

1) When it comes to pooling individual contributions toward some goal, people will often say that “every little bit helps”. But sometimes, when the bit is little enough, it can seem like no help at all. Arguably, whether or not I personally vote in the next presidential election won’t affect the outcome, period. Similarly, whether or not I myself refrain from buying meat will have no impact whatsoever on animal welfare. And whether or not I contribute \$20 to a big international humanitarian organization won’t change anything important at all. (Better to give it to a local homeless person!)

Come up with some examples where it’s true that every little bit helps. How do these cases differ from those in which it’s false? Can you give general principles for sorting cases into these two categories? Topics from the course to think about in this connection: the lottery paradox; counterfactuals; and the optional Singer reading.

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When pooling together individual contributions toward some goal, people will sometimes say “every little bit helps.” When the contribution is little enough, however, it may be too small to help. For example, will my vote in a presidential election really make a difference? One vote in a pool of millions, arguably, does not matter. In this paper, we will analyze various examples to try and derive general principles for sorting cases into two distinct categories: one where every little bit helps, and one where every little bit does not.

### **Breaking down the Problem**

Every goal or problem will have a set of appropriate ways of being accomplished or solved. The nature of the goal determines the appropriate means of accomplishing it. For example, a humanitarian project to end famine in Africa may be best accomplished by collecting money. In this way, the appropriate method of accomplishment will be monetary. By knowing what this method is, we are then able recognize different implementations – or individual contributions – that will successfully fulfill the method. In this case, one successful implementation would follow Singer’s strong argument of changing moral code, and have everyone reduce their standard of living to marginal utility and give leftover money to humanitarian organizations. Another implementation would be the voluntary donation of any amount of money to the cause; for example, I could decide to give \$5 to an organization and hope that “every little bit helps.” In this case then, such a small donation could only fulfill the end-goal of ending famine depending on a *set of circumstances*. Such an implementation could only work depending on the circumstances that many others donate too.

This example serves to show that solving a specific problem necessitates understanding the requirements to solve it. Once we understand the requirements, we will then be able to see what each individual contribution should look like and what the set of circumstances it should come under are. As a result, we will be able to see if a \$1 donation is indeed too small to end famine.

This paper will take on the following structure. I will firstly show that although each little individual contribution alone cannot affect the end goal, when little contributions are added together they can make a difference and *help*. I will then argue if the characteristics of the individual contribution are *positive*, then every little bit will help because the chances of fulfilling the end goal when individual contributions are grouped is much higher. Let a *positive contribution* be one of the characteristics I will describe later on, such as having spreading power, scalability, appeal to human senses etc. Finally, I will claim that we have a moral duty to contribute in a way that maximizes the power of the group, because our contributions alone do not stand the test of “every little bit helps.”

### **Individual Contributions Added Up**

Firstly, I will show that although an individual contribution with positive characteristics cannot help alone, a collection of such contributions will help. Let us return to the problem of famine, to which a method of accomplishment is money. I claim that a \$5 donation to an organization does not alone help end famine. For example, a non-negligible amount of this donation will go to ground costs, paying workers and even government corruption. Under the set of circumstances where my donation is the only one, this bit is too small to make a difference. Now, let us consider the lottery paradox. I have argued that I do not believe that my donation will make a difference. I also argue that Person B’s donation will not matter. This applies indefinitely for Person C, D, E... If the agglomeration principle holds, then if:

Premise A: I believe Person A will not make a difference.

(...)

Premise  $x$ : I believe Person  $x$  will not make a difference.

Agglomeration Principle: I believe A...and I believe  $x$ , so I believe (A...and  $x$ )

However, like in the lottery paradox, this leads to an inconsistency. I do not believe that  $x$ ’s individual efforts can make a difference, but if  $x$  people donate \$5 then their combined efforts can help end famine. We must therefore reject the agglomeration principle, because it leads to a contradiction. Then, under the set of circumstances where a person donates a small amount alone, every little bit does not help. On the other hand, under the set of circumstances where many donate small amounts of money, every little bit does help. In this way, for the problem of famine, the success of my donation is strongly related to other people’s actions.

This follows the idea that power for change comes with the masses. Alone, an individual contribution is powerless. However, the collection of many contributions gives power to individual contributions and allows us to say: every little bit helps.

### **Special Qualities of Individual Contributions**

I have argued here that fulfilling goals rely on the collective addition of many individual contributions. If I were to give \$10 to the Red Cross, then this ‘little bit’ would only help if others did the same; I rely on the cooperation of others to ensure that my donation

helps. By counterfactual, not giving \$10 will only negatively affect the end goal of ending famine if others are donating with me. *Every little bit helps only if others are ready to help with me.* The success of the end goal relies, then, on *positive* qualities of the individual contribution. Having positive characteristics then maximizes the probability that the goal will be achieved. Likewise, not having these positive characteristics will decrease the chance that your contribution will make an impact.

A common element unites the characteristics. I have already argued that an individual contribution finds its helpful power when it is coupled with other contributions, so it will be no surprise that many of the positive characteristics described next *unlock this power.* These characteristics draw the masses in. I will now support a series of positive characteristics.

### **Goal-appropriateness Characteristic**

The first positive characteristic I will describe is one that can be deduced directly from the end goal. Given a specific goal or problem, we have stated that some methods of accomplishment will be more adequate to fulfill the goal. Let us consider a more extreme example, which will illustrate the point. Say there is an H1N1 flu outbreak in Southeast Asia, and you decide to get involved. If you decide that your individual contribution should be a box of pencils, then you will most likely not be helping the cause. On a basic level, the content of the individual contribution should be related to the problem and should be related to the solution. In this case, we can imagine many methods of accomplishment that will serve the goal more closely: money for research, vaccines, doctors, sterilization soap etc. Hence, the content of the individual contribution should be related to the goal of the initiative. Furthermore, as a critical citizen, you will be more likely to contribute to an initiative if you believe your contribution will make an impact. The more goal-appropriate the contribution, the more people will join the initiative. This characteristic is further elaborated under “reasonable characteristic.”

### **Scalability Characteristic**

This second positive characteristic refines the first one in an interesting way. Once we have chosen a goal-appropriate contribution – say money for the H1N1 outbreak – we must ask ourselves how *scalable* our solution under the set of circumstances where many people are contributing. Returning to our previous example, out of all the possible goal-appropriate contributions that were listed, some are more scalable than others. For example, disinfectant soap is a massively less scalable contribution compared to money. Say Cambodia receives two tons of disinfectant soap; these would be distributed and would be helpful in limiting the spread of the disease, but would have no effect beyond this instant impact. Now, consider Cambodia receives \$20 million from individual contributions; this is massively more scalable because funds can be dedicated to a wide array of issues that make up problem of H1N1: soap, medicine, workers etc. This scalability characteristic is an economic issue: soap’s marginal utility decreases as its supply increases, whereas the marginal utility of money stays relatively constant. Even though soap is a goal-appropriate contribution, it does not scale well.

This is not to say that donating soap does not help. As I stated previously, a problem such as a virus outbreak can be decomposed into many sub-problems. Your personal individual contribution, can as a result, be helpful to a specific sub-problem (limiting the contagion from spreading) but it will not be able to help other sub-problems. In this way, a more scalable contribution means a higher probability that your 'little bit' will indeed help when joined to other contributions.

### **Spreading Characteristic**

The third positive characteristic of an individual contribution is its ability to attract other contributions. Let us now consider the example of Kickstarter, a crowdfunding platform. Crowdfunding is the collection of finance to sustain an initiative from a large pool of backers – the "crowd" – usually made online by means of a web platform. For example, let the goal of one of these initiatives be: to finance a 6-month trip to Europe for a group of underprivileged Indian teenagers. If I make a small donation to their Kickstarter initiative, say \$10, this will not be enough to cover their trip costs. However, through my donation, the web-platform makes the initiative visible to more and more people. Hence, by donating even a little bit, I am able to attract an exponentially growing amount of people to their initiative. Under this set of circumstances, however small the donation is, you are making a meaningful difference.

When the end-goal demands the contribution of many people, the issue of spreading information becomes very important. If people are able to see that others are contributing, then they will be more likely to take part. In *Famine, Affluence and Morality*, Singer claims "what [a person] is likely to do...is very greatly influenced by what people around him are doing and expecting him to do." Using this spreading characteristic, I claim that a small donation helps because it unlocks the power of the masses.

### **Human-sense Characteristic**

This characteristic piggybacks off the goal-appropriateness and the spreading characteristics. I claim that if the individual contribution appeals to certain human senses of the contributor, then it will most likely be more goal-appropriate, scalable and as a result, spread better. The success of an aggregation of individual contributions depends on the willingness of individual contributors to take part in an initiative. If the contribution appeals to their sense of reason, patriotism or even laziness, their willingness increases.

Consider the following example: after the Fukushima power plant meltdown, the Japanese government urged the population to limit their consumption of energy because their primary source of energy had been crippled. Hence, it was crucial that air conditioning be kept down during hot summer months. Lowering consumption of air conditioning appealed to the Japanese population as appropriate to the goal of decreasing energy consumption. Not only was it reasonable, it also appealed to their patriotism; the country needed them to make sacrifices and they did. I claim here that the more senses a

contribution appeals to (reason, patriotism etc.), the more likely the contribution will take on other characteristics (spread, scalability etc.). As a result, if it takes on more characteristics the higher the chance every little bit will help.

### **The Moral Implications of Universalization**

Until now, I have outlined specific characteristics of an individual contribution that are recommended for the collective to solve problems. We have seen that the characteristics I have outlined increase the probability of the group acting together. As an individual contributor you are also part of a larger potential group of contributors called society. As a result, you have a duty to recognize society's goals and act as a part of the group to accomplish these goals. Why do you have such a duty? Because your small contribution only helps when it is part of a greater pool of contributions. If you want to help, you must help as part of a group. Consider this short anecdote.

Imagine that you and your child are taking a walk through a botanical garden when she suddenly pulls a flower off a tree.

"You shouldn't do that," you tell her.

"Why not?" she asks.

"Well," you reason, "because if everyone picked one, there wouldn't be any flowers left at all."

"Yeah, but everybody isn't picking them. Only me."<sup>1</sup>

I have already claimed that an individual contribution helps when grouped with other contributions; in other words, the little bit helps if others are ready to help too. Imagine a specific goal and a chosen individual contribution. Now let us universalize the contribution – that is to say, scale it so that many others are also contributing in the same way. If the universalization leads to helping achieve the goal, then we are able to say that the individual contribution helps. It is clear, by now, that if the contribution passes the universalization then it has positive characteristics that allow it do so. We can also universalize non-contributions. For example, consider the goal of enjoying botanical gardens and the contribution of picking flowers. If we universalize this contribution, no one will then enjoy the gardens because no flowers will be left.

This universalization reflects the importance of viewing your individual contribution within the set of all possible contributions. Here, I argue a moral duty to contribute in ways that impact a goal when your contribution is universalized. And similarly, I argue a moral duty to avoid non-contributions that when universalized do not achieve the goal – or even go against the goal. In a world where little contributions can help when grouped

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<sup>1</sup> Dubner, Stephen J. "Why Vote?" *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 05 Nov. 2005. Web. 03 Mar. 2014. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/06/magazine/06freak.html?pagewanted=print&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/06/magazine/06freak.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0)>.

together, we must strive to behave in ways that maximize the impact of the collective group. For example, under universalization, it is important that everyone vote because only when the whole group works in conjunction does the goal of electing a true representative of the people succeed. An individual deciding not to vote would be akin to claiming it is acceptable for no one to vote, under universalization. This is a deviation from the group cooperation, and does not fulfill the end goal.

This view partially coincides with Singer's absolutist argument. His main claim is "if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it." However, I argue a more moderate view that if we are presented with the opportunity to contribute, and that our contribution can make a difference when grouped with other contributions, then we ought to do it. Similar to Singer, this moral view implies that a large group of potential contributors is *not* an excuse for inactivity. In December 2012, a wave of outrage spread across the Internet when a freelance photographer came under fire for taking a photo of a man who had fallen onto the tracks, before he was fatally struck by a subway train. The man stood by idly instead of helping. I argue that the fact that there were many onlookers in the station does not lessen the man's obligation to help; as Singer emphasizes, it is absurd that numbers lessen obligation.

## **Conclusion**

In a world where problems can be solved by large groups acting in cooperation, I argue that "every little bit helps" if an individual contribution has certain positive characteristics. Among these characteristics are goal-appropriateness, scalability and spreading ability. If your individual contribution has one or more of these positive characteristics, I have shown that there is a higher chance that it will fulfill the end goal by unlocking the power of the masses. In this way, the framework I have created is not black or white – it cannot say if your 'little bit' will help with certainty. However, I claim that with the right characteristics, it has a higher probability of doing so. And conversely, if it does not have these characteristics, it has a lower chance of helping. A large pool of potential contributors is at our fingertips, and choosing the right type of contribution allows us to solve problems as a united group. As a result of realizing that groups acting together have immense power, I have argued for a moral obligation to act in a way that maximizes the success of a larger contributing group. If our contribution embodies positive characteristics, then we have a duty to contribute.

