**ON THE MORAL IMPORTANCE OF NUMBERS, RELEVANCE AND THE WORKINGS OF NON-AGGREGATIVE REASONING**

ABSTRACT. How can we explain why a morally motivated stranger should cure a large number of persons from permanent paralysis instead of saving one from death but should save one from death instead of curing a multitude from being bedridden for a day? An interesting family of responses to this question employs both a non-aggregative and an aggregative approach to the distribution of scarce benefits, arbitrating between them. Focusing on Alex Voorhoeve’s uniquely well-developed version of this response, I demonstrate that his argument lacks the necessary resources to prove its point in that it rests on a specific interpretation of the non-aggregative approach without even acknowledging the existence of a conflict with an established alternative and, therefore, without justifying the interpretation of non-aggregative reasoning its conclusions depend upon. This problem has important implications for the appeal of non-aggregative approaches to the distribution of benefits, while the highlighted conflict of possible interpretations should be of interest to anyone who aims to understand how non-aggregative reasoning works.

KEYWORDS. Aggregation; numbers; Thomas Nagel; pairwise comparisons; Alex Voorhoeve.

I. INTRODUCTION

The debate over the moral importance of numbers forms a key battleground between those who favour and those who oppose the aggregation of individual interests into the claims of groups when it comes to distributing scarce benefits. A particularly interesting question in this debate is whether we should help the greater number when each member of the larger group of potential beneficiaries has a claim to help that, although weaker than the claim that every member of the smaller group can make, is strong enough to be *relevant* to it. This question is so interesting because it puts a great deal of pressure on those theorists who think that non-aggregative reasoning has an important role to play in the distribution of benefits; unless they give up their anti-aggregative commitment, such theorists seem forced to reject the intuitive judgement that we should help the greater number in at least some cases of conflict between a smaller group and a larger group with weaker but relevant claims.

A very stimulating position emerged that holds that non-aggregative reasoning actually contributes to explaining why we should sometimes help the greater number in the case of relevant claims, but only *if we properly arbitrate* between it and aggregative reasoning. This position was first outlined by Frances Kamm (2007, 297-298 and 483-486), while Alex Voorhoeve (2014) developed it in full detail and provided a rationale for it. Focusing mainly on Voorhoeve’s more well-developed proposal, my main aim in this paper is to demonstrate that the argument supporting this position falls short of its target. On Voorhoeve’s account, the judgement that there are times when we should help the greater number in the case of relevant claims is explained by a principle that spells out the conditions under which non-aggregative reasoning reaches an impasse on its own terms and, therefore, leaves matters in the hands of the aggregative approach. The same principle is also used to explain another intuitive judgement, namely, that there is no number of persons who could receive a trivial benefit that can outweigh a claim to be saved from death or another strong claim to help. Contra Voorhoeve, I argue that the non-aggregative approach peacefully makes way for aggregation in cases of conflict between a smaller number and a larger number of weaker but still relevant claims only if it is specified in a very particular way. However, Voorhoeve does not recognise this problem of specification, the existence of an alternative implicit in the work of some of his own key sources of inspiration and the need to provide any justification for the preferred interpretation.

Another aim of this paper is to discuss the far-reaching implications of my argument. In critiquing Voorhoeve’s position, my argument opens up a new question relative to the specification of the non-aggregative method, which reaches well beyond the significance of numbers in the distribution of benefits and highlights an important future direction of research for anyone who is interested in how non-aggregative reasoning works in general. As for the conflict cases between a smaller group and a larger group with weaker but relevant claims, given that a key interpretive issue is still open, it might very well eventually turn out that Voorhoeve’s interpretation of non-aggregative reasoning is to be discarded. In other words, Voorhoeve’s argument cannot exclude that a difficult choice might still be imposed on those who sympathise with the non-aggregative approach; given that non-aggregative reasoning would at that point clash with our intuitions, its supporters would be forced either to bite the bullet or to admit defeat on an important issue.

The structure of my argument is simple. I start by summarising the most relevant positions in the debate over the moral importance of numbers, including Voorhoeve's argument. Next, I demonstrate that such argument hinges upon a specific interpretation of the non-aggregative approach, which is described by Voorhoeve as a sequence of distinct steps while Thomas Nagel originally depicted it as a single step. In the absence of any justification for this deviation from one of Voorhoeve’s key sources of influence, Voorhoeve’s adoption of a sequential interpretation of non-aggregative reasoning can be considered ad hoc. In conclusion, I explore the implications of my argument.

II.FROM THE DEBATE OVER THE MORAL IMPORTANCE OF NUMBERS TO VOORHOEVE’S ARGUMENT

As I mentioned in the introduction, the question of the moral significance of numbers is a key battlefield between aggregative and non-aggregative approaches to the distribution of benefits. Historically, the approaches that oppose aggregation have received much traction from their ability to give intuitively right answers to certain cases of conflict between greater and lesser numbers. Unlike aggregative theories such as classical utilitarianism, non-aggregative approaches are well-suited to explain why there is no number of persons who could be spared a trivial burden that can outweigh a single claim to be saved from death, which is extremely strong if taken individually. The challenge for non-aggregative approaches is to demonstrate that they do not deny the importance of numbers altogether, so that they can accommodate our intuitions in at least two other conflict cases, which I will now outline.

Regarding the first case, where the choice is between two differently sized groups whose members are identical in all relevant respects, authors like Frances Kamm (2007, 48-77) and Thomas Scanlon (1998, 231-235) have done a lot of work to demonstrate that there is no need to aggregate individual claims if we want to argue for helping the greater number. The second case is the one mentioned in the introduction, in which there is a conflict between a small group of potential beneficiaries and a large group with weaker but still relevant claims to help, where the relevance of these claims is a product of their being not too far away from the claims of the members of the other group in terms of strength.

This case is particularly interesting because the very authors who support a non-aggregative approach to numerous other distributive issues admit that aggregation may have to do some work here. Although Scanlon (1998, 238-241) claims that the argument used when the members of the two groups are identical could be adapted to the case of relevant claims, he admits that this is nothing more than a tentative suggestion. Kamm (2007, 297-298 and 483-486) rejects Scanlon's suggestion and offers brief comments mixing non-aggregative considerations (given the strength of their claims, helping the individuals with weaker but still relevant claims is not disrespectful towards any of those with stronger claims) with aggregative ones (if aggregated throughout all affected parties, the opportunity cost of helping the members of the small group would be too high) in support of helping the greater number in conflict cases between a small group and a large group with weaker but relevant claims.

Voorhoeve contributes to this debate by considering examples of two of the conflict cases between greater and lesser number that are discussed in this context.

**Death v. Permanent Paralysis**.You can either save a young person’s life and restore her to good health or cure a number of other young persons of an illness that will not shorten their lives but will leave them completely paralysed.

Is there a number of persons you can save from permanent paralysis for which you should help them instead of saving the one from death?

**Death v. A Day of Paralysis**. You can either save a young person’s life and restore her to good health or save a number of other young persons from being bedridden for a day.

Is there a number of persons you can save from being bedridden for a day for which you should help them instead of saving the one from death?

Voorhoeve argues for a principle that explains why we should answer yes to the first question and no to the second one. Voorhoeve’s contribution is stimulating because his principle is grounded in neither an exclusively non-aggregative nor an exclusively aggregative logic; following the lead set by Kamm, Voorhoeve's principle arbitrates between them, effectively providing a far-reaching account of where the limits of both non-aggregative and aggregative reasoning lie.

This principle, called “Aggregate Relevant Claims” (ARC), holds that an individual’s claim to be helped is stronger the lower her level of well-being absent aid and the greater the benefit she could receive from intervention. When a morally motivated stranger is in a situation in which she can help some, but not every person whose well-being is at stake, ARC requires that she should choose the alternative that allows her to satisfy the greatest sum of strength-weighted relevant claims, where a claim is considered to be relevant if and only if it is *strong enough* relative to the strongest competing claim (Voorhoeve 2014, 64-68).

According to Voorhoeve, ARC is justified because it arbitrates in an appealing way between the non-aggregative and the aggregative response to the equal value of each individual's well-being. In brief, it arbitrates by requiring that the non-aggregative approach be applied first, while the aggregative approach should enter the picture only if non-aggregative reasoning reaches what can be described as an impasse on its own terms.

Voorhoeve's non-aggregative approach requires that when it comes to distributing aid, the decision-maker should place herself in the shoes of every individual whose well-being is at stake, *one individual at a time*. While occupying the perspective of an individual, the decision-maker should make a series of pairwise comparisons between the claim of the individual in question and the claim of every other individual whose well-being is at stake. This process should be repeated from the perspective of every other affected individual in the hope that, in the end, unanimity would follow because every person whose well-being is at stake will have agreed on which individual has the weightiest claim to help and, therefore, deserves priority (Voorhoeve 2014, 68-70). Unanimity is very important within non-aggregative reasoning. As underlined by Voorhoeve, the effort to put ourselves in the shoes of every single individual rests on a principle of respect for the separateness of persons. In the context of the non-aggregative approach, a commitment to the assent of every affected individual is therefore crucial because it is uniquely well-suited to implement the basic principle that we owe separate concern equally to every person.

I have already mentioned that ARC is meant to explain our intuitions about Death v. Permanent Paralysis and Death v. A Day of Paralysis. Why does the non-aggregative approach reach an impasse when a claim to be saved from death conflicts with a large number of claims to be cured of permanent paralysis but not when the conflict is with a multitude of claims to be saved from being bedridden for a day? When the claims to be saved from permanent paralysis are on the table, unanimity cannot be achieved. This is because Voorhoeve endorses what he calls “*permissible personal perspective*”, i.e., the idea that each individual is allowed to be (to some extent) more concerned about her own claims than the claims of anyone else (Voorhoeve 2014, 70-75).

If the decision-maker looks from the perspective of the individual who will die without intervention at a pairwise comparison with someone who faces permanent paralysis, saving the first individual takes priority because not only is her claim to help objectively stronger, but also its importance is augmented by the personal perspective. Now, what happens when the decision-maker places herself in the shoes of one of the individuals who face permanent paralysis? Each person is allowed to place extra importance on her own claim. Although objectively weaker than a claim to be saved from death, a claim to be cured of permanent paralysis is strong enough for the personal perspective to fill the gap. Therefore, an individual who faces permanent paralysis can legitimately consider her claim as more important than the claim of the individual who will die if untreated, giving priority to saving herself from paralysis.

It is when the non-aggregative approach results in this kind of disagreement that aggregation should be employed, leading to the conclusion that we should help the greater number in some cases of conflict between a smaller group and a larger group with weaker but still relevant claims. By contrast, no such disagreement results when a claim to be saved from death competes with a multitude of claims to be rid of a day of paralysis. Even when the decision-maker adopts the permissible personal perspective of an individual who faces a day of paralysis, satisfying the claim to be saved from death takes priority. Everyone is only allowed a degree of greater self-concern and it seems fair to say that prioritising one's own claim to be cured of a day of paralysis over another person's claim to be saved from death is impermissible.

III. A PROBLEMATIC INTERPRETATION OF NON-AGGREGATIVE REASONING

If we look at the previous section’s reconstruction of Voorhoeve’s argument from the end, the philosophically powerful story told by such argument is that if we take the permissible personal perspective seriously from within non-aggregative reasoning, in certain cases that prerogative will bring about *all by itself* a failure of unanimity that opens the door to aggregative reasoning. In turn, this will lead to conclusions that are consistent with our intuitions in situations like Death v. Permanent Paralysis. I aim to challenge this story, which is over simplistic in the sense that Voorhoeve fails to provide a piece of argument that is necessary to prove his point.

My claim is not that inadequate support is offered for Voorhoeve’s idea that we should arbitrate between non-aggregative and aggregative reasoning by taking matters out of the hands of the former when it results in disagreement. If unanimity is unachievable, no choice of a course of action can fully implement the separate concern for everyone that forms the basis of the non-aggregative approach. Therefore, from the very perspective of non-aggregative reasoning, these are the best conditions for passing matters on to aggregation because non-aggregative reasoning does not have much to lose from this transfer of authority.

However, I disagree with the idea that it is enough to couple this model of how to arbitrate between non-aggregative and aggregative reasoning with the personal perspective for such model to lead to ARC and thus to an explanation of our intuition that we should cure a large number of individuals of permanent paralysis instead of saving one from death. In this section, I argue that Voorhoeve's model of arbitration only leads to ARC if we also accept a very specific interpretation of how non-aggregative reasoning works – one still in need of justification and with an alternative that is well grounded in the most relevant tradition of thought.

The non-aggregative approach as described by Voorhoeve is centred on pairwise comparisons between individuals with competing claims. However, Voorhoeve's interpretation of pairwise comparisons differs in one key respect from the one suggested by Thomas Nagel, who is arguably the most important proponent of pairwise comparisons; Nagel is also described as a source of influence for Voorhoeve's argument at large (Voorhoeve 2014, 68), and Voorhoeve refers very extensively to his work specifically when explaining non-aggregative reasoning in terms of pairwise comparisons (Voorhoeve 2016, 2-5 and footnotes).

The method of pairwise comparisons is described by Voorhoeve as *a sequence* made up of a number of distinct steps. At every step, the problem of who should receive priority is looked at from the perspective of *a* *different* *individual*, and the decision-maker makes all possible one-to-one comparisons between the individual in question and everyone else. In contrast, Nagel is explicit in stating that pairwise comparisons are meant to enable the decision-maker to go as close as logically possible “to view things *simultaneously* from everyone's point of view” (1991, 67, italics added). All possible one-to-one comparisons between the claim of *each* affected individual and the claim of *everyone else* should be considered to be part of the same step, in which the decision-maker does all that she can to look at the problem of who should receive priority from each perspective simultaneously, as opposed to one specific perspective at a time.[[1]](#endnote-1) In Nagel's words, we are morally required to make an effort to imaginatively “split into all people in the world” (1979, 127) – words that, again, are at odds with a sequential interpretation of non-aggregative reasoning, which does not evoke any image of splitting in that it simply requires moving from one person’s point of view to the next. Pairwise comparisons, described as “the way to choose from many separate viewpoints simultaneously” are said to follow naturally from this requirement (Nagel 1979, 127).

Voorhoeve's case for ARC depends upon his sequential interpretation of pairwise comparisons. Let us return to the conflict between a single claim to be saved from death and numerous claims to be saved from permanent paralysis, granting that the permissible personal perspective has a place in the non-aggregative approach. If we adopt Nagel's interpretation of pairwise comparisons, the personal perspective is no longer activated by one person at a time. All affected individuals place extra importance on their own claims to help at the same time because the decision-maker is supposed to look at the problem of who should receive priority from all perspectives simultaneously. Therefore, when the one-to-one comparisons between the claim of each individual and that of everyone else are made, the magnifying effect that the personal perspective has on the importance of each claim in the eyes of the person who makes it is compensated by the magnifying effect of the perspective on the importance of the claim of everyone else. Augmented by the personal perspective, the claim to be saved from death is again beyond the reach of any claim to be saved from permanent paralysis, even though the latter claim has also been augmented. In sum, as long as the decision-maker is supposed to occupy everyone's perspective simultaneously, the fact that the claim to be saved from death is more important than any other claim imposes itself to each perspective that she must adopt, ensuring unanimity and closing the door to the idea that numbers count in some cases of conflict between a smaller group of claims and a larger group of weaker but relevant claims.

A critic might suggest that I have forgotten that the permissible personal perspective magnifies the claims of individuals *in a comparative sense*. When the decision-maker occupies an individual’s personal perspective, this individual’s claim looms larger than it does from an objective viewpoint. This affects pairwise comparisons in that the satisfaction of that individual’s claim becomes more important than the satisfaction of objectively stronger competing claims, apparently preventing both interpretations of pairwise comparisons from reaching unanimity in the permanent paralysis case.

My reply is that the ability of the permissible personal perspective to make an individual’s claim more important than the claims of others is limited. For example, a person’s claim to be rid of a day of paralysis is simply too weak for her personal perspective to make it as important as another person’s claim to avoid death; when a decision-maker looks at a series of pairwise comparisons from an individual’s permissible personal perspective, what makes the difference is whether the extra importance brought by that perspective suffices to catch up with the objectively stronger competing claims of others. Having said this, we can return to the permanent paralysis case. On the sequential interpretation of pairwise comparisons, there is a step of the method in which the decision-maker compares the claim to be cured of permanent paralysis with the claim to be saved from death from the sole perspective of a person who faces paralysis. Here the personal perspective suffices to catch up with the (non-augmented) claim to be saved from death, disrupting unanimity. On Nagel’s interpretation, the decision-maker occupying the perspective of a person who faces permanent paralysis meets her own eyes when looking at the person who faces death. This brings to the table the enlarged importance that the person who faces death attaches to her own life being saved. From the perspective of the person who faces permanent paralysis, the decision-maker must acknowledge that not even the augmented claim to be cured of paralysis can catch up with the claim to avoid death as the decision-maker experiences it now, securing unanimity.

I wish to reiterate that Nagel's conception of pairwise comparisons leads away from ARC in virtue of its denial of the sequential interpretation of non-aggregative reasoning, not because I have targeted the idea of a permissible personal perspective, which still works as described by Voorhoeve. In the previous paragraphs, I did not deny that each potential beneficiary of a decision is allowed a degree of greater self-concern, which is activated when the decision-maker takes up her perspective. My conclusion clashed with ARC simply because according to Nagel's approach, the decision-maker is supposed to adopt everyone's perspective at the same time.

In requiring that different individual perspectives be adopted simultaneously, Nagel appears to be in line with Immanuel Kant, who is the greatest inspiration among classic philosophers behind the contemporary proponents of non-aggregative reasoning – among other things, Kant's claim that you must not treat a person merely as a means, not even to the greater good of a group or society at large, incorporates a strong anti-aggregative attitude (1998, especially 34-47).

Here my focus is on Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative, which runs as follows: “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (1998, 31). As stressed by Christine Korsgaard, “it is important to notice that Kant says the categorical imperative tells you to act on amaxim which you can *at the same time* will to be a universal law: hemeans at the same time as you will the maxim itself” (1998, xviii-xix, italics in the original). Sometimes, the categorical imperative forbids an action because it is impossible to conceive of a world in which you are still trying to carry out that action although everyone acts on its maxim (generating what is often called a “contradiction in conception”). However, I am only interested in those cases in which an action is forbidden because it leads to a different sort of contradictions – what Kant (1998, 33) describes as contradictions in the will. For example, when the categorical imperative is applied to a person currently acting on the maxim “I will never help other individuals in distress”, the requirement that he must also be able to will that maxim to be a universal law effectively asks that person to adopt a new perspective - one that lies at the receiving end of the same maxim. Once at that end, however, it becomes impossible for him to will the maxim any more, since “many cases could occur in which one would need the love and sympathy of others and in which, by such a law of nature arisen from his own will, he would rob himself of all hope of the assistance he wishes for himself” (Kant 1998, 33). Now, Kant’s concern for the acceptability of maxims from different perspectives anticipates the role played by unanimity in contemporary theories of pairwise comparisons. Moreover, as explicitly stated in Kant’s first formulation of the categorical imperative and as stressed in the comment by Korsgaard quoted above, the person from Kant’s example is required to imagine himself in the shoes of someone at the receiving end of a maxim while *at the same time* trying to will to act on that maxim, therefore simultaneously maintaining the perspective of someone at its “delivering” end and going against a sequential interpretation of the categorical imperative.

In sum, the seemingly compelling story told by Voorhoeve's argument for ARC falls short of its mark in that work is yet to be done to supplement it and offer proper theoretical support to our intuitive judgements in Death v. Permanent Paralysis. I have demonstrated that Voorhoeve’s argument stands or falls on an interpretation of pairwise comparisons and, therefore, non-aggregative reasoning that clashes with both the most prominent contemporary theorist of pairwise comparisons, who is also the theorist that Voorhoeve typically draws on when explaining them, and the classic author who has provided the greatest inspiration for non-aggregative reasoning.[[2]](#endnote-2) The departure from these two authors should have been addressed. The idea that, contra Kant and Nagel, non-aggregative reasoning must be interpreted as a sequence of distinct steps should have been analysed in depth, with the aim of providing a justification. However, Voorhoeve does not even acknowledge the existence of a problem of specification and, therefore, does not offer any consideration in support of the interpretation he adopts.

Something that Voorhoeve’s interpretation has to recommend itself is that such interpretation is instrumental to settle Death v. Permanent Paralysis in accordance with our intuitions. However, given that the goal of Voorhoeve’s argument for ARC is to justify our intuitive judgements in the two cases he discusses, this consideration has a question-begging quality to it. This adds a further spin to my critique of ARC – the *ad hocness* of a key assumption behind Voorhoeve’s argument. This point creates an interesting link with John Halstead’s critique of ARC while maintaining the originality of my argument and, as I aim to suggest below, keeping my objection to ARC more broadly appealing than Halstead’s. Halstead writes:

We can make an infinite number of modifications to the aggregative and nonaggregative approaches in order to render them consistent, but, in the absence of an adequate justification for these modifications, they will be ad hoc. One implication of these modifications is that they allow us to hold on to the commonsense judgments about cases 1 and 2. Even if we accept that this is a good justification for the modifications, it is not the justification Voorhoeve is looking for. (2016, 793).

When we place this quotation against the background of the rest of Halstead’s argument, it becomes clear that here he means to make a pretty radical point. This quotation comes from a section in which Halstead (2016, 792-796) objects to Voorhoeve that he does not provide any proper justification for the appeal of non-aggregative reasoning in conflict cases. Later on in his article, Halsted (2016, 796-799) also introduces several traditional critiques of the non-aggregative approach, which are meant to prove that we should simply reject it. Therefore, for Halstead what is ad hoc in Voorhoeve’s argument is to bring to the table the non-aggregative approach *at all*.

In contrast, I accept Voorhoeve’s assumptions that it is not for him to justify the value of either the non-aggregative or the aggregative approach, and that he can take the appeal of both of them virtually for granted. However, even on this assumptions a charge of ad hocness can be built – the charge that no true support could have been offered to our intuitions in at least one of the cases that Voorhoeve is interested in if he had not deviated from Nagel’s framework and embraced a favourable interpretation of pairwise comparisons, which, however, still stands in need of justification. Also, it is interesting to note that the charge of ad hocness that I raise should have greater appeal than Halstead’s for those scholars who are convinced that non-aggregative reasoning has value. Therefore, it promises to be more palatable for the intended audience of Voorhoeve’s argument for ARC.

IV. CONCLUSION

Voorhoeve’s case for ARC stands or falls on a specific interpretation of pairwise comparisons. However, Voorhoeve does not acknowledge the inconsistency between this interpretation and the work of the main source of influence for his reconstruction of the workings of pairwise comparisons, let alone provide a justification for such interpretation. The fact that this interpretive issue is still open has important implications for those who, like me, believe that the non-aggregative approach has a significant role to play in the distribution of scarce benefits. Voorhoeve’s argument cannot exclude that an in-depth analysis might find Nagel’s interpretation preferable. Therefore, it cannot exclude that a hard choice between two options might still be imposed on the supporters of non-aggregative reasoning in a case like Death v. Permanent Paralysis. One thing the supporters of non-aggregative reasoning might do at that point is admit defeat on this issue, acknowledging that the non-aggregative approach clashes with our intuitions in Death v. Permanent Paralysis and, therefore, gives the wrong answer to some cases of conflict between a smaller group and a larger group with weaker but relevant claims. Alternatively, they might stick to their guns by arguing that in such conflict cases, it is our intuitions that are misplaced. Perhaps this option is not as absurd as it may initially sound and it could be worth exploring. Ultimately, a claim to be rid of permanent paralysis clearly comes from a lower bracket than a claim to be saved from death, and the idea that we should prioritise individual claims to aid according to their strength is one of the main sources of appeal of the non-aggregative approach to the distribution of benefits.

Looking at a more general set of implications of my argument, something that emerged from my critique of Voorhoeve’s case for ARC is that the conflict of possible interpretations that I highlighted can have *great importance* for understanding what we are required to do in concrete cases by a non-aggregative approach to morality; indeed, denying Voorhoeve’s sequential interpretation would equate to denying that non-aggregative reasoning ever allows a morally motivated stranger to help the greater number in Death v. Permanent Paralysis and similar cases. Moreover, this conflict around the sequential nature of pairwise comparisons is between interpretations of how non-aggregative reasoning works *in general*, therefore reaching well beyond the question of the moral importance of numbers. It follows that this brand new question of specification of non-aggregative reasoning is worthy of attention for anyone who is interested in understanding the non-aggregative method at large. What other recommendations about concrete cases depend on accepting or rejecting a sequential reading of pairwise comparisons? From within the non-aggregative approach, how should we go about debating a specification issue of this sort and eventually deciding which interpretation must be preferred? These are some of the extremely wide-reaching questions that, worthy of future attention, we discovered through a critical discussion of Voorhoeve’s ARC.

NOTES

1. It might be objected that Nagel’s requirement that we should adopt more than one individual perspective simultaneously lies beyond the limits of human imagination. This is probably true, but the same holds true for other building blocks of the non-aggregative approach. Take the basic command, echoed by Voorhoeve, that we should place ourselves in the shoes of every person with a stake in the decision at hand, “as if each of their lives were our only lives” (Nagel 1991, 68). Nagel rightly comments that the task of fully identifying with the perspective of anyone else “is a tall order and does not describe a logical possibility”. However, here as well as with the adoption of different perspectives simultaneously, it seems enough to design the workings of the proposed moral method so as to “preserve”, as written by Nagel (1991, 66) while discussing a similar problem, the spirit of the tall order in question as effectively as possible; for example, as I intend to explain in the main text, to deviate from Voorhoeve in requiring that the magnifying effect of every individual’s permissible personal perspective be activated simultaneously while comparing the strength of claims one-to-one is a good reflection in the design of pairwise comparisons of Nagel’s depiction of such comparisons as a single step in which things are looked at simultaneously from everyone’s viewpoint. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A tangential but stimulating question is, did any other scholar go down the route of a sequential reading of pairwise comparisons or of a similar method before Voorhoeve? I do not have the space to conduct an in-depth review of the literature here, but my feeling is that it would be difficult to find scholars who are as consistently committed to a sequential reading as Voorhoeve. For example, consider John Taurek’s seminal attempt to apply a method similar to pairwise comparisons to a conflict between a single individual, named “David”, and a larger group in a case where everyone would die if not helped. It is true that at a certain point, Taurek (1977, 299) imagines that in reply to the suggestion that he should give up the prospect of being helped, David would first say that from where he stands, his death is a worse thing than the death of the others and, therefore, he cannot be expected to accept that suggestion, before acknowledging that the same can be said from the perspective of any member of the other group. This seems to go in the general direction of Voorhoeve’s interpretation of non-aggregative reasoning, with David (and the reader with him) moving at a certain point from his own perspective to the next. However, when later on in the article Taurek provides more abstract descriptions of how his non-aggregative method works, the sequential undertones disappear. At this point, the wording seems to allude to the idea that each comparison between David’s claim and that of any member of the other group should be looked at by the decision-maker *once*, as in the following passage: “In making my decision (…) I should compare what David stands to suffer or lose, if I do not prevent it, to what will be suffered or lost by any other person, if I do not prevent that” (Taurek 1977, 310; see also 307-308). This goes in the direction of the decision-maker occupying the perspectives at the two ends of each comparison simultaneously, instead of first looking at each comparison from the perspective of David and then coming back to it later from the other individual’s perspective.

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