



## Innumerate Ethics

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*Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer, 1978), 285-301.

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*Philosophy and Public Affairs* is currently published by Princeton University Press.

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Suppose that we can help either one person or many others. Is it a reason to help the many that we should thus be helping more people? John Taurek thinks not. We may learn from his arguments.<sup>1</sup>

## I

Taurek understates his conclusion. At one point he is aware of this. Let this be our starting point.

Suppose that we could easily save either the life of one stranger or the arm of another. Call these strangers X and Y. Taurek argues:

*First Premise:* If the choice were Y's, he would be morally permitted to save his arm rather than X's life.

*Second Premise:* What we ought to do must be the same as what Y ought to do.

*Conclusion:* It cannot be true that we ought to save X's life rather than Y's arm.<sup>2</sup>

Could it be true that we, but not Y, ought to save X's life? Is there a difference between us and Y in virtue of which this could be true?

1. John M. Taurek, "Should the Numbers Count?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6, no. 4 (Summer 1977): 293-316. Page numbers in the text refer to this article. I have been greatly helped by the editors of this journal.

2. Taurek, pp. 301-302. Here, and throughout, I summarize Taurek's argument in my own words.

Some would answer: "Yes. While it would cost us nothing to save X's life, it would cost Y his own arm." Taurek rejects this answer. His argument can be restated in a way which makes this clear. It is aimed at those who believe

- (A) If we could save either one stranger's life or another stranger's arm, and it would cost us nothing to do either, we ought to save the first stranger's life.

Taurek assumes

- (B) It would not be true that we ought to save this stranger's life at the cost of our own arm,

and

- (C) Whether we ought to save this stranger's life cannot depend on whether it would cost us nothing, or our own arm.

If we accept both (B) and (C), we must reject (A).

Ought we to accept both (B) and (C)? Only if we find both more plausible than (A). There are some who would accept (C)—such as Godwin and the sterner Utilitarians. These must choose between (A) and (B). Most would choose (A). They would think we ought to save a stranger's life at the cost of our own arm. Suppose that we cannot believe this. Suppose that we find (B) more plausible than (A). We must then choose between (A) and (C). Unless there is some further argument, few would choose (C).

Is there a further argument? Return to the choice between X's life and Y's arm. After claiming that Y would be permitted to save his arm, Taurek writes: "Unless it is for some reason morally impermissible for one person to take the same interest in another's welfare as he himself [permissibly] takes in it, it must be permissible for me, in the absence of special obligations to the contrary, to choose the outcome that is in [Y's] best interest" (p. 302). If "take the same interest in" means "care as much about," this sentence is irrelevant. We *would* be

permitted to care about Y's welfare just as much as Y himself (permissibly) cares. But Y would then be someone whom we love deeply. We shall return to such a case. In the case that we are now discussing, Y is a stranger. We must therefore reinterpret Taurek's sentence. It must mean: "Unless we are not permitted to give to the welfare of any stranger just as much priority as he may give to his own welfare. . . ."

Are we so permitted? There are three views. According to some, we ought to give equal weight to everyone's welfare. We may not give priority to a stranger's welfare. Nor may he.

Most of us take a different view. We believe that we may give priority to our own welfare. This priority should not be absolute. Perhaps Y could save his arm rather than X's life; but he ought to save X rather than his own umbrella. May we give priority to the welfare of others? Most of us think we sometimes may, and sometimes ought to do so. Thus we ought to give priority to the welfare of our own children. This is what Taurek calls a "special obligation."

These obligations are "agent-relative." It is to *my* children that I ought to give priority. Taurek would agree. And he agrees that we may give priority to ourselves. The question is, Are these permissions agent-relative? Is it to *myself* that I may give priority?

We would answer yes. That is why we should reject Taurek's argument. If Y could save his arm rather than X's life, so could we. But this would not show that *we* could save Y's arm rather than X's life. None of us would then be saving *his own* arm.

Taurek gives a different answer. He believes that Y's permission cannot be agent-relative. It cannot be a permission to save *his own* arm. It must be a permission to save *anyone's* arm. That is why Taurek draws his conclusion. If Y could save anyone's arm rather than X's life, so could we.

Taurek's view is entirely general. Suppose that I must choose whether to save you from losing *p* or to save some stranger from losing *q*. Taurek thinks I ought to help the stranger only if you, given the choice, ought to do so too. It makes no difference that it would cost me nothing to help the stranger, while it would cost you *p*. This is so whatever *p* may be (p. 301, ll. 22-26). Taurek thus assumes:

- (D) Whether we ought to help strangers cannot depend upon how much we in particular<sup>3</sup> would thereby lose.

This is believed by some Utilitarians. But Taurek combines (D) with a more popular belief. He assumes that we may give priority to our own welfare. We are permitted to save ourselves from lesser harms rather than saving strangers from greater harms. For example:

- (E) It would not be true that we ought to relieve a stranger's agony rather than our own minor pain.<sup>4</sup>

According to (D), whether we ought to help the stranger cannot depend on whether we in particular would undergo the minor pain. The permission claimed by (E) cannot be agent-relative. Hence

- (F) It would not be true that we ought to relieve the agony of one stranger rather than the minor pain of another.

Ought we to accept Taurek's view? Ought we to believe both that we may give priority to our own welfare and that these permissions cannot be agent-relative? I can think of no one else who accepts this view. Since it is not defended by Taurek,<sup>5</sup> I suggest that it should be rejected. When it would cost us nothing to do either, we ought to relieve one stranger's agony rather than another's minor pain. And we ought to save lives rather than limbs.

## II

Ought we to save many lives rather than one? Suppose that we could easily save either one stranger or five others. Call the one stranger David. Taurek argues (pp. 299-303):

3. These words matter. Whether we ought to help strangers may depend upon how much we would thereby lose. We ought to save a stranger's umbrella if it would cost us nothing, but not at the cost of our own life. Taurek would agree. But it would make no difference here whether we *in particular* would lose the life. We ought not to save umbrellas at the cost of *anyone's* life.

4. This is surely implied by p. 308, ll. 35-37.

5. Curiously, Taurek never mentions agent-relative permissions.

*First Premise:* If the choice were David's, he would be morally permitted to save himself rather than the five.

*Second Premise:* If this is permissible for David, it must be permissible for us.

*Conclusion:* It cannot be true that we ought to save the five rather than David.

David's permission would be agent-relative.

### III

Taurek argues (pp. 295-299):

*First Premise:* If David was our friend, we would be morally permitted to save him rather than the five.

*Second Premise:* That David was our friend would be a fact too trivial to affect our obligations.

*Conclusion:* Even though David is not our friend, we are permitted to save him rather than the five.

Are we to imagine David as a mere acquaintance? Would he just be someone whom we would prefer to save? The argument would then be this. Given

(G) It would not be true that we ought to save the five if we preferred to save someone else,

and

(H) Whether we ought to save the five cannot depend on what we prefer,

we must reject

(I) If we have no preference either way, we ought to save the five.

Taurek defends (H) with a question. If we really ought to save the five, how could we “so easily escape” this obligation? How could it be overridden by a mere preference? A real obligation to save five people’s lives surely cannot be as weak as this (pp. 297-298). We might agree. We must then choose between (G) and (I). Few would choose (G).

What if David was more than a mere acquaintance? What if he was someone we love? The argument would now be this. Given

- (J) It would not be true that we ought to save the five rather than someone we love,

and

- (K) Whether we ought to save the five cannot depend on whether we would thereby lose nothing, or someone we love,

we must reject

- (L) If we would lose nothing either way, we ought to save the five.

Taurek’s defence of (H) does not apply to (K). Our own death may be the greatest loss, but it would be terrible to lose someone we love. Taurek could not say, “How could you so easily escape your obligation?” Are there other arguments for (K)? Taurek suggests the following. If we were contractually obliged to save the five, or it was our military duty, it would make no difference whether we would thereby lose someone we love. Why should it make a difference in the present case (p. 298)? We might answer: “Contracts and military duties give rise to special obligations. Perhaps we ought to carry out these even at a heavy cost to ourselves. But this need not be true of everything we ought to do. It may not be true of saving the lives of strangers” (cf. p. 311, ll. 10-17). Taurek has one other reason for rejecting (K). He believes there cannot be agent-relative permissions. Whether we ought to save the five cannot depend upon how much we in particular would thereby lose. Some Utilitarians would agree. But they would reject (J).

In the absence of a further argument, ought we to accept both (J) and (K)? Only if we find both more plausible than (L). Few will.

#### IV

Taurek argues:

*First Premise:* In the absence of special obligations, the only moral reason to prevent an outcome is that it would be worse than its alternative.

*Second Premise:* The deaths of the five would not be a worse outcome than the death of David.

*Conclusion:* We have no moral reason to save the five rather than David.<sup>6</sup>

Why should we accept the second premise? Why would the deaths of the five not be a worse outcome than the death of David?

At certain points, Taurek suggests that no outcome can be worse than its alternative. One of two outcomes may be worse *for particular people*, but it cannot be simply “worse.”<sup>7</sup> On this suggestion, Taurek’s first premise becomes implausible. It implies that, in the absence of special obligations, we have no moral reason to prevent anything. We have no reason even to prevent those outcomes which are worse for everyone. Even Taurek would not accept this. If he keeps the suggestion that no outcome can be “worse” than its alternative, he must therefore abandon his first premise.

He might instead abandon this suggestion. He must then support his second premise in a different way. He must claim that, while some

6. I take this argument to be implied by these two passages: “The claim that one ought to save the many instead of the few was made to rest on the claim that, other things being equal, it is a worse thing that these five persons should die than that this one should” (p. 303). “. . . For the reasons given, I cannot subscribe to such an evaluation of these outcomes. Hence, in this situation, I have absolutely no reason for showing preference to them as against him . . .” (p. 306).

7. Taurek, p. 295, ll. 15-16; p. 304, ll. 26-27. G. E. Moore claimed the reverse (*Principia Ethica*, Cambridge, 1903, pp. 98-99). Taurek’s claim seems the more plausible.



outcomes can be worse than others, the deaths of the five would not be a worse outcome than the death of David.

Taurek does defend this claim. He argues:

*First Premise:* If we prefer the worse of two outcomes we are morally deficient.

*Second Premise:* David would not be morally deficient if he preferred that we save him rather than the five.

*Conclusion:* The deaths of the five cannot be a worse outcome than the death of David.<sup>8</sup>

If we accept the second premise, we can reject the first. We might say: "We can prefer the worse of two outcomes without being morally deficient. This would be so if the better outcome would impose on us too great a sacrifice." Taurek gives no argument against this view. Is it less plausible than his conclusion?

## V

Why do we think it worse if more people die? If David dies, he would lose as much as any of the five. But they together would lose more. Their combined losses would outweigh his.

Taurek rejects this reasoning. He does not "take seriously . . . any notion of the sum of two persons' separate losses" (p. 308). He rejects this notion for two reasons.

One is that he cannot understand it. He refers to "our collective or total pain, whatever exactly that is supposed to be" (p. 308). And he writes, "I cannot understand how I am supposed to add up their separate pains and attach significance to that alleged sum. . . ." (p. 309).

What does Taurek not understand? A puzzling passage reads: "Suffering is not additive in this way. The discomfort of each of a large number of individuals experiencing a minor headache does not add up to anyone's experiencing a migraine" (p. 309). If "add up to" meant "be the same as," this would be true. But it would not be rele-

8. Taurek, pp. 304-305. Taurek here assumes that some outcomes can be worse than others.

vant. Those who believe that suffering is “additive” do not believe that many lesser pains might be the same thing as one greater pain. What they believe is that the lesser pains might together be as bad.

Consider first pains that are felt by one person. I might decide that fifty minor headaches would be worse than a single migraine. If I had to endure the fifty headaches, I would suffer more. In other words, my “sum of suffering” would be greater. Such comparisons are, even in principle, rough. There is only partial comparability. But that does not make the comparisons senseless. And this use of the phrase “sum of suffering” would, I believe, be understood by Taurek. At any rate, he says nothing against it.

Suppose, next, that each of fifty headaches would be had by a different person. If these headaches were about as bad, they would again together involve about as much suffering. The “sum of suffering” would be about as great. This is not a different use of this phrase. It is the same use. Since he understands this use when applied within one life, Taurek thereby understands it when applied to different lives. So what can his problem be?

There is a well-known problem here. If two headaches come in different lives, it is harder to tell which, if either, is the worse. Certain people, notably some economists, make a bolder claim. On their (official) view, such comparisons are senseless. It makes no sense to suppose that one of the headaches could either be, or not be, worse than the other. More generally, no one can be worse off than anyone else. If I lose an arm and you lose a finger, it makes no sense to suppose that my loss could be greater than yours.

If this were Taurek’s view, it would explain his problem. If none of the fifty headaches could be either less bad than a migraine, or at least as bad, we cannot suppose that they together might be worse. We cannot suppose they might involve a greater “sum of suffering.” But this is not Taurek’s view. He writes of different people undergoing “differential losses,” and even contrasts “fifty individuals suffering a pain of some given intensity” with “some individual suffering a pain many or fifty times more intense” (pp. 309-310). Taurek’s problem is not about interpersonal comparisons.

What can it be? It may help to quote another passage (p. 309):

. . . To my way of thinking it would be contemptible for any one of us in this crowd to ask you to consider carefully, "not, of course, what I personally will have to suffer. None of us is thinking of himself here! But contemplate, if you will, what *we*, the group, will suffer. Think of the awful sum of pain that is in the balance here! There are so many more of us." At best such thinking seems confused. Typically, I think, it is outrageous.

This recalls a paragraph in C. S. Lewis:

We must never make the problem of pain worse than it is by vague talk about "the unimaginable sum of human misery." Suppose that I have a toothache of intensity  $x$ : and suppose that you, who are seated beside me, also begin to have a toothache of intensity  $x$ . You may, if you choose, say that the total amount of pain in the room is now  $2x$ . But you must remember that no one is suffering  $2x$ : search all time and space and you will not find that composite pain in anyone's consciousness. There is no such thing as a sum of suffering, for no one suffers it. When we have reached the maximum that a single person can suffer, we have, no doubt, reached something very horrible, but we have reached all the suffering there can ever be in the universe. The addition of a million fellow-sufferers adds no more pain.<sup>9</sup>

Like Taurek, Lewis assumes that any "sum of suffering" must be felt by a single person. Why not add that it must be felt at a single time? That would reduce still further the Problem of Pain. It might even offer a solution. We might not mind a pain, however intense, if it lasted a short enough time. The maximum possible "sum of suffering" would then be something no one minds.

This would not be a true solution. Suffering at other times is more suffering. So is the suffering of other people. Lewis must have known this. I suggest that he confused two different claims. He makes the factual claim that the suffering of more people cannot be more suffering. He may have meant the moral claim that it cannot matter more.

9. *The Problem of Pain* (London, 1957), pp. 103-104.

He may have thought the suffering of one person to be as great an evil as the suffering of a million.

This provides a second way of understanding Taurek. When he says that “suffering is not additive,” he too may not mean that the pains of different people cannot be more pain. He may mean that these pains cannot be *morally* summed—that they cannot together make an outcome worse. If fifty people each have a headache, that would be no worse than if one person does. More generally:

(M) If one person is harmed, that would be just as bad as if any number are each equally harmed.

Whether this is all that Taurek means, it appears to be his view.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from C. S. Lewis, I can think of no one else who accepts this view. Taurek calls it a “natural extension” of

(N) We ought to save one person from harm rather than saving any number from smaller harms.<sup>11</sup>

If the harms to the many would be only *slightly* smaller, few would accept (N). But we might accept

(O) We ought to save one person from harm rather than saving any number from *much* smaller harms.

Is Taurek’s view a “natural extension” of (O)? He might say: “Unless you accept (M), how can you explain (O)? Why should we prevent the greater harm rather than *any number* of the smaller

10. More exactly, it would be his view if he abandons the suggestion that no outcome can be “worse” than its alternative. If he keeps that suggestion, his view must be expressed in a different way. For the phrase “just as bad as” we might substitute “something which we have just as strong moral reasons to prevent.” For convenience, I shall use “bad” and “worse.”

11. Taurek writes: “. . . a refusal to take seriously . . . any notion of the sum of two persons’ separate losses. . . . appears a quite natural extension of the way in which most would view analogous trade-off situations involving differential losses to those involved” (p. 308). On p. 309, lines 27-29, Taurek stops short of accepting (N)—perhaps because of the argument that I discussed in Section I. The argument that I discuss here is at most suggested by p. 308.

harms? The explanation must be that the smaller harms cannot be morally summed. And this must be because they are harms to different people.”

We might give a different explanation. If the single person faces a much greater harm, he may be the person who would be worst off. We may think that we should give priority to helping such people. We should then be appealing to a well-known principle of justice. Call this “Maximin.”<sup>12</sup>

What if the single person would not be worst off? Ought we to save one arthritic from blindness rather than saving any number of the blind from arthritis? Ought we to save one deaf person from paralysis rather than any number of the paralysed from deafness? If we answer no, (O) is not our real view. We do not believe that we should always save the single person from the one much greater harm. We would at most believe this if the harm would make this person worst off. We would then accept (O) only when it coincides with Maximin. That would be our real view.<sup>13</sup>

Here is a third example. For each of many people, yesterday was agony. For some other single person, it was a day of minor pain. Ought we now to save this person from a day of agony rather than saving each of the many from a day of minor pain? Would this be so whatever the number of the many?

Suppose that we answer yes. How could we explain our view? We might appeal to Maximin. Call the single person Z. We might claim

(P) Z is the person who would be worst off.

Is this true? If we do not intervene, Z would be worst off throughout the coming day. But the many were as much worse off throughout yesterday. Counting both days, Z would not have suffered more than

12. Rawls would not apply this principle to individuals (see, for example, John Rawls, “Some Reasons for the Maximin Criterion,” *American Economic Review*, 64, Papers & Proc., May 1974, p. 142).

13. I owe this idea to James Griffin. In an unpublished paper, Griffin argues that the intuitions behind Negative Utilitarianism are, when freed from confusions, intuitions about Justice. I am just extending this idea.

any of them. Someone might say: "It is irrelevant that, for the many, yesterday was agony. Pain no longer matters when it is over." This objection seems to me invalid. When we are discussing distribution, past pains count. Those who have suffered more have more claim to be spared future pain. In deciding who would be worst off, we must think in terms of lives—we must ask whose life would have gone worst. I conclude that, in this case, Z would not be worst off. If we help the many, he will have had one day of agony and one day of minor pain. But if we help him this will be true of each of them.

If Z would not be worst off, why should we help him rather than them? Why should we prevent his day of agony rather than their days of minor pain? We might claim

(Q) We would be preventing the greater sum of suffering.

Is this true? Taurek might say: "Their pains cannot be summed. Whatever the number of the many, their 'sum of suffering' would be the same. It would be a single day of minor pain." We have rejected this view. If more people are in pain, there is more pain.

There is another way of defending (Q). We might claim

(R) Agony is infinitely worse than minor pain.

Is this true? Perhaps we can imagine pains to which it would apply.<sup>14</sup> But these are not what Taurek has in mind. The pain of his single person is not infinitely worse than the pains of the many. Taurek calls it "fifty times more intense." That means this. Fifty of the lesser pains would be as bad to undergo. No one's judgments would be so precise. But we can assume the following. A thousand of the lesser pains would be worse. They would involve more suffering. (That is not a different claim. It is just another way of saying that they would be worse to undergo.)

14. See the footnote on p. 132 of Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1963. To be reprinted by Oxford University Press). See also James Griffin, "Are There Incommensurable Values?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1977): 44-47.

If this is the difference between the pains, we cannot appeal to (R). The agony of Z would not be infinitely worse than the pains of the many. So we must abandon (Q). We cannot claim that, in helping Z, we should be preventing the greater sum of suffering. Within one life, a thousand of the lesser pains would involve more suffering. If they came in different lives, each might be easier to bear. Each might involve less suffering. But some number of these pains would involve a greater sum of suffering.

If we cannot appeal to (Q), how could we explain our view? Why should we prevent Z's agony rather than their lesser pains? We might claim

(S) We would be preventing the worse of two outcomes.

Is this true? We might say: "Below some threshold, pain is not morally significant. It is bad for the sufferer. But it cannot make the outcome worse. It is not an evil." This assumption is quite common. It can be challenged. But I shall not present this challenge here.<sup>15</sup> If the assumption is correct, (S) might be trivially true. The agony of Z would be morally significant. It would be, if undeserved, an evil. But the pains of the many might have no significance. In that case, they could not amount to as great an evil. No number of zeroes could amount to one.

Let us make this explanation unavailable. Let each lesser pain be morally significant. Each would be a minor evil. Could we now defend (S)? We might claim

(T) No number of these lesser evils could together be as great an evil.

This would be like Newman's view about pain and sin. He believed that both were bad, but that sin was infinitely worse. If all mankind

15. See Jonathan Glover, "It Makes No Difference Whether Or Not I Do It," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 49 (1975), pp. 172-176. (In Chapters 16 and 17 of his book *Causing Death and Saving Lives*, London: Penguin Books, 1977, Glover discusses the kind of case with which Taurek is concerned.)

suffered “extremest agony,” that would be less bad than if one venial sin was committed.<sup>16</sup>

Is (T) plausible? Surely not. A thousand of the lesser pains would be worse for Z. He would prefer the agony. If they would be worse for Z, they would surely be a worse outcome. They would be, if undeserved, a greater evil.

If we cannot appeal to (T), how could we explain our view? Why should we help Z rather than any number of the many? Taurek might say: “You must now accept *my* explanation. Pains in different lives cannot be morally summed.”

If we are consequentialists, we may have to agree. We must then accept (S). We must think that, in helping Z, we would be preventing the worse of two outcomes. How could this be true? If they came within one life, a thousand of the lesser pains would be a worse outcome. How could there be *no* such number when they come in different lives? We may have to accept Taurek’s view. Perhaps pains in different lives cannot be morally summed. Even if a million people suffer, that may be no worse than if one person does.

There is an alternative. We need not be consequentialists. We might say: “We ought to prevent one much greater harm rather than any number of much smaller harms. But this is not because we should be preventing the worse of two outcomes. The urgency of moral claims does not always correspond to the badness of outcomes.” On this alternative we avoid Taurek’s view. We could still believe that, if a million people suffer, that is worse than if one person does. And we could still believe that, in the case of equal harms, numbers count. If we could save from equal harm one or a million, we should help the million.

Which alternative is the more plausible?

## VI

Return to David and the five. We have discussed three arguments for Taurek’s view. The first assumes

<sup>16</sup> *Certain difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching* (London, 1885), vol. 1, p. 204.



(U) We would be morally permitted to save ourselves rather than the five, but this could not be because we would be saving ourselves.

The second assumes

(V) We would be morally permitted to save a friend rather than the five, but this could not be because we would be saving a friend.

The third assumes

(W) It would not be worse if more people die.

I have questioned these assumptions.

Taurek gives one other argument. Suppose the five invest in a rescue service. They tell David: "You should pay your share. The rescuer should then save us rather than you." This would be unfair. If David pays, he should have a chance of benefiting. Taurek suggests that a coin be flipped (pp. 306, 313-314).

The argument supports more extreme conclusions. Suppose that David stands to lose, not his life, but his umbrella. The five say: "You should pay your share. The rescuer should then save us rather than your umbrella." This would also be unfair. But should another coin be flipped? Should there be a random choice between five lives and one umbrella?

There is a better solution. The five should pay David's share.<sup>17</sup>

17. Suppose the rights of property are not involved. We are the rescuers, and have not been hired. Taurek might say; "There is still a case for flipping coins. Only then would each person have an equal chance." There would be something in this argument. Would there be enough? Consider three examples: (1) We can save X or Y. Nothing could be lost by flipping coins. Something would be gained. (2) We can save X's life or Y's arm. Something would again be gained. We would give Y a chance. But if Y wins X would die. The case for flipping coins seems here to be outweighed. (3) We can save David or the five. There is again a case for flipping coins. But I believe it is again outweighed. (Much more needs to be said. I will add this. David's death is undeserved. So is the loss of Y's arm. It is simply their misfortune that their claims are outweighed. In a way, this is unfair. It involves a kind of natural

## VII

Taurek ends with this remark. Suppose we save the larger number. This would not “reflect an equal concern for the survival of each.” It would be like giving priority to saving the rich (pp. 315-316).

This is not so. If we give the rich priority, we do not give equal weight to saving each. Why do we save the larger number? Because we *do* give equal weight to saving each. Each counts for one. That is why more count for more.

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injustice. But such injustice cannot be removed by flipping coins. It could only be transferred. Natural injustice is bad luck. Making more depend on luck will not abolish bad luck.)