

Talk title: A New Method of Value Aggregation

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Abstract: Many ethical theories say that the rightness or wrongness of options is in some sense grounded in the aggregate of the goodness or the badness of these options for distinct individuals. This is most obvious for utilitarian consequentialism, but other theories have this feature as well. Most commonly, this is done by giving a numerical representation for these goodnesses, summing (or averaging) them over all individuals, and taking the expectation of this result if there is uncertainty about the outcome of an option. Philosophers like Mark Johnston, Nick Bostrom, and Frank Arntzenius say this theory has problems dealing with infinite populations, for which sums or averages are infinite or undefined. It seems to fetishize certain mathematical operations, in a subject that is not inherently mathematical. And perhaps most significantly, the fact that it is the sum or average of the individual goodnesses that is the object of the theory is said to mean that the theory ignores the separateness of persons, and treats the individuals as mere receptacles of value, which matters in an impersonal way.

The method I propose is an extension of work in my 2014 paper, "Decision Theory without Representation Theorems". I start with a partial ordering on options that is grounded only in individual goodnesses, without using any representation of aggregate goodness, and supplement it with various accounts of when one option is equally good as another. I illustrate how the resulting theory can account for a case involving an infinite population, dealing with the objections by Johnston, Bostrom, and Arntzenius (and in a more elegant way than the responses by Bostrom and Arntzenius). I connect this to the theory of measurement, to explain why the mathematical operations of addition and expectation can be coextensive with the results given by this method in cases where they are defined, without grounding it. And because the method works in cases with an infinite population, where various results by economists show that there can be no numerical representation of aggregate value, I address the worry that utilitarianism treats individuals only in the aggregate.