

Increasing Harm and Offsetting

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1 What's Wrong with Merely Increasing Harm?

SINGLE PLAYER, SINGLE VICTIM ZAPPING GAME:

- Three buttons:
 - o Up (+1, +\$20) o Down (-1, -\$20) o Exit
- Score: 7
- The higher the score, the more painful the zap
- Maximum 10 U and D presses

Question: Why is (UE) wrong?

Easy answer: doing harm (except in special cases) is wrong, and the U in (UE) does harm to the victim. (UE) violates the constraint against doing harm. (E) and (DE), on the other hand, do not involve any harming, only failures to prevent harm.

Why this answer isn't good enough: many of the permissible options have U's in them.

Impermissible	Permissible	Supererogatory
(UE)	(E)	(DE)
(UUE)	(UDE), (DUE)	(DDE)
(UUUE), (DUUE), (UUDE), ...	(DUDUE), (UUDDE), ...	(DDDE), (DUDE), (UDDE), ...
(UUUUE), (DUUUE), ...		(DDDDE), (UDDDE), ...

My suggestion: the old constraint against doing harm doesn't work for these cases, we should instead appeal to a constraint against unoffset harm increases.

But maybe these are 'special cases'?

2 Offsetting Skepticism

Alternative explanations:

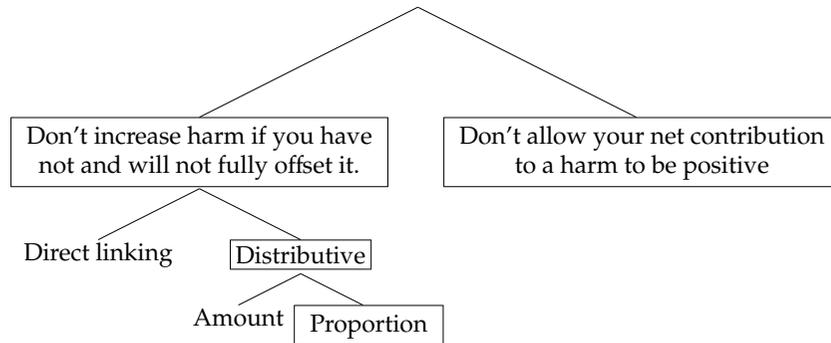
- (1) Moral balancing
(No. The harms aren't required for the benefits)
- (2) Compensation
(No. Harms can follow the benefits; ratio can be 1:1; multiple victim case)
- (3) Hypothetical Consent
(No. Doesn't help on its own; doesn't work when there's explicit non-consent)
- (4) Withdrawing Aid
(No. Irrelevant whether your decrease interacts with *your* increase, even if it's possible to identify such things)
- (5) Preventing of Would-be Harm
(No. Same reason)

On (4) and (5): Token version of the zapping game (or maybe better: U-stones and D-balloons).

Other options: deny permissibility of fully offset harm increases; become a consequentialist or something.

But if you don't want to do that, you should consider accepting. . .

3 A New Constraint



Problem: ‘offsetting’ between aspects of the same harm doesn’t seem permissible. (Probably can’t increase a pain’s intensity by decreasing its length by an amount that results in the pain’s being as bad as it would have been)

Revision: substitute “an aspect of a harm” in for “harm”.

But what are harm aspects, exactly? And why can’t we offset between them?

4 Deriving the Old Constraint

The new constraint is needed and can’t be derived from the old one, but the old one is derivable from the new one as a special case. So we can replace the old constraint with the new one.

The basic idea of the derivation is simple: standard harm-doing involves new harms or harm parts. It thus involves net positive contributions to aspects of harms, violating the new constraint.

Offsetting doesn’t work in ‘normal’ doings of harm because it’s impossible, not because it would fail to make the harm increases permissible if it could be done.

5 Future Work?

Potentially related issues:

- overdetermined harms
- underdetermination and harms to ‘statistical people’ (Hare)
- collective harms and responsibility
- Actualism and Possibilism about choices between parts of complex alternatives (Prof. Procrastinate, etc.); more generally: relations between deontic status of complex acts and that of their parts.

Theory:

- More on the details of the constraint (and the notions it involves, like harm aspects), and how it can be justified.
- Do we really have a good account of permissible offsetting in the Multiple Victims case (p. 13) yet?
- Required beneficent offsetting?

Suppose benefiting oneself by making a net neutral contribution to a harm, like (DUE) is permissible only when abstaining (E) is. There are cases where it seems that (E) is impermissible, like when we have “Up +1 \$20” and “Down -1 -\$5”. You shouldn’t play (E), since (UUDDDDDDDD) leaves you just as well off but greatly reduces a harm, and (UUUDDDDDDDD) benefits you and greatly decreases a harm. But then if we were right that if (DUE) is permissible then (E) is, then (DUE), as well as other net neutral contributions, would be impermissible. What plays are permissible in this kind of setup? (I have some suspicion that the distinction between harming or increasing harm and failing to benefit or decrease harm may end up breaking down once we think through series of cases like this.) And supposing that the benefits to you are transferable, and that you can help the victim after the game ends, must you use at least some of it to help or compensate them?

Applications:

- carbon offsets
- meat offsets
- offsetting political/economic injustice