Two “New” Principles of Aggregation

This chapter further explores problems about trade-offs. It does this by examining two “new” principles of aggregation: the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, and the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View. I call these “new” principles of aggregation because they are not typically distinguished, or discussed, as distinct principles in the philosophical literature. Nevertheless, these principles represent familiar modes of reasoning. In fact, I believe these principles can be seen as natural extensions of the Second Standard View discussed in chapter two. I believe both principles are plausible, and that each may play an important role in the assessment of outcomes.

However, worries arise when one considers iterated applications of the principles. This chapter aims to illuminate these principles and the worries they generate. As we will see, we may have to either reject these principles, or refuse to allow ourselves to be repeatedly guided by them.

Some reject the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View. So they needn’t worry if it has implausible implications. But the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View is harder to reject. Hence, its implications must be heeded carefully.

Some principles of aggregation are complete. For any two lives, or outcomes, they generate a comparative ranking of those lives, or outcomes. But a principle of aggregation may also be incomplete. It may rank some, but not all, lives, or outcomes, in comparison with each other. The two principles of aggregation this chapter explores are incomplete. Let me now turn to the first of these.

3.1 The Minimize Great Additional Burdens View
I believe most people accept the following.

*The Minimize Great Additional Burdens View:* in general, if additional burdens are dispersed amongst different people, it is preferable for a given total burden to be dispersed amongst a vastly larger number of people, so that the additional burden any single person has to bear within her life is “relatively small,” than for a smaller total burden to fall on just a few, such that their additional burden is substantial.

The Minimize Great Additional Burdens View reflects the anti-additive aggregationist position of chapter two’s Second Standard View. But it differs from that view by focusing on burdens rather than benefits. In addition, the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View drops the “similarly situated” clause that was included in the Second Standard View. This is significant. The Minimize Great Additional Burdens View doesn’t merely maintain that amongst people equally well off, it is preferable if many people receive minor burdens than if a few people receive great burdens. It holds that it is preferable if many people receive minor burdens than if a few people receive great burdens, even amongst people that aren’t equally well off, and in particular, *even if those who would receive the minor burdens were initially much worse off than those who would receive the great burdens.* This feature of the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View makes it more controversial than chapter two’s Second Standard View and, as we will see, has worrisome implications. Nevertheless, on reflection, I believe many find the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View compelling, at least for those cases where if many people have their burdens increased a “little” this would have relatively little overall impact on their lives, whereas if a few people have their burdens increased “substantially” this would have a substantial impact on their lives. Importantly, the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View is not necessarily plausible as an *all-things-
considered judgment; but I think it represents an important principle that underlies and influences many people’s judgments about the desirability of alternative outcomes.

Let us further explore the nature and appeal of the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View. One question that arises is whether the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View is only plausible when one assumes the additional burdens shared by the many are “trivial.” For example, one might readily admit that no number of pin pricks spread out amongst innumerable masses would outweigh a substantial burden felt by a few, but wonder if a similar judgment ever holds when the many’s burdens are non-trivial. So consider the following case. Suppose we have to choose between 100,000 people each suffering great pain for a week, or ten people suffering great pain for 50 years. Surely, suffering great pain for a week is not a trivial matter. Still, I think many would judge that, ceteris paribus, the former situation would be preferable to the latter, and this is so even though in the former case there would a greater total amount of great pain—100,000 weeks, rather than 26,000 weeks. This judgment accords with the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, if we assume that as bad as a week of great pain is, it would only increase the burden in a person’s life a “little,” in the sense that it would have relatively little overall impact on a person’s life, whereas 50 years of pain would have a substantial impact on a person’s life. Of course, if we imagined that the week of pain had a substantial and lasting impact on each person’s life, the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View would no longer apply, and we might well make a different judgment about the preferability of the two outcomes. Still, it seems that the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View can be plausibly applied in at least some cases
where the many’s additional burdens would be non-trivial, yet still have relatively little overall impact on their lives.

Since the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View opposes the simple additive aggregationist model of total utilitarianism, some might wonder whether it is really deriving its force from other well-known anti-additive aggregationist principles like equality or maximin. I think not. The Minimize Great Additional Burdens View is a plausible principle in its own right, and is distinct from both equality and maximin. To see this, let us consider a variation of Tim Scanlon's example against additive aggregation, presented in chapter two.

Recall that in Scanlon's imagined case Jones is experiencing extremely painful electrical shocks, and that we cannot rescue him for an hour unless we interrupt television transmission of a World Cup match. Scanlon claims that we should rescue Jones immediately, no matter how many viewers there are. Now suppose we add some details to Scanlon's example. Suppose that Jones has led a remarkably pain-free life, and in fact would still be amongst society's best-off members even if he were to suffer an hour of extremely painful shocks. Suppose further that among those who are enjoying watching the match are some of society's worst-off members.

In such a case, both equality and maximin would line up with utility to oppose helping Jones immediately. And certainly the reasons for helping Jones are less strong than they would be if Jones were amongst the worst-off and the viewers amongst the best-off. Nevertheless, I think Scanlon would contend we should still help Jones immediately, and powerful elements of our thinking support such a view. One such element, I believe, is the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View.
Unfortunately, the above example is not pure. Partly, our judgment may turn on powerful intuitions about the urgency or primacy of relieving extreme pain, which we may think always trumps the "trivial" pleasure of watching a sporting event. So let us alter Scanlon's example. First, imagine that the match will continue for three hours, so that Jones will suffer from three hours of extremely painful shocks unless we turn off the transmitter. Next, imagine that amongst the worst-off people watching the game are 200 who suffer from chronic pain of the same intensity as Jones is suffering while being shocked. Imagine further that those 100 are such rabid fans that watching the game distracts them from their pain, effectively serving as a psychological anesthetic. Finally, imagine that one only needs to turn the transmitter off for two minutes to rescue Jones.

If one rescues Jones, 100 people who are amongst the worst off will each suffer two additional minutes of intense pain, for a total of 200 (extra) minutes of intense pain. In addition, many millions of others will suffer aggravation from having the match interrupted. On the other hand, if one waits till the match is over, one "merely" allows one of society's best off members—Jones—to suffer excruciating shocks for three hours.

Here, considerations of the urgency and primacy of intense pain apply to both choices, with the total amount of intense pain being greater if one rescues Jones, 200 minutes versus 180 minutes. As above, considerations of equality, maximin, and total utility all support waiting till the match concludes before helping Jones. Moreover, we may assume that perfectionist ideals are neutral between these alternatives, as neither alternative better affects beauty, truth, the advancement of society, and so on. Even so, it seems there is powerful reason to help Jones immediately, at least some of which is provided by the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View. In one respect, at least, it
seems preferable for millions to suffer aggravation from having a match interrupted and 100 people to suffer intensely for two extra minutes, than for one person to have to suffer intensely for three hours.

Let me be clear. There are many factors that might support the intuition that we ought to help Jones that do not appeal to the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, and have nothing to do with the relative desirability of the different outcomes. For example, assuming that Jones is “right there, in front of us” with a pressing need, many may feel that there are special deontological, agent-relative, or contractualist reasons why what we ought to do is help Jones. And, indeed, Scanlon’s discussion of his example focuses on his understanding of “what we owe to each other,” and doesn’t appeal to the relative desirability of the different outcomes. Even so, I believe that in an important respect the outcome in which Jones is spared the burden of great pain for three hours is preferable to the outcome in which 100 worse-off people are spared (an additional) two minutes of comparable pain, and millions of others are spared the aggravation of having a World Cup broadcast interrupted. Specifically, I believe that the shorter instances of pain and frustration spread out over many people don’t “add up” in the way they would need to in order to outweigh the significance of the pain Jones would suffer if we don’t help him. Underlying this view, I suggest, is the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View.

Note, the claim that in an important respect the outcome where Jones doesn’t suffer will be preferable to the one where he does is ambiguous. On one reading it is trivially true. On the other it is significant. I intend the significant reading. Let me explain. It is trivially true that the outcome where Jones doesn’t suffer is better in one respect than the outcome in which he does, insofar at it is better for Jones. The
significant claim is that in one respect the overall total and distribution of pain is better in the outcome where Jones doesn’t suffer. This is the claim I am making above, and it relies on a principle of aggregation like the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View. This substantive principle tells us that burdens do not aggregate in a certain way, so that lots of “minor” burdens spread across many would not outweigh “major” burdens shouldered by a few. The difference between the trivial and the significant reading is easily illustrated, by considering a different case. Suppose that in one outcome Jones would suffer mild pain for one minute, but nobody else would suffer at all; while in a second outcome Jones wouldn’t suffer at all, but hundreds of others would suffer greatly. On the trivial reading, there would still be one respect in which the second outcome was preferable to the first. After all, the second outcome would be better for Jones, and this would give us some reason, though not much, to prefer the second outcome to the first. Still, in this case the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View does not apply, and it is clear that overall the amount and distribution of burdens in the second outcome is much worse than that in the first. This doesn’t yet mean that the first outcome is preferable to the second all things considered, since we don’t know how the two outcomes compare with respect to other ideals, like justice, freedom, equality, or perfection. Still, it seems clear that the burdens of the many aggregate in such a way that, overall, the first outcome is preferable to the second in an important respect. Thus, throughout this work, when I claim that there is an important respect in which one outcome is preferable to another, I am making the substantive, overall, claim, not the trivial one that focuses on the plight of a particular individual.
Though suggestive, the preceding example is open to two criticisms. First, since even extreme pain may not seem “substantial” if it lasts “only” three hours (At least if it belongs to someone else! Think back to the last time you were in genuinely extreme pain for even five minutes, say from a bee sting, or an exposed nerve in your tooth, or a virulent bout of food poisoning.) it may be doubted whether the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View really applies to my version of Scanlon’s example. Second, as implied above, it may be doubted whether one can safely generalize from examples involving “trivial” costs, like two minutes of pain or aggravation. Correspondingly, it will be helpful to consider another example. Earlier, I claimed that 100,000 people each suffering great pain for a week would be, in at least one important respect, preferable to 10 people suffering great pain for 50 years, and that this is so even though suffering great pain for a week is clearly non-trivial. Let me next urge that this is an extremely robust intuition, that survives in the face of conflicting intuitions generated by equality, maximin, and utility.

Suppose that each of 100,000 people currently faces the prospect of suffering great pain for 50 years, while ten people currently have pain-free prospects. In outcome A, the ten people will also face the prospect of 50 years of great pain. In outcome B, the ten people continue to have pain-free prospects, but each of the 100,000 will face the prospect of an additional week of pain. A would be better than B regarding equality, maximin, and utility. But I think many would agree that B seems better in an important respect, and perhaps even all things considered. This judgment is supported by the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, at least on the assumption that to those already facing the prospect of suffering for 50 years, one additional week will have
relatively little impact on the overall quality of their lives, while to those originally facing pain-free prospects, suffering for 50 years will have a substantial impact on the overall quality of their lives.

I conclude, then, that the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View is plausible even in cases where the many’s burdens are clearly non-trivial, and that its force is distinct from that of other anti-additive aggregationist principles like equality and maximin.

3.2 The Minimize Great Additional Burdens View and the Levelling Down Objection

One of the most prevalent, and powerful, objections to egalitarianism is the Levelling Down Objection. An example of the Levelling Down Objection may be made with the aid of diagram 3.1, where the column heights represent how well off people are, and the widths represent the number of people in each group.

![Diagram 3.1](image)

Imagine that B is a world where half are blind, and A is a world where all are. One could always transform B into A by putting out the eyes of the sighted. But surely it would be abominable to do this. Hence, many have thought, inequality doesn’t matter, or at least it doesn’t matter very much.
I have argued that the Levelling Down Objection does not succeed in establishing that inequality doesn’t matter, or even that it doesn’t matter very much. All it establishes is that inequality is not all that matters, and that in certain cases, at least, inequality doesn’t matter more than every other ideal combined. These, of course, are points that egalitarians have long recognized and accepted. I shall return to the Levelling Down Objection and its lessons in chapter n, but for now I’d like to suggest that the spirit of the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View may partly underlie our firm conviction that A is much worse than B, in diagram 3.1.

Strictly speaking, the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View doesn’t apply to the comparison between A and B. But, as I say, I think its spirit does. After all, if one believes, in accordance with the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, that it is preferable if a small additional burden is added to the lives of many, than if a great additional burden is added to the lives of a few, then surely one will also believe that it is better if no additional burden is borne by many, than if some people’s burdens are increased substantially. We might call this a limiting case of the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View. Applied to A and B, this view regards B as clearly better than A, since it spares half the population the substantial burden of being blind, with no additional burden to the many who would be blind in either outcome.

Because B is so much better than A in other respects, it is easy to overlook the extent to which our judgment about A and B might derive force from the spirit of the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View. After all, B is better than A regarding utility, perfectionism (we may presume), and maximin (at least if we accept a lexical version of the maximin principle, that would have us first maximize the expectations of the worst-
off group, and then minimize the size of that group). Indeed, I, myself, discussed the Levelling Down Objection for many years, without noting any connection with the spirit of the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View. Still, I now believe that most people who would oppose levelling down the sighted to the level of the blind, would also oppose levelling down some of the sighted to the level of the nearly blind, even if this slightly improved the situation of countless people who were blind. Moreover, I don’t think this is merely a judgment about what we ought or ought not to do. Rather, I think many believe that a situation in which some people have normal eyesight would be preferable to one in which they suffer near blindness, even if in the latter situation the lives of many blind people were non-trivially, but still only slightly, improved. More generally, in accordance with the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, I think many believe that an outcome where some are spared a significant burden would be preferable to one where they must bear such a burden, but many others would be spared a minor burden.

Consider diagram 3.2.
Diagram 3.2

In Case I, let A represent a group who are not well off, B a much smaller group who are very well off, and C the people who are best off, and whose lives determine the extent to which Case I achieves the goals of perfectionism. Most agree that it would be *clearly* undesirable if Case I’s B group was levelled down to the level of the A group.

Would the many who are *so* confident about this judgment completely change their minds if they were told that in fact the situation would be like that depicted in Case II of diagram 3.2? In Case II, let us suppose, the C group is unaffected, so the level of perfection is unchanged, the B group is lowered almost to the level of the Case I’s A group, and this has a substantial negative impact on their lives, and the A group benefits slightly, and non-trivially, though not enough to have a significant impact on the overall quality of their lives. I suspect most staunch opponents of “mere” levelling down in cases like diagram 3.1, would not suddenly become strong proponents of “redistributive” levelling down in cases like diagram 3.2. But in diagram 3.2, not only is the “levelled down” situation better regarding equality, which was also the case in diagram 3.1, but, we may suppose, unlike in diagram 3.1, the “levelled down” situation is better regarding utility and maximin, and no worse regarding perfection. Here, it seems, any temptation to hang on to the view that “redistributive” levelling down should still be opposed, is best attributed to a position like the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View.

Considering diagram 3.2, I suspect that many will believe that the increases in utility, maximin, and equality accompanying the levelling down of the B group in Case
II, will be outweighed by the substantial extra burden placed on the B group in order to achieve those increases. However, my aim here is not to insist that Case I is better than Case II all things considered. Perhaps it isn’t. Still, I believe that most will agree that there is one important respect in which the overall distribution in Case I is preferable to that in Case II. This is, I think, attributable to the power and influence of a position like the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View. And, of course, if I am right that such a view provides strong intuitive support for opposing levelling down in diagram 3.2, there is good reason to suppose that the spirit of that view also provides strong intuitive support for opposing levelling down in cases like diagram 3.1. Unfortunately, however, as implied above, it was easy to overlook the role that the spirit of the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View might have been playing in our judgments about such cases, since in those cases other more familiar ideals, like utility, perfectionism, and maximin, as well as welfarist and person-affecting intuitions, also oppose levelling down.

The Minimize Great Additional Burdens View partly underlies and supports some common attitudes about charitable contributions. Most people deny that they have a moral obligation to do everything they possibly can to help the world’s needy. Typically, they believe in deontological, or agent-relative, duties or permissions, that license them to devote most of their time, effort, and resources to their own projects and commitments, or to providing for their loved ones. Still, many would admit that from a certain impartial perspective, aiding the needy would improve the situation, even if it involved substantial additional burden in their lives, as long as it significantly enhanced the life prospects of enough of the needy to outweigh the attendant losses to themselves and their loved ones. On the other hand, many find it hard to believe that heavily burdening themselves to aid
the needy would improve the situation, if doing so would merely improve the lives of *lots* of needy by just a little. They see the point, from an impartial perspective, of making substantial sacrifices for the sake of substantial gains to others, but they don’t see the point of making substantial sacrifices if such sacrifices fail to have a significant impact on the lives of others. This view is supported by the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, and together with the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View, discussed next, it helps explain the well-known phenomenon of certain charities identifying particular individuals who will be the recipient of one’s contributions, and who will be significantly benefited by one’s donation.

3.3 The Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View

Let us next consider

*The Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View:* in general, if additional benefits are dispersed amongst different people, it is preferable for a given total benefit to be consolidated among a few people, such that each person’s additional benefit is substantial, than for a larger total benefit to be dispersed amongst a vastly larger number of people, so that the additional benefit any single person receives within her life is “relatively small.”

Like the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View reflects the anti-additive aggregationist position shared by chapter two’s Second Standard View, and drops the “similarly situated” clause of the Second Standard View. However, like the Second Standard View, the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View differs from the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View by focusing on benefits rather than burdens.

Some people accept the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, but have doubts about the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View. In recognition of this, I have presented the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View and the Consolidate
Substantial Additional Benefits View as distinct views. Still, I’m inclined to think that they express the same fundamental position, so that if one accepts the former, one should also accept the latter. After all, in one sense one can always regard questions about the distribution of burdens as questions about the distribution of benefits (the benefits of not bearing burdens!) and vice versa.

Consider diagram 3.3.

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
& A & \\
B & & C \\
III & & \\
\end{array}
\]

Diagram 3.3

Suppose additional benefits were to be distributed to the people in Case III. On one scenario, the additional benefits would be consolidated, and they would all go to the few members of group B. On this scenario, each person who receives additional benefits would be benefited substantially, and the resulting situation would look like Case I of diagram 3.2. On a second scenario, a larger total benefit would be dispersed amongst the members of group A. On this scenario, the additional benefit any single person receives is small, and the resulting situation would look like Case II of diagram 3.2. Now I previously claimed that there is one important respect in which Case II would be preferable to Case I, and suggested that this would be supported by the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View. But if there is an important respect in which Case II is
preferable to Case I, then it appears this should also be supported by the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View, as this view would support a distribution of benefits that would transform Case III into Case II rather than Case I.

The preceding argument is suggestive but not conclusive. As we will see later in this book, one might argue that the relative desirability of Cases I and II depend not merely on how the different members of those outcomes fare, but on how those outcomes were produced. On such a view, it can make a difference to the desirability of Cases like I and II whether they were produced by imposing burdens on some rather than others, or by providing benefits to some rather than others. Now as we will see in chapter n, such a view has important and controversial implications. However, even if we ultimately recognize the possibility of making such a move, the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View remains appealing. If, for example, in one outcome a few people would benefit substantially by many additional years of food, medicine or shelter, while in another outcome many people would benefit a small amount by just a few additional hours, or days, of food, medicine, or shelter, in an important respect the first outcome would be preferable to the second even if it wouldn’t be better in terms of other familiar ideals such as maximin, equality, utility, or perfection. I suggest, then, that like the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View is a plausible principle of aggregation even if its dictates are not necessarily plausible as all things considered judgments.

3.4 Worries about Iteration.

Let me next turn to a worry concerning the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, and the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View.
Suppose, in accordance with the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, one agrees that it would be better to spare one person from suffering 50 years than each of 10,000 people from suffering one week, and that this is true in most cases independently of how well off the 10,000 people are both in absolute terms and relative to the one person. This immediately raises a problem of iteration.

Imagine facing a similar choice many times. Specifically, imagine that in each of many cases one can prevent a different person from suffering 50 years alone, or the same 10,000 people from suffering for one (extra) week. The first time we face such a choice we think it better to spare the single person, leaving each of the 10,000 to suffer a week. The second time, we again think it better to spare the different single person, leaving each of the 10,000 to suffer but one additional week. And so on. Given what we said above, we might make the same decision each time. Thus, even when the 10,000 people will already have suffered for 100, 1000, or even 2000 weeks, we might think it better for each to suffer just one more week, than for some other person to have to suffer fifty years. But the result of making such decisions, one at a time, is that after making 2600 decisions 10,000 people will each suffer for fifty years, rather than 2600! And if anything is clear, in this murky and treacherous area, it is that it is better for 2600 people to suffer fifty years each, than for 10,000 people to do so. Thus, a sequence of choices, each of which apparently produces the best outcome given the alternatives, produces a final outcome that is clearly worse than the one that would have been produced had different—seemingly inferior—choices been made.

Here is a variation. Suppose that if an international agency like the World Health Organization (WHO) invests its resources in curing one illness, it will effectively prolong
1000 people's lives by *fifty years*. Alternatively, if WHO invests its resources in attacking another illness that affects 2,000,000 people, it will prolong their lives by *one month*. Although in the first case, WHO would be keeping people alive a total of 600,000 extra months, and in the second case it would be keeping people alive a total of 2,000,000 extra months, in accordance with the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View or the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View, I think many would agree that the first outcome would be preferable to the second. Yet, were WHO to face and make the same choice with a different group of 1000, but the same group of 2,000,000 involved each time, after 600 such choices WHO would have prolonged the lives of 600,000 people for fifty years rather than 2,000,000 people for fifty years!

Finally, similar considerations apply to hunger relief. Given the choice between relieving hunger for 1000 people for 50 years, or 4,000,000 people for a week, many would agree that the former would be preferable. And this is so, even though the former "only" eliminates 2.6 million weeks of hunger rather than 4 million weeks of hunger. In accordance with the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View or the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View, many believe it is preferable to consolidate the benefits of one's resources so as to make a significant impact for some, rather than disperse them so as to make a relatively small difference for many. Yet here, as before, iterations of this policy could lead to terrible results. As a result of a sequence of 2600 choices one might make—each of which seemingly brought about the preferable result among the available alternatives—one would only have fed 2.6 million people for fifty years, rather than 4 million.
The preceding suggests the following practical result. National and international organizations are often in a position to trade off between helping or burdening a few people a lot, or many people a little. When this occurs, such organizations must pay close attention to the nature and possibility of iterations. If an organization can help a few people a lot, or many people a little, it makes a great difference whether they will face similar choices many times, and also whether it will be the same or different people who are affected each time. If the choice-situation is rare, it may be morally imperative to help the few a lot. Similarly, if the choice-situation is frequent, but different people will be involved each time, it may again be morally imperative to choose on each occasion, so as to help the few a lot, rather than the many a little. But if the choice-situation is frequent enough, and the opportunity obtains to help the same large group on each occasion, then it may be imperative to help the large group repeatedly, even if one is only helping the members of that group a little each time. In such a case one must look at the combined effects of one's actions taken as a complete set, as in fact, one would then be helping a large group of people a lot, over time. Here, as elsewhere in practical reasoning, it would be disastrous to consider each action separately from the larger context of which it is a part.

3.5 The Bad Old Days and Harmless Torturers

My discussion, both in this chapter and chapter two, was sparked by two examples of Derek Parfit’s. Let me next present his two examples, and then sketch how they influenced my thinking.

*The Bad Old Days.* A thousand torturers have a thousand victims. At the start of each day, each of the victims is already feeling mild pain. Each of the torturers turns a switch a thousand times on some instrument. Each turning of a switch affects some victim’s pain in a way that is imperceptible.
But, after each torturer has turned his switch a thousand times, he has inflicted severe pain on his victim.

*The Harmless Torturers.* In the Bad Old Days, each torturer inflicted severe pain on one victim. Things have now changed. Each of the thousand torturers presses a button, thereby turning the switch once on each of the thousand instruments. The victims suffer the same severe pain. But none of the torturers makes any victim’s pain perceptibly worse.

Parfit used these examples to illuminate a host of intriguing topics, including whether there can there be imperceptible harms and benefits, whether someone’s pain can become less painful, or less bad, by an amount too small to be noticed, and whether an act can be wrong, because of its effects on other people, even if none of the people could ever notice any difference? Among his conclusions, Parfit showed that it can be a great mistake to overlook, or ignore, imperceptible or trivial harms or benefits. Parfit is surely right about this, but as I thought about his examples, and numerous variations of them, I came to the view that such examples had fascinating implications regarding aggregation, and that these implications extended beyond cases involving imperceptible or trivial harms or benefits.

I began by simplifying Parfit’s alternatives. Suppose that I faced a single choice. I could push a red button, or a blue button. If I pushed the red button, a single individual would receive 1000 jolts of electricity, such that each individual jolt, by itself, would be imperceptible or trivial, but together they would cause the individual to suffer excruciating pain. If I pushed the blue button, each of 1000 individuals would receive a single jolt of electricity, whose effect on them would be imperceptible or trivial. Faced with such a choice it seemed clear that I should push the blue button, and that this wasn’t merely for deontological or agent-relative reasons. Rather, it seemed clear that the outcome in which one person suffered excruciating pain would be less preferable than the
outcome in which 1000 people were made imperceptibly or trivially worse off. Next, I noticed that this intuition was both powerful and robust. For many cases, at least, I felt the same way whether the one individual was initially well off or poorly off, and whether the 1000 individuals were initially well off or poorly off. The clearest case, of course, was where I imagined the one person was initially poorly off and the 1000 people were initially well off, but even when I assumed the one person was initially much better off than the 1000, it seemed clear that there was an important respect in which it would be preferable to make the 1000 imperceptibly or trivially even worse off, than to make the one person suffer excruciating pain he would otherwise avoid.

I next considered cases where there were more than 1000 people connected to the blue button, each of whom would receive a single jolt of electricity. My firm conviction that the outcome would be preferable if I pushed the blue button than if I pushed the red button didn’t waver if I imagined 1010 people would be connected to the blue button, each of whom would receive one jolt of electricity. Was my conviction about such cases just a “mistake of moral mathematics?”6 On reflection, I thought not. This wasn’t an instance of the common tendency to overlook or ignore imperceptible or trivial harms or benefits; rather I fully attended to the affects on the many, but came to the considered judgment that the trivial or imperceptible pains of the many just didn’t add up in the way they would need to, to outweigh the significant pain of the one.

Yet another variation of the example confirmed my thinking about such cases. In this variation, if I pushed the red button, one person would suffer intense pain for 1000 straight days. If I pushed the blue button, 1010 people would suffer intense pain for one day each. Here there is no illusion that suffering intense pain for a day would be
“imperceptible” or “trivial.” No tendency to mistakenly overlook or ignore the effects on the many that pushing the blue button would have. I am acutely aware that the effects of my pushing the blue button would be bad for each of the 1010 people who experienced them, and I would think it quite bad for so many people to have to suffer as a result of my choice. Indeed, in this case, unlike those involving imperceptible or trivial burdens, it is clear that there are morally compelling reasons to go to great lengths, if necessary, to avoid pushing the blue button. Still, faced with such a choice, in most cases I think I should push the blue button rather than the red button, and as above, I think this not merely for deontological or agent-relative reasons. Though neither imperceptible nor trivial, typically, one day of intense pain will have a relatively small impact on someone’s life, while 1000 straight days of intense pain will have a significant impact on someone’s life. In such cases, at least, it seems that many instances of the former spread across different lives, would be preferable to one instance of the latter.

Consideration of such examples led me to distinguish, and recognize the force, of chapter two’s First and Second Standard Views, as well as this chapter’s Minimize Great Additional Burdens and Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits Views. But, of course, just as Parfit pointed out that from the standpoint of the victims the outcome produced by The Harmless Torturers was just as bad as that produced by The Bad Old Days, it was apparent that the non-additive aggregationist views I favored faced the problems of iteration noted in section 3.4. Thus, faced with the choice of pushing the red button once or the blue button once, I would think it preferable to push the blue button. Faced with the choice of pushing the red button a second time, this time connected to a new individual, or the blue button a second time, connected to the same 1010 individuals,
I would again think it preferable to push the blue button. And so on. Even if I’d already pushed the blue button 999 times, I think it might be preferable for each of the 1010 people to suffer one additional day of intense pain, than for a new individual to have to suffer 1000 straight days of intense pain. At least, there is an important respect in which an outcome where 1010 people suffer 1000 straight days of intense pain and a separate individual is spared 1000 straight days of intense pain, seems preferable to one where the 1010 people will suffer 999 straight days of intense pain (anyway!) and in addition a separate individual will suffer 1000 straight days of intense pain. But, of course, if I face such choices repeatedly, and push the blue button each time in accordance with my anti-additive aggregative reasoning, after 1000 such choices I will have produced an outcome that is clearly inferior to the one I would have produced had I pushed the red button each time. In the former case, 1010 people suffer intensely for 1000 straight days, in the latter “only” 1000 do so.

Let us explore this issue further. When I consider each red or blue button choice separately, it seems there is powerful reason to push the blue button, in accordance with the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View. However, when I consider 1000 such decisions collectively, it is clear that I would produce a preferable outcome if I pushed the red rather than the blue button on each occasion. Why? The reason is simple. The collective result of 1000 red-button pushes is that 1000 people suffer greatly for 1000 days. The collective result of 1000 blue-button pushes is that 1010 people suffer greatly for 1000 days. Between these alternatives there is no issue of trading off between small additional burdens for many, and large additional burdens for a few. There are just large burdens for many, or the same large burdens for more. Hence, for these alternatives the
Minimize Great Additional Burdens View—which licenses my pushing of the blue button when each choice is considered separately—is silent. It simply doesn’t apply to the alternatives that consist in the collective consequences of my actions. Thus, the collective result of pushing the red button each time is clearly preferable to the collective result of pushing the blue button each time, in accordance with chapter 2’s principle N, that other things equal, numbers matter.

Given the foregoing, it may seem that for any fixed set of alternatives, it will be a simple matter to determine whether we should adopt a red-button or blue-button strategy. If we will face the choice once, or but a few times, we should be blue-button pushers. If we face such a choice a “many” times—such that the outcomes produced by our actions considered collectively are such that the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View no longer applies to them—we should be red-button pushers. Unfortunately, however, this simple approach for cases where we face such a choice many times is theoretically unstable for familiar reasons. After all, as rational agents, we needn’t restrict ourselves to a simple all-red or all-blue strategy. Rather, we can adopt mixed strategies so as to produce the most preferable outcome. That is, we can “defect” from the all-red choice just once, or twice, or a “small” number of times. But once one considers such mixed strategies, and allows any “defections,” it is difficult to justify any particular “stopping point” between the all-red strategy, and the clearly inferior all-blue strategy.

Let me spell out the difficulty here. Suppose I know, in advance, that I shall face the red-button or blue-button choice 1000 times. This can be seen as involving 1001 distinct alternatives. On the first alternative, I push the red-button each time, and the blue button not at all. On the second alternative, I push the red button 999 times, and the blue
button once. On the third alternative, I push the red button 998 times, and the blue button twice. And so on. On the 1001st alternative, I push the red button zero times, and the blue button 1000 times. I start with the clear conviction that the first alternative is preferable to the last: preferable that 1000 people suffer intensely for 1000 days, while 1010 other people don’t, than that 1010 people suffer intensely for 1000 days, while 1000 other people don’t. But I then think that the second alternative may be preferable to the first: preferable that 999 people suffer intensely for 1000 days, one person doesn’t suffer, and 1010 others each suffer for one day, than that 1000 people suffer intensely for 1000 day while 1010 others don’t suffer. I may think this in accordance with the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, which applies to these alternatives and licenses the trade-off between the substantial burden for one person and the relatively small burden for many others. Next, I consider the second and third alternatives. Again, I may think the third alternative is preferable to the second: preferable that 998 people suffer intensely for 1000 days, two people don’t suffer, and 1010 others each suffer for two days, than that 999 people suffer intensely for 1000 days, one person doesn’t suffer, and 1010 others each suffer for one day. Again, my judgment might be guided by the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, which applies to these alternatives. Likewise, I might think that the fourth alternative is preferable to the third, the fifth to the fourth, and so on. For each pair of “adjacent” alternatives from the first through the 1001st, I might think that the “later” alternative is preferable to the earlier one in accordance with the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View. But then this might lead me to think it would be preferable to “defect” from the all red strategy once rather than not at all, twice rather than once, three times rather than twice, and so on. Here, the problem of iteration
combines with the issue of transitivity discussed in chapter two to generate a theoretical
dilemma. For any alternative short of the all-blue strategy, there is another available
alternative that seems preferable. But, of course, reasoning in such a manner would
seemingly lead one, via iteration and transitivity, to adopt the all-blue alternative, which
we know is inferior to the all-red one.

One can see, then, how reflection on variations of Parfit’s examples might lead
one to recognize both the power of non-additive aggregationist principles, and the
problems of iteration and the intransitivity of preferability to which they lead. They also
give rise to insights about Prisoner’s Dilemmas, and Each-We Dilemmas, to which I turn
next.

3.6 Anti-additive Aggregationist Principles, Prisoner’s Dilemmas, and Each-We
Dilemmas

Prisoner’s Dilemmas have been widely discussed. Classic Prisoner’s Dilemmas
involved conflicts between two self-interested individuals. But I shall use the term
Prisoner’s Dilemmas to include the cases involving more than two people that raise
similar problems. Parfit calls such cases Many Person Prisoner’s Dilemmas, but for our
purposes it is unnecessarily cumbersome to distinguish between two-person and many-
person cases.

In a Prisoner’s Dilemma, each of a group of individuals could benefit herself to a
certain extent, or other group members, collectively, even more. If each person had to act
separately, there was no way to “bind” the acts together such that whatever one person
chose the others would also have to choose, there wasn’t a possibility of “retaliation” by
the other group members, and one wouldn’t be facing similar choices in the future, then
each person would be best off, in self-interested terms, if she chose to benefit herself. After all, if I am facing a genuine Prisoner’s Dilemma, then I know the following will be true. If others benefit me, and I benefit myself, I’m better off in purely self-interested terms than if they benefit me and I benefit them; and likewise, if they benefit themselves, and I benefit me, I’m better off in self-interested terms than if they benefit themselves and I benefit them. Hence, in such situations, whatever anyone else chooses, I’m best off in self-interested terms if I act so as to benefit myself. But, that is true of each person facing a Prisoner’s Dilemma. Hence, each member of the group has self-interested reasons to benefit herself. But, in a Prisoner’s Dilemma, if each person acts in her own best interest, they, together, are worse off. Indeed, together, they may be much worse off than they would have been, if each had acted on behalf of the others, rather than on behalf of herself.

Here is an exaggerated example. Eleven people face a one-time only choice of giving themselves 10 units of happiness, or each of the other ten people 100 units of happiness. There is no possibility of communication, binding the choices together, retaliation, or redistribution after the fact. In such a case, each person is better off in purely self-interested terms if she gives herself the 10 units of happiness. This insures that she will end up with ten more units of happiness than she would otherwise have, whatever everyone else decides. But, of course, if each person acts in this way, each person will only end up with 10 units of happiness—the ten she gives herself; while if each person acted on behalf of others, together they would produce 1000 units of happiness for each group member. That is, each person would benefit 100 units from the
choices of each of the other ten people, and clearly they would all be *much* better off than
they would be if each person acted self-interestedly.

In Prisoner’s Dilemmas, together people would fare better if they were motivated
to act on behalf of others, or guided by the Kantian question “what if everybody did what
I will choose to do?” rather than if they were motivated to act self-interestedly.
Correspondingly, some have seen Prisoner’s Dilemmas as vindicating, at least for a
certain class of cases, the importance of being moral rather than merely self-interested.
Interestingly, however, Derek Parfit has suggested that not all moral theories avoid
Prisoner’s Dilemmas, and that in fact Common-Sense Morality faces moral analogues of
the standard Prisoner’s Dilemmas.

Parfit reasons as follows. On Common-Sense Morality, people have special
duties or obligations towards those with whom they have special relationships. For
instance, doctors, lawyers, priests, and teachers, have, respectively, *special* obligations to
their *own* patients, clients, parishioners, and students. Likewise, each of us has special
obligations to our family and friends. So, for example, Parfit suggests that given the
choice between saving her *own* child, or saving two children who are strangers,
Common-Sense Morality requires that a parent save her own child. But, then, suppose
that two parents face the following situation. Each parent has three children facing death.
Each can save one of her own children, or two children of the other parent. Moreover,
suppose that each parent knows that unless she saves her own child, that child will die for
sure, as the other parent will only be in a position to save her other two children. If we
assume that the case involves the standard features of the classic Prisoner’s Dilemma—
namely, that each parent has to act separately, that there is no way for the parents to
“bind” their acts together such that whatever one parent chooses the other would also have to choose, that there isn’t a possibility of “retaliation” by the other parent after the fact, and that the parents wouldn’t face similar choices in the future—then it appears that according to Common-Sense Morality each parent ought to save her own child. After all, each parent knows for sure that the fate of one of her children lies wholly in her hands, and that she can insure that child’s survival simply by giving it the priority over two strangers that Common-Sense Morality dictates she should. Moreover, each parent knows that whatever decision the other parent makes, she will inevitably do what is best for her children by saving her own child, as doing this will save one more of her children than would otherwise be saved. Specifically, by saving her own child, each parent insures that either one of her children is saved, rather than none, or that all three of her children are saved rather than two, depending on what the other parent chooses. In such a case, then, it seems that Common-Sense Morality will say that each parent ought to save her own child. But, of course, if each does this, together they will only save two of their children—one apiece—rather than the four they would have saved if each had saved two of the other person’s children.

In cases like the foregoing, Common-Sense Morality seemingly directs us to do what is best for our children; but if each of us does what is best for our children, then we, together, produce an outcome that is worse for our children. Reflecting on such cases, Parfit suggests that for each classic Prisoner’s Dilemma involving self-interest, there may be an analogous Prisoner’s Dilemma involving Common-Sense Morality, that rides “piggyback,” as it were, on the original dilemma. Thus, just as it may be in my interest to pollute, have more children, grow more crops, overfish the seas, or drive my car rather
than take public transportation—even if this imposes a greater total burden on others than the burden I would bear if I refrained from such activities—so it may be in the interests of my children, or family, for me to pollute, have more children, grow more crops, overfish the seas, or drive my car rather than take public transportation—even if this imposes a greater total burden on the children or families of others than the burden that my children or families would have to bear if I refrained from such activities. Assuming that the actions in question are not violating anyone else’s rights, Common-Sense Morality may direct me, and others, to do the actions in question for the sake of those to whom we have the special obligation of providing for their welfare. But, of course, if each of many people acts in such a way, they, together, will be much worse off, as the collective burden imposed on the community will exceed the individual benefits derived from such choices.

Parfit analyzes Prisoner’s Dilemmas as examples of what he calls Each-We Dilemmas. He suggests that Each-We Dilemmas only arise for so-called agent-relative theories, theories that prescribe distinct aims (or reasons for acting) to different agents. Thus, the self-interest theory of rationality gives to each agent the distinct aim of providing for his own welfare, and these aims conflict in the standard Prisoner’s Dilemmas. Likewise, Common Sense Morality gives to each agent the distinct aim of providing for the welfare of her own family, and these aims conflict in the analogues of the Prisoner’s Dilemmas Parfit discusses. By contrast, Parfit contends that “Consequentialist theories cannot produce such [Each-We] Dilemmas…. this is because these theories are agent-neutral, giving to all agents common aims.” It is, Parfit thinks, a significant advantage of agent-neutral over agent-relative moral theories that, because
they give to all agents common aims, they are able to avoid moral analogues of the standard Prisoner’s Dilemmas.

Consider a consequentialist theory that gives to each agent the common aim of promoting the best outcome, and which treats each agent’s interests equally for the purposes of evaluating outcomes. Such a theory would tell each agent to give 100 units of happiness to each of 10 others, rather than 10 units of happiness to himself, and hence would avoid the unpalatable consequences that the self-interest theory faces in the first kind of Prisoner’s Dilemma discussed above. Likewise, such a theory would tell each agent to save two children of another parent rather than only one of his own children, and hence would avoid the unpalatable consequences that Common-Sense Morality purportedly faces in the second kind of Prisoner’s Dilemma discussed above.

Parfit’s analysis of Prisoner’s Dilemmas in terms of Each-We Dilemmas is illuminating, but this chapter’s considerations suggest that he is mistaken in thinking that consequentialist theories avoid moral analogues of Prisoner’s Dilemmas altogether. As seen, consequentialist moralities will be able to avoid some of the moral analogues of Prisoner’s Dilemmas facing Common-Sense Morality; namely, those that arise in certain contexts because Common-Sense Morality gives different people distinct, and conflicting, agent-relative aims. But moral analogues of the Prisoner’s Dilemmas can arise even for consequentialist theories that give everyone common, agent-neutral, aims. Specifically, this can happen for any consequentialist theory that rejects the simple additive aggregationist approach to assessing outcomes, in favor of a non-additive aggregationist approach.
Consider, again, the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View. I believe there is nothing about consequentialist, or agent-neutral, theories as such, that requires them to rule out the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View as incoherent, unintelligible, or indefensible. Thus, just as consequentialists might value equality or justice, so they might believe that the outcome in which a given total burden was dispersed amongst a vastly larger number of people, so that the additional burden any single person had to bear within her life was “relatively small,” would be preferable to the outcome in which a smaller total burden fell on just a few, such that their additional burden was substantial. Correspondingly, a consequentialist theory might well give everyone the common, agent-neutral, aim of acting in accordance with the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, so as to bring about the most preferable outcome.

Suppose, then, consequentialists find themselves facing the red-button blue-button scenario of section 3.4. If each consequentialist has to act separately, there is no way for them to “bind” their acts together, there isn’t an issue of “retaliation” or redistribution after the fact, and they wouldn’t be facing similar choices in the future, then wouldn’t each consequentialist rightly choose to push the blue button, in accordance with his common agent-neutral aim of promoting the most preferable available outcome? That is, each consequentialist would recognize that whatever choices his fellow consequentialists make, his choice is between an outcome where n people suffer intensely for 1000 days, and 1010 people suffer for x days, and one where n - 1 people suffer for 1000 days, and 1010 people suffer for x + 1 days. Correspondingly, in accordance with the Minimize Great Additional Benefits View, he knows that whatever everyone else does, he will produce the most preferable available outcome by pushing the blue button. But, of
course, this is true for each consequentialist, and we know that if each consequentialist produces the most preferable available outcome, together they will produce a less preferable outcome; one where 1010 people suffer for 1000 days, rather than one where 1000 people suffer for 1000 days. Here, I submit, we have a moral analogue of the Prisoner’s Dilemma for consequentialists.

I suggest, then, that Parfit was mistaken in thinking that only agent-relative theories face analogues of the Prisoner’s Dilemmas. Agent-neutral theories can as well; at least, agent-neutral theories that endorse non-additive aggregationist principles, while giving each agent the common aim of promoting the most preferable available outcome.

Parfit’s analysis of Prisoner’s Dilemmas as examples of Each-We Dilemmas was insightful and illuminating. But I think he was mistaken in thinking that Each-We Dilemmas only arise when a theory gives individuals distinct aims whose pursuit would conflict with the aims the theory would prescribe for the collectivity. Each-We Dilemmas can also arise from the fact that each of us is a distinct individual who must sometimes act alone to promote one’s aims. In such cases, even when one shares common aims with other individuals, the result of each of us acting separately to promote those aims may be an outcome that is less preferable than the one we would achieve if we acted together as a collectivity.

Even if I am a consequentialist, I am still not a we. I am an I. Correspondingly, when I act, I necessarily act as an I, even when, in acting, I am guided by considerations of what would be best, collectively, for all concerned. Thus, as we have seen, even consequentialists can face moral analogues of the Prisoner’s Dilemmas. Contrary to Parfit’s suggestion, even consequentialists can face Each-We Dilemmas.
Although I believe Parfit was mistaken in suggesting that only agent-relative theories could face Each-We Dilemmas, we might still believe that he has highlighted an important difference between agent-relative and agent-neutral theories. Specifically, we might think that there is an important difference between a theory that faces Each-We Dilemmas because it gives individuals distinct aims, and a theory that faces Each-We Dilemmas because its aims give weight to non-additive aggregative principles, and these aims are unavoidably given to distinct individuals. Thus, distinguishing between Distinct Aims Each-We Dilemmas and Distinct Individuals Each-We Dilemmas, we may note that since we are individuals, who must sometimes act separately, if the correct principles of aggregation are non-additive, every theory may have to face Distinct Individuals Each-We Dilemmas. Hence, if Hume is right, that what tells against all theories tells against none, it will be a lamentable fact, but hardly a shortcoming of agent-neutral theories, that they sometimes face Distinct Individuals Each-We Dilemmas. The situation is otherwise regarding agent-relative theories. Such theories will face Distinct Aims Each-We Dilemmas as well as Distinct Individuals Each-We Dilemmas, and while there isn’t much we can do about the latter—assuming that the correct principles of aggregation are non-additive and given our natures as distinct individuals—we can avoid the former. After all, as Parfit emphasizes, we needn’t accept a theory that has untoward results because the way it recognizes individuality is to give different people distinct aims; we can be agent-neutralists instead. Thus, even if Parfit is mistaken in claiming that agent-neutral theories can’t face Each-We Dilemmas, he may be right that only agent-relative theories can be criticized for facing certain Each-We Dilemmas. On the other hand, it is a deep and open question, not settled by anything addressed here, whether agent-neutral
theories both adequately reflect our individuality, and ultimately have less untoward results than their agent-relative counterparts.

Distinct Aims Each-We Dilemmas are important, and have received the most attention. But ultimately, I think that Distinct Individuals Each-We Dilemmas, that arise from non-additive aggregative principles, are more disturbing. Let me explain. Given the possibility of finding oneself facing a Distinct Aims Each-We Dilemma, it is fairly clear that there are different ways one might reasonably respond. First, on the self-interest theory, one might try to get everyone else to bind their acts together when facing a Distinct Aims Each-We Dilemma, or to become disposed to act as agent-neutralists in such situations, while remaining self-interested oneself. On common-sense morality this option might be unavailable, if it involved duping others, or taking unfair advantage of them. Second, given that the first option is likely to be practically, as well as morally unfeasible, one could try to alter the structure of the impending situation, so as to prevent the dilemma from arising in the first place. So, for example, one could try to insure that there was a means of communication, or a way of binding all the acts together, so that whatever one agent chose the others would also have to choose. Third, in concert with others, one could try to effect a collective psychological transformation, so that each agent-relativist would become disposed, for good agent-relative reasons, to act as an agent-neutralist when facing a Distinct Aims Each-We Dilemma. For these purposes, collective hypnosis might suffice. Fourth, one could become convinced of the truth of an agent-neutral theory, and try to convince everyone else of that truth. If one succeeded, then agents would avoid the unpalatable consequences of Distinct Aims Each-We Dilemmas by no longer being agent-relativists.
There are, then, various avenues one might plausibly pursue to avoid Distinct Aims Each-We Dilemmas. However, Distinct Individuals Each-We Dilemmas are another matter. Such dilemmas pose a deep problem even if one allows people to communicate or bind their acts together, and this problem is not one that can be evaded through psychological transformation or by adopting a different approach to practical reasoning. The deep problem, in a Distinct Individuals Each-We Dilemma, is that even if we are able and motivated to coordinate our responses in pursuit of the most preferable outcome, it isn’t clear what the most preferable outcome is, or even that there is such an outcome. Worse yet, it seems that for any outcome we might collectively choose, there is another available outcome that we might have chosen instead which would have been preferable.

For example, in our red-button blue-button case, we know that the all blue-button outcome, where 1010 people suffer intensely for 1000 days is clearly inferior to the all red-button outcome, where only 1000 people suffer intensely for 1000 days; but that only tells us how we should choose between those alternatives. In accordance with the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, it appears that rather than have everyone push the red button we should coordinate our selections so that 999 people push the red button and one person pushes the blue button, since that would produce an outcome preferable to the one in which everyone pushes the red button. But then, as we have seen, it also appears we should coordinate our selections so that 998 people push the red button and two people push the blue button, since that would produce an outcome preferable to the one in which 999 people push the red button and one person pushes the blue button. And so on. Here, we have the problem discussed in the previous section, and there seems to
be no stable, non-ad hoc, stopping point before the clearly unpalatable solution of each person pushing the blue button.

As noted above, agent-relativists can avoid Distinct Aims Each-We Dilemmas through communication and cooperation, or by becoming, or making themselves disposed to act as, agent-neutralists. But no analogous solutions seem available for the deep problem posed by Distinct Individuals Each-We Dilemmas. One “solution” to such dilemmas is to abandon the non-additive aggregationist approach reflected in such positions as the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View. But for the reasons discussed in this chapter and chapter 2, this solution is difficult to accept. Whether other solutions might be better will be considered in subsequent chapters.

3.7 Summary of Chapter 3

In this chapter, I have presented two “new” principles of aggregation, the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, and the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View. These views are natural extensions of chapter 2’s Second Standard View. The views are non-additive principles of aggregation that govern the permissibility of trade-offs involving large benefits or burdens for some, versus small benefits or burdens for many. The principles are incomplete, in that they only generate rankings for certain kinds of alternatives, but, importantly, they purport to hold whether or not those who would receive the large benefits or burdens are better or worse off than those who would receive the small benefits or burdens.

Appealing to a series of examples, I argued that the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View and the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View are both plausible. I argued that the plausibility of these views extends beyond cases where the
benefits or burdens affecting the many are imperceptible or trivial. I also argued that these views are distinct from, and retain independent force in the face of, other non-additive principles of aggregation like equality or maximin. I claimed that the Levelling Down Objection may derive force from the spirit of the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, suggesting that most who vehemently oppose leveling down in cases where some who are better off lose lots and the worse off gain nothing, are not likely to suddenly support leveling down in cases where some who are better off lose lots, but many who are worse off gain slightly. I suggested that such reasoning may help explain certain prevalent attitudes people have towards the reasonableness of charitable giving, hence the strategy of many charities to imply that your individual contribution will make a substantial impact on a particular person’s life.

I did not argue that the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View and the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View are plausible as all things considered principles. Nor did I argue that the two views are equally plausible; to the contrary, I acknowledged that some do not find the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View compelling. But I offered ample considerations to suggest that both play a role in our assessment of outcomes.

Unfortunately, the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View and the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View face problems of iteration. This is both theoretically troubling, and practically significant. In some contexts, if we let ourselves be guided by such views, repeatedly, we may be led to produce an outcome that is clearly inferior to the outcome we would have produced had we not been guided by such views. This may not be a practical problem for most individuals, but it may be a problem for
national or international organizations that face the ongoing choice of helping a few people substantially, or many others just a little, each time. I suggested two areas where this problem might arise, international health care and famine relief.

I next noted that my thinking about these topics was sparked by Derek Parfit’s examples of the Bad Old Days and the Harmless Torturers, and variations of those examples. Thinking about such examples it seemed plain that the trivial, or imperceptible “suffering” of many doesn’t “add up” in a simple additive way so as to outweigh the substantial suffering of a few, and that this is so even if the total additive aggregate of suffering is greater in the former situation than the latter one. Moreover, importantly, this result seemed generalizable beyond cases involving trivial or imperceptible effects, to include clearly noticeable and undesirable effects for the many, as long as the overall impact on the lives of those affected remained relatively insignificant. I observed that it was reflection on such examples that led to my recognition of the importance of chapter two’s First and Second Standard Views, together with this chapter’s Minimize Great Additional Burdens and Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits Views. It also led to the recognition of the deep problems associated with iterations of such views, the instability of mixed strategies designed to avoid the unpalatable implications of unchecked iteration, and the threat to transitivity ultimately posed by such views.

Finally, I suggested that while Parfit’s analysis of Prisoner’s Dilemmas in terms of the more general phenomena of Each-We Dilemmas is illuminating, he was mistaken in claiming that only agent-relative theories can face Each-We Dilemmas. I claimed that there can be two important kinds of Each-We Dilemmas, Distinct Aims and Distinct
Individuals Each-We Dilemmas, and while Parfit is right that only agent-relative theories face Each-We Dilemmas, both agent-relative and agent neutral-theories face Distinct Individuals Each-We Dilemmas. Thus, even agent-neutral moral theories face a particular kind of moral analogue of the Prisoner’s Dilemmas. Worse, while several strategies suggest themselves for avoiding Distinct Aims Each-We Dilemmas, no analogous solutions are available for avoiding the deep problems associated with Distinct Individuals Each-We Dilemmas. To avoid such Dilemmas it appears one has to reject the anti-additive principles of aggregation discussed in this chapter and chapter two. This is not an attractive option—even if ultimately it is more attractive than every other option.

In sum, this chapter expands on and reinforces the worries raised in chapter two. There are many cases where anti-additive aggregative principles seem compelling. These principles are incomplete, applying to some alternatives but not others in such a way as to raise problems of iteration, resist a stable solution to those problems, and pose a threat to the transitivity of preferability. As we will see in the following chapters, similar problems arise in a multitude of arenas.

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11 Based on conversation.

2 See chapter one. Seems clear to ME, Foot and others may disagree! Note, I’ll have to say something in the intro chapter re. the views of Foot, Nozick, and others… the fundamental methodological assumption of this book…. Certain kinds of comparisons of this kind ARE meaningful. That IS my starting point. Though some would take the arguments of this book as a reductio of that position, and hence as an argument favoring Foot’s position. Maybe so, but I think one needs to ARGUE for such a position and be dragged there, as it were, one shouldn’t START with such an assumption.

3 Insert appropriate notes to HGHB, chapter 9, EP&LDO, and possibly new E&P paper.

4 See chapter n’ for a discussion of a model of moral ideals—what I call the gymnastics model of moral ideals—that would explain, and perhaps vindicate, such a judgment.
In chapter three of *Reasons and Persons*, “Five Mistakes in Moral Mathematics,” Parfit identifies the
tendency to overlook or ignore imperceptible or trivial harms or benefits as one of the “mistakes of moral
mathematics” to which we are prone.

Insert relevant cites to Elster, McLennen, vast literature…

Insert appropriate cites.

Reasons and Persons, p. 91.

Insert relevant cite. Make the passage in the text a quotation?

Here, or elsewhere, be sure to include the proper further acknowledgment—which in turn were sparked
by Jonathan Glover’s example…. 