

“Saving Lives and Statistical Deaths”

Rahul Kumar (Queen’s University)

Abstract

Faced with a choice between saving an individual from a very likely harm and preventing a similar harm from befalling a large number of others, each of whom is, at the time of choice, only at some low risk of that happening, most intuitively favour saving the person from the very likely harm. According to social psychologists, this is because ordinary moral reasoning displays an ‘identifiable person’ bias: we intuitively favour aiding the person we can identify as the one we will saving over doing what will save a large number of others from a similar fate, but who we can only identify under the description of ‘some proportion of a large population facing a low but non-negligible risk of harm’. Consequentialists argue that because this bias leads us away from saving as many as we can, it is morally indefensible. Many non-consequentialists hold, however, that the numbers do not always count. Relying on a familiar understanding of contractualist reasoning, they argue that there is a plausible non-consequentialist justification for saving the person now at great risk of harm, no matter how many can be saved by instead reducing the already lower risk of harm faced by a large number of currently unidentifiable others.

In this paper, I will argue that contractualist reasoning cannot be employed to support this surprising, and arguably implausible, conclusion. Quite the opposite: with respect to the choice in question, contractualist thinking always supports doing what is likely to result in minimizing the number harmed. But unlike consequentialism, it does not dismiss ‘identifiable person bias’ as a mere bias. Rather, it helps us isolate an important moral reason to which the ‘bias’ is a response, but whose relevance to what we morally ought to do is limited to a particular type of choice situation.