

RATIONAL NUMBERS: A NON-CONSEQUENTIALIST EXPLANATION OF WHY YOU SHOULD SAVE THE MANY AND NOT THE FEW¹

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You ought to save a larger group of people rather than a distinct smaller group of people, all else equal. A consequentialist may say that you ought to do so because this produces the most good. If a non-consequentialist rejects this explanation, what alternative can he or she give? This essay defends the following explanation, as a solution to the so-called numbers problem. Its two parts can be roughly summarised as follows. First, you are morally required to want the survival of each stranger for its own sake. Secondly, you are rationally required to achieve as many of these ends as possible, if you have these ends.

I. THE NUMBERS PROBLEM

Consequentialists have a simple account of beneficence: they claim that you should distribute your aid wherever it will do the most good. But some non-consequentialists are reluctant to explain what you ought to do in terms of promoting the good. What alternative theoretical resources can they use to determine whom you ought to help? They face this question head on with a case like this:

Drug. You have 100ml of a drug that you own. Two strangers, Anna and Bert, each need 50ml to live. A third stranger, Clare, needs all 100ml to live. The strangers are

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in all relevant respects alike. You do not stand in any special relationship to these strangers. All else is equal.

Most of us think that you ought to save Anna and Bert. John Taurek famously denies this.² This is because he rejects the consequentialist rationale that the ‘numbers should count’ because you ought to produce the most good. (Here and throughout I am using the word ‘consequentialism’ to refer to the view that you may not bring about an outcome that is impersonally worse than another outcome you can bring about, noting that others, such as James Dreier, use the term more broadly.)³ Some non-consequentialists also reject this rationale, but are reluctant to join Taurek in denying you ought to save Anna and Bert. They would have little reason to do so if they had an alternative explanation of why the numbers should count. The problem of providing this explanation is the so-called numbers problem.

I.1. *Why some non-consequentialists eschew goodness*

Some non-consequentialists do let goodness-maximising play some role in their theories; they simply limit what this role is. Maybe they say that promoting the good is limited by deontological constraints, such as a constraint against killing people. Maybe they say that you have options to behave partially instead of producing the most good, such as an option to look after your family at the expense of more needy strangers. But absent constraints or options, they say that you ought to produce the most good. These non-consequentialists can offer the same explanation of why you ought to save the many in Drug as a consequentialist: saving Anna and Bert leads to a better outcome than saving Clare does. But other non-consequentialists are reluctant to give any role to maximising the goodness of outcomes in their explanations of why you should help people. Let us look at four key reasons behind their reluctance.

First, some reject the very notion of ‘the good’ or ‘a better outcome.’ For example, Judith Jarvis Thomson denies that there is a property of ‘goodness simpliciter.’⁴ She allows that we may be tempted to think there must be such a property because we frequently say things are good. But Thomson claims that on closer inspection, we will see that we never meaningfully use the word ‘good’ to talk about goodness simpliciter. Instead, she

² J. Taurek, ‘Should the Numbers Count?’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 6 (1977), pp. 293–16.

³ J. Dreier, ‘The Structure of Normative Theories’, *The Monist*, 76 (1993), pp. 22–40.

⁴ J.J. Thomson, ‘Goodness and Utilitarianism’, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 67 (1993), pp. 145–59.

claims that we only do so to talk about goodness in a respect. Thomson claims that, for example, it makes sense to say that saving Anna is good for her. But it does not make sense to say that saving her is good simpliciter. In support of this claim, Thomson appeals to Peter Geach's linguistic argument that 'good' functions as an attributive adjective like 'small', and not a predicative adjective like 'red'.⁵ If something is a small, red elephant, we can infer that it is red, but not that it is small. (For we should not hold that any elephant is a small animal, let alone small simpliciter.) On the grounds that 'good' functions as an attributive adjective, if something is a good toaster, we cannot infer that it is good simpliciter. In addition to Thomson's linguistically motivated argument, others have different reasons for rejecting the idea that there are better and worse outcomes. They say that it is impossible to rank outcomes as better or worse when individuals' interests conflict, because there is no impersonal point of view from which we can evaluate some outcomes as 'better' than others. Instead, these outcomes can only be ranked as better or worse from each individual's point of view. This is Taurek's view, which Weyma Lübke summarises:

Taurek does not even see how speaking of 'goodness' and 'betterness,' as opposed to 'goodness for' and 'betterness for,' is to be understood in such cases. Certainly it is better for the one if he is saved and better for each of the five if the five are saved, but what does it mean to say that it is better, period, if the five are saved?⁶

Friends of these views cannot explain an obligation to save the greater number on the grounds that this produces the most good, because they deny there is such a thing as goodness.

Secondly, some claim that the goal of promoting the good is too impersonal a ground for helping others. Some think that this is to see people merely as containers of goodness. Similarly, Taurek thinks that it is to see people as valuable objects that are to be saved, such as we would see statues. Instead, Taurek claims that you should empathise with strangers, and care about their welfare because their welfare matters to them (pp. 304–5 *et passim*).

Thirdly, some are independently attracted to a moral theory that does not explain what you ought to do in terms of promoting the good. A virtue ethicist may explain what you ought to do in terms of the actions a virtuous person would perform. By contrast, a Kantian may do so in terms of

⁵ P. Geach, 'Good and Evil', *Analysis*, 17 (1956), pp. 32–42. For a related discussion of common uses of the word 'good' see P. Foot, 'Utilitarianism and the Virtues', *Mind New Series*, 94 (1985), pp. 196–209.

⁶ W. Lübke, 'Taurek's No Worse Claim', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 36 (2008), pp. 69–85.

whether you can rationally endorse a world in which your maxim for action is universal law. These broader moral theories give no important theoretical role for the goodness of states of affairs nor for the betterness of outcomes.

Fourthly, some are sceptical of hybrid theories that mix a requirement to promote the good with constraints or options. David Wasserman and Alan Strudler ‘suspect that [pluralist moral theories that mix consequentialist and nonconsequentialist elements] are doomed attempts to breed species that are in essence incompatible.’⁷ In a similar vein, Thomson worries that if our metaethic allows that states of affairs are good, then we will find consequentialism inescapable.⁸ For once we have made the initial concession that outcomes are better and worse, how could we resist the conclusion that you ought to bring about the best outcome?

There is of course much a consequentialist can say in response to these objections. This is not the place to settle the debate about these objections, and I do not aim to press them here. Rather, I mention them to frame my project in this paper. This will be to offer a new explanation of why the numbers should count which is acceptable to people moved by these objections. I will not, however, compare its merits to extant non-consequentialist rationales,⁹ many of which have recently met with forceful criticism.¹⁰

II. THE ENDS EXPLANATION

My proposal is inspired by an insight of Philippa Foot’s. Foot is one of the people who believe that ‘we go wrong in accepting the idea that there are better and worse states of affairs in the sense that consequentialism requires.’¹¹ Nevertheless she confesses that this idea seems ‘inescapable’

⁷ D. Wasserman, and A. Strudler, ‘Can a Nonconsequentialist Count Lives?’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 31 (2003), pp. 71–94, at p.72.

⁸ J.J. Thomson and G. Harman, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996).

⁹ G. Kavka, ‘The Numbers Should Count’, *Philosophical Studies*, 36 (1979), pp. 285–94; F. Kamm, *Mortality, Mortality Vol. I: Death and Whom to Save From It* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993); T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998); R. Kumar, ‘Contractualism on Saving the Many’, *Analysis*, 61 (2001), pp. 165–70; I. Hirose, ‘Saving the Greater Number without Combining Claims’, *Analysis*, 61 (2001), pp. 341–2; J. Raz, ‘Numbers, with and without Contractualism’, *Ratio* (new series), 16 (2003), pp. 346–67; N.-H. Hsieh, A. Strudler and D. Wasserman, ‘The Numbers Problem’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 34 (2006), pp. 352–72; A. Hosein, *The Significance of Fairness*, (Doctoral Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009).

¹⁰ Wasserman and Strudler, ‘Can a Nonconsequentialist Count Lives?’; M. Otsuka, ‘Saving Lives, Moral Theories and the Claims of Individuals’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 34 (2006), pp. 109–35; T. Doggett, ‘Saving the Few’, *Noûs*, 47 (2013), pp. 302–15.

¹¹ Foot, ‘Utilitarianism and the Virtues’, p. 199.

(p. 204). Foot traces the plausibility of the idea that states of affairs can be good to the idea that ‘there are some things that a moral person must want and aim at in so far as he is a moral person’ (p. 204). So on Foot’s view the truth that lurks behind consequentialism is that the virtue of benevolence has a teleological element: there are some altruistic ends you ought to have.

My plan is to build on Foot’s insight. I propose that when you come across someone in need, you should have the end of the alleviation of this person’s need. By this, I mean you ought to aim at this alleviation for its own sake. This goal should guide your decision-making and hence your action. This is a requirement to have a certain type of attitude. I take it that morality requires you to have attitudes, as it places requirements on what sort of person you ought to be. For example, you are morally required not to take pleasure in others’ misfortune. There can be these requirements even if these attitudes are not under your voluntary control, just as there can be epistemic requirements governing your beliefs, even if these attitudes are not under your voluntary control.

I assume that this moral end should be one of the considerations on the basis of which you deliberate about what to do. Apart from this, my proposal need not presuppose any moral psychology. Depending on different non-consequentialists’ moral psychologies, they may have different conceptions of what attitude you bear to your ends. A Humean may say that you desire your ends. A Kantian may hold that you will your ends. Others may hold that you commit yourself to these ends. A solution to the numbers problem should not presuppose any of these particular moral psychologies. Nonetheless, in order to formulate the proposal, I need to make a terminological choice, and so arbitrarily I will talk of ‘wanting’ ends. But the proposal could be put terms of any of these attitudes. It only requires that the attitude be one that can form the basis of deliberation and one that has differing degrees of strength. The latter requirement strikes me as harmless, since any moral psychology would need to be able to make sense of the possibility that someone’s goal of growing a tomato plant is less important to him or her than his or her goal of raising a child.

As a virtue ethicist, Foot claims that the ground of a requirement to have altruistic ends is the virtue of benevolence.¹² But there are other non-consequentialist grounds for this requirement. Not only could a Kantian say you ought to have altruistic ends, Kant himself does explicitly say this: he glosses the duty of beneficence as a duty to make the ends of others your own, as far as you are able. Taurek himself simply says that you

¹² For a proposed solution to the numbers problem that appeals to the requirements of beneficence, see Hosein, *The Significance of Fairness*.

ought to empathise with a needy person's point of view, and take on her concerns (p. 303). Plausibly, adopting the end of alleviating a stranger's need is part of what it is to properly empathise with her. After all, Taurek is not recommending that we simply stand around feeling sorry for her! So there are many different non-consequentialist grounds for the requirement I posit. Thus the claim that there is such a requirement can appeal to non-consequentialists of many stripes. Indeed, given this goal, I will not tie the requirement to have altruistic ends to any deeper rationale.

Now, knowing that you ought to have certain altruistic ends in Drug is not yet enough to work out what to do. We also need to know how important these ends should be to you. How much are you morally required to want each stranger's survival for its own sake and not as a means to some further end? In Drug, the strangers are equally needy. And they are stipulated to be alike in all relevant respects. (I leave open what these respects may be: for example, the severity of someone's need, their relationship to you, moral desert and so on). Therefore, you ought to want each stranger's survival to an equal degree. I insist on equality here, because I take it that our moral community involves relations of equality.¹³ It is not the case that our standing is roughly on a par with each other's.¹⁴ Consequently, you should not want each stranger's survival to roughly a similar degree. You should want it to an equal degree. So the full content of the moral requirement is:

Moral Ends. When you come across someone in need whom you could help at no cost, you are morally required to have as your end the alleviation of his or her need. When several strangers are equally needy and in all relevant respects alike, you are morally required to consider equally important your ends of the survival of each.

This is a requirement on the attitudes you should have. As such, the claim that there is such a requirement differs from the consequentialist's claim that alleviating needs is good—this latter claim assumes that there is a normative property of goodness inhering in this alleviation, but my claim makes no such assumption.

II.1. *A rational requirement on how to pursue your ends*

So in Drug you ought to have multiple altruistic ends that you place an equal importance in. How should you pursue these ends? I propose that

¹³ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to address this point.

¹⁴ For argument for the claim that we are rationally required to care about strangers' interests equally, see C. Hare, 'Perfectly Balanced Interests', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 23 (2009), pp. 165–76.

we should answer this by addressing the question of how in general you should rationally choose between several relevantly similar ends.

It will help to answer this question by focusing on an end that has nothing to do with helping people—let us say, the protection of bird nests. Suppose Jones has this end in virtue of his peculiar interest in these works of avian craftsmanship. He is not interested in protecting them for the sake of birds. He simply aims at the safety of each intricate nest for its own sake. Suppose that there are three bird nests, but Jones cannot protect all three at the same time. Instead, he has to choose between protecting one of them or the other two. Imagine he says, ‘Well, then. If I cannot protect all three, then I do not mind whether I protect two or just one.’ That would be irrational of Jones: Jones is rationally required to achieve as many of these ends as possible.

Let us be clear about why he is rationally required to achieve these. The explanation is not that some normative property inheres in the nests themselves, and Jones is rationally required to maximise the amount of this property. No, the explanation is simply that these nests matter to Jones: his ends include protecting them, and further three key conditions hold. First, Jones considers each end equally important. Secondly, each of Jones’s ends is an end in itself: Jones’s goal of protecting each bird nest does not depend on whether he protects any other nest. Thirdly, Jones’s decision about which nests to protect does not affect his pursuit of his other ends, such as his end of his sister’s happiness. These three conditions are jointly sufficient for Jones to be rationally required to maximise the number of ends he achieves. There is nothing special about bird nests, however. Whenever these three conditions hold, we would equally judge someone irrational if she chose to pursue one end at the expense of two similar ends. So I propose the following general rational requirement:

Rational Pursuit of Ends. You are rationally required to achieve as many of a group of ends as possible if

- (i) you consider each end equally important;
- (ii) your goal of achieving each end does not depend on whether you achieve another of these ends; and
- (iii) your achieving each end does not affect whether you achieve other ends that are not members of this group.

Now this rational requirement echoes similar claims that have been made about rationality. But its distinctive feature—which is absolutely crucial for making my explanation a non-consequentialist explanation of why the numbers should count—is that it does not rely on an idea that rationality

requires you to maximise some normative property that inheres in various states of affairs. As such, it is different from any view that concerns the rationally appropriate stance to take with respect to states of affairs with certain amounts of objective value.¹⁵

This is a requirement to make a conditional true: if you have certain ends, then you achieve as many as possible. Thus you could satisfy this requirement either by achieving as many of these ends as possible, or by not having a group of ends such that conditions (i) to (iii) obtain. Since the requirement takes ‘wide-scope’ over the entire conditional, these are ‘wide-scope requirements’ in John Broome’s helpful terminology.¹⁶ That is to say, the requirement takes ‘wide-scope’ over the conditional. Using brackets to denote the scope of the deontic modal operator, a wide-scope operator has the form

(a) You ought (If p, then q);

By contrast, a narrow-scope requirement has the form

(b) If p, then you ought (q).

For a requirement of the form specified in (b), if p is in fact true, then your only way of satisfying the requirement is by making q true. But for a requirement of the form specified in (a), if p is in fact true, you can satisfy the requirement either by making q true or by making p false. The moral requirement posited in Rational Pursuit of Ends has the wide-scope form of (a).

II.1. *Putting the moral and rational requirements together*

So far, we have seen what ends you are morally required to have in Drug, and how you are rationally required to pursue these ends. To complete the explanation, we need to put these two parts together.

My argument for this is simple and short. In Drug, these are no other requirements besides the moral and rational requirements. The only way to satisfy both requirements would be to save the larger group. Therefore, the only way to satisfy all the requirements that you face is to save the larger group. Therefore, you are all things considered required to do so.

¹⁵ For an example of such a theory, see Julian Savulescu’s refinement of Derek Parfit’s Present-Aim Theory of Reasons, which an anonymous reviewer has pointed out to me bears important similarities to the principle Rational Pursuit of Ends. For further differences, see footnote 21 below. D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 119; J. Savulescu, ‘The Present-Aim Theory: A Submaximizing Theory of Reasons’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 76 (1998), pp. 229–43 at p. 233.

¹⁶ J. Broome, ‘Does Rationality Give us Reasons?’, *Philosophical Issues*, 15 (2005), pp. 321–37.

An explanation of why you ought all things considered to save the larger number in Drug would constitute a respectable solution of the numbers problem. But we could be more ambitious and aim to offer an explanation of the claim that you are morally required to save the many. We could do so by making the following claim:

Moral-Rational Link. Moral requirements to have ends are accompanied by moral requirements to perform actions that are rationally required in light of these ends.

This strikes me as a plausible rationale for how altruistic ends generate moral requirements to perform actions. Moreover, some non-consequentialists have additional reasons for positing this connection between rationality and morality. A virtue ethicist may explain what you morally ought to do in terms of what a virtuous person would do. If they hold that practical rationality is a virtue, then they will explain what you morally ought to do in terms of rational requirements. A Kantian may explain what you morally ought to do in terms of which worlds you could rationally endorse. You would have a duty to have altruistic ends if you could not rationally endorse a world in which people do not have these ends. Further, you would have a moral duty to pursue these ends rationally, if you could not rationally endorse a world in which people do not pursue these ends rationally.

III. OBJECTIONS

This completes the explanation I propose of why the numbers should count. Let us call it the ‘Ends Explanation.’ Next I will consider objections to it.

III.1. *People who lack altruistic ends*

First, consider the objection that it would not be rational for you to save the greater number if you did not aim at saving each stranger. The objection continues that if you failed to have these ends, then you would not be all things considered required to save the greater number. But this would be an unacceptable result: you are all things considered required to save the greater number.

In response to this objection, we should note that to lack the ends of each stranger’s survival is to violate the requirement, Moral Ends. You would not be all things considered permitted to fail to save the greater number if doing so violates a moral requirement and there is a way of satisfying this requirement and all the other requirements you face. In your situation, there is a way of satisfying all the requirements you face—

the correct way to respond to this situation is to adopt the ends of saving each stranger, and then act rationally in light of these ends.

III.2. *A requirement of fairness*

Part of the Ends Explanation is the claim that you face no other requirements in Drug. This leaves it open to the following objection. Someone could object that there is an opposing requirement of fairness. For example, someone could claim that fairness requires you to toss a coin to decide which group to save in Drug. This is a significant objection in the literature on the numbers problem because people often interpret Taurek as making this claim. (However, Tyler Doggett has pointed out to me in conversation that while Taurek says he would toss a coin, he never says that this is what he must do and indeed he never actually mentions fairness.)

Even if fairness did require this, this need not be fatal to the Ends Explanation. It could be that the relevant moral and rational requirements are sufficiently stringent that you are all things considered required to conform to them rather than the requirement of fairness. Still, a strong case can be made for the position that there is no requirement of fairness in play.

It is true that fairness can sometimes bear on your decision about whom you should help. But a stranger could only complain that you are distributing your aid unfairly if she has a claim to this aid. If strangers have claims, then this would be significant in light of an argument made by John Broome. Broome holds that when people have equal claims to a good, fairness requires leaving people with an equal share of this good. Broome claims that if the good in question is indivisible, then a chance of having a claim satisfied would be a 'surrogate' for having one's claim satisfied. Thus he holds that fairness would require that these chances be equally distributed.¹⁷ While Broome's argument has some plausibility when people have claims, it does not speak to cases where they lack these claims. By contrast, if a stranger lacks a claim, then the stranger would not be entitled to this aid, and cannot demand it as her due. In the absence of such entitlements, she cannot complain of unfair treatment. If she lacks a claim, then the norms of beneficence, not justice, would govern the distribution of your aid. Consequently, you would be free to help whom you like, without having to worry that you have thereby wronged someone.

¹⁷ J. Broome, 'Fairness', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society New Series*, 91 (1990–1991), pp. 87–101; For an argument that you should save the many, even if strangers have equal claims, see Hsieh, Wasserman and Strudler, 'The Numbers Problem.'

This raises the question of whether the people in Drug have claims to your aid. Now, some people do say that the strangers in Drug have claims, and these claims explain why you ought to help them. Conceiving of the needy as having ‘claims’ is common in the literature on the numbers problem.¹⁸ But I suspect many use the term innocuously, without intending that claimants of aid are entitled to this aid.¹⁹ However, the plausibility of the view that fairness plays a special role governing how you satisfy ‘claims’ depends on these claims being understood as something like entitlements. Now, clearly in some circumstances, potential recipients do have claims. For example, the strangers would be entitled to your helping them if you had promised to give your drug to them, if they jointly owned the drug, or if you occupied an official role, such as being a physician. But it is stipulated in Drug that none of these further facts obtain. In light of this, we should not hold that strangers have claims to your help.

To see why strangers lack claims to your aid, compare this variant of the case:

Friend. You have 100ml of a drug. Two strangers each need 50ml to live. Your friend David needs all 100ml to live. You do not stand in any special relationship to the strangers. All else is equal.

I hope that you agree that in Friend you may help David. Furthermore, it would not be unfair of you to do so. But this would not be the case if the strangers have claims to your aid: it is unfair to show partiality towards your friends when strangers have equally weighty claims. For example, if you had promised to each stranger that you would give them your drug, then they would have claims against you, and it would be unfair to give the drug to David. But in Friend all else is stipulated to be equal, and so we are assuming that you have not made such a promise. Therefore, from the fact that it would not be unfair to give the drug to David, we can infer these strangers do not have these claims.

Let me briefly respond to two obvious responses to this argument. First, one could respond that strangers in need have claims, but friends in need have stronger claims. This response is unsatisfactory. If that were the case, then you would be morally required to help David. But intuitively,

¹⁸ See, for example, Kamm, *Morality, Mortality*; Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*; Hirose, ‘Saving the Greater Number’; Wasserman and Strudler, ‘Can a Nonconsequentialist Count Lives?’; Otsuka, ‘Saving Lives.’

¹⁹ Broome himself does use the term ‘claim’ in a more robust sense, conceiving of it as a ‘duty owed to’ the claimant. (p. 92), but he only hesitantly suggests that needs give rise to claims (p. 97).

tively you are merely permitted to help him and also permitted to help the strangers. Secondly, one could respond that strangers in need have claims to your help, but only when you do not have a friend nearby whom you could also help. This view of claims is unattractive, as it entails that the existence of strangers' claims depends on whether a friend of yours is around. But people's entitlements are not so fragile. In a similar vein, when considering the suggestion that people have rights to help when the help is easy, but not when it is hard, Judith Jarvis Thomson claims that 'it's rather a shocking idea that anyone's rights should fade away and disappear as it gets harder and harder to accord them to him.'²⁰

I suggest that the reason why some people are tempted to think that the strangers in Drug have claims is that you have a particularly stringent obligation to help them. But we should not think that justice is the only source of stringent obligations. Another ground is beneficence.²¹ Indeed, identifying beneficence as the ground explains why you may save David: you are allowed to show partiality when practicing beneficence. Moreover, fairness does not constrain your beneficence. It is not as if when you write a cheque to Oxfam, you are being unfair to the people you could help by writing a cheque to Action Against Hunger instead.

IV. WHY THE ENDS EXPLANATION IS ACCEPTABLE TO NON-CONSEQUENTIALISTS

Earlier, we went by the consequentialist's account of why the numbers should count quite quickly. Let us pause a little to look at it more closely. The consequentialist only has an explanation if he or she offers an axiology that entails that saving Anna and Bert produces more good than saving Clare. Typically the consequentialist's rationale will be that each additional life saved produces a little more good. If so, her theory is 'aggregative'—benefits to different people aggregate together to produce more goodness. The aggregative consequentialist explanation works by combining this axiological claim with a maximising claim: you ought to produce the most good.

²⁰ J.J. Thomson, 'A Defense of Abortion', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1 (1971), pp. 47–66, at p. 61; see also Hosein, *The Significance of Fairness*.

²¹ For more detailed accounts of this distinction between justice and beneficence, put in terms of whether you ought to help someone because they have a 'right' to this help, see ch. 5 of J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*; Thomson, 'A Defense of Abortion.'

The principle ‘Rational Pursuit of Ends’ is a limited maximising claim: it says that when you have relevantly similar ends, you ought to achieve as many of these ends as possible.²² As a result, some might complain that the Ends Explanation is similar to the aggregative consequentialist explanation. We might wonder though: if the explanation is similar to the aggregative explanation, then how could it serve as an alternative to it?

Well, the mere fact that there is some similarity should not strike us as a problem. We should be unconcerned if the Ends Explanation is only similar to the aggregative consequentialist explanation in the respects in which the latter is attractive! The consequentialist explanation incorporates a teleological element (a property of goodness) and a maximising principle (a requirement to maximise the good). The Ends Explanation also incorporates a teleological element (a moral requirement to have altruistic ends) and a maximising principle (a rational requirement on how to pursue these ends). This is the extent of the similarities. And these are desirable similarities: an explanation of why the numbers should count will not have the ring of truth unless it incorporates a teleological element and some form of maximising principle.

Does this mean that the Ends Explanation is no alternative to the consequentialist’s explanation? No. This is because of the extent of the dissimilarities between the explanations. In particular, we should note that the scopes of the aggregative principles vastly differ. The principle ‘Rational Pursuit of Ends’ is a circumscribed principle that narrowly applies only to cases where an agent pursues relevantly similar ends. It does not speak to cases where you have different ends, such as when you aim to help people with differing needs. As a result, the Ends Explanation does not share an alleged commitment of the aggregative consequentialist explanation, namely a commitment to ‘summing up ... small benefits to many to reach a sum that outweighs ... serious losses to a few.’²³ Thus, the Ends Explanation is a considerably more limited proposal than aggregative consequentialism. Furthermore, the spirit of each proposal is different. While the consequentialist is ultimately concerned with the total amount of goodness, the Ends Explanation invokes us to take a specific concern with each individual, and then to deliberate rationally on the basis of these concerns. The focus is on the individual and not the aggregate.

But the best way to see how the Ends Explanation is an alternative to the consequentialist explanations is to see that it is acceptable to the non-

²² A different way in which a principle can be a limited maximising claim is if it is a claim that we should ‘satisfice’ by only aiming at a ‘good enough’ state of affairs. For an example of such a ‘submaximising’ claim, see Savulescu, ‘The Present-Aim Theory.’

²³ Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 237.

consequentialists we saw earlier who are looking for a solution to the numbers problem. To see that it is, let us revisit the four grounds that led them to reject the consequentialist explanation.

The first ground was a rejection of the notion of a 'better outcome.' The Ends Explanation makes no use of such a notion. It is after all based on Foot's insight that the illusion of the appeal of the claim that certain outcomes are 'good' derives only from the truth that there are some ends that we morally ought to have. As such, the Ends Explanation does not claim that a stranger's survival is good simpliciter. It simply claims that you ought to have a stranger's survival as your end. Even if, as Thomson claims, all goodness is goodness in a respect, we should still have the goal of helping others. Moreover, the explanation does not presuppose that there is some impersonal point of view according to which saving the many is better than saving the few. It only holds that there is, in general, a rational way for you to pursue similar ends.

The second ground was a worry about regarding potential beneficiaries in too impersonal a way: you are not to see them as containers of goodness nor valuable objects. The Ends Explanation does not make you do so. Your end of the alleviation of another's need could be rooted in a personal concern for this person as an individual.

The third ground was an independent attraction to a broader theory like Virtue Ethics or Kantianism. The Ends Explanation could be seamlessly integrated into many of these theories. A virtue ethicist should say, with Foot, that the virtue of generosity requires adopting altruistic ends and that the virtue of practical rationality requires pursuing them in certain ways. Alternatively, a Kantian should hold that you cannot rationally endorse a world in which people do not adopt altruistic ends, nor a world in which they do not pursue them rationally. There may be some non-consequentialist theories into which it would be hard to integrate the Ends Explanation. But there are many more into which it could be easily integrated.

The fourth ground was a desire to leave room for constraints and options. The Ends Explanation can accommodate both. We can say that you should pursue your altruistic ends within deontological constraints. And we can say that you have options to pursue these ends in partial ways. We saw that some people worry that if we concede that some outcomes are better or worse, then we will face pressure to accept consequentialism. But no such pressure is generated by merely holding that you ought to have altruistic ends and that you ought to pursue these ends rationally.

V. CONCLUSION

This concludes my case for the Ends Explanation as a solution to the numbers problem. My hopes for this case are modest. I have not compared the Ends Explanation to other non-consequentialist explanations, and so cannot claim to have shown that it is the best explanation. Instead, I hope merely to have shown that it should have some appeal to many non-consequentialists who agree the numbers should count, but are puzzled as to why they should. That is not to say it will find favour with absolutely everyone. It may not convince numbers skeptics—those who deny that the numbers should count.²⁴ Still, from a neutral's point of view, the Ends Explanation should be more attractive than numbers skepticism since the latter is such a counterintuitive view. And even if we are not able to convince the numbers skeptics, we can take some comfort in knowing that their numbers are few.

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²⁴ E. Anscombe, 'Who is Wronged?', *The Oxford Review*, 5 (1967), pp. 16–17; Taurek, 'Should the numbers count?'; V. Muñoz-Dardé, 'The Distribution of Numbers and the Comprehensiveness of Reason', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 105 (2005), pp. 207–33; A. Thomas, 'Giving Each Person Her Due: Taurek Cases and Non-Comparative Justice', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 15 (2012), pp. 661–76; Doggett, 'Saving the Few.'