

Thesis abstract

The Relevance View: aggregation and the structure of reasons

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When allocating scarce resources, decision-makers must weigh up the competing claims of the various individuals whose wellbeing is at stake. Many of us accept that there are cases where a number of weaker claims can, in aggregate, outweigh a stronger claim. But we resist the aggregation of weaker claims in other cases. For example, aggregation seems appropriate in a case where one person's claim to the treatment of a broken arm competes with a million people's claims to the treatment of broken fingers. Aggregation seems inappropriate, by contrast, in a case where one person's claim to life-saving medical treatment competes with a million people's claims to the treatment of mild headaches.

The Relevance View is an influential account of our moral duties to assist others in cases like those just described. The view occupies a middle ground between aggregation and non-aggregation, affirming and rendering coherent our intuitions about these cases. It allows weaker claims to aggregate to outweigh a stronger claim just when the claims, compared pairwise, are sufficiently close in strength that the weaker is “relevant” relative to the stronger. No number of claims against mild headaches can outweigh a claim against premature death, for example, because a headache

claim is so much weaker than a life claim as to be irrelevant to it.

This thesis explores and further develops the Relevance View, and defends it against prominent objections. My starting point is Alex Voorhoeve's pathbreaking presentation of a version of the Relevance View that he calls “Aggregate Relevant Claims” (ARC). Over the course of the thesis, I develop new versions of the Relevance View that avoid ARC's shortcomings and that extend the view beyond the class of simple cases to which it has typically been restricted.

In the first two chapters, I defend the Relevance View against criticisms that have been advanced in the literature. Chapter 1 addresses the objection advanced by several critics that the non-aggregative intuitions that motivate and justify the view are unreliable due to the unimaginably vast numbers involved. Chapter 2 addresses Patrick Tomlin's arguments that ARC suffers from serious failures of internal logic and fails to apply to cases resembling real-world health-care allocation problems.

Chapter 3 sets out an objection to ARC that I argue cannot be addressed within the confines of Voorhoeve's approach. If the Relevance View is to offer plausible guidance in non-binary choices, I argue, its proponents must accept a “binary contrastive” account of the moral reasons associ-

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ated with claims for assistance. Chapter 4 explores whether the Relevance View could be applied in population ethics, to choices that affect which future populations come to exist. I develop a choice rule for populations where relevance serves as a limit on the aggregation of possible people's wellbeing.

The Relevance View offers a compelling account of our duties of rescue. The chapters of this thesis together demonstrate the view's robustness to the criticism it has received, and its considerable promise as

an account of our moral obligations beyond the simple binary cases that have figured most prominently in this literature to date.

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