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# Arithmetic and goodness

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**Abstract:** **The idea of a sum (or even average) of pleasure or value occurs in a number of philosophical discussions, But it has been challenged, and it seems to lead to paradoxical conclusions. Rashdall defended it by citing cases where it clearly applied; but it turns out hard to assign quantities to values without being arbitrary. It is argued here that we can only 'do sums' where like is being compared with like. In other cases, we begin by judging which of two possible states of affairs would be the better, and only then are in a position to speak (if we choose) of sums of goodness. The implications of this for certain forms of utilitarianism and theodicy are briefly considered.**

There is a quite long-standing tradition, especially (and understandably) among utilitarians, of thinking in terms of the sum of a number of pleasures and pains (or other goods and evils). For instance, G. E. Moore, setting out to describe utilitarianism, writes 'This theory points out that all actions may, theoretically at least, be arranged in a scale, according to the proportion between the *total* quantities of pleasure or pain which they cause'.[1] And this arithmetical tradition can be, and has been, taken further. Derek Parfit, for example, can state the hedonistic version of what he calls the Average Principle as, 'If other things are equal, the best outcome is the one in which there is the greatest average net sum of happiness, per life lived.'[2] Parfit does not himself agree with this principle, but he has no difficulty in using the notion of such an average. Indeed, he uses other arithmetical language, such as '*more than half as much* worth living', and 'the quality of life in B is about four-fifths as high as the quality of life in A'.[3] Some philosophers have even – not wholly, I think, in jest – used the idea of a unit of evil, the 'turp', and enquired whether God could be justified in creating a world where there were $10^{13}$ turps in existence.

This tradition is not universal. For example, C. S. Lewis, in *The Problem of Pain*, states firmly (in the interests of theodicy) that '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 be in the universe'.[4] I presume that he would



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have said the same about pleasure, or about quality of life. On the other hand, another theodicist, Richard Swinburne, in *The Existence of God*, argues (as against those who hold that God should create the best of all possible worlds, and hasn't) that there can be no best possible world, in reasoning which seems directly to contradict Lewis's. The goodness of such a world, he reasons, would include the existence of conscious beings enjoying it; and 'surely a world with a few more conscious beings in it' (also, of course, enjoying it, and without interfering with others' enjoyment) 'would be a yet more valuable world'.[5] In other words, enjoyments *can* be summed; and, as with Lewis, there seems no relevant difference between the summing of enjoyments and that of sufferings. Indeed, in a later book, Swinburne implies this, saying that 'the total quantitative requirement is that the expected value of allowing any bad state to occur should be positive; and if it is negative for a particular individual there must be enough compensation for that individual in this life, or the next life'.[6] Perhaps we could use Parfit's expression, 'quality of life', to cover equally enjoyments, sufferings, and combinations of the two (and of any other elements of good or evil we may wish to include.)

Parfit's own use of the arithmetical gives rise to problems, as he points out. It opens the way to his 'Repugnant Conclusion'. If a world A, enjoyed by conscious beings, can be exceeded in goodness by one which has *more* conscious beings, enjoying it to the same degree, it can also be exceeded in goodness by one whose inhabitants also enjoy it, though appreciably less, but who heavily outnumber those in the first. The process can be repeated indefinitely, until we have a world Z with a far greater population than A, but also a far lower level of enjoyment, where lives are not much above the level where life ceases to be worth living. Z is (it seems) to be preferred to A, a conclusion which surely few would agree with.[7]

Even if we do not go this far, consider A+, a world in which the same quality of life is enjoyed, and by the same number of people, as in A, but with the addition of a number of lives of lower quality. As this has all the goodness of A with some more besides, it is presumably better than A. But then consider world B, where there are twice as many people as in A. Everyone in B is a lot better off than the less happy group in A+, but less happy than those in A. B is it seems better than A+, for there is a greater total sum of happiness in it. But is B preferable to A, when everyone in it is less happy than anyone in A? Surely not.

Opponents of theodicy have also used this notion of summing. It figures extensively in Stephen Grover's criticism of Swinburne.[8] It would seem, Grover argues, that on Swinburnian principles we have to accept that Z and B really are better than A, which surely is just what Parfit called it, a 'Repugnant Conclusion'. This does not (Grover points out) mean that there necessarily is a best of all possible worlds; but it does mean that anyone rejecting the Repugnant Conclusion is debarred from using Swinburne's argument.

But the assumption apparently made by Parfit and Grover (and, one would have thought, implied by all talk of 'sums' of goods), that a numerical value could be

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given to qualities of life looks very doubtful. Certainly no-one has ever devised a formula for calculating such a value. But the idea has been explicitly defended. The question was raised and discussed nearly a hundred years ago by Rashdall,[9] who agreed that 'as a general rule our judgements about pleasure are expressed in the form of ''more'' or ''less'', not of so many times more or less'. But, he pointed out, two minutes of a given pleasure, other things being equal, could fairly be said to be twice as pleasant as one minute of it. And if I should rate one minute of one pleasure as just as good as two minutes of another, I may reasonably be said to regard the one as twice as pleasant as the other. In fact, Rashdall went further. Imagining somebody planning a treat for children, he suggested that, 'if it helped him … to express the value of the pleasure which each shilling expended in different ways would buy by assigning marks to each item and then totting them up, I do not see that there would be anything essentially unmeaning or irrational about his procedure'.[10]

But, of course, when one considers this proposal more closely, it shows strong signs, not perhaps of meaninglessness or irrationality, but of arbitrariness and unreliability. Does our philanthropist assign 10 to the pleasure given by a shillings worth of fireworks and 8 to that given by a shillings worth of cakes, or, instead, 11 and 9? Only, it seems, by an arbitrary fiat, which cannot be relied upon (especially as the children's tastes may differ). Again, how does he allow for the fact that a mixture of treats would probably be more acceptable than fireworks or cakes alone – except by means of another arbitrary fiat? And so on.

I suggest that in order to avoid these problems we take a closer look at the idea of adding goods (and evils). What is there to make us think that this ought to be possible? Rashdall's first example will give us a start. With this – the pleasure that lasts for two minutes rather than one – we are clearly comparing like with like. The two are plainly 'commensurable' (a word Rashdall himself uses when he goes on to discuss balancing pleasures against, say, virtue or culture). The pleasure is exactly the same in itself, and enjoyed by the same person.

I think this suggests what is wrong with Lewis's position. We *can* compare a situation where one person suffers pain or enjoys pleasure with one where two suffer or enjoy *the same* pain or pleasure, and conclude that the second is (twice) as bad or good, as the case may be. On the other hand, when we are dealing with quite different pains or pleasures, comparison becomes much harder. To adapt an example of Lewis Carroll's,[11] giving every person in the world a small pinprick, while deplorable, is not comparable to the torturing of just one person. Again, Parfit's A+ may safely be judged better than A, because it contains a common element (the people in A and their opposite numbers in A+) which is identical in both, plus an extra element which is itself good. (The same applies to Swinburne's similar process of improvement.)

It may help if we may consider a parallel which does not involve theodicy or quality of life. Let us imagine an art-collection, X, which contains, say, ten master-

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pieces by Titian. It seems clear that to add another Titian of the same quality would improve the collection. (This, I take to be the Swinburnian position.) Now suppose the collector adds a painting, still good, but of lesser status, by (say) Benjamin West. The collection (X+) still contains its eleven Titians. It is (according to Parfit's argument, and I see no reason to disagree) at least no worse a collection than it was. So far, so good.

But now the continued Parfit-style argument would ask us to consider a collection Y which contains twenty-four paintings by (shall we say) Van Dyck, all, we shall suppose, better than the West, but none as good as the Titians. We are asked to consider the possibility that this collection is of higher (or indeed lower) total quality than X. I am not clear that I can attribute any meaning to this. It would, of course, be perfectly possible to say that the average *monetary value* of Y was greater than that of X+ (which was in turn greater than that of X), or that its pictures occupied on average a greater area of canvas; for monetary value and area are both quantifiable. But artistic merit, to all appearances, is not. Quantitative comparison is indeed possible where the collections are of the same type, (as with X before and after the addition of the eleventh Titian). It is also possible if two collections have elements in common and if the elements not in common are comparable with one another. (For example, if X+ had added, not a West, but an Alma-Tadema, we could simply judge whether the West or the Alma-Tadema was the better.)

The same applies with worlds of people enjoying qualities of life, except that the situation is more complicated, and even harder to assign values to, because so many things contribute to quality of life. And at this point it is instructive to return to Rashdall, who, as we noted above, was well aware of these 'many things'. He distinguishes[12] between two ways in which it may be asserted that goods of different kinds are commensurable. 'It may mean that a certain amount of one good is regarded as a sufficient and satisfactory substitute for the other.' This, as he rightly decides, will not do. Quite apart from the problem of combinations of different goods in a single life, to say that, 'however much Virtue may be superior to Culture, a sufficient amount of Culture could be regarded as an entirely satisfactory compensation for the absence of all Virtue' would be ridiculous. But the 'commensurability' needed may only mean that when I can only secure for myself, or for someone else, a limited range of goods, I can and must decide which collection of goods I would rather secure.

Now this is of great interest. It suggests that the basic idea is not of summing a collection of goods, and then comparing this with another sum, but simply of comparing the collections directly and deciding which appears to be the better collection. It is perhaps significant that Moore (as far as I can tell) never uses this kind of 'arithmetic' in describing his own views, but speaks generally of the intrinsic value of wholes, between which we may be able to choose. Swinburne, again, describes the necessary 'weighing' of bad states against good ones in simi-

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lar terms: 'We need … to draw out what sort of a life we regard as on balance good for us'.[13] This illuminates Rashdall's second example, I think. It is not that I feel a pleasure twice as great in one case than the other, but that I judge that I should value equally one minute of the one and two minutes of the other; the choice comes first, and the arithmetical value is assigned as a result.

If this is correct, Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion is not forced on us. We may judge that world B is *not* to be preferred to A+; or rather, that it is not possible to describe the existence of B in the way that Parfit does. It is, of course, possible to conceive of a world where everyone is happier than the less happy people of A+, but less so that the people of A; but the idea of one in which people live lives '*more than half as much* worth living' is one that cannot get off the ground. We may, of course, judge that it would be better, if we had the power, to bring into existence a world B in which there are twice as many people as in A, though they do not have as high a quality of life as those in A; but it is on the basis of this judgment that we may, speaking rather carelessly, speak of the B lives as 'more than half as much worth living' as those of A. Not the other way round.

Where does this leave the utilitarians and theodicists with whom we began? We can offer both qualified help and qualified criticism. Classical utilitarianism seems to need the idea of a sum of pleasures and pains, and we have seen that this cannot be managed. On the other hand, the so-called 'ideal utilitarianism' of Moore and Rashdall himself, provided that it deals with the goodness of wholes and not the sum of goods, is not, I think, affected. Again, Lewis's argument, if it is intended to suggest that God need not concern Himself with *how many* of His creatures suffer, will not do. But Swinburne's argument, intended to show that there is no such things as a best of all possible worlds (and therefore no obligation on God to create it) will stand up against the criticisms of, e.g., Grover, whose argument requires the summing and averaging of goods in order to work; for no such processes are possible.

## Notes

1. G. E. Moore *Ethics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 13; author's italics.
2. Derek Parfit *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 386.
3. *Ibid*., 385, 419; author's italics.
4. C. S. Lewis *The Problem of Pain*, Fontana edn (London: Collins, 1957), 103–104.
5. Richard Swinburne *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 114.
6. *Idem Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 239.
7. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 385–388.
8. Stephen Grover 'Mere addition and the best of all possible worlds', *Religious Studies*, **35** (1999), 173.
9. Hastings Rashdall *The Theory of Good and Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), vol. 2, 23.
10. *Ibid*., 25.
11. Lewis Carroll 'Some popular fallacies about vivisection', *Fortnightly Review* (June 1875), reprinted in *Works*, R. L. Green (ed.) (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965), 1095.
12. Rashdall, *Theory of Good and Evil*, 38–39.
13. Swinburne *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 240.

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