

The Rules of Rescue: Cost, Distance, and Effective Altruism

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Abstract

This is a book about duties to help others. When do you have to sacrifice life and limb, time and money, to prevent harm to others? When must you save more people rather than fewer? These questions arise in emergencies involving nearby strangers who are drowning or trapped in burning buildings. But they also arise in our everyday lives, in which we have constant opportunities to give time or money to help distant strangers in need of food, shelter, or medical care. With the resources available to you, you can provide more help or less. This book argues that it is often wrong to provide less help rather than more, even when the personal sacrifice involved makes it permissible not to help at all. It shows that helping distant strangers by donating or volunteering is morally more like rescuing nearby strangers than most of us realize. The ubiquity of opportunities to help others threatens to make morality extremely demanding, and the book argues that it is only thanks to adequate permissions grounded in considerations of cost and autonomy that we may pursue our own plans and projects. It concludes that many of us are required to provide no less help over our lives than we would have done if we were effective altruists.

Introduction

This introduction presents the topic, background, and aims of the book. The book is about moral reasons and requirements to help others—whether in nearby rescue cases or in everyday cases of donating time and money to help distant strangers. Contrary to act consequentialism, you are not always required to do whatever available act has the best outcome, or helps the most. There are non-consequentialist permissions. Nonetheless, there are moral reasons to engage in effective altruism, sometimes even requirements to do so. The introduction includes a significant discussion of methodology, particularly concerning the role of intuitive claims in ethics and the use of “clean” imagined cases. It then provides a brief sketch of the book’s chapters, followed by more detailed chapter summaries.

Chapter 1: Requirements to Rescue and Permissions Not to

Chapter 1 introduces the book’s basic framework of requiring reasons and permitting reasons. Requiring reasons serve to make acts required. Permitting reasons serve to make acts permissible (without serving to make acts required) by serving to prevent requiring reasons from making acts wrong. An act is required—wrong not to do—when there is most requiring reason overall to do it, and no sufficiently strong permitting reason not to do it. The chapter then proceeds to defend two main claims. First, that there are (strong) requiring reasons to rescue strangers from (large) harms. Second, that there are (cost-based and autonomy-based) permitting reasons not to rescue, which can make it permissible not to act in accord with the balance of requiring reasons to rescue. Finally, the chapter discusses the compatibility of these two claims with three competing views of rights to be rescued.

Chapter 2: Numbers Count

Chapter 2 defends the view that, while there is more requiring reason overall to save A and C than there is to save A, and more requiring reason overall to save B and C than there is to save A, there is an individualist permitting reason to save A in the latter “conflict case” but not in the former “no-conflict case.” While the individualist permitting reason to save A’s life does not make it permissible to save A’s life instead of saving B’s life and C’s life, it does make it permissible to save A’s life instead of saving B’s life and C’s finger. The chapter further shows how this view does not imply various counterintuitive claims, such as the “fully aggregative” claim that you are required to save billions of people from very mild pain rather than save one person from very intense agony.

Chapter 3: The All or Nothing Problem

Chapter 3 defends the claim that it is wrong to save one stranger at great cost to yourself instead of saving two strangers at the same great cost, even when it is permissible to save no one. The chapter first provides a positive explanation of this claim, appealing to the framework of requiring reasons and permitting reasons. It then turns to the “all or nothing problem” that this claim seemingly implies that, if you are not going to save the greater number, you are required to do nothing. The chapter presents four possible solutions to this problem and rejects all but one. According to the solution accepted, while it is (non-conditionally) wrong to save one stranger when you can instead save two strangers at the same cost, it is conditionally permissible to save one given that you are not going to save two.

Chapter 4: Praiseworthiness

Chapter 4 addresses a new objection to the claim that it is permissible to do nothing, wrong to save the lesser number, and permissible to save the greater number. The objection is that, if it is wrong to save the lesser number (and you lack an excuse for doing so), then you are overall blameworthy for saving the lesser number. But, at least in conflict cases, this is counterintuitive. In response, this chapter argues that not all unexcused wrong acts are overall blameworthy, even if all are blameworthy to some extent. Some wrong yet overall praiseworthy acts are less responsive to the balance of requiring reasons than is required. Other wrong yet overall praiseworthy acts are more responsive to the balance of requiring reasons than is required—such wrong acts can be more praiseworthy overall than permissible alternatives. The chapter presents examples of each sort.

Chapter 5: Distant Rescues

Chapter 5 considers a number of differences between cases in which you can rescue nearby strangers (who are drowning or imperiled by hurtling boulders) and cases in which you can use time or money to help distant strangers in need of food, shelter, or medical care. These include differences with respect to distance, salience, uniqueness, injustice, and diffusion. On the basis of several “clean” cases, it is argued that—whether taken individually or in combination—these differences would not make it the case that, while it is wrong not to save a nearby stranger (at a given cost), it is permissible not to save a distant stranger (at a similar cost). Nor would these differences make it the case that it is permissible to save one near stranger rather than two distant strangers. Differences with respect to “risky diffusion” are an exception to these claims.

Chapter 6: Frequent Rescues

Chapter 6 explores a case in which opportunities to rescue nearby strangers arise very frequently. In this case, it seems you are not required to take every individual opportunity to help, even if you are required to take some. The chapter develops a view of requiring reasons and permitting reasons that explains this claim. According to this view, “lifetime” features can amplify (cost-based and autonomy-based) permitting reasons not to save strangers. The chapter then asks whether it can be permissible not to respond to a frequently occurring opportunity to help even when it would be wrong not to respond to an otherwise similar rarely occurring opportunity to help. It argues that, while frequency cannot itself make this kind of moral difference, considerations of cost and autonomy correlated with frequency can. Such considerations can make it permissible to rescue one near stranger rather than two distant strangers.

Chapter 7: Special Connections

Chapter 7 focuses on whether, when, and how special connections—including personal relationships, projects, and commitments—enhance requiring reasons or permitting reasons to save others. It first looks at some of the different ways in which reasons can be enhanced by special connections, in accord with the kinds and degrees of these connections. It then shows how lifetime features can amplify otherwise insufficiently strong (permitting and requiring) reasons to save a lesser number of people to whom you are specially connected over a greater number of strangers, making it permissible or even required to save the lesser number. Finally, the chapter distinguishes between responsibly acquired special connections and non-responsibly acquired special connections, and shows how the former (but not the latter) can increase the cost you are required to incur in helping others over the course of your life.

Chapter 8: Must You Be an Effective Altruist?

Chapter 8 draws together the book's main argument: that core claims from chapters 1-4, about requiring reasons to help the most and permitting reasons not to, carry over to a significant range of real-world cases in which you can help using time and money. It argues that in the real world there is a ubiquity of requiring reasons to help strangers. This isn't overly demanding, given that there is also a ubiquity of sufficiently strong permitting reasons. The chapter then discusses how to modify the book's main argument, when we drop the assumption that the time, money, and other resources in your possession rightfully belong to you. Finally, the chapter argues that a significant proportion of us are required either to be effective altruists or else provide no less help over our lives than we would have done if we did the minimum required as effective altruists.