

Phil 104, March 22, 2007
Parfit: Individual and Collective Wrongdoing

Individual-Collective Cases:

- *Several actions* together have an “as-good-as-wrong” effect: an effect, such that, if an individual action had that effect, it would be wrong.
- However, *any one of those actions* does not have an as-good-as-wrong effect.

These are cases in which we may say: “It makes no difference whether *I* do it.”

Two kinds of situation that seem to give rise to Individual-Collective Cases:

1. *Negligible effect*: No matter how many other people X, one person’s X-ing *never* has an as-good-as-wrong effect. If more than N people X, however, then, together, their X-ing has an as-good-as-wrong effect.

Example: Emitting greenhouse gases, one more car on the road, overfishing, etc.

2. *Threshold effect*: When, but only when, more than N people X, their X-ing, together, has an as-good-as-wrong effect. Therefore, one person’s X-ing has an as-good-as-wrong effect when and only when *exactly* N others X. When fewer or more others X, no one’s X-ing has an as-good-as-wrong effect.

Examples:

- Voting Satan for President ($N = \#$ of voters/2)
- Firing squad that shoots simultaneously ($N = 0$ people shooting).

Why are Individual-Collective Cases troubling?

- Even if *no one does anything wrong*, as-good-as-wrongdoing takes place.
- So morality cannot save us!

Can there be negligible effects cases?

It may seem so. Suppose I have two options.

- If I “focus,” I turn the switch N times on a single victim.
- If I “disperse,” I turn the switch once on each of N+1 different victims.

Suppose that I am the only person facing this choice. It seems plausible that:

1. It would be wrong for me to focus.

Now suppose that N of us face the same choice. It seems plausible that:

2. No matter how many others disperse, it would be wrong for me to focus.
3. If all of us disperse, the outcome is that N+1 victims get the switch turned to N.
4. If none of us disperses, the outcome is that N victims get the switch turned to N.
5. Therefore, if all of us disperse, we have an as-good-as-wrong effect.

For the time being, assume Aggregation. So it is wrong, and as-good-as-wrong, to produce a larger sum of pain than one could have produced.

First case: Additional pain from each turn is constant.

- Then 1 is false. My dispersing produces a larger sum of pain, and so is wrong.
- 1 seems intuitive, because we find it psychologically difficult to aggregate many tiny effects and compare them to a single large effect. But this is just what Parfit calls the “Fourth Mistake.”

Second case: Additional pain from each turn increases with each turn.

- 1 is true, because the first turn causes little pain.
- But 2 is false because making (say) the Nth turn causes great pain.
- However, now we have a threshold effect case.

Third case: Additional pain from each turn is *zero*!

- How can the additional pain from *each* turn be zero, but the additional pain from *N* turns be more than zero?
- Because one cannot perceive any difference between the pain from *X* turns and the pain from *X+1* turns. And one pain cannot be worse than another if one cannot perceive any difference.
- This would be a negligible effects case.
- Worse, *no matter what we together do*, we together could have produced less pain! This means that, *no matter what we together do*, we together have as-good-as-wrong effects! Suppose 0 disperse, *N* focus. We would produce less pain if 1 dispersed, *N-1* focused. Suppose 1 disperses, *N-1* focus. We would produce less pain if 2 dispersed, *N-2* focused.... Suppose *N* disperse, 0 focus. Then we would produce less pain if 0 dispersed, *N* focused....
- However, Parfit claims that pain still gets worse in this case, even if we cannot perceive the difference. Ignoring imperceptible effects is the “Fifth Mistake.”

Fourth case: Reject Aggregation. Suppose we accept Scanlon’s contractualism. The numbers do not count, except to break ties.

- Then 1–5 are true.
- So we have a negligible effects case.
- However, if someone would be badly affected by *N* of us X-ing, then perhaps he has an objection to a principle allowing each of us to X, when *N* of us will X. So perhaps 2 is false.

How do we deal with Threshold Cases?

(1) We share a *collective obligation* to see to it that not more than *N* of us X. So each of us is individually obligated to do at least his fair share to fulfill this collective obligation. This fair share is not to X.

- What if *fewer* or *more* than *N* are X-ing?
- Why should you refrain from X-ing? If you X, you do not *increase* the burdens on those who refrain, and you do not *decreasing* the benefits that their refraining produces.
- But perhaps it is still unfair. You should do your part, even if it makes no difference.

(2) X-ing can be wrong not simply because of *its* effects, but also because it *belongs to a set* of actions that has as-good-as-wrong effects. Ignoring this possibility is what Parfit calls the “Second Mistake.”

- How can it matter whether or not I act with other agents, or with Nature?
- How are individual effects to be weighed against participation? What if I can do good by X-ing?

(3) Often, we may not know how many others will X. There may be some *probability* that exactly *N* others will X, in which case our X-ing would have a very bad effect.

Parfit believes that we should discount this bad effect by the probability of its occurring.

- And the probability may be very small.
- But if the effect is bad enough, it may still be wrong to X.
- Ignoring small chances is what Parfit calls the “Third Mistake.”

According to Scanlon’s contractualism, probabilities do not matter at all.

- It is wrong to X simply if the loss that an individual will suffer if more than *N* people X is greater than the loss that any individual will suffer from refraining from X-ing.