Still Lives for Headaches:
A reply to Dorsey and Voorhoeve

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There is no large number of very small bads that is worse than a small number of very large bads – or so, some maintain, it seems plausible to say. In this article, I criticize and reject two recently proposed vindications of the above intuition put forth by Dale Dorsey and Alex Voorhoeve. Dorsey advocates for a threshold marked by the interference with a person's global life projects: any bad that interferes with the satisfaction of a life project is worse than any number of bads that don't interfere with such a life project. Such thresholds, I argue, are broadly implausible. Voorhoeve gives a contractualist account for the irrelevance of minor bads. His account, I argue, does not, among other things, provide the right kind of reason in defence of the above intuition.

I. INTRODUCTION

Spring is coming around and, as always at this time of year, I feel this slight pressure in my head right after I wake up; barely noticeable but uncomfortable nevertheless. It turns out that a lot of people feel this way at this time of year. Wouldn't the world be a better place if none of us had those headaches in exchange for one person's headaches being just slightly worse? At least as far as headaches go, this would be a good thing.

This line of reasoning generalizes. For virtually all disvaluable[1] states there is some slightly better – but still bad – state enough of which is worse than a single one of the former states. This train of thought quite naturally leads to the conclusion that there is some large number of minor bads (e.g. minor headaches) that outweighs (i.e. is worse than) a small number of large bads (e.g. the premature death of a young person). Call this the 'lives for headaches' conclusion. Many find this conclusion unpalatable and have set out to show how it can be resisted. In this article, I criticize and reject two recent attempts to resist the 'lives for headaches' conclusion.

Before arguing for anything, however, let me note that the denial of the 'lives for headaches' conclusion is *not a desideratum* in normative ethics; i.e. a theory's being consistent with 'lives for headaches' does not constitute a *reductio* of that theory. After all, intuitions about the lives-vs-headaches problem are not entirely uniform. John Broome

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[1] 'disvaluable', for the purposes of this article, means 'possessive of negative value'.

and Alastair Norcross[2] argue that numerous headaches can, in fact, outweigh a good human life; Alex Voorhoeve, Dale Dorsey, and Larry Temkin[3] argue against this conclusion. Therefore, if the best arguments against 'lives for headaches' fail, then this provides some evidence that we should embrace this seemingly unwelcome conclusion; it does not merely indicate that the solution has yet to be found.

In section II, I will first set out the puzzle in greater detail, and then go on to discuss and criticize an intuitively plausible solution advanced by Dale Dorsey.[4] In section III, I present and criticize Alex Voorhoeve's argument against the aggregation of minor claims.

II. DORSEY'S THRESHOLD VIEW

Here is a seemingly plausible argument that has as its conclusion that a large number of just slightly disvaluable states outweighs the badness of a small number of grossly disvaluable states. Dale Dorsey states this argument as follows:

P1 – Badness. A headache is bad.

P2 – Aggregation. Bads can be aggregated across people.

P3 – Continuity. For every bad x, there is a bad of lesser weight y, enough of which will outweigh the disvalue of x.

P4 – Transitivity. If A is worse than B, and B is worse than C, then A is worse than C.

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Conclusion – Lives for Headaches. There is some number of mild headaches such that the relief of those headaches is sufficient to outweigh the good life of an innocent person.[5]

John Broome points out that *Continuity* is too weak in the context of this argument.[6] His reasoning is this: consider an infinitely long chain of events, {$E1, E2, E3, \ldots$}. Suppose each event '$En + 1$' is worse than En. If the increasing badness of these states is correctly described by a

    [2] John Broome, 'No Argument against the Continuity of Value: Reply to Dorsey', *Utilitas* 22.4 (2010), pp. 494–6, and Alastair Norcross, 'Comparing Harms: Headaches and Human Lives', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 26.2 (1997), pp. 135–67.
    [3] Alex Voorhoeve, 'How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?', *Ethics* 125.1 (2014), pp. 64–87; Dale Dorsey, 'Headaches, Lives and Value', *Utilitas* 21.1 (2009), pp. 36–58; Dale Dorsey, 'Preferences, Welfare, and the Status-quo Bias', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88.3 (2010), pp. 535–54; Larry S. Temkin, 'Intransitivity and the Mere Addition Paradox', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 16.2 (1987), pp. 138–87.
    [4] Dorsey, 'Headaches, Lives and Value'.
    [5] Dorsay, 'Headaches, Lives and Value'.
    [6] Broome, 'No Argument against the Continuity of Value: Reply to Dorsey', p. 495.

function that approaches an asymptote, then, although the chain of bad events is infinite, there could be some bad states (i.e. the ones beyond the asymptote) that are not part of the chain. This point, I take it, is correct. It pinpoints a formal glitch in Dorsey's argument. However, it does not present a case against the spirit of the argument. An explicit, continuous chain supporting Dorsey's challenge can be constructed. Here is a slightly abbreviated version:

Dorsey's Chain

$S1$ The premature death of a young, innocent person.

⋮

$S7$ Having a serious migraine 7 days a week.

$S8$ Having a serious migraine 6 days a week.

$S9$ Having a serious migraine 5 days a week.

⋮

$S14$ Having a serious migraine 1 day a week.

⋮

$S25$ Having a barely noticeable headache 1 day a week.

⋮

Slast Having a barely noticeable headache for 1 minute just once.[7]

The problem, then, is this: on the one hand, it seems intuitive that *there is no number of Slasts that is worse than a single $S1$.*[8] On the other hand, the above argument seems to entail that there is some number of *Slast*s that is worse than a single $S1$ (i.e. that *Lives for Headaches* is true). Let me illustrate how the argument would achieve this. If *Dorsey's Chain* is continuous, then for each state Sn there is some number of $Sn+1$s that is worse than Sn. If this reasoning holds for each two *adjacent* states in *Dorsey's Chain*, then, given *Transitivity*, it must hold for far-away states (e.g. $S1$ and *Slast*) as well. Consider the following statements to be an illustration of this problem:

(1)   10 people suffering from $S8$ is worse than one person suffering from $S7$.

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[7] A similar chain can be found in Larry S. Temkin, *Rethinking the Good: Moral Ideals and the Nature of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford, 2011).

[8] For instance, Dorsey says: '[b]oth headaches and deaths are intrinsically bad. But death is worse. In fact, saving someone from death is lexically prior in value to the relief of headaches. In other words, though headaches are bad, no amount of headaches equal the badness of death' (Dorsey, 'Headaches, Lives and Value', p. 39).

(2)   100 people suffering from $S9$ is worse than 10 people suffering from $S8$.

Furthermore, given *Transitivity* (see above) it follows that:

(3)   100 people suffering from $S9$ is worse than one person suffering from $S7$.

If the reasoning illustrated in (1), (2) and (3) generalizes over the entire chain, then it is indeed hard to see how one can avoid the conclusion *Lives for Headaches*.[9]

Dale Dorsey intends to show how this conclusion can be resisted, by showing that the above chain is *not*, in fact, continuous: any bad state that interferes with 'the fulfillment of global plans'[10] is 'strongly inferior'[11] to any state that does not interfere in this way. A state S is said to be strongly inferior to some other state S^* if *no number* of S^*s is jointly worse than even a single S.

Of course, as indicated, not any old plan counts. My plan to take out the garbage does not count. Rather, plans that count are 'global' plans that are 'genuinely endorsed' and that are issued in 'full awareness'.[12] These are 'major plans, projects and relationships that characterize an agent's whole life or significant segments of an agent's whole life'.[13] Examples of such life projects include, for instance, becoming a philosopher, or becoming a trombone player.

The fact that Dorsey focuses on projects and not on quantities of one's lifespan is instructive. An account that renders any bad that shortens life by just a tiny bit strongly inferior to any other bad that does not have such an effect is wildly implausible. It is implausible, say, that 'any extension of a person's life, however short, is better than improving the life by letting the person see the Northern Lights'.[14] Dorsey avoids these unintuitive consequences by focusing on life *projects* rather than quantities of life. Life projects, arguably, don't come in quantities. By definition, such projects are discrete and have rather large scope.

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[9] This problem is by no means a recent invention. In the influential 1978 article 'Innumerate Ethics' Derek Parfit notices that aggregating claims across people leads to a Lives for Headaches-type conclusion. See Derek Parfit, 'Innumerate Ethics', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 7.4 (1978), pp. 285–301.

[10] Dorsey, 'Headaches, Lives and Value', p. 42.

[11] Dorsey, 'Headaches, Lives and Value', p. 46.

[12] Dorsey, 'Headaches, Lives and Value', p. 42.

[13] Dorsey, 'Headaches, Lives and Value', p. 43.

[14] James Griffin, *Well-being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance* (Oxford, 1986).

Let's move to objections. Consider again *Dorsey's Chain* from above:

Dorsey's Chain
$S1 \ldots S7, S8, S9, \ldots, S14, \ldots, S27, \ldots, Slast$

States such as $S1$ (i.e. death) and $S7$ (i.e. extensive migraine) are strongly inferior to *Slast* (i.e. minor headache). According to Dorsey, this is because premature death and migraines interfere with one's global plans, but mild headaches do not interfere in this way.

However, defending the strong inferiority between the first and last links in *Dorsey's Chain* by distinguishing them with regard to life project interference is hardly enough. Strong inferiority should also hold between at least one pair of *adjacent* states one of which is marked by life project interference, while the other is not. In other words, strong inferiority should also hold between the *worst* non-life project interfering state and the *most benign* life project interfering state; but this just looks much less plausible. Consider the following case:

Bob the Trombonist
Bob's genuinely endorsed life project is becoming a trombone player. Ann is faced with a decision to push either the red or the green button. Pushing the red button will (*a*) cause Bob to have horrible trombone-noise related headaches. As a result, he won't be able to become a trombone player; the trombone is simply too loud. He will reorient and become a flute player instead, which is his second favourite choice. Pushing the green button will (*b*) make every person experience headaches of varying strength. All these headaches are a little short of interfering with each person's most seriously endorsed life plans. People with few plans will have quite strong headaches; people whose plans are mostly related to summer travelling will experience strong headaches the rest of the year etc. Not pushing any button will realize both outcomes (*a*) & (*b*).

Not much seems to be lost if Bob doesn't get his favourite choice. However, the bad introduced by the headaches seems quite severe. It is overwhelmingly plausible that Ann should push the red button. Perhaps, it might be thought, we should amend Dorsey's account, ruling out the idea that Bob's choosing his second favourite option constitutes interference with his life plans. Perhaps we should say that what makes a state strongly inferior to some other state is that it prohibits one from achieving *any* life projects whatsoever; not just the ones one actually happens to have. This proposal will not work either, as the following example will show:

Bob's Migraines
Bob's genuinely endorsed life project is becoming a trombone player.
Ann is faced with a decision to push either the red or the green
button. Pushing the red button will (*a*) cause Bob to have horrible
migraines. As a result, he won't be able to become a trombone player
or take up any job etc.; rather, he'll live a miserable life. Pushing
the green button will (*b*) make every person experience very strong
headaches. These headaches will make everyone give up *almost* all of
their seriously endorsed life projects. However, these people will still
be able to pursue *at least one* of their seriously endorsed life projects.
Not pushing any button will realize both outcomes (*a*) & (*b*).

I think it is obvious that it is not reasonable for Ann to push the
green button. Billions of people having to give up almost all of their
projects is clearly the worse option. The general problem with Dorsey's
proposal is this: wherever we set the cut-off point in *Dorsey's Chain*
based on the fact that life projects of varying intensity are being
interfered with, it just isn't plausible that two adjacent states stand in
the strong inferiority relation. The examples *Bob the Trombonist* and
Bob's Migraines are an illustration of this point. A forceful way to make
the point more broadly is by way of constructing a chain analogous to
Dorsey's Chain that takes interfered life projects as its values:

Chain of Upset Life Projects
One most seriously endorsed life project thwarted $\prec$[15] One quite
seriously endorsed life project thwarted $\prec$ ... $\prec$ One quite
unimportant life project thwarted.

In *Chain of Upset Life Projects*, it becomes apparent that each two
adjacent states do not stand in the strong inferiority relation. This
entails that for all candidate notions of 'life project interference' it will
always be implausible that one life project interference of a certain
magnitude is strongly inferior to, say, a million life project interferences
of a slightly lesser magnitude. *Chain of Upset Life Projects* reinstates
the original problem; it does not provide its solution.

One might suspect that these problems are due to vagueness.
One may wish to argue that terms such as 'seriously endorsed life
project' are vague; i.e. for some things it is not determinately true or
false whether they are (or aren't) a 'seriously endorsed life project'.
Accordingly, one may wish to argue that in *Dorsey's Chain* there is
no determinate threshold we can set such that the states on the left-
hand side of the threshold clearly interfere with one's projects and the

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[15] Let '$\prec$' stand for 'is worse than'.

states on the right-hand side do not. However, the defence continues, problems of vagueness are notorious, and, therefore, not specific to Dorsey's account.

Vagueness, I think, is not the problem. Reconsider, for instance, *Bob the Trombonist*. Bob's trombone-noise-related headaches make him choose his second-best option (i.e. to become a flute player). It turns out that there are lots of *much less bad* states a great number of which would outweigh the badness of Bob choosing his second-best option. Consider, for instance, one million people experiencing serious migraines for one month. It is easy to imagine that all of these people's seriously endorsed life plans are *determinately* not being interfered with. Nevertheless, we would not judge that Bob's not realizing his preferred plan trumps one million people's experiencing disastrous migraines for a month.

That said, from an intuitive standpoint, Dorsey's solution to the puzzle seemed compelling. But despite its intuitive appeal, Dorsey's account cannot withstand thorough reflection. I argued that Dorsey's theory requires strong superiority between two adjacent links in *Dorsey's Chain*. This, however, is implausible. I further demonstrated that the problems associated with this view are not due to vagueness. In the next section, I will analyse and reject Alex Voorhoeve's rejection of P2 of the above argument.

III. VOORHOEVE'S ARGUMENT FROM PERMISSIBLE SELF-CONCERN

In his 2014 article 'How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?' Alex Voorhoeve argues that not all moral claims can be aggregated, thereby denying P2 of the above argument.[16] Voorhoeve gives a broadly contractualist rationale for the irrelevance of a certain claim: it is justified to deem claims irrelevant in an allocation case, if this can be reasonably explained to the parties whose claims are deemed irrelevant. In this section, I will present and criticize Voorhoeve's argument.

Voorhoeve holds that when weighing competing claims, only those that are 'sufficiently strong relative to the strongest competing claim'

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[16] Another case against aggregation is put forth by Samantha Brennan, 'Moral Lumps', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 9.3 (2006), pp. 249–63. Her basic thought is that certain minor bads don't 'lump' together to outweigh larger bads. However, unlike Voorhoeve, she does not give a rationale against lumping. Furthermore, in *Dorsey's Chain* enough instances of one bad do, at least prima facie, lump together to outweigh the next state in the chain. For these reasons I won't focus my discussion on her doubts concerning aggregation.

are 'relevant';[17] and only relevant claims figure in aggregation. Aggregation refers to the process of conjoining a number of claims to produce a stronger claim. Note that claims, on this picture, are not aggregatable or non-aggregatable *per se*; rather, certain claims don't aggregate when held against much stronger claims.

Of course, he owes a rationale for the distinction between relevant and irrelevant claims. According to Voorhoeve, an irrelevant claim is one that it would be impermissible for an agent to satisfy even if this claim were *this agent's own claim*. Here is a simple example in illustration of this point. Suppose Ann is faced with a decision to either alleviate headaches in 10,000,000 people or let a person die. Now she should ask herself 'Would it be permissible for me to alleviate *my* headache if it entailed letting another person die?'. Presumably, Ann's claim to have her headache alleviated is not strong enough to justify letting one person die. In a broad range of cases, it is permissible to favour one's own claim over those of others. However, intuitively, there is a limit to the 'permissible degree of self-concern'.[18] Allegedly, this limit explains why certain claims cannot be aggregated.

Voorhoeve's account is appealing from an extensional standpoint. After all, the philosophical problem discussed in this article is that there is no number of *very minor* disvaluable states that outweighs the badness of a *severely* bad state. In congruence with this diagnosis, permissible self-concern stretches quite far; only when my own claim is *very* weak and your claim is *very* strong am I not morally permitted to favour the satisfaction of my own claim. Of course, extensional correctness is but a necessary condition for the plausibility of Voorhoeve's account. Still, we'd also want a *rationale* for why permissible self-concern justifies non-aggregation.

Voorhoeve's account is broadly contractualist. He first argues that his account can explain why there should be unanimous agreement concerning the way claims are weighed in the relevant cases.

From the permissible personal perspective of someone with the very weak claim, the satisfaction of the competing very strong claim will take priority over the satisfaction of her own claim . . . . From his personal perspective, his claim to be saved from death takes priority over a stranger's claim to be saved from very minor harm.[19]

Therefore, everybody will agree with the prioritization of the stronger claim. I think it is true that, when comparing weak claims to very strong claims, it can be unanimously agreed upon that the strong claims take

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[17] Voorhoeve, 'How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?', p. 66.
[18] Voorhoeve, 'How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?', p. 74.
[19] Voorhoeve, 'How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?', p. 73.

priority. However, this does not need to be a function of permissible prioritization of one's own claims. Suppose, say, a resource allocator, call her 'A', had to make a decision between either saving B's arm, or C's life. Presumably, if B had to make this decision it would be permissible for him to save his own arm. However, even B can agree that A is justified in prioritizing C's over A's claim. B should realize that special reasons based on permissible self-concern don't apply to A. The resource allocator is not bound by those special reasons, because it is *not her own* arm that she has to make a decision about. This point has been forcefully emphasized by Parfit, who argues that certain potential losses can be prioritized if they are *your own* losses.[20] Accordingly, if B is rational, one would expect him to realize that A is not bound by reasons related to permissible self-concern.[21]

Lastly, Voorhoeve argues that his solution

allows for a powerful explanation to a person whose claim is judged irrelevant. For one cannot complain that one's claim is not satisfied by an impartial third party when it would not even fall within one's personal prerogative to satisfy it oneself if no moral considerations apart from the minimally required concern for the stranger's well-being stood in one's way.[22]

This argument, it seems to me, begs the question. If my own claims aren't strong enough to justify satisfying my own interests straight away, then this could possibly explain why an impartial third party should not satisfy my claim *straight away* or give both claims *equal* weight. However, it does not entail that an impartial third party should not give it *proportional* weight. Analogously, why would it not be permissible for me to give my weak claim *proportional* weight? Why would I not be permitted to flip an *extremely* biased coin in such a conflict situation? The answer, presumably, is that this would be impermissible because my claim is irrelevant. This shows that Voorhoeve's argument *relies* on the idea of irrelevance of certain claims, rather than explaining it.

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[20] Parfit, 'Innumerate Ethics', p. 287. Similarly, Francis Kamm argues that harms that seem *subjectively* equivalent (e.g. my arm and your life) are not *objectively* equivalent (Frances Kamm, 'Précis of *Morality, Mortality*, vol. 1: Death and Whom to Save from It', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58.4 (1998), pp. 939–45). The resource allocator, however, is bound only by the objective considerations, not by the subjective considerations.

[21] Note that the fact that the resource allocator is not bound by special self-concern-related reasons B would have is not to prescribe any particular way A should go about her decisions. All that is important right now is that B should realize that A is not bound by any reasons constituted by permissible self-concern.

[22] Voorhoeve, 'How Should We Aggregate Competing Claims?', p. 74.

IV. CONCLUSION

Many philosophers hold that there is no number of mild headaches the alleviation of which could outweigh the disvalue constituted by the premature end of a good life. In this article, I have discussed and rejected two recent defences of this intuition. As indicated above, rejecting *Lives for Headaches* is not a desideratum in normative theory; in fact, many have embraced this conclusion. Therefore, the iterated failure of all arguments against it makes it all the more evident that we may need to settle in with the seemingly unintuitive idea that the disvalue of a large number of very small bads can outweigh the disvalue constituted by a small number of very large bads.[23]

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