Reply to Vallentyne

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I am immensely grateful to Peter Vallentyne for his stimulating comments, as I am to anyone who takes the trouble to work through the complex arguments of *Weighing Lives* and make useful responses to them.

In our thinking about the ethics of population, we have some strong intuitions, but I am sorry to say they are not all consistent with each other. In *Weighing Lives*, I built up a theory of goodness that gives our intuitions as much credit as I could. I worked particularly hard at the so-called person-affecting intuitions. Since I am strongly gripped by those intuitions myself, I tried hard to preserve them. However, I eventually concluded that they cannot be incorporated into a coherent theory of goodness. So I gave them up.

Mine is a theory about the goodness of distributions of wellbeing. By a 'distribution of wellbeing' I mean the sort of thing that Vallentyne designates with vectors such as $<3, *, 2>$. I shall adopt Vallentyne's notation. Each place in one of these vectors is assigned to a particular person. A '*' in a person's place indicates that that person does not exist in that particular distribution. A number in a person's place indicates that that person does exist and that she has an amount of wellbeing given by the number.

Peter Vallentyne reports that the conclusions of *Weighing Lives* offend his person-affecting intuitions. That does not surprise me; they offend mine too. But I produced the best coherent theory of goodness I could come up with. Since we have intuitions that are inconsistent with each other, we have to sacrifice some of them. I concluded that person-affecting intuitions have to go. After that, it does no good just to reassert them. To object effectively to my conclusion, Vallentyne needs to show how person-affecting intuitions can be fitted into a coherent theory of the goodness of distributions.

He does in fact give us a coherent theory that incorporates person-affecting intuitions. But it is a deontic theory rather than an evaluative

one. It tells us when an action is permissible; it says nothing about goodness. It consists of four principles that he adopts from Melinda Roberts:[1]

> P* (Permissibility): An action is permissible (in a given choice situation) if and only if it would (if performed) wrong no one.

> M* (Maximal Well-Being): A person is not wronged by an action if it is at least as good for her as any feasible alternative.

> N* (Non-Existence): An individual is not wronged by an action if she would never exist (in past, present, or future) if the action were performed.

> D* (Deprived Gratuitously): An individual is wronged by an option X if (1) she exists in X, and (2) there is an option, Y, such that (a) everyone who exists in both X and Y is at least as well off in Y as in X, (b) Y makes her better off, and (c) everyone who exists in Y but not in X is as well off as is feasible.

It is comparatively easy for a deontic theory to be coherent. It is not constrained by the formal structure of betterness. Betterness is an ordering relation. That is to say, the relation … is better than … is transitive and asymmetric. This is an analytic truth. 'Better than' means 'More good than'. The operator 'more … than' converts a monadic predicate into a dyadic ordering relation. For instance 'more confusing than' is an ordering. Because betterness is an ordering, there cannot be cycles of betterness. It cannot be that A is better than B, B better than C, C better than D and D better than A. This is a constraint on any theory of goodness. But there is no corresponding constraint on a deontic theory.

As it happens, Vallentyne's deontic theory implies there are cycles of a sort. Think about these four distributions of wellbeing:

$$A = <3, 1>$$

$$B = <2, *>$$

$$C = <1, 3>$$

$$D = <*, 2>.$$

[1] Roberts, Melinda A., *Child Versus Childmaker: Present Duties and Future Persons in Ethics and the Law* (Rowman and Allanheld, 1998).

Suppose you had a choice between just *A* and *B*, so that only those two distributions are feasible. Choosing *B* wrongs the first person according to D*; to see this, substitute *B* for *X* and *A* for *Y* in the statement of D*. Choosing *B* is therefore impermissible according to P*. Suppose next that you had a choice between just *B* and *C*, so that only those two distributions are feasible. Choosing *C* wrongs the first person according to D*, so it is impermissible according to P*. Repeating the same considerations takes us round a cycle. We may conclude that:

Cycle of impermissibility

If you had a choice between A and B, it would be impermissible to choose B.

If you had a choice between B and C, it would be impermissible to choose C.

If you had a choice between C and D, it would be impermissible to choose D.

If you had a choice between D and A, it would be impermissible to choose A.

This cycle is entailed by Vallentyne's theory. There is nothing incoherent about it. It is acceptable in a deontic theory.

So far as I can tell, Vallentyne's four principles are mutually consistent: they imply no contradiction. Moreover, so far as I can tell, they are also coherent in another way. I take it to be a requirement of coherence for a deontic theory that, whatever choice you might face among alternatives, one of the alternatives must be permissible. I assume Vallentyne accepts this requirement, since it is entailed by his assumption of maximizing teleology. I think his theory satisfies it. So I think his theory is coherent.

It is an incomplete theory in that it does not determine, for every action, whether or not it is permissible. For one thing, the principle D* is too weak to serve its purpose. Its purpose is to say that it is wrong to deprive a person gratuitously. Suppose you had a choice among these three alternatives:

$$E = <1, *, *>$$

$$F = <2, 2, 3>$$

$$G = <2, 3, 2>.$$

It is intuitively plain that choosing E would gratuitously deprive the first person: she could be better off at no cost to anyone. Yet D* does not imply that the first person would be wronged by choosing E, and Vallentyne's theory does not imply is it impermissible to choose E.

The theory therefore needs strengthening. It remains to be seen whether it can be extended to form a complete deontic theory that is coherent and still incorporates some person-affecting intuitions. But for the sake of argument, I assume it can be.

If it can, that does no damage to my conclusion in *Weighing Lives*. My conclusion is that no coherent theory of goodness for distributions of wellbeing can incorporate person-affecting intuitions. Vallentyne may have a coherent deontic theory that incorporates person-affecting intuitions. But he needs somehow to develop it into a theory of goodness for distributions if he is to challenge my conclusion.

He tries to develop it through two assumptions, one explicit and one implicit. The explicit one is, in his words:

> *Maximizing teleology*. An action is permissible if and only if it is a best feasible action.

Applying this principle to the cycle of impermissibility above, we get

> *Apparent cycle of betterness for actions*
>
> If you had a choice between A and B, choosing A would be better than choosing B.
>
> If you had a choice between B and C, choosing B would be better than choosing C.
>
> If you had a choice between C and D, choosing C would be better than choosing D.
>
> If you had a choice between D and A, choosing D would be better than choosing A.

There may be nothing incoherent about this apparent cycle, despite first appearances. It is plausibly not a genuine cycle of betterness. We may plausibly suppose that the identity of an action of choosing depends on what the choice is. For instance, we may suppose the action of choosing B when you have a choice between A and B is different from the action of choosing B when you have a choice between B and C. This is a very plausible way of individuating choices. If we adopt it, this is not a genuine cycle of betterness.

I therefore believe that Vallentyne's deontic theory, together with maximizing axiology, can be developed into a coherent theory of goodness for acts of choosing. But we have not yet arrived at a theory of goodness for distributions of wellbeing. To make this last step, Vallentyne implicitly also assumes:

> *Wellbeing consequentialism*. One action is better than another if and only if it leads to a better distribution of wellbeing.

When Vallentyne says 'I work within a welfarist framework (as Broome does)', he adopts this assumption.

Applying wellbeing consequentialism to the apparent cycle of betterness for actions, we get:

> If you had a choice between *A* and *B*, *A* would be better than *B*.
>
> If you had a choice between *B* and *C*, *B* would be better than *C*.
>
> If you had a choice between *C* and *D*, *C* would be better than *D*.
>
> If you had a choice between *D* and *A*, *D* would be better than *A*.

But the definition of a distribution of wellbeing ensures that the goodness of a distribution is independent of the choice through which it comes about. We can therefore derive:

> *Cycle of betterness for distributions*
>
> A is better than B.
>
> B is better than C.
>
> C is better than D.
>
> D is better than A.

This is a genuine cycle of betterness. But cycles of betterness are analytically impossible, so these four comparative statements cannot all be true.

I conclude that the deontic theory consisting of P*, N*, M* and D*, the assumption of maximizing teleology and the assumption of wellbeing consequentialism are not mutually consistent. So either the theory is false or one of the two assumptions is false.

The argument that brought me to this conclusion is extremely robust. It rests on virtually no premises. My example of a cycle does not require wellbeing to be interpersonally comparable; it does not require wellbeing to be measured on a cardinal scale; it does not even require there to be a complete ordering of wellbeings for a person. The cycle of A, B, C and D can be generated so long as, for each person, there are three levels of her wellbeing such that one is better for her than the second, which is better for her than the third. I used the numbers 1, 2 and 3 to designate levels of wellbeing for each person, but that was just for convenience. The particular numbers signify nothing. Only their order matters, and I could have used different numbers for the different people.

Furthermore, the argument does not even rely on the transitivity of betterness as a premise. Its premise is that betterness is acyclic: that it does not have the sort of cycle exhibited by the example. Vallentyne seems to doubt that betterness is transitive, but he willingly agrees it is acyclic.

So one of these three is false: the deontic theory, maximizing teleology, or wellbeing consequentialism. I am sure Vallentyne would not want to give up the deontic theory. He also espouses maximizing teleology explicitly, so I doubt he would give that up. I think he would more willingly abandon wellbeing consequentialism. Indeed, the way he introduces this assumption shows he does not really believe it; he adopts it for convenience, and apparently because he attributes it to me. Giving it up would be enough to save him from inconsistency: the deontic theory and maximizing teleology are consistent with each other.

But without wellbeing consequentialism Vallentyne has no theory of goodness for distributions of wellbeing. He has not exhibited a theory of goodness for distributions that incorporates person-affecting intuitions. So he has no answer to my arguments in *Weighing Lives*. I continue to maintain that no coherent theory of goodness for distributions of wellbeing can incorporate person-affecting intuitions.