Review of "Rethinking The Good: Moral Ideals and the Nature of Practical Reasoning"

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Book Review | Rethinking The Good: Moral Ideals and the Nature of Practical Reasoning

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Titles are a slippery thing, indeed. One might get the impression, given the title of Larry Temkin’s new book Rethinking The Good, that you are digging into a hefty tome that breaks apart and scrutinizes modern moral philosophy, but you’d only be partially right. The subtitle Moral Ideals and Practical Reasoning swings the book’s largest goal into focus: an analysis and reconsideration of practical reason, broadly, and the logic of transitivity, narrowly. This is very much a specialist work of philosophy, and an excellent one, but casual readers who expect to see Temkin taking on the main moral theories that rule the day will be left wanting. His project, building on over a decade’s worth of work following his 1993 book Inequality (but also reaching back to the beginnings of his graduate studies at Princeton in the late 1970s), shares the overarching quest for an understanding of practical reasoning and ‘the good’ with Derek Parfit, and Parfit’s shadow, including his criticisms of Temkin’s view of transitivity, looms large over the whole of the book. Readers will find many of Parfit’s most famous arguments from Reasons and Persons being revisited, challenged, and critiqued here, including the Mere Addition Paradox, the Repugnant Conclusion, and Hells One Two and Three. The intellectual back-and-forth between Parfit and Temkin is, in itself, quite fun to try to follow. But don’t assume that Rethinking The Good is merely an attempt to out-Parfit Parfit … there is much to recommend this book, for those interested in normative ethics, metaethics, theories of practical reason, decision theory, economics, and logic. In what follows, I will offer a brief overview of the overall project of the book, followed by a short synopsis of each of the core chapters, and, finally, I conclude with some comments and criticism. The intellectual core of the book is Temkin’s

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concern with the logic of a certain form of “all-things-considered better than” transitivity. As he describes it, the view of transitivity being questioned here is of this basic form:

“All-things-considered better than transitivity:” In a relationship of this type: “if \( a \) is better than \( b \), and \( b \) is better than \( c \), then \( a \) is better than \( c \),” then (all things considered) is \( A \) is a better outcome than \( B \) and \( B \) is a better outcome than \( C \), then \( A \) is a better outcome than \( C \).

So, for instance, if I find fish to be a better choice than chicken, and I find chicken to be a better choice than steak, then I should prefer fish to steak, if given an option between those three dinners. Temkin notes that some thinkers (most notably Parfit in his Mere Addition Paradox) find it necessary to give up one of the premises that lead to a conclusion of the sort “\( a \) is better than \( b \), and \( b \) is better than \( c \), but \( c \) is better than \( a \).” Temkin’s response, to challenge the core idea of transitivity, is a bold philosophical move and one, he notes, that has been rejected by such philosophical heavyweights as Parfit, Tom Nagel, and T.M. Scanlon.

Transitivity, understood as such, is a fairly commonly held logical and normative position. Temkin claims that he is no longer trying to challenge the notion of transitivity in toto, as he has tried to do in the past, but to instead show that transitivity is incompatible with several other commonly held assumptions. The commonly held assumptions that cannot all stand together, despite the fact that each is intuitively plausible on their own, are the following four:

The First Standard View (FSV): in general, an outcome where a larger number of people have a lower quality benefit is better than an outcome where a smaller number of people have a higher quality benefit IF the number receiving the lower quality benefit is sufficiently greater than the number receiving the higher quality benefit and IF the differences in the initial situations of the people benefited and the degrees to which they are benefitted are not “too” great. (30)

The Second Standard View (SSV): if the quality of one kind of benefit is ‘sufficiently’ low and the quality of another kind of benefit is ‘sufficiently’ high, then an outcome in which a relatively small number of people received a higher quality benefit would be better than one in which virtually any number of (otherwise) similarly situated people receive the lower quality benefit. (32)

The transitivity of the all-things-considered-better-than relationship. Spectrum Arguments: The plausible assumption that there could be a spectrum of benefits ranging from the very great to the very minor.
According to Temkin, it is intuitively plausible to accept each of these four views individually, but taken together, they become contradictory and problematic. What needs to be jettisoned, or at least reconfigured, is the principle of transitivity. The example that is given to prepare us for the rejection is one that asks us to consider a series of cases that range from intense short-term torture to long-term but mild discomfort. This version of a Spectrum Argument, The Torture-To-Limp scenario, goes as follows:

Imagine a scale of uncomfortable experiences, ranging from level of 1, the discomfort of a mosquito bite to a level of 100, extreme torture. Suppose a moderately uncomfortable limp is an 11 - significantly worse than a mosquito bite, but not nearly as bad as extreme torture. Start with a choice between A, level 100 discomfort for two days or B, level 80 discomfort for four days. B’s discomfort is 20 percent less than A’s, but lasts twice as long. Many believe A is better than B. Next, compare B to C, where C stands to B as B stands to A. C is 20 percent less intense than B, level 64, but lasts twice as long, eight days. Again, many think B is better than C. The tenth choice would be between J, discomfort level of 13.4 for 1024 days and K, discomfort of level 11 for 2048 days. Again, many would think J is better than K. Given these rankings, the transitivity of ‘better than’ entails that A is better than K…” (158)

So, according to Temkin, we see that transitivity tells us the A > B > C … J > K. But, he says, if asked to choose one of the options for someone he loved (and given the condition that, regardless of the choice, there would be no lasting psychological effects on the person outside of the given physical suffering), he would choose a mildly painful but eventually-corrected limp for 5.6 years (K) over intense-but-short-torture (A). If Temkin is right, then it seems like the chain of transitive relationships is either subject to some sort of secondary analysis, or there is a point where transitivity ‘breaks off,’ or that the basic idea of ‘all-things-considered’ transitivity fails to tell the whole story. Temkin favors the third option, and this is the strand of argument that runs through the book. Temkin ties the logical conclusions of this failure of rationality to morality by raising serious problems for an important position in moral theory: total utilitarianism. The book is not designed as a criticism of any particular moral theory, however, but it does seem to be the case that total utilitarians tend to accept the conditions that make up the standard view.

This is a massive book, and each of the chapters deserves a much more detailed analysis than I will be able to give them here, but I will summarize, briefly the core ideas of each chapter here. Chapter One, along with the preface and introduction, offer a roadmap for the book’s arguments. In Chapter Two, he details several important intuitive positions (“Standard Views”) and explores the most common aggregationist and anti-aggregationist
views available. In overly simplified terms, an aggregationist view would say that, more utility is better. Adding more lives to the world, even if those lives were miserable, would be preferable than not, since even miserable lives contain some utility. And the anti-aggregationist view challenges this claim by claiming that there are cases where the total amount of utility might be increased, but the overall results might not be improved. He also presents the framework of the Spectrum Arguments that become crucial to his rejection of transitivity as the book progresses.

In Chapter Three, Temkin develops an alternative to the standard views, a “new” principle of aggregation called the Dispense Additional Burdens view, which allows trade-offs of benefits and burdens depending on the circumstances and the numbers of people affected. Chapter Four argues that we should reject Sidgwick’s account of self-interest, and that anti-aggregative arguments apply both within lives and between lives. Chapter Five continues the argument about lives, showing that there are intuitively plausible reasons to accept both aggregative and anti-aggregative arguments WITHIN lives. It is here that he also continues to draw conclusions from the Torture-to-Limp Spectrum Argument previously mentioned. Chapters Four and Five are meant to rebut the objection that arguments of the sort Temkin is making are only applicable within the framework of one life, or, alternatively, are only applicable when comparing distinct lives. According to him, they apply to both equally.

Chapters Six and Seven (close to 80 pages combined) do yeoman’s work of presenting the traditional arguments for transitivity, and the standard set of objections and replies. Chapter Six exposes the various problems of transitivity, including the problem of comparing options, global-vs-local reasoning, and the practical semantics of ‘better-than’ claims. Chapter Seven delves deeper into the moral implications of transitivity, and considers recent work by John Broome, F.M. Kamm, and T.M. Scanlon on moral goodness and ‘buck-passing’ arguments about the right and good. Chapter Eight explores possible conflicts between expected utility/expected value theory and the principle of transitivity. If something must go, Temkin leans toward jettisoning transitivity, but he also notes that Expected Value Theory (which he admits being a “fan” of) might, even if it were the best theory available, be deeply flawed or morally problematic. In Chapter Nine, he considers some possible problems with the Spectrum Arguments that he rests much of his case upon, and disposes of claims that they fall victim to versions of the Sorites Paradox or similarity heuristics.

Chapter Ten brings the final section of the book into view, and moral ideals begin to come to the forefront. After broad-based discussion about the good and overall utility, Chapter Ten introduces a Capped Model for Utility (contrasted with the Standard Model) that doesn’t strictly limit the assessment of moral outcomes to utility alone, but allows for value pluralism by incorporating other moral ideals (equality, maximin, perfectionism, autonomy,
virtue, friendship, achievements, family, respect all get mentioned as options). Here, Temkin wants to acknowledge the anti-aggregationist view that merely adding more total utility might not lead to a better overall outcome, particularly if the utility added would increase, for example, inequality. The Capped Model, says Temkin, allows us to avoid Parfit’s Repugnant Conclusion without rejecting Utility Theory in toto.5 Chapter Eleven tackles Parfit’s Mere Addition Paradox, which seems to show a failure of transitivity (where option A is better than option B, and option B is better than option A+, BUT somehow option A+ is NOT worse than option A). The chapter then dissects two distinct ways of comparing outcome goodness: the Internal Aspects View and the Essentially Comparative View. Temkin argues that the air of paradox in the Mere Addition case is caused by an intuitive acceptance of the Internal Aspects View (where all of the value of an outcome is fixed solely by the internal features of the outcome itself) instead of the Essentially Comparative View (where the value of an outcome is based both on internal features AND by the other possible outcomes it might compared with). Under an Internal Aspects View where utility is the benchmark, for example, three options are compared and evaluated only how much expected utility they would bring. But in an Essentially Comparative View, we must evaluate multiple possible outcomes, compare them, and we may find that certain options will rank higher in terms of utility but lower in terms of equality, or perfection, and this will alter their all-things-considered sense of goodness.

Chapter Twelve concludes the discussion of moral ideals by considering the Person-Affecting and Impersonal Views and considers the interesting metaphysical problem of people-who-don’t-exist yet.6 The chapter continues to push for the Essentially Comparative View, in place of the Internal Aspects View, by connecting commonly accepted moral and rational principles (maximin, Pareto, utility) to the Essentially Comparative View. Chapter Thirteen moves back from morality to the more general issue of transitivity, and considers four possible ways to try to preserve the transitivity of ‘all-things-considered-better-than.’ The most interesting of these is what he calls The Sports Analogy, which points out that Team A might be the best team in the league but still lose consistently to Team B (the worst) and Team C (the second worst).

In the concluding chapter, Temkin wraps up the book by highlighting some of his overall arguments and conclusions, surveying some possible combinations of views that might be held as a result of his analysis, taking on the issue of accepting possibly incredible and/or inconsistent views, examining the possibility of moral dilemmas, looking at the potential skepticism that might arise from his arguments, and, finally, offering a few closing notes. The most telling concluding comment is his own admission that he has chosen not to take a stand on which combination of views is the right one. In the end, the book has left us with good reason to doubt our traditional conception of practical reason and our standard approaches to moral thinking, but Temkin goes no further.
Following the concluding chapter, the book provides readers with an additional wealth of material, including six appendices that take on, in greater detail, specific arguments raised in earlier chapters that might have been tangential to the chapter itself, but are explicated for completeness in these extended footnotes. The seventh appendix offers a 16-page summary of the overall content of the book. Along with a detailed index, there is a helpful (and separate) list of the over one hundred cases and examples used, and then an even more helpful glossary list of principles and views discussed in the text.

My commentary on the book will be focused on three main lines of criticism, although many of these criticisms are not direct challenges to Temkin’s own claims, but questions about where these claims will lead us.

**Intuitions and Experiences**

Throughout the book, references are made to intuitive responses that people (in general) have and that the author (in particular) has to particular scenarios, theories, and cases. For instance, Temkin’s own take on the Torture-To-Limp Scenario is that he would choose, for his loved one, 5.6 years of an uncomfortable limp over two days of intense torture. He doesn’t want to rest the whole of the case on this choice, but he argues for its coherence for several pages. In 1.3, he defends the use of intuitions as the ‘starting point for moral theory’ but in other places, he notes that nothing firmly rests on intuitions because they are subject to revision, confusion, alteration (sometimes by Reflective Equilibrium) and that they are often unreliable when it comes to our ability to comprehend big numbers (pp. 119-123). It seems like Temkin wants a little too much from intuitions, at times, and shrugs them aside at other points as being nothing more than starting points for moral thought. But if the Torture-To-Limp scenario is as central to the story as it seems (it recurs repeatedly throughout the book), it would be good to know how he would reply to someone who says “I would prefer to have my child suffer intense (but immediately forgotten and leaving no lasting physical effects) torture for two days rather than to suffer a mild limp (which will also eventually heal and be forgotten) for 5.6 years.” I fail to see how the choice of torture, which would preserve transitivity, is illogical or irrational in the sense that Temkin seems to find it.

Related to this issue is Temkin’s claim (303) that people’s intuitive judgments about cases like his are ‘extremely strong and not easily dislodged’ and are not heuristically generated moral reasons but are, instead, ‘fast, automatic, effortless, associative’ intuitive methods of moral reasoning. But this leaves Temkin open to criticism when the intuitions themselves end up conflicting. How do we develop strong footholds for moral claims based on
intuitions when Temkin chooses K and I choose A? Reflective equilibrium might be a reasonable option, but my acceptance of A (and transitivity) and his acceptance of K (and the rejection of transitivity) might put us in an unbreakable deadlock.

Thirdly, I would be interested to see (although I do not hold it against Temkin that he didn’t canvass the data on these questions) what the empirically driven “experimental philosophy” contingent could tell us about these issues. It might be useful to see, for instance, what ‘the folk’ have to say about Torture-to-Limp. It would be helpful to see how ‘the folk’ respond to aggregationism and anti-aggregationism as the cases are altered. And it would be very interesting to know what ‘the folk’ think of transitivity, in general, and about some of Temkin’s cases, in particular. Much discussion will be generated by this book, and I expect that good, experimentally minded philosophers will begin to run surveys on these intuitions, which might bring more fruit to the overall project.

Finally, I was left puzzled this comment: “I am not making claims about how people would psychologically react if they actually lived a life containing two years of intense torture, or how they would actually psychologically evaluate such a lived experience in comparison with the lived experience, were it possible, of countless years of a mosquito bite. I am asking how we should, normatively, evaluate the two pain episodes” (311, my emphasis). While I might be reading too much into these two sentences, it seems like the actual phenomenological results of torture should be deeply relevant to our normative assessment of the options, and that the relevant datum (whatever they may be) should be factored in. It seems overly simplistic to make normative claims based on intuitions, or wherever else our normative evaluations would come from, without considering what exactly it is like to have lived through two years of intense torture.

Moral Theory

Some readers might be put off by the lack of an overtly theory-driven approach in the book, but they would be missing the point of its project. But where we are left, after 14 chapters and seven appendices, is in a bit of a moral muddle. It would be easy to imagine someone who espoused a form of total utilitarianism to find their moral code challenged by Temkin’s arguments, while more fine-grained forms of utilitarianism might have avenues available for reply to Spectrum Arguments and Internal Aspects Theories. Moreover, it’s not clear that his argument would have much to say to absolutist deontologists who simply refuse to compare options, even if the heavens may fall because of one’s moral reluctance to consider an option. Virtue ethicists, who might be willing to compare outcomes and possibilities, might find much to like about Temkin’s value pluralism, even if they are not willing to limit themselves to the values he proposes, but they might find the book’s emphasis on utility to
be excessively narrow. And Parfit himself, who now defends a ‘triple-theory’ that seems to want to absorb the best of deontology, consequentialism, and contractarianism, would reject Temkin’s rejection of transitivity, even if he now claims some of his arguments to prove transitivity (in Reasons and Persons) were wrongheaded. All of this is not to criticize Temkin, whose stated goal is not to provide a comprehensive moral theory, but to raise, as an issue, the possible results of the theory. If it turns out that transitivity doesn’t apply in some moral contexts, then much of moral theory, which has been built on an acceptance of the logic of transitivity, might need to be re-though. This need not be a bad thing, but we might be forced to rebuild our ship, Neurath-style, while having to dispose of much of hull in mid-ocean. There is no guarantee that we will not be left adrift, on the scraps of wood that once made our ship.

One way that this might be resolved, in concert with the rejection of transitivity but without obtaining any seemingly incredible views, would be to adopt some form of moral pluralism or moral particularism. Some version of pluralism or particularism (and I am not assuming they are the same, only that they have some surface similarities) might be able to withstand the fluctuations that will occur in our moral theory based on situations. One (or both) of these views might be able to allow us to make sense of the fact that we have aggregationist leanings in some cases, and anti-aggregationist leanings in other cases (see 467). If transitivity really can’t hold up, as a universal standard, particularism and/or pluralism may be left as better options than any theory that relies on such strict forms of comparison.

**All-Things-Considered-Better-Than**

Much of the failure of transitivity rests on the fact that, under certain forms of comparison, the ‘all-things-considered-better-than’ relationships don’t follow the pattern of transitivity. The idea of ‘all-things-considered’ is a fluid one, to be sure, and is often invoked in vague contexts. Temkin himself points out that there are cases where, despite the appearance of all-things-being-considered, things are NOT equal. In cases where utilities are compared against utilities, it might be that other values (autonomy, equality, perfection, virtue) have not been adequately considered. But there are moments where we are asked to simply accept that all things HAVE been considered, and this might be a mistake. Take one of the examples Temkin offers: Philosopher S has a job teaching at prestigious public University A, but gets an offer from University B. University B is less prestigious (but still quite good), has no graduate program, and his colleagues will be less academically respected, but the classes will be smaller, the undergrads exceptional, the city better, and he will be closer to his family. He accepts the job at B, which he deems better (all things considered) than A. Later, he gets an offer from less prestigious private university C, where the faculty and undergraduates were inferior to those at B, but whose location, campus, research money,
graduate program, and facilities were superior to those at B. He chooses to take the job at C. But when S considers C in comparison to A, he felt that job C was WORSE than job A (Note this seemingly illogical formal statement of Philosopher S’s moves: A < B, B < C, but C < A). Temkin claims that “S has not changed his attitudes or preferences over the years, nor did he regret his previous decisions” (453) but that the all-things-considered-better-than relationship fails to hold up to transitivity. While this is his case, and he can structure it as he likes, I wonder if it would be fair to say that all things ARE really considered here. In the intervening years, as he has moved from job A to job B to job C, Philosopher S has probably changed, personally, and one wonders if Philosopher S at timeC is the same person, all-things-considered, as Philosopher S who makes the decision to leave A for B at timeB or who initially accepted the job at A at timeA. If the relationship of transitivity requires other things being, for the most part, equal, there is residual doubt that things are ever really equal enough for this to work in the proper way. This might be useful, and not harmful, for Temkin’s case: it might give yet another reason for us to doubt transitivity, particular in (moral?) cases where all-things-considered better than fails to apply.

It might be to Temkin’s misfortune that his book *Rethinking The Good* was published just a few months after the long-promised and eagerly-awaited two-volume *magnum opus* from his interlocutor and sometimes-colleague Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*. I don’t expect that we will find Temkin’s book gracing its own photo-meme Tumblr as Parfit’s has ([http://onwhatmatters.tumblr.com/](http://onwhatmatters.tumblr.com/)) but those interested in the same kinds of issues as Parfit addresses in his recent work would be advised to add Temkin to their to-read list. It is highly recommended for those interested in the intersection of rationality, metaethics, and normative ethical theory, and would be an excellent addition to graduate courses on such topics. It might be too advanced or specialized for beginning philosophers or dabblers, but will provide great reward for those willing to put in the time and effort to read and understand the arguments. I expect that this book will be the subject of much analysis and discussion in the coming years, and rightly so.

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2 For an earlier attempt to reject transitivity of this sort, which he now rejects, see Larry Temkin, “A Continuum Argument for Intransitivity,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25 (1996): 175-210.

3 At times, Temkin shifts from the views of benefits and burdens to the discussion of qualities of LIVES, and develops similarly worded versions of the FSV and SSV that directly reference lives.
Parfit’s famous Repugnant Conclusion (Reasons and Persons, 388) is the jumping off point for the discussion here.

The Capped Model, it might be noted, can also provide some insight to the question of virtue and the Aristotelian ‘unity of the virtues’ thesis by explaining what it would mean to simply have one virtue but lacking others (336).

Interestingly, despite the fact that his work is very up-to-date in its citations, Temkin neglects some of David Benatar’s excellent recent work on this problem. See David Benatar, Better Never To Have Been (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

I don’t use apostrophes around ‘the folk’ in a pejorative sense here, but merely to denote the controversial idea that there are folk and that they have a codifiable set of beliefs and values.

I have no data to back this up, but only a sneaking suspicion that ‘the folk’ would accept transitivity in certain kinds of cases (the steak-chicken-fish scenario) but would be willing to reject it in others (the Sports Analogy). I would expect something similar in aggregation and anti-aggregation cases. But this is merely a supposition.