The New Taurek Problem

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John Taurek (1977) invites us to imagine a situation where we are faced with a choice between (a) rescuing five strangers and letting one different stranger die, and (b) rescuing the one stranger and letting the five strangers die.[1] Assume that there are no morally relevant differences between these six strangers – none of the six strangers is your partner, or friend, or child. Utilitarianism and other forms of consequentialism would hold that it is right to save the five strangers because the aggregated loss of five lives is greater than the loss of one life. Taurek argues that, in this situation, we should flip a fair coin to give the 50% chance of being saved to each one of the six strangers. He thinks that the coin-flipping best captures his beliefs that (1) there is no impersonal evaluative perspective from which the losses of five separate lives is said to be bad, (2) we are not obliged to save the five strangers, and (3) we should show an equal and positive respect to each person individually. He endorses the coin-flipping even if the choice is between saving one life and saving five hundred lives. Critics of utilitarianism usually want to rule out interpersonal aggregation of gains and losses of different people, and seem to have to agree with Taurek. But Taurek's claim appears counterintuitive to many people, including many critics of utilitarianism, and poses a problem to the critics of utilitarianism. Call this problem the *original Taurek problem*.

Although Taurek's claim is intuitively implausible, it makes perfect sense to critics of utilitarianism. We should take his claim seriously, and try to figure out its scope. To do so, consider the following situation, which might be called the *new Taurek problem*.

Imagine that a large ship with a crew of six members is rapidly sinking in the middle of stormy ocean, and that there are only two lifeboats, each of which can take up to five people. Suppose that we find ourselves in a position to rescue only one of the two lifeboats because it is highly likely that the storm will sink one boat by the time we reach the other boat. Our rescue boat has the radio device that enables us to tell the crew what they should do. The difference between the original and new examples is in whether we can choose the distribution of individuals across two sides.

Utilitarianism would hold that we should tell the crew to put any five members on a lifeboat (call this boat *A*) and put the remaining member on the other lifeboat (call this

[1] For useful survey, see Hirose (2007).

boat *B*), and then we should rescue the five members on *A*. What would Taurek say? He would flip a fair coin to decide which boat we would save, *regardless* of the distribution of the six crew members across the two boats. The crew can be split into three-and-three, two-and-four, or one-and-five. Taurek would be indifferent between these different ways of splitting insofar as we are committed to the coin-flipping. No matter how we divide the crew, we will show the positive and equal respect to each crew member individually and there is no impersonal factor in a morally relevant sense, which would make one way of splitting better than another.

A problem arises. Intuitively, it is plausible to split the six crew members into three-and-three even if we agree with Taurek's claim that we should given an equal chance to each stranger. Why? Here is a reason that non-expected utility theorists can offer. For the sake of argument, let us agree to flip a coin in order to decide which boat we should rescue. There is no difference between three ways of splitting in terms of expected good. That is, the expected number of lives saved is 3, regardless of the distribution of the crew. To illuminate, when the six crew members are split into one-and-five, the expected number of lives saved is 1 x 1/2 + 5 x 1/2 = 3. It is easy to see the expected number is 3 in the other cases, too. Insofar as the expected good is concerned, three ways of splitting are all indifferent, as Taurek would claim. However, it may be argued that the three-and-three split has an advantage. When we split into three-and-three, we can save three members *for sure*, although we do not know which lifeboat we would ultimately rescue. There is a special kind of good in the sure thing. The sure thing is better than uncertainty or taking risk of ending up saving fewer lives. Even if we agree with Taurek that each member should receive the positive and equal chance of being saved, there is a reason to choose the three-and-three split.

Either way, we give the 50% chance to every one of the crew, and hence we show a positive and equal respect to each crew member in the way that Taurek contends. So, why wouldn't Taurek choose the sure thing? Taurek does not need to accept what non-expected utility would say. It suffices to acknowledge that there is a reason to choose the sure thing. By acknowledging this reason, Taurek can avoid the risk of saving fewer members without giving up his claim of giving the equal and positive chance. If we say that insofar as we give the 50% chance to every one of the crew, splitting into three-and-three is better than splitting otherwise, Taurek would complain that, from his belief (1), there is no impersonal evaluative perspective from which splitting into three-and-three is said to be better than splitting otherwise. Taurek does not have the grounds for comparing the different ways of splitting. He merely claims that we should give the positive and equal chance to each member, and stops there. What matters to him is that each member receives the positive and equal chance, and other things such the relative desirability of procedures cannot be taken into consideration. But this appears counterintuitive. The new example shows another counterintuitive implication in Taurek's claim. The virtue of Taurek's claim is consistency: It is consistently counterintuitive.

The new example poses a problem to proponents of weighted lotteries. For example, consider Timmermann's (2004) version of weighted lottery, which he calls the *individualist lottery*.[2] Timmermann believes that it is the individuals that should count, not their numbers. In the original example we considered, he claims that we should give a 1/6 chance to each stranger (this amounts to giving a 5/6 chance to the group of five and the 1/6 chance to the one). This is not too counterintuitive. But, like Taurek, he would be indifferent to the different ways of splitting in the new example. More precisely, he would be indifferent between the 1/6-and-5/6 lottery, the 2/6-and-4/6 lottery, and the 3/6-and-3/6 lottery, insofar as individuals count seriously by virtue of each receiving the 1/6 chance. If he prefers the 1/6-and-5/6 lottery to the 3/6-and-3/6 lottery, he is comparing the expected good of lotteries: the expected good of the 1/6-and-5/6 lottery is 1 x 1/6 + 5 x 5/6 = 26/6; that of the 2/6-and-4/6 lottery is 20/6; and that of the 3/6-and-3/6 lottery is 18/6. In which case, he appeals to probabilistic consequentialism. This is what he would not want. If he prefers the 3/6-and-3/6 lottery to the other lotteries, he does not maximize the expected good but takes his risk-averse attitude into consideration. In which case, individuals count as well as the rescuer's attitude toward risk. This is what he would not want, too. Thus, proponents of weighted lotteries must be indifferent regarding the different ways of splitting. But there are many reasons not to be indifferent, and I suggested two reasons above (i.e. the expected good of individual lotteries and the rescuer's attitude toward risk).

The new Taurek problem shows Taurek's coin-flipping and the weighted lottery are counterintuitive in this new example. We had better adopt the principle of saving the greater number both the original and new Taurek problems.

References

[2] See also Kamm (1993).

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