

Aggregation and Equality

Moral aggregation is the combining of claims or the well-being of individual people in order to decide what we morally ought to do. There is an influential strand in contemporary moral philosophy that objects to the aggregative element in Utilitarianism and other theories. This kind of scepticism about interpersonal aggregation is a staple of contemporary non-consequentialist moral thought. Take the following case:

Death vs. Headaches: We can either save Ann from a terminal illness or prevent any number n of different people from suffering a mild headache.

The claim that there is a number n for which we ought to prevent the headaches rather than save Ann is denied by many people. Rather, they take it for granted that no matter how large n is, we ought to save Ann. The contrary, however, is implied by the following principle which, as I show, is very hard to reject.

Full Aggregation. For any harms X and Y , where Y is worse than X , there is some n , such that we ought to save n people from X rather than one different person from Z .

Many sceptics of Full Aggregation are also on record as egalitarians. However, usually issues regarding aggregation are treated separately from equality. I here argue that they should be treated together. Full Aggregation is most plausibly rejected on egalitarian grounds. This is because the most powerful positive arguments for Full Aggregation rely on premises that seem to deny egalitarianism. If one is committed to egalitarianism, one will want to reject these premises. And since, as I will argue, these are the weakest premises of the arguments, Full Aggregation can most plausibly be resisted by taking on egalitarian commitments.

I further argue that the proper way to understand these egalitarian commitments is on deontic rather than axiological grounds. These are commitments rooted in considerations of fairness, with fairness not being an axiological notion. One upshot of this is that egalitarians could reject Full Aggregation on deontic grounds but concede that our axiology could be fully aggregative.

I proceed as follows. I first introduce two arguments, which I take to be the strongest positive arguments for Full Aggregation. The first is

based on Harsanyi's aggregation theorem. This argument relies on the Sure Thing Principle and the Ex Ante Pareto Principle. According to

The Sure Thing Principle. If two prospects P and Q yield the same outcome in some state of nature, then our preference between P and Q depends only on the outcomes in other states of nature.

As has been noted by Peter Diamond and others, the Sure Thing Principle can be questioned on egalitarian grounds. This is the first point then, where we can see that an appeal to equality could serve as a road block on the route to Full Aggregation. Next, according to

Ex Ante Pareto. If prospect P has higher expected value than prospect Q for some i and Q does not have higher expected value than P for any i , then we ought to choose P over Q.

This principle is very plausible, nonetheless, it can also be questioned and has been questioned, on the basis of equality. Here then we have another clash between Harsanyi's theorem and possible egalitarian considerations. These considerations, however, are markedly different from those that led Diamond and others to doubt the Sure-Thing Principle. Those were worries about equality in *expected* utility. Here we are concerned with worries about equality in *final* utility. If we care about this kind of *outcome-* or *ex post* equality, we should reject Ex Ante Pareto. If we care about *ex ante* equality, we should reject the Sure-Thing Principle. Either way of insisting on the importance of equality will likely lead one to reject the argument for Full Aggregation based on Harsanyi's theorem.

I will argue that sceptics of Full Aggregation should reject Ex Ante Pareto rather than the Sure Thing Principle. This is because another strong positive argument for Full Aggregation also relies on Ex Ante Pareto, but not the Sure Thing Principle. This is the deontic variant of an argument from individual risk taking by Alastair Norcross. In addition to Ex Ante Pareto, this argument relies on the following principle.

Many Person Risk. For every harm X and every probability p , there is some n , such that we ought to save n people from suffering X with probability p , rather than one different person from X.

This principle is deeply plausible. It is straightforward and intuitively obvious in cases where we can, for example, either save one person from death or ten different people from a very high chance, say 99.9%, of death. Things are intuitively less clear when the risks are smaller.

Suppose we can either save one from death or ten different people from a 10% risk of death. Here it is no longer clear and a lot of factors, like our attitude to risk, are involved. But it seems clear that as the number of people we can save from the risk grows, at some point we ought to help them and let the one die. Again, sceptics of Full Aggregation face a choice. Either reject this plausible principle or reject Ex Ante Pareto. Given this analysis I will argue they should reject the latter.

One upshot of my analysis is that non-aggregative moral theories that explicitly endorse Ex Ante Pareto, like, for example, Johann Frick's 'Ex Ante Contractualism', are bound to fail. On the other hand, approaches that reject Ex Ante Pareto do show some promise. The key to the success of these accounts is to provide a rationale for the rejection of Ex Ante Pareto that is independent from their rejection of Full Aggregation, but also not ad-hoc. In the rest of the paper I outline one such rationale based on considerations of fairness.