason-giving features that might initially seem non-instrumental. It is plausibly virtuous, not vicious, appropriately expressive of fitting concerns (2017, 2018); and required as one's fair share (2015) for A and B to contribute their $5 and $10 bills, *but not* (or at least not to anything like the same degree) for C to contribute their quarter.[12] As Nefsky (2015, 2017, 2023) observes, this does not show these features are irrelevant to explaining why we have strong moral reasons to contribute in collective action cases. It simply shows that these features' presence – at least to any great degree – depends upon our contributions' playing a non-superfluous causal role in bringing about beneficial outcomes, thus making them, and approaches to the ethics of collective action that employ them, instrumental.

As Nefsky (2023) has also argued, (2) is true of at least the non-instrumental '*simple participation*' approach developed by Wieland and van Oeveren (2020). On this view, one has strong moral reasons to participate in a group that brings about a beneficial outcome, and one counts as doing so if one contributes to the 'underlying dimension' upon which the outcome depends. In the case of the Vending Machine, the underlying dimension is the amount of money deposited in the machine before the pressing of the button. Nefsky convincingly contends that (2) is true of the simple participation approach; *both* A and B contributing their $5 and $10 bills *and* C contributing their quarter are contributing to the underlying dimension, and count in the relevant sense as 'participating' in the group purchasing food for the hikers. But the fact that C's

[12]We are being slightly anachronistic in summarizing Nefsky's argument against non-instrumental versions of all of these accounts in this way, since Vending Machine occurs in Nefsky (2023) and did not occur in Nefsky (2015, 2017, or 2018). Still, in earlier works Nefsky illustrated the superfluity problem with similar cases.

contributing their quarter makes them a 'participant' in this sense shows that simply being a 'participant' in this sense is not a plausible candidate for a strong moral reason to contribute.

Can we guarantee that, for any allegedly non-instrumental feature that is supposed to explain why we have strong moral reasons to contribute in collective action cases, either (1) or (2) must be true of it? Perhaps we cannot completely rule out the possibility of a plausible non-instrumental approach that has not been proposed in this literature. But we think that there is a directly plausible principle that strongly suggests that any attempted non-instrumental approach will not be defensible, namely that it is more important to actually help others than it is to simply engage in causally irrelevant gestures and poses, or.

> *The Anti-Performative Principle*: Our non-instrumental reasons (if they exist at all) to engage in merely performative acts, quite independently of their causal contribution to anyone's being benefitted as a result, are much weaker than our reasons to perform acts that can play a significant causal role in bringing about benefits.

We think that something like the anti-performative principle is operative in the background of Nefsky's discussion of the disconnect problem. The non-instrumental approaches that are perhaps most obviously vulnerable to this problem are those that traffic heavily in ideas related to agents' acting on appropriate attitudes. These include approaches that directly identify strong moral reasons to contribute as reasons to express appropriate attitudes towards the beneficial outcome.[13] They also include approaches that identify such reasons as reasons to act virtuously, to avoid acting viciously, or to meaningfully participate in a group, which understand these further features largely in terms of the agent's acting out of pro-attitudes towards the beneficial outcome.[14]

As Nefsky (2015, 2018, 2023) argues, these accounts face the problem of explaining why agents should act out of these pro-attitudes specifically by contributing to the beneficial outcome, rather than by performing

[13]This would seem to include non-instrumental understandings of such approaches as those developed by Hill 1979 and Adams 1999.

[14]This would seem to include non-instrumental understandings of such approaches as those developed by Sandler 2010 and Kutz 2000. Once more, as Nefsky argues, approaches that traffic in such features as acting virtuously, not acting viciously, and meaningfully contributing to the beneficial outcome are free to hold that actions which can be expected to play a non-superfluous causal role in bringing about the beneficial outcome have greater degrees of virtue, the absence of vice, and meaningful contribution than actions which cannot be expected to play any such role. It is simply that these approaches would then have to acknowledge the importance of contributions' expectations of playing such a causal role for us to have strong moral reasons to make them, and in this sense cease to be non-instrumental approaches.

some merely symbolic gesture, such as holding up a sign or wearing a t-shirt praising the beneficial outcome. In particular, these accounts would seem unable to explain why A and B should contribute their $5 and $10 bills to buying food for the hikers, as opposed to simply whole-heartedly telling the hikers how much they support the idea of their obtaining food. But, obviously, A and B have vastly stronger moral reasons to contribute their $5 and $10 bills to actually buying food for the hikers than they have to simply whole-heartedly exclaim their support for the hikers having food.

A more subtle version of the disconnect problem is operative in Nefsky's (2023) arguments against accounts that place more extramental constraints on what it is for the non-instrumental factor to be present, such as Wieland and van Oeveren's (2020) simple participation approach. One problem Nefsky raises is that such approaches seem unable to explain why we have much stronger moral reasons to contribute to beneficial outcomes in ways that can play a much greater non-superfluous causal role. To see this, Nefsky asks us to consider David Parfit's (1986, p. 76) case of

> *Drops of Water*. You are one of 10,000 people who each have a pint of water, who must choose whether to pour your pint into a cart which is about to be driven into the desert to alleviate the thirst of 10,000 wounded people.

Nefsky argues that in its present form, Wieland and van Oeveren's (2020) approach cannot explain why in this case one should add one's entire pint as opposed to just a drop, since on their view adding only a drop would still make one a 'participant' in the group that brings about the beneficial outcome of alleviating the wounded people's thirst.

It might seem that this could be easily remedied by a revised version of Wieland and van Oeveren's (2020) account according to which one has greater moral reason to participate to a greater degree, where this is among other things a matter of the degree to which one contributes to the underlying dimension.[15] But this would not work in cases where the ability of a contribution to play a non-superfluous causal role comes apart from its degree of contribution to the underlying dimension. To see this, consider a set of variants of Vending Machine in which we continue to add an additional quarter to what C has. The strength of

[15]As Nefsky (2023, p. 12, Note 29) notes, although Wieland (2022) adds degrees to the simple participation approach, they do not add the feature that one's degree of participation and thus the strength of one's reasons to contribute to collectively caused benefits increases as the size of one's contribution to the underlying dimension increases. But such an addition would be easy to make.

C's moral reasons to contribute do not simply increase by a fixed amount each time C has another quarter; they instead go from very weak to non-existent when C has 1-3 quarters, to very strong when C has a full dollar (which, together with A's $5 and B's $10 bills, can purchase an additional granola bar).

Finally, Nefsky argues that even non-instrumental approaches like the simple participation approach, which place considerable extramental constraints on what it is for the non-instrumental factor to be present, still cannot adequately explain why we have stronger moral reasons to contribute to the beneficial outcome than we have to make useless gestures. As Nefsky (2023, p. 12) argues:

> Suppose [in Drops of Water] I don't want to give up my pint of water, and you say to me 'why don't you see if you can instead just rock the cart back and forth a little bit before it is taken to the desert. That way you will still have participated in the group effort. It's true that Simple Participation does not count this as a way of participating. But why not? If making a contribution to the underlying dimension is a morally recommended way of participating even though the contribution is entirely useless, then it seems like rocking the cart back and forth should be too.

Here we think that Nefsky is drawing upon something like the anti-performative principle, as all clearly useless acts seem to be in a category of things that we have much weaker reason to do than those that can play a non-superfluous causal role in bringing about beneficial outcomes.

3. Why non-instrumental approaches cannot meet the comparative requirement

We believe that Nefsky's arguments against non-instrumental approaches to explaining our strong moral reasons to contribute to beneficial outcomes in collective action cases are compelling. We think, moreover, that non-instrumental approaches' vulnerability to these problems is closely related to their inability to meet the comparative requirement. Consider the following sets of choices:

> *Posting vs. Volunteering*. Superior is running in a closely contested federal election against Inferior. One can spend most of one's free time (O1) criticizing random supporters of Inferior on social media, or (O2) volunteering for Superior's campaign and participating in canvassing and get-out-the-vote operations.

> *Posting vs. Campaigning*. Superior is elected on a platform that includes important environmental promises. But Superior is not fulfilling these promises due to

corporate opposition within Superior's coalition. One can spend most of one's free time (O1) complaining about the situation and criticizing random supporters of Superior on social media, or (O2) participating in campaigns to lobby or pressure Superior or other federal, state, or local decision makers to take needed environmental action.

In these cases, we have much stronger moral reasons to take O2 and participate in the collective endeavours of political and environmental campaigns than we have to take O1 and participate in the collective endeavours of criticising random people on social media. This is because.

(1) the campaigns have much greater chances of succeeding in electing better candidates and enacting beneficial policies, and
(2) one's participation in the campaigns has a much greater chance of playing a non-superfluous causal role in helping them to succeed.[16]

These features also explain why our reasons to participate in O2 are substantially stronger in relation to our reasons of self-interest not to participate than our reasons to participate in O1. Since arguing with random people on social media is unlikely to change much anyway, it is generally not worth the mental costs and time investment. But because political and environmental campaigns have a reasonable chance of success, and one's contribution to them has a reasonable chance of non-superfluously contributing to this success, participating in them can be well worth one's time and energy.

The same features of non-instrumental approaches that make them vulnerable to Nefsky's Superfluity and Disconnect problems make them unable to plausibly explain why we have stronger moral reasons to contribute in ways O2 than O1. We cannot explain why O2 would be more virtuous, appropriately expressive of fitting concerns, required to do our fair share, or participatory in a group that brings about beneficial outcomes than O1 *unless* we invoke the point that O2 is likely to play much more of a non-superfluous causal role than O1 in electing better candidates and enacting beneficial policies. It seems, moreover, that we should strongly suspect that no other non-instrumental factor could explain why we have stronger moral reason to engage in O2 than O1, precisely because it is directly plausible that we have these stronger reasons *because* O2 is likely to play much more of a non-superfluous role in bringing about beneficial outcomes than O1. This also seems supported by the

[16]See e.g. the references in footnote 6.

directly plausible anti-performative principle, according to which the role of O2 in playing more of a non-superfluous causal role in bringing about benefits than O1 is a stronger moral reason than any non-instrumental considerations that equally support the more merely performative acts constituted by O1.

Proponents of non-instrumental accounts might try adding to their views the idea that one has stronger moral reasons to contribute to collective endeavours that (i) will bring about greater benefits if successful, and (ii) have greater chances of success.[17] The main problem with this approach is that by continuing to ignore the causal roles that our contributions can play in helping collective endeavours to succeed, it encourages contributions to impactful, but already sufficiently supported causes, rather than less impactful but badly neglected causes. Consider, for example:

> *Where to Volunteer*. In the US state in which you reside, the Superior candidate for governor has both a commanding lead and many people working on their campaign. There are, however, many state legislature and local races that could go either way, which could really use additional help. While these state legislature and local candidates' winning won't do as much good as the Superior candidate for governor winning, they will still do a significant amount of good. You can (O1) volunteer for the governor's campaign or (O2) volunteer for a state legislature or local candidate in a closely contested election.

Clearly we have stronger reasons to take O2 than O1. Although it is more important that the governor win than any one state legislature or local candidate win, the governor's race is already so safe and has so much support that one's volunteer time is better spent on a state legislature or local race, where it can play more of a non-superfluous causal role in clinching crucial support. But a non-instrumental account that weighs reasons to participate in collective endeavours only by the expected benefits of the collective endeavour while ignoring the extent to which we are likely to play a non-superfluous causal role in the endeavour's success will advise us to take O1 over O2. This advice is mistaken, because our reasons to support endeavours depend not only on how

[17] See e.g. Wieland (2022). Presumably such a view should weigh both (i) and (ii) proportionately, and thus hold that we should weigh in favour of contributing to a collective endeavour both the size of the endeavour's possible benefits, in proportion to the endeavour's likelihood of bringing about those benefits – which would be to hold that the strengths of our reasons to participate in a collective endeavour should be proportional to the endeavour's expected benefits. The approach could, like Wieland's (2022), seek to remain non-instrumental by holding that it is irrelevant to the case in favour of contributing to a collective endeavour whether one's contribution plays any non-superfluous causal role in making it successful.

much good they will do if they succeed, but how much they need our help to succeed. That is,

> *Reasons' Strengths are Proportional to Expected Importance and Helpfulness*: All else held equal, the strengths of our reasons to contribute to a collective endeavour are proportional to (i) the expected benefits of the endeavour's success, and (ii) the expected degree to which our act will make a non-superfluous causal contribution to its success.

4. Nefsky's helping approach and the strength of reasons to contribute

4.1. Nefsky's helping approach

The expected consequences approach is a paradigmatic instrumental approach, on which our reasons to contribute to beneficial outcomes concern the possibility that our contributions will help – or play a non-superfluous causal role – in bringing them about. But Nefsky (2017) seeks to develop an alternative instrumental approach, on which (i) one can help bring about an outcome without making a difference to its occurrence, and (ii) our primary reasons to contribute to a beneficial outcome are reasons to help bring it about – regardless of whether our help makes a difference to its occurrence. On

> *Nefsky's Helping Approach*: your primary reasons to contribute to a collective endeavour are reasons to help bring about the benefits of the endeavour, and 'your act of *X*-ing is non-superfluous and so could help to bring about *Y* if and only if, at the time at which you *X*, It is possible that *Y* will fail to come about due, at least in part, to a lack of *X*-ing' (Nefsky 2017, 2753).

As Nefsky observes, while one's chances of making a difference to the success of a collective endeavour can be quite remote, one's chances of helping, in her sense, to cause its success can be quite good. Consider an election between Superior and Inferior, where Superior's chances of winning are about 50%. One's chances of making a difference to Superior's being elected might be quite remote – e.g. 1 in 60 Million if one is voting in an arbitrary state in a US general election.[18] But, because at the time of one's voting it is possible that Superior will fail to win due at least in part to not enough votes for Superior, one's vote will count on Nefsky's analysis as *helping* to bring about Superior's being elected so long as Superior is elected. Since Superior has a 50%

[18]Cf. Gelman, Silver, and Edlin 2012.

chance of being elected, one's vote has, on Nefsky's analysis, a 50% chance of helping to elect Superior.

In discussing the strength of these helping-based reasons to contribute to collective endeavours, Nefsky (2017, p. 2764) expresses sympathy for the view that they are stronger

> (N1) the greater the benefits of the endeavour's success,
>
> (N2) the larger the causal role one's contribution would play in bringing about the endeavour's success, and
>
> (N3) the 'more up in the air' it is whether the endeavour will succeed, or the closer its chances of success are to 50-50.

This corresponds to our above principle that reasons' strengths are proportional to expected importance and helpfulness. At the time of action one typically cannot know with certainty how great the benefits of an endeavour's success will be. So from this perspective (N1) corresponds to taking the strength of one's reasons to contribute to an endeavour to be proportional to (i) the endeavour's expected importance, understood as the expected benefits of its success.

(N3) and (N2) similarly correspond to proportioning one's reasons to contribute to an endeavour to (ii) the contribution's expected helpfulness, understood as the expected degree to which it will make a non-superfluous causal contribution to the endeavour's success. The farther the chances of an endeavour's success are from 50-50, the more it appears to be something that either.

(1) will happen regardless of what one does, in which case one's contribution will be superfluous; or
(2) will not happen regardless of what one does, in which case one's contribution will fail to contribute to its success.

So, all else held equal, one's contribution has a greater expectation of making a non-superfluous causal contribution to an endeavour's success the closer the endeavour's chances of success are to 50-50. One's expectation at the time of action of the magnitude of one's causal role in bringing about the endeavour's success can also be understood as determining the expected degree to which it will make a non-superfluous causal contribution to the endeavour's success.

4.2. Degrees of causal contribution: dependence and production measures

How, though, should we make sense of the notion of the degree of an act's causal contribution to an outcome in (N2)? Drawing on Alex Kaiserman's (2018) important distinction, which we think is unfortunately absent in existing discussions of Nefsky's approach, there are two general ways of thinking about the degree of a causal contribution to an effect, which correspond to two general ways of thinking about causes.[19] The first way of thinking about causes is in terms of the *dependence* of effects on individual causes, or of causes as *making a difference* to their effects. Corresponding to this are what Kaiserman calls *dependence measures* of the degree of a cause's contribution, which understand this degree in terms of the degree to which the cause made a difference, or the degree of ease with which the cause could have made a difference if it turns out not to make a difference. The second way of thinking about causes is in terms of the *production* of effects by their collective causes, or of causes as *jointly sufficient* for their effects. Corresponding to this are what Kaiserman calls *production measures* of the degree of a cause's contribution, which understand this degree in terms of the number of sufficient sets of causes to which the cause belonged, and the cause's degree of contribution to these sufficient sets of causes (understood as the probability of the effect happening given that the cause happened in relation to the probabilities of its happening given that its other causes happened).

We think that the measures of causation that matter for our strong moral reasons to bring about benefits are dependence measures. An extremely plausible principle about the kind of causal role that our contribution to a benefit must play in order for us to have strong moral reasons to make it is.

> *Strong Reasons Require Expected Difference Making*: From the standpoint of the forward-looking deontic question of what to do, the causal relation to benefits that matters most is that of difference making. For the fact that an act will be among the causes of a benefit to constitute a strong moral reason to perform the act, the act must make a difference to the occurrence of the benefit. From the standpoint of one's imperfect information at the time of action, one's having strong moral reason to perform an act requires an expectation that one's act will make a difference.

[19] See also Lee (2022, pp. 101–105).

In our view, the plausibility of this principle is illustrated by cases discussed above, such as A and B having strong moral reasons to insert their $5 and $10 bills but C having little if any moral reason to insert their quarter in Vending Machine, and one's having stronger moral reason to (O2) volunteer for a state legislature or local candidate in a close election than to (O1) volunteer for the governor in Where to Volunteer. Insertions of money into the machine by each of A, B, and C would be among the causes that together suffice for or produce the hikers obtaining the number of granola bars they obtain. But because A's inserting their $5 bill and B's inserting their $10 bill would make a difference to the number of granola bars the hikers obtain, they have strong moral reasons to insert their bills; while because C's inserting their quarter would make no difference to what the hikers obtain, C has little if any moral reason to insert it. Similarly, although one's volunteering could be among a set of causes that together produce a greater amount of benefit if one performs (O1) than if one performs (O2), because (O2) has a much greater chance of making a critical difference than (O1), one has stronger moral reason to perform (O2).

Our backward-looking, aretaic or hypological intuitions about someone's degree of responsibility for an outcome after the fact may be torn between tracking production measures and tracking dependence measures of the degree of their conduct's causal contribution to the outcome (cf. Kaiserman 2018, pp. 5–7). But we think that it is quite clear on reflection that when it comes to the forward-looking deontic question of what we have most reason to do, our strong moral reasons to contribute to an outcome track expectations of dependence measures of the degree to which our act will causally contribute to the outcome. Consider for instance

> *Antidote distribution*. Vulnerable Victim and Hardy Victim have both been poisoned and are in danger of dying before you and two other rescuers can get to them. The only way for you and the other rescuers to administer the life saving antidote to the victims in time is to fire antidote-loaded darts at them. You and the other two rescuers each have only one antidote-dart. Hardy Victim only needs to be shot with one antidote-dart to survive, but Vulnerable Victim needs to be shot with two antidote-darts. One of the other rescuers has just fired their antidote-dart at Vulnerable Victim and the other has fired their antidote-dart at Hardy Victim. You need to choose whether to fire your somewhat faster-moving antidote-dart – which will arrive at the same time as the antidote-darts fired by the other rescuers – at either Vulnerable Victim or Hardy Victim.

Obviously you have most reason to fire your antidote-dart at Vulnerable Victim, as this will make the critical difference between their survival and death; while any reasons you might have to fire your dart at Hardy Victim are extremely weak in comparison, as your dart will make no difference to their survival. Because your antidote-dart would suffice on its own to save Hardy Victim, but would only be half of what suffices to save Vulnerable Victim, firing your dart at Hardy Victim would make a greater degree of causal contribution to saving Hardy Victim than to saving Vulnerable Victim according to production measures. But as this case illustrates, our act playing a larger causal role in bringing about a benefit according to production measures is irrelevant to our having strong moral reason to perform the act. Our strong moral reasons to perform an act are determined by a dependence measure of the degree of its causal contribution to benefits, namely the extent to which our performing the act increases the probability of the benefits.[20]

With imperfect information at the time of action, one needs to rely upon one's expectation of the extent to which one's act will increase the probability of the outcome – so the probability in question will be the degree of confidence that is warranted by one's evidence at the time.[21] Even if, after the fact, a contribution turns out to have made no difference to an outcome, before the fact one's degree of warranted confidence that it would make a difference is what determines its expected degree of causal contribution on this dependence-based way of thinking about degrees of causal contribution. That said, the dependence-based way of thinking about degrees of causal contribution also gives us a compelling way of thinking about the degree to which our act contributed to an outcome even if it made no difference to the outcome. This is to think of the act's degree of causal contribution in terms of how easily it could have made a difference, or how many things would have had to go differently for it to have made a difference.[22] So long as the ease with which things could have gone differently tracks one's reasonable expectations before the fact that they might go differently, the expected degree to which one's act will contribute to an outcome before the fact will correspond to facts about the degree to which it contributed after the fact.

If Nefsky were to adopt this dependence-based way of thinking about an act's degree of causal contribution, her helping approach would be consistent with the proportionality requirement. As we have seen,

[20]This is an instance of the dependence measure that Kaiserman (2018, p. 3) calls β.
[21]This can come apart from its actual objective probability, if such a probability exists (cf. Lewis 1980)
[22]This is an instance of the dependence measure that Kaiserman (2018, p. 3) calls γ.

Nefsky's N1-N3 are consistent with the lesson we drew from the problems with non-instrumental accounts, namely the principle that reasons strengths are proportional to expected importance and helpfulness. If the expected degree to which our contribution will help bring about an endeavour's success is proportional to its chances of making a difference to this success, it follows from this principle that the strengths of our reasons to contribute to an endeavour are proportional to (i) the expected benefits of the endeavour's success, and (ii) the chances that our contribution will make a difference to this success. In the absence of our contribution's having other morally relevant effects, proportionality to (i) and (ii) entails proportionality to our contribution's expected benefits. Call such a version of Nefsky's helping approach, which employs a dependence measure of degrees of causation and meets the proportionality requirement, a *dependence version*.

While such a dependence version of the helping approach would agree in principle with the expected consequences approach about the strength of our reasons to contribute to beneficial outcomes, we think that the approach would remain importantly distinct. While the expected degree to which a contribution helps to bring about an outcome would be equivalent to its chances of making a difference, these remain importantly distinct entities. As mentioned above, if the superior candidate wins in a large important political election, it will almost certainly not be due to one's vote making the critical difference between their winning or losing. But a dependence version of Nefsky's helping approach can say that one's vote may still have a very good chance (e.g. 50%) of helping to contribute to the superior candidate's victory. So long as the superior candidate wins, the degree to which one's vote for them helped to elect them will be proportional to how easily one's vote could have made the critical difference. Because it would have been very difficult for one's vote to make this difference, this degree will still be relatively small. But the idea that one should vote because doing so has a good chance of contributing to an important electoral win, even to a very small degree, may seem to many people to be a much more compelling reason to vote than the mere idea that one should vote simply as a form of insurance against the extremely remote chance that one's contribution would actually make the critical difference between the superior candidate's election and defeat.[23]

[23] As Nefsky (2017, 2748) puts this kind of worry, 'in the case of voting in a large national election, contrary to the expected utility approach, it doesn't seem plausible that the main or only reason I have to vote is that there is a miniscule chance of a tie or a one-vote-win, and so a miniscule chance that the

4.3. Nefsky's own approach to degrees of causal contribution

Despite these reasons to adopt a dependence version of the helping approach, Nefsky rejects such versions. We will argue in the next section that this causes problems for Nefsky's own version of the helping approach, which need to be remedied by adopting a dependence version. To understand how Nefsky thinks an act's expected degree of non-superfluous causal contribution to an outcome can come apart from its chances of making a difference to the outcome, consider apparent 'non-threshold' cases, in which there does not seem to be any sharp threshold of individual contributions the crossing of which triggers a morally relevant difference in outcome. Parfit's (1986, p. 76) Drops of Water is a paradigm such case. Unlike voting in an election, where there is a clear threshold of votes for the superior candidate that must be crossed for their election and its consequent benefits to occur, there does not seem to be any sharp threshold of contributions of pints of

election will come down to me.' One worry about the helping-based rationale for voting might be that, in the context of a US presidential election, it may seem to over-generate reasons to vote in one's side's safe states and under-generate reasons to vote in the opposing side's safe states. If one votes in one of one's side's safe states, the superior candidate has a high chance of winning the state's electoral college votes, so one's vote might seem to have a high chance of helping to elect them if they win. If one votes in one of the opposing side's safe states, the superior candidate has a low chance of winning the state's electoral college votes, so one's vote might seem to have a low chance of helping to elect them even in the event that they win. We think that this is a genuine problem for the helping account if it employs a production measure of degrees of causal contribution. On this way of thinking about causal contribution, one's vote only contributes to the superior candidate's victory if it is a member of a set of causes that suffices for their victory, which requires something like one's vote being a necessary member of a set of votes that is minimally sufficient for the candidate's victory; or one's vote being such that a collective of votes obtains partially in virtue of one's vote, where the superior candidate's victory is an outcome of the obtaining of this collective of votes (Kaiserman 2018, pp. 3–5; Lee 2022, 88-98). In either case one's vote only contributes to the superior candidate's victory if the superior candidate wins one's state's electoral votes (as otherwise one's vote will be unnecessary to any set of votes that actually sufficed for their victory, or there will be no collective of votes that obtained in virtue of one's vote of which the superior candidate's victory was a genuine outcome). But we think that the problem does not actually arise for the helping account if it employs a dependence measure of degrees of causal contribution. On this way of thinking about causal contribution, one's vote contributes to the superior candidate's victory so long as it has a chance of making a difference, or could have made a difference to their victory; and its degree of contribution is equivalent to its chances of making a difference, or the degree to which it easily could have made a difference. So long as the superior candidate wins, one's vote can count on this kind of measure as contributing to their victory even if the superior candidate does not win the electoral votes of the state in which one votes. This is because there was some chance that the superior candidate could have won those electoral college votes, that their victory depended upon them, and that their winning these crucial electoral college votes depended upon one's voting in their favour – and the degree of one's causal contribution is proportional to this chance, or how easily this scenario could have obtained. As such, so long as the superior candidate wins, one's degree of causal contribution will actually be equal so long as one's chance of making a difference to their victory is equal. Equally low chances of making a difference and thus equal dependence-based degrees of contribution will arise from voting in one of one's own side's safe states in relation to one of the opposing side's safe states, so long as the states had equally low chances of being lost by the party for which they are supposed to be safe, and equivalent effects on the electoral map.

water that make a difference to how any of the wounded people feel. Nefsky (2012, 2017) contends that in apparent non-threshold cases, it is determinately metaphysically impossible for one's contribution to make a morally relevant difference. Nefsky contends in particular that it is determinately metaphysically impossible that one's contributing one's pint in Drops of Water will make a morally relevant difference to how any of the wounded people feel.[24]

But how, then, are we to understand the size of the causal role of acts like adding one's pint in apparent non-threshold cases like Drops of Water? Nefsky seems clearly to think that an important part of the story is that, at the time of one's contributing one's pint, it is possible for the thirst of some of the wounded people to fail to be alleviated due, at least in part, to a lack of acts of that kind being performed. In light of her rejection of a dependence-based understanding of such possibilities, we think that the only clear candidate for Nefsky's understanding of the size of an act's causal contribution to an outcome in N2 is what we might call a *constrained production measure*, according to which.

> (N2.1) the act's degree of causal contribution to the outcome is given by a production measure – understood as the number of sufficient sets of causes to which it belongs, or the probability of the outcome occurring given the act's performance in relation to the probabilities of the outcome occurring given the occurrence of its other causes (Kaiserman 2018, pp. 3-5),
>
> (N2.2) subject to the constraint that the act's contribution is non-superfluous, in the sense that at the time of the act's performance, it is possible for the outcome to fail to occur due in part to a lack of acts of that kind being performed.

While Nefsky does not explicitly endorse this constrained production measure of degrees of causal contribution, she seems to express

[24]Or at least that our reasons to add the pint are greater than the expected benefits of our doing so. Nefsky (2012) leaves open the possibility that there is a non-zero chance of it making a morally relevant difference to how some of the wounded people feel, but insists that this chance may be determinately so remote in relation to the relevant morally relevant differences that the expected benefits of our adding the pint are too low to track the strength of our reasons to add it. While we are sympathetic to Nefsky's (2012) argument that cases like Drops of Water may have vague morally relevant differences among states, (i) we do not think that her description of such vague boundaries as involving the determinate metaphysical impossibility of contributions making morally relevant differences is a coherent description of them, and (ii) Nefsky is mistaken in assuming in effect that proponents of the proportionality requirement must insist (in the way Kagan 2011 tries to insist) that the drops of water case must involve sharp morally relevant thresholds in order to plausibly explain our reasons to contribute. The expected consequences approach has been extended by its proponents to vague probabilities and vague values, and this enables them to give a plausible explanation of the strengths of our reasons in cases like Drops of Water, even if they do involve vague morally relevant differences between states (see e.g. Nye 2021).

sympathy for at least a particular instance of it. Like Wieland and van Oeveren (2020), Nefsky focuses on cases in which the beneficial outcome (like the wounded people feeling better, or the hikers obtaining more granola bars) depends up on an 'underlying dimension' (like the amount of water poured into the cart, or the amount of money inserted into the vending machine). In these cases, the production measure in (N2.1) of the causal contribution of an act that contributes to the underlying dimension will, all else held equal, be proportional to its degree of contribution to the underlying dimension. After noting that in its present form Wieland and van Oeveren's (2020) simple participation account does not proportion the strength of one's reasons to contribute to a beneficial outcome to their degree of contribution to the underlying dimension, Nefsky (2023, p. 12, Note 29) considers revising the account along these lines. She concludes that, so long as it obeys the constraint that the contribution is not superfluous in the sense of (N2.2), it is a solution of the correct, instrumental kind.

Similarly, Asker (2023, pp. 16–19) argues in effect that endorsing this special case of the constrained production measure of degrees of causation appears to be the best way for Nefsky's account to avoid the same disconnect problem that Nefsky raises for non-instrumental approaches. As we discussed above, Nefsky poses the disconnect problem for the simple participation account by holding that it cannot adequately explain such things as why

> E1. A and B have vastly stronger moral reasons to add their $5 and $10 bills than C has to add their quarter in Vending Machine, and
>
> E2. one has vastly stronger moral reason to add one's full pint than one has to add only a drop or a molecule to the water cart in Drops of Water.

As Asker notes, Nefsky's approach makes the strength of one's reasons to contribute to a beneficial outcome dependent upon whether it is possible for the outcome to fail to occur due in part to a lack of acts *of that same type* being performed. This raises questions about how we should individuate the relevant types, which Asker (2023, p. 16) calls the '*action individuation problem*.' For example, it might not be clear if

> T1. A, B, and C's acts can all be counted as of the type 'inserting money into the vending machine'; and
>
> T2. one's adding one's full pint, only a drop, and only a molecule can all be counted as of the type 'adding water to the cart.'

Moreover, as Asker observes, this action individuation problem can seem to make Nefsky's account vulnerable to the disconnect problem. This is because, if one can individuate acts along the lines of T1 and T2, then.

> D1. it is equally true *not only* of A and B adding their $5 and $10 bills, *but also* of C's adding their quarter to the vending machine, that it is possible for the hikers' hunger to fail to be maximally alleviated due in part to a lack of acts of the same type (i.e. 'inserting money into the machine') being performed, and
>
> D2. it is equally true *not only* of one's adding one's full pint, *but also* of one's adding only a drop or a molecule to the cart, that it is possible for the wounded people's thirst to be maximally alleviated due in part to a lack of acts of the same type ('pouring water into the cart') being performed.

But if D1 and D2 are true, then it might seem that Nefsky's account has lost its ability to explain E1 and E2, and thus fails to overcome the disconnect problem.

As Asker (2023, p. 18) notes, it seems that Nefsky's best way to respond to the action individuation problem and the consequent re-arising of the disconnect problem is to 'accept the view that each amount added to the underlying dimension constitutes an action type in itself, which would separate larger contributions from smaller ones … [and] hold that the helping-based reason is stronger the greater the contribution to the underlying dimension. On this view, the helping-based reason would be much stronger for donating the full pint than for donating just a drop.' This is exactly what Nefsky's approach entails in cases involving an underlying dimension if we interpret degrees of contribution to a beneficial outcome along the lines of the constrained production measure.

Finally, interpreting Nefsky as understanding degrees of reason-giving causal contribution in terms of a constrained production measure would give her account at least some ability to generalise beyond cases involving underlying dimensions. This would help respond to Asker's (2023, p. 19) residual concerns about Nefsky's account working in cases where

> it is unclear how to describe the relevant action type … [which] might be particularly salient when it comes to evaluating individual actions that do not add to [an] underlying dimension but that still seem to be part of the collective impact situation since they contribute in other, perhaps more indirect ways. Examples include various kinds of political action such as demonstrations and online activism. Categorizing such actions into types and evaluating them against the conditions for helping might not be straightforward.

Fortunately for Nefsky, there are production measures of degrees of causal contribution that extend beyond cases involving contributions to

a single underlying dimension, which can be applied even when actors' contributions are extremely heterogeneous. As Kaiserman (2018, pp. 4–5) notes, a basic idea here is that an act contributes more to an outcome the greater the probability of the outcome occurring given that the act is performed, in relation to the probabilities of the outcome occurring given its other causes.

Consider a case in which many instances of participating in demonstrations and online activism can jointly cause a desirable political decision (D). We can think of the degree of causal contribution of any such instance of activism (a_i) to D as the ratio of

> $P(D|a_i)$, or the conditional probability of the desirable decision D occurring given – or assuming we know that – the instance of activism a_i took place, to
>
> $\sum_{j=1}^{n} P(D|a_j)$, or the sum of the conditional probabilities of D on each individual piece of activism.

For instance, if the (unconditional) chance of the desirable decision being made absent knowing that any activism is taking place is .5, then the chance of it being made conditional on any individual piece of activism will presumably be only slightly greater than .5. If this chance of D given the activism slightly greater than .5 is the same for every piece of activism, then each will make a relative causal contribution equal to one out of the total number of activists.[25] If the chances of D being made conditional on the performance of some individual instances of activism are higher than the chances of D being made conditional on the performance of other instances of activism, then the degree of causal contribution of the former will be higher than that of the latter.[26]

[25]Note that throughout this subsection we are for simplicity discussing degrees of causal contribution to an outcome on the assumption that the outcome actually occurs. As discussed above, given imperfect information before the fact, the expectation of making a causal contribution of a given degree is (i) the act's causal contribution to the outcome should the outcome occur, in proportion to (or discounted by) (ii) the chance of the outcome occurring if the contribution is made.

[26]Unfortunately some of Asker's worry about the ability to individuate types of action in cases without underlying dimensions may remain if we need to separate superfluous from non-superfluous contributions in such cases. Given the heterogeneity of non-superfluous acts, there might seem to be nothing that unites them as a type other than their non-superfluity. If we try to understand an act's type very narrowly, as acts that are numerically identical to the token act one is considering performing, requirement (N2.2) would essentially require the possibility of one's act making a difference to the beneficial outcome, which Nefsky wants her version of the helping account to avoid. The only other option might be to say that the relevant type is those acts that are among the causes of the beneficial outcome, which add in the relevant sense to the collective causal power of the set of the outcome's causes, and are *unlike* those of its causes which, e.g. simply pre-empt or otherwise undo the effects of other causes, or (like C's adding their quarter in Vending Machine) are too small or otherwise unsuited to adding to this collective causal power.

5. Nefsky's helping approach and the comparative requirement

The *constrained production version* of Nefsky's helping approach that we have argued best fits what she says about degrees of causation in many ways mimics a dependence version. Unfortunately, by trying to substitute (N2.1), (N2.2), and (N3) for an act's chances of making a difference to the outcome, its notion of an allegedly non-superfluous causal contribution fails to correspond to how much an endeavour needs our help to succeed, and subsequently fails to give a plausible account of our reasons to contribute to different collective endeavours. Consider this case of.

> *Strategic Organizing*. You are a potential organic worker leader (cf. McAlevey 2016) who is in a position to choose to (O1) work on and be an organizer for the day shift, or (O2) work on and be an organizer for the night shift. The workers on the day shift are mostly single parents with young children, who are fairly open to a union, and thus need only 3 organizers to successfully organize. You have identified 3 workers on this shift who will come forward to be organizers if but only if they can afford to keep their children in daycare longer. This will happen if but only if a state bill, which has a 50% chance of passing, passes and increases childcare benefits. The workers on the night shift are less open to a union and thus need 4 organizers to come forward to successfully organize. You have identified three workers on this shift who seem open to being organizers, and you have a 50% chance of successfully convincing them all to do so.

Clearly, in this case, one should choose O2, and work on and be an organiser for the night shift, because this is where one's help can be most useful. Whatever happens, O1 working on and being an organiser for the day shift will be useless, because there is a 50% chance that there will be enough help from others, in which case one's help will be redundant; and a 50% chance that there will be insufficient help from others, in which case one's help will be insufficient. But if one takes option O2 and works on organising the night shift, one has a 50% chance of making the critical difference and successfully organising a shift that otherwise would not have been organised.

To give this explanation we must understand the strength of our reasons to help as proportional to the chances of the help making a difference and the size of the difference it would make – that is, to our help's expected consequences. Nefsky's attempt to understand degrees of helpfulness in terms of (N2.1) and (N2.2), together with her requirement (N3) that reasons are stronger the more 'up in the air' or closer to 50-50 are the chances of an endeavour's success, departs from this dependence-based understanding of the relevant degrees of causation. Because of this, it

gives the wrong answer in Strategic Organizing, saying that we have no reason to prefer to take O2 over O1. With both O1 and O2:

> (N2.1) one's degree of contribution to the outcome of the organization of the shift as given by a production measure, since each organizer's contribution to a successful outcome can be taken to be equally powerful, so the contribution would be one out of the total number of organizers, or 1/4, in the event that the organizing is successful;
>
> (N2.2) at the time of one's acting, it is possible for the shift's being successfully organized to fail to occur at least in part due to a lack of people organizing the shift; and
>
> (N3) it is equally 'up in the air' whether each shift will be successfully organized (each has a 50% chance of success if you work and become an organizer for that shift).[27]

We think that the central problem for Nefsky's constrained production version of her helping approach is that, in the end, it is telling us that our strong moral reasons to contribute to collective endeavours are reasons to be among their causes – even if our being among these causes is guaranteed to change nothing – so long as certain conditions are met. But as we saw in our discussion of different measures of degrees of causation in section 4.2, these mere reasons to be among the causes of a beneficial outcome seem much weaker than our reasons to contribute in ways that have a chance of making a difference. The conditions Nefsky introduces serve to rule out many ways of making contributions that are among the causes that we seem clearly to have relatively weak moral reasons to make. But as we can see in cases like Strategic Organizing they do not rule out all such cases, and we think that this is because Nefsky is still capturing the wrong kind of causation. The kind of causation that matters to our strong moral reasons to contribute is dependence, and we think that *helping* to cause an outcome in the sense and to the degree captured by dependence measures of causal

[27]We certainly assume that the most charitable interpretation of Nefsky's assessment of the extent to which an endeavour is 'up in the air' is as subject to the assumption that one contributes to the endeavour. If we were to assess the relevant extent to which the endeavour is 'up in the air' as its chances of success independently of one's contributing to it, then Nefsky's account would actually assess the chances of success of the enterprise of organising the day shift as 50-50 and the chances of success of organising the night shift as 0. Given that on Nefsky's account N1 and N2 are fixed between O1 and O2, and N3 tells us that we have more reason to contribute to enterprises the chances of success of which are more 'up in the air' or closer to 50-50, this would then tell us that we have positively more reason to waste our efforts on O1 where we can make no difference than we have to take O2 where we have a 50% chance of making the critical difference.

contribution are what belong in the most plausible version of Nefsky's helping approach.

We thus think that Nefsky's core ideas that our strong moral reasons to contribute to a beneficial outcome are reasons to help bring it about, and that we can succeed in helping to bring an outcome about even if we fail to make a difference to it, are correct. Where we think Nefsky goes wrong is in using a constrained production understanding of helping, according to which one can help even if one's contribution is guaranteed to make no difference. We must instead, as we have argued in this paper, adopt an understanding of helping according to which our contribution's degree of helpfulness is proportional to its chance of making a difference. This, as we have seen, meets the proportionality requirement.

6. Conclusion: proportioning reasons to expected benefits

If successful, what our arguments here distinctively show is that in order to meet the comparative requirement of giving a plausible account of the relative strengths of our reasons to contribute to different collective endeavours, approaches to the ethics of collective action must meet the proportionality requirement of holding that the strengths of our reasons to make a given contribution are proportional to the contribution's expected benefits.

Fully non-instrumental approaches cannot meet the comparative requirement for the same reason that they face what Nefsky calls the superfluity and disconnect problems. The plausibility of such approaches tacitly presupposes that the allegedly non-instrumental factors have instrumental significance, and the anti-performative principle, that we have much stronger moral reasons to help bring about benefits than to engage in inefficacious gestures and poses, is directly plausible.

Moreover, even instrumental accounts like Nefsky's, which understand an act's expected degree of helping to bring about a beneficial outcome in terms that do not correspond to dependence measures that proportion this degree to the act's chances of making a difference to the outcome's occurrence, cannot meet the comparative requirement for similar reasons. The apparent deontic relevance of other measures of helping, like Nefsky's constrained production measure, presuppose their tracking a dependence measure, and can be seen to be implausible in cases (like Strategic Organizing), where they come apart from dependence measures. The thesis that strong moral reasons require expected difference making is directly plausible, and this plausibility is illustrated by

cases (like Antidote Distribution and Strategic Organizing) where we must choose whether to do things that have a chance of making a difference to a beneficial outcome or bearing some other causal relation to another beneficial outcome to a greater or equal degree.

We lack space to address the concerns that Nefsky and others have in effect raised for the proportionality requirement. We think these are best put as a dilemma according to which the proportionality requirement either portrays our reasons to contribute to collective endeavours as too weak or too strong (see especially Nefsky 2021). That it makes these reasons too weak has been contended by.

(1) Arguments by authors like Nefsky (2012, 2017) that it cannot account for our reasons in apparent 'non-threshold' cases like Parfit's drops of water, where they allege it is determinately metaphysically impossible for one's contribution to make a morally relevant difference;
(2) Arguments by authors like Brennan (2012), Gesang (2017), Budolfson (2019), and Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong (2018) that it cannot account for the strength of our reasons even in apparent 'threshold' cases like voting, abstaining from purchasing harmful products, and mitigating one's contributions to climate change, on the alleged grounds that one's chances of crossing the threshold are too small; and
(3) Arguments by authors like Wieland and van Oeveren (2020), Wieland (2022), and Lee (2022) that it cannot account for our reasons in what Nefsky (2023, 13-15) calls 'closed cases,' like omitting to overdetermine a victim's assassination, where the relevant outcome is allegedly certain regardless of what one does.

The most prominent argument that the proportionality requirement in effect makes our reasons to contribute to beneficial outcomes too strong of which we are aware is that of Nefsky (2017, 2021). This contends that the proportionality requirement incorrectly condemns as wrongful such acts as the occasional drive to the woods to go hiking, or the one-off flight to Italy with a friend, of someone who otherwise lives a very low emissions lifestyle (by the standards of someone in the global north).

What we will do is briefly note two things. First, we think that there are convincing responses on behalf of the proportionality requirement to all of these challenges in the literature. We think that authors like Broome (2018); Nye (2021); Barnett (2020); McMullen and Halteman (2019); and Hedden (2020) have successfully responded to (1) and (2). We also

think that responses of the kind offered by Norcross (2005) are successful against (3). Namely, (i) in practice one can never be certain that one is in a closed case, and (ii) all else held equal, there are much weaker moral reasons to contribute to beneficial outcomes in what seem extremely likely to be closed cases than there are to contribute to comparable outcomes in what are more likely to be open cases. Finally, we think that contextualist views about wrongness like those of Norcross (2020b) can respond successfully to Nefsky's (2021) contention that proportioning reasons to expected benefits incorrectly condemns occasional luxury emissions as wrongful. On such views, an act's wrongness is not simply a matter of our having decisive moral reason not to perform it, but instead depends upon such contextual factors as whether it should be sanctioned, at least with reactive attitudes of blame, guilt, or shame (in the absence of a contextually relevant set of excuses).

Second, as Asker (2023, 8-14) has argued, Nefsky's own version of the helping approach is just as vulnerable to the dilemma of portraying our reasons in collective action cases as either too weak or too strong as approaches that meet the proportionality requirement, and it stands in need of responses similar to those mentioned above. As we have seen, Nefsky's constrained production understanding of factors (N1)-(N3) closely tracks the proportionality requirement, and as Asker contends, they are similarly vulnerable to concerns about portraying our reasons as too weak. Moreover, Nefsky (2017, p. 2765) actually makes the exact same kind of distinction between what one has most moral reason to do and what one is morally required to do advanced by authors like Norcross (2020b) in defense of an approach that proportions reasons to expected benefits. As such, it is rather surprising that Nefsky (2021) presents the need to make such a distinction as a problem for approaches that meet the proportionality requirement in particular.

One way to proportion the strengths of our reasons to contribute to collective endeavours to their expected benefits is to accept the expected consequences approach. But other approaches can still give their own normative explanations of why we should contribute in terms of virtue, fairness, helping independently of making a difference, and so on. Our argument is only that these accounts must understand the expected reason-giving degrees of these factors as proportional to the action's expected benefits. We suspect that many audiences will find the normative explanations provided by such accounts more compelling than those of the expected consequences approach alone. By proportioning reasons to expected benefits, these other accounts can, as we have argued,

appropriately account for the relative strengths of our moral reasons to contribute to various collective endeavours, and thus facilitate the same kinds of strategic thinking, as the expected consequences approach. This is extremely important, because collective struggles like those for distributive, environmental, and animal justice require us to think and communicate about the ethics of collective action in ways that are both most compelling and most strategic.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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