

# In Defense of the Internal Aspects View: Person-Affecting Reasons, Spectrum Arguments and Inconsistent Intuitions

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## Abstract

According to the Internal Aspects View, the value of different outcomes depends solely on the internal features possessed by each outcome and the internal relations between them. This paper defends the Internal Aspects View against Larry Temkin's defence of the Essentially Comparative View, according to which the value of different outcomes depends on what is the alternative outcome they are compared with. The paper discusses both person-affecting arguments and Spectrum Arguments. The paper does not defend a person-affecting view over an impersonal one, but it argues that although there are intuitive person-affecting principles that entail an Essentially Comparative View, the intuitions that support these principles can also be accommodated by other principles that are compatible with the Internal Aspects View. The paper also argues that the rejection of transitivity and the Internal Aspects View does not help us to solve the challenges presented by Spectrum Arguments. Despite this, the arguments presented by Temkin do succeed in showing that, unfortunately, our intuitions are chaotic and inconsistent. The paper argues that this has metaethical consequences that will be unwelcome by a moral realist such as Temkin, since they challenge the idea that our intuitions may track a moral reality existing independently of our preferences.

**Keywords:** betterness, Essentially Comparative View, Internal Aspects View, person-affecting reasons, Spectrum Arguments, transitivity.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Larry Temkin's book *Rethinking the Good: Moral Ideals and the Nature of Practical Reasoning* (Temkin 2012) is the most powerful challenge to our understanding of axiology and normative theory in contemporary philosophy to date. Calling it a classic or a masterpiece is an understatement:

it is a true milestone with which we enter a new stage in the study of value theory. Its importance can hardly be overestimated given how radically it will change axiology as well as normative ethics. The reason why this is so is that *Rethinking the Good* shows that a fundamental assumption in value theory that we used to consider axiomatic is not free from doubts and may be actually challenged. To understand why this is so, consider the following two opposing views about the factors according to which an outcome can be better than another:

*The Internal Aspects View:* the value of different outcomes, and whether a certain outcome is better or worse than another, depends solely on the internal features possessed by each outcome and the internal relations between them.

*The Essentially Comparative View:* the value of different outcomes, and whether a certain outcome is better or worse than another, depends on what is the alternative outcome they are compared with. A given outcome may have one value given one alternative, but a different value given another alternative. This can happen both when we compare outcomes regarding a certain ideal in particular or when we compare them as a whole, all things considered.

The Internal Aspects View is of course the traditional and more intuitive view concerning the value of outcomes. Value theory as we understand it today is based upon it. Yet Temkin has claimed that we should reject this view and accept instead an Essentially Comparative View. He has done this by presenting a set of arguments against the claim that betterness relations (“A is better than B”) must be transitive.<sup>1</sup> Those arguments show that in a number of cases it is just impossible for us to hold intuitive views regarding which outcomes are better than others unless we abandon the axiom of the transitivity of betterness. If we do this, however, that would mean that a very important part of what has been considered essential to practical reasoning until now will no longer apply.

Temkin’s arguments are so strong that from now on we will not be able to just take for granted, as most of us have done thus far, the Internal Aspects View. This does not mean, however, that we have to abandon this view, as Temkin argues. But it does mean that if we want to defend this view we will be now forced to respond to these arguments and not just presume the Internal Aspects View is true. In fact, this is what I intend to do in this paper.

1. See Temkin (2012; see also 1987; 1996; 1997 and 2010). The other main proponent of this view has been Stuart Rachels (1998; 2001 and 2004). See also Friedman (2009). For criticisms of this view see Norcross (1997; 1998 and 1999); Binmore and Voorhoeve (2003); Voorhoeve (2008); Broome (2004: 55-62).

I will argue that, powerful as Temkin's case for the Essentially Comparative View is, there are ways to resist it and to keep on maintaining the Internal Aspects View. I will claim that Temkin's arguments, instead, may drive us to doubt realist metaethics. In order to defend these claims, my argument will unfold as follows:

In section 2, I will distinguish two main ways in which an Internal Aspects View can be challenged: by appealing to person-affecting essentially comparative principles such as the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle, and by appealing to Spectrum Arguments. I will claim that the kinds of reasons that are appealed to in each of these two lines of reasoning are essentially different ones. Due to this, whether one of them succeeds does not mean that the other will succeed too.

In section 3, I will explain that while some principles such as the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle can lead to intransitive rankings of outcomes, the job this principle does in accommodating some common intuitions regarding person-affecting reasons can also be done by other principles as well. I will present three other principles that can do this: the *Time-Dependent Person-Affecting Principle*, the *Actuality-Dependent Person-Affecting Principle* and the *Identity-Dependent Person-Affecting Principle*. These principles entail the rejection of the transitivity of the “\_ is better than \_” relation. But they also seem to imply the asymmetry of that relation. I will claim that, despite this, when we examine the matter we discover that these principles do not really imply that betterness is not asymmetric or intransitive.<sup>2</sup> They only *appear* to have that implication. I will argue that, unlike the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle, they are not essentially comparative principles, and do not really question the Internal Aspects View. This does not mean that we should accept a person-affecting view instead of an impersonal one, but it does mean that those who accept it do not need to assume an Essentially Comparative View.

I will then argue in section 4 that in Spectrum Arguments essentially comparative principles such as the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle do not play any role. I will then consider the puzzles we find in Spectrum

2. Note that nonasymmetry does not entail symmetry. The claim that betterness is an asymmetric relation means that if A is better than B, then B cannot be better than A. So the claim that betterness is not an asymmetric relation implies that if A is better than B, then B may or may not be better than A. But if betterness were a symmetric relation that would mean that if A is better than B, then B is better than A. Nonasymmetry is also different from antisymmetry. If betterness were an antisymmetric relation that would mean that if A is better than B, and B is better than A then A would be equal to B. Similarly, although accepting that betterness is intransitive entails rejecting it is transitive the opposite is not the case. As Temkin (2012: 17) points out, transitivity of betterness may fail to apply in a certain set of alternative outcomes without that implying that intransitivity does apply. That would happen, for instance, if A were roughly equal to B, A were better than A' and A' were roughly equal to B. However, all the cases of nontransitivity we will see in this paper will also be cases of intransitivity.

Arguments, and will argue that they are not solved if we abandon the claim that betterness is transitive. We can see this when we consider what happens when we aim at global maximization instead of local maximization. This means Spectrum Arguments do not provide us with any conclusive reason to reject the Internal Aspects View.

Next, section 5 will conclude that in light of what has been argued in sections 3 and 4 the Internal Aspects View can be maintained despite the very strong objections Temkin has presented against it.

Finally, in section 6, I will argue that there is a conflict between the arguments against the Internal Aspects View presented by Temkin and his realist metaethical positions. Even though the problems presented by Temkin do not necessarily have metaethical implications, they still give us reasons to doubt moral realism. This is so because if moral reality exists we can only track it with our intuitions, and the arguments presented by Temkin show that our intuitions are chaotic and inconsistent. Temkin can only make his attack on the Internal Aspects View and the moral realist view he holds compatible by accepting a methodological approach that leaves room for inconsistency. But this clashes against some strong intuitions that many of us have towards consistency, as well as towards other metacriteria such as simplicity and transitivity. In fact, for many of us these intuitions can be stronger than those we have when we face pairwise comparisons of particular outcomes that contradict them. This is what will make us resist Temkin's arguments against the Internal Aspects View. But it will also drive us to doubt that those intuitions towards particular choices in pairwise comparisons of outcomes can be reliable, and thus to deny they can track any moral reality existing out there independently of us.

## 2. DIFFERENT WAYS TO QUESTION THE INTERNAL ASPECTS VIEW

In *Rethinking the Good* Temkin argues against the Internal Aspects View in different ways. I want to focus here in two of the strongest ones:

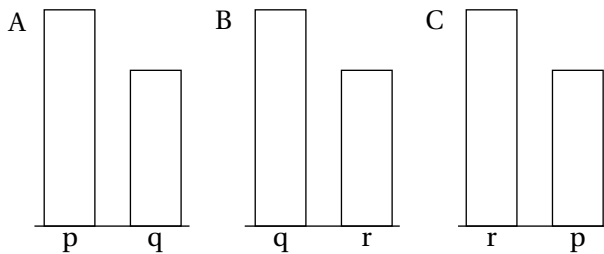
### 2.1. *Appealing to Person-Affecting Reasons*

Temkin tries to show that a consideration of person-affecting reasons is incompatible with the Internal Aspects View (2012: ch. 11 and 12).<sup>3</sup> This would be so because according to these reasons whether a certain outcome is better or worse than another depends on the relative situation of the individuals who are in them. If individuals in some outcome A

3. In chapters 11 and 12 Temkin considers also other reasons apart from this one in favor of the Internal Aspects View that are closely related to the one I discuss here, but for lack of space I will not address them here.

are better off than they would be in outcome B, then A is better than B according to these principles. And if individuals in B are better off than they would be in C, then B is better than C. But this may be because the individuals that there are in A, B and C, and their relative situation in these outcomes, varies in such a way that makes it the case that the individuals in C are better off than they would be in A, so C would be better than A according to these principles. Imagine, for instance, that outcomes A, B and C are as follows:

**Figure 1**



Suppose now that we accept a principle such as the following one:

*The Narrow Person-Affecting Principle:* In assessing possible outcomes, one should (1) focus on the status of independently existing individuals, with the aim of wanting them to be as well off as possible, and (2) ignore the status of dependently existing individuals, except that one wants to avoid harming them as much as possible.<sup>4</sup>

According to this principle B would be better than A, since independently existing individuals would be better off in B. But for the same reason C would be better than B and A would be better than C. This means that if we accept this principle we have to reject transitivity and the Internal Aspects View. Due to this, we can consider it to be an essentially comparative principle, which we may define as follows.

*Essentially comparative principles:* a certain principle is essentially comparative if the factors for comparing two alternatives according to it may vary depending on the alternatives being compared, so an Essentially Comparative View necessarily is the case.

4. See Parfit (1984: 392); Temkin (2012: 417).

In other words, any principle whose acceptance entails accepting an Essentially Comparative View (as the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle) is an essentially comparative one.

## 2.2. *Appealing to Spectrum Arguments*

Another way to question the Internal Aspects View is by considering what happens in Spectrum Arguments (2012: chs. 2 and 5). In them we compare a number of different outcomes in which the values or disvalues that there are vary with respect to at least two dimensions. For instance, the outcomes may differ according to the intensity and the distribution through time or among different individuals of certain harms.<sup>5</sup> Let us focus here, for the sake of simplicity, on a single-person Spectrum Argument Temkin discusses (2012: ch. 5). In it we compare outcome A, which is terrible torture for one year against outcome B, which is some only slightly milder torture for a much longer period. Then, we compare B against C, which is again some torture only slightly milder than the one in B, but for a much longer period. And we go on comparing each new outcome against a new one in which the torture is just a bit less painful but lasts for much longer. At the end, we reach outcome Z in which we experience some mild pain for a very long time—one which would be much longer than the total time we could ever live (Temkin suggests this could be the pain that a mosquito bite suffered each month would cause).<sup>6</sup> Z is worse than another outcome Y in which we suffer for some pain which is only slightly higher but for a much shorter time.

In this spectrum, A seems clearly better than B, which seems clearly better than C, which seems better than D, etc., until we reach Y, which seems better than Z, which in turn, if transitivity applied, should be much worse than A. Yet Z seems intuitively better than A. Our intuitions in Spectrum Arguments therefore appear to entail that  $A > B$ ;  $B > C$ ;  $C > D$ ; ... ;  $Y > Z$ ;  $Z > A$ . In this way,

5. See Quinn 1990.

6. This stipulation is unfortunate because it complicates unnecessarily the examination of the problem by introducing in it another dimension according to which our evaluation of different outcomes may vary: intermittence. By presenting Z as a situation in which one just suffers an extra mosquito bite for a month (in addition to other pains we may suffer, including other mosquito bites) we are not only considering intensity of pain and duration of pain, but also intermittence between different pains (this is not only so because a mosquito bite does not feel bad for a whole month, but also because mosquito bites do not itch continuously). Many of us would think it is worse to receive a more intense pain of some non trivial duration altogether in time than distributed in very short times spread in time. Consider, to see this, that a whole year of terrible torture seems to be worse than five seconds of torture each five years during a number of years equivalent to the number of seconds in a year. For the case to present the problem without including the problem of intermittence, the pain in Z should be felt continuously and uninterruptedly, although it would be an extremely mild pain.

if we accept what our intuitions tell us, transitivity does not seem to apply, and the Internal Aspects View fails.

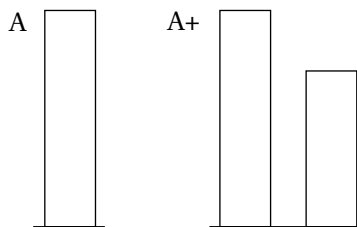
These two lines of reasoning, the one appealing to person-affecting reasons and the one appealing to Spectrum Arguments, are very different ones. Whether one of them succeeds is not dependent on whether the other one does. So in order to see if Temkin's case against the Internal Aspects View succeeds we will have to examine them separately.

### 3. THE APPEAL TO PERSON-AFFECTING PRINCIPLES

#### 3.1. *Principles that Can Entail Intransitivity: The Narrow Person-Affecting Principle*

In order to explain why person-affecting principles challenge the Internal Aspects View Temkin considers what happens in the comparison that takes place between A and A+ in the Mere Addition Paradox (Parfit 1984: ch. 142). As it is well known, in the Mere Addition Paradox A is an outcome in which a small group of individuals is enjoying a significantly high level of wellbeing. A+ is an outcome in which there are two groups: one of them is a group of individuals whose level of wellbeing is just like the one in A; the other one is a group of individuals whose level of wellbeing is a bit lower than the one of those in A. The size of both groups is just like that of the group in A:

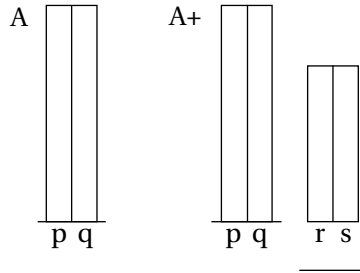
**Figure 2**



Is A+ worse than A? Someone who considered this problem by taking into account exclusively impersonal reasons would reach always the same conclusion no matter the identity of those who are in A and A+. If she concluded that if A+ is worse than A, then that would mean that A+ has to be worse than A in all circumstances. And the same would happen if she concluded that A+ is better than A.

But those who accept person-affecting reasons can reach a different conclusion. The reason for this is that there are different ways in which we could move from A to A+. Consider first the one we can see in the next picture:

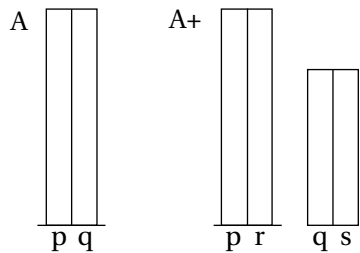
**Figure 3**



In this case, all the individuals who live in A are also present in A+ with the same level of wellbeing, but in A+ we add an extra group of individuals whose level of wellbeing is lower but still very good. According to a view that takes into account person-affecting reasons this would not make A+ worse than A: if anything, it would make it better.

But consider now this other way in which we may move from A to A+:

**Figure 4**



In this other case, half of those who are in A see their level of wellbeing reduced to the level of the worst off individuals in A+. And then, the population of both the better off and the worse off doubles. According to a view that takes into account person-affecting reasons and gives priority to the interests of those independently existing in both A and A+, this would make A+ worse than A. So A+ can be considered worse than A in some cases and not worse than A in others depending on the identity of those who are



in A+. <sup>7</sup> This can be concluded, in particular, if one assumes a principle such as the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle. The rejection of the axiom of transitivity is an inescapable conclusion of the acceptance of this principle, at least as long as we face comparisons with different individuals.

This appears to be a powerful argument against the Internal Aspects View, although it depends on a view that is very controversial. It is not at all clear that we should accept a person-affecting view, and for those accepting a purely impersonal view Temkin's argument will have no force at all. In this paper I will remain neutral regarding whether we should accept an impersonal view or a person-affecting one. But I will argue that those who think that considering impersonal reasons alone has counter-intuitive implications need not accept essentially comparative principles such as the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle. There are different ways to defend the idea that person-affecting reasons must be considered. There are different person-affecting principles. The Narrow Person-Affecting Principle implies rejecting Transitivity, but other person-affecting principles lack this implication, even if they appear to possess it at first. Let me elaborate.

### *3.2. Person-affecting Principles that Seem to Imply Betterness Need Not Be Asymmetric*

In order to examine this I need to point at an important distinction between different principles that appeal to person-affecting reasons. Some of these principles imply nontransitive or actually intransitive comparisons regarding the betterness of three or more outcomes, but despite this it is clear that according to them betterness is always asymmetric. The Narrow Person-Affecting principle is an example of these principles. If a certain outcome A is better than another one B, then according to this principle it is not possible that B is better than A according to it. This seems very intuitive. But there are other principles that appear to imply that betterness need not be asymmetric. <sup>8</sup> I will consider here three different principles that can imply this. There are other possible principles which can also fall within this class of principles, but for simplicity I will focus on these three principles that I think many of those defending a person-affecting view can find intuitive. In particular, I think many accept

7. See Temkin 2012: chs. 11 and 12. The initial trigger for the development of this idea was Parfit's claim that the inequality occurring in A+ cannot be bad because it is produced by a mere addition of extra individuals (1984: 425). See on this claim also Temkin 1997: 304. For criticisms see Dancy 2005; Weber 2007.

8. They also seem to imply, in a similar vein, that the “\_ is at least as good as \_” relation need not be antisymmetric.

*The Actuality-Dependent Person-Affecting Principle:* in assessing possible outcomes, one should (1) focus on the status of those who exist in the actual world, with the aim of wanting them to be as well off as possible, and (2) ignore the status of those who do not exist in the actual world, except that one wants to avoid harming them as much as possible.

I think many people also accept

*The Time-Dependent Person-Affecting Principle:* in assessing possible outcomes that have not occurred yet, one should (1) focus on those who will exist in the outcome that will occur first, with the aim of wanting them to be as well off as possible, and (2) ignore the status of those who will not exist in the outcome that will occur first, except that one wants to avoid harming them as much as possible.

And at least some philosophers also accept:

*The Identity-Dependent Person-Affecting Principle:* in assessing possible outcomes, one should (1) focus on the status of those whose identity is already determined, with the aim of wanting them to be as well off as possible, and (2) ignore the status of those whose identity is not determined yet, except that one wants to avoid harming them as much as possible.

I shall henceforth refer to these principles as “the three alternative person affecting principles” or simply “the three other principles”.

Now, to see these principles in action consider the way in which the move from A to A+ in the Mere Addition Paradox may be assessed according to them. The standard way of presenting this move assumes we depart from A and then we move to A+. But suppose we depart from A+, and are asked whether it would be worse to remain in A+ rather than to move to A, in which only those who are best off at A+ will exist. If we applied any of the three principles I have introduced above, we would then claim that remaining in A+ would be better. The reason would be that in A+ certain individuals whose existence is good exist, who instead would not exist if we moved to A.

But suppose we were not at A+, but at A. Many people have the intuition that if we are at A, while it would be fine if we moved to A+, it need not be necessarily better to move to A+ than to stay at A. The reason for this is that after all those extra individuals who would exist at A+ do not exist, in fact they have never existed and may never exist. Most people do not regret that there are possible happy individuals who may have lived but have never existed. On the contrary, if moving from A to A+ implied that the wellbeing of some of those in A is reduced, these principles would claim that A+ would be worse than A. Therefore, A might be better than A+ if A was actual or

previous than A+, or if the identity of those in A was established but not the identity of those in A+. But A+ would always be better than A if A+ was actual or previous than A, or if the identity of those in A+ was established.

### 3.3. *Why Person-affective Principles that Seem to Deny Non-asymmetry Fail to Support an Essentially Comparative View*

Given what we have just seen, it seems that these three principles I have just introduced appear to imply an Essentially Comparative View in an even more radical way than the Narrow Person-Affective View. This is so because although rejecting the transitivity of betterness is one way to reject the Essentially Comparative View, rejecting the asymmetry of betterness is another, more radical, way to do so. I will now claim, however, that this is not really the case. These person-affective principles only *seem* to imply that “better than” is asymmetric and intransitive. On closer examination, they are not.

To see this, we must consider that whether an outcome is better than another depends on which of those outcomes is the actual outcome. These facts need to be taken into account to know what outcome it would be better to obtain. There are two ways to explain this. We can count temporal position, actuality and the determination of individuals’ identity as something internal to outcomes, or we can count it as something external to them.

Suppose we consider that these circumstances are internal to outcomes themselves. That is, suppose they are part of that which defines a certain outcome and, therefore, of what can distinguish it from a different outcome. This means that two outcomes that are equal in everything except the time at which they occur are in fact different outcomes. And the same happens if one of them is actual and the other one is not, or if the identity of the individuals in them is determined beforehand or not. If we accept this we will have to conclude that A and B are not really the same outcomes when A is better than B and when “B” is better than “A”. And when we claim that A is better than B, B is better than C, and C is better than A, what happens is that A when A is better than B is different from “A” when C is better than “A”.

That is, let us assign the names A’ and B’ to “A” and “B” when “B” is prior to “A”, when “B” instead of “A” is actual, or when the identity of the individuals existing in “B”, but not in “A”, is determined. If  $A > B$  and  $B' > A'$ , then  $A \neq A'$  and  $B \neq B'$ .

Let us now assign the name B’ to “B” when “B” is prior to C, when “B” is actual, or when the identity of the individuals existing in “B”, but not in “C”, is determined, and the names C’ and A’ to “C” when “C” is prior to “A”, when “C” is actual, or when the identity of the individuals existing in “C”, but not in “A”, is determined. If  $A > B$ ,  $B' > C$  and  $C' > A'$  then  $A \neq A'$ ,  $B \neq B'$  and  $C \neq C'$ .

Given this, there is no reason to deny betterness is symmetric. But there is no reason either to deny it is a transitive relation.

Consider now the other solution. Let us suppose that when we compare two outcomes, whether one outcome is previous to another one, or is actual, or has individuals whose identity is already determined, is something “external”, so to speak, to whatever defines the outcomes themselves. We have seen that according to these principles it is impossible to know whether an outcome is better than another one without knowing which one is prior or actual, or whether the identity of those who exist in them is determined. But then, this means that knowing *everything* about two outcomes is not enough to know which one is better. This means that an outcome cannot be considered better or worse than another one *in itself*. So in order to compare two outcomes we need to know also something “external” to these outcomes.

If this is right, then whenever we compare which outcome is better according to the three principles I have presented we are not comparing the outcomes *as such*, but outcomes *and* something else. Therefore, it is not the outcomes *themselves* that are ordered according to the relation “all things considered better than”. We must thus conclude that these principles are compatible with (i) the view that “all things considered better than” is a transitive relation, and with (ii) an Internal Aspects View.

As we saw above, this is not the case when we consider other principles such as the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle whose application does not depend on factors such as time, actuality or whether the identity of individuals is fixed. Whenever we compare two outcomes according to principles such as this one we can tell which one is better without having to know anything else apart from the outcomes. Therefore, these principles never give rise to comparisons regarding betterness that are not asymmetric. But they can genuinely give rise to intransitive comparisons regarding betterness all things considered. Therefore, as long as we accept the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle (or any similar principle) we will have to reject the Internal Aspects View.

The difference between the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle and the three other principles I have presented is that, unlike these three principles, the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle compares different outcomes by virtue of the features of the outcomes themselves and that these features do not include circumstances, such as which outcome is previous, or actual. It is for this reason that according to the three other principles in certain circumstances A would be preferable to B and in other circumstances B would be preferable to A, while according to the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle this cannot be so.

This result, however, can also mean that while according to the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle it is possible that  $A > B > C > A$  (though not that  $A > B$  and  $B > A$ ), this is not so according to the other three principles. While according to them it seems that it can be the case not only that  $A > B > C > A$ , but also that  $A > B$  and  $B > A$ , this is so either because (a) when A is better

than B, B and A are different than they are when “B” is better than “A”; and when A is better than B and B is better than C, A and C are different than they are when C is better than A; or (b) because the comparison is not only between outcomes but between outcomes *plus* other circumstances. It is due to this that the Time-Dependent Person-Affecting Principle, the Actuality-Dependent Person-Affecting Principle and the Identity-Dependent Person-Affecting Principle are fully compatible with an Internal Aspects View. This means it is possible to reject an impersonal view when it comes to comparing outcomes with different individuals and yet accept an Internal Aspects View. This setting aside the fact that those who accept an impersonal view will have no reason to reject the Internal Aspects View either.

#### 4. WHAT HAPPENS IN SPECTRUM ARGUMENTS?

##### 4.1. *No Essentially Comparative Principle Applies in Spectrum Arguments*

Let us assess another way Temkin defends an Essentially Comparative View, the one that appeals to Spectrum Arguments. We have seen already that in them our intuitions regarding which outcomes are better than others appear to imply that betterness is not transitive. However, this does not happen due to the application of a certain essentially comparative principle such as the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle. To be sure, in Spectrum Arguments one can assume an Essentially Comparative View. But if that is so, it needs to be due to reasons other than the application of essentially comparative arguments such as the ones presented in the previous sections (note that appeals to person-affecting reasons play no role here). In fact, what happens in Spectrum Arguments is that certain principles appear to clearly outweigh other principles in certain comparisons, but they appear to be clearly outweighed by them in other comparisons. To use the language Temkin introduces here (2012: ch. 2 and 5, appendices A and B), for some comparisons between outcomes there is a certain “standard view” that seems to be clearly right, while for other comparisons between outcomes there is another standard view that appears to be clearly correct as well.

Temkin points out that there is a standard view according to which trade-offs between the duration and the quality of a certain suffering are sometimes desirable (2012: 30). This is so because it is assumed that it is better to experience more intense suffering for a shorter period of time, rather than less intense suffering for a longer period of time, if the difference in the intensity of the two pains is sufficiently small, and the difference in their durations is sufficiently large. This is the view we can think of when we face comparisons between immediate options, as that of A against B, B against C, C against D, etc. It is therefore the one that may drive us to think that  $A > B > C$ . When we compare options that are located far away in the

spectrum, however, as when we compare Z against A, Temkin claims that there is another standard view according to which trade-offs between the duration and the quality of a certain suffering are not acceptable. This is so because it is assumed that it is worse to receive a more intense pain of some non trivial duration than a very mild pain of virtually any duration. This is the one that drives us to think  $Z > A$ .

So *two* standard views apply here, not a single principle.<sup>9</sup> And note that none of these two views is an essentially comparative principle as defined above. Suppose we only accepted the standard view that claims that trade-offs between quality and duration can be desirable and therefore concludes that  $A > B > C$ . We would never reach any result according to which  $A > B > C > \dots > Y > Z > A$ , because that view would give us no reason to conclude that  $Z > A$ . Suppose now that we only accept the standard view that in some cases trade-offs between quality and duration are not desirable and concludes that  $Z > A$ . Again, the same result obtains: this view would never drive us to conclude  $A > B > C > \dots > Y > Z > A$ . In this case, because the view itself gives us no reason to accept  $A > B > C$  or  $Y > Z$ . So, our intuitions may drive us to conclude that  $A > B > C > \dots > Y > Z > A$  only when we combine these two principles.

Consider now the issue the other way around. Suppose we accept an essentially comparative principle such as the Narrow Person-Affecting Principle. This need not give us any reason to reject transitivity in Spectrum Arguments, because in them no variation regarding the individuals involved in different outcomes occurs. Therefore, if in these cases transitivity and the Internal Aspects View also fail to apply it must be due to completely different reasons. As I mentioned earlier, the only reasons to doubt about whether transitivity applies here is the conflict between our intuitions concerning the two different principles that we may accept in Spectrum Arguments. The examination of Spectrum Arguments must thus be different from the discussion of the cases involving essentially comparative principles visited above.

9. Note that the contradictions between the application of principles sometimes works in different directions, so it is possible to draw two Spectrum Arguments in which things work just the other way around as in Temkin's main Spectrum Argument. For instance, consider one Spectrum Argument that starts with A, in which we suffer a very mild pain for a month. Then compare it to B, in which we suffer moderate pain for three weeks. B seems to be worse than A. Then consider C, which is a much worse pain for two weeks. C appears to be worse than B. And so on. Finally, you reach Z, where you suffer excruciating pain for a second. Many would deem Z preferable to A (though maybe not on reflection, providing a second is a relevant duration).

The fact is that the intuitions we have towards each Spectrum Argument vary. For instance, I find the idea that excruciating pain for a second is worse than a headache for a month harder to accept than the idea that torture for a year is worse than some very mild pain lasting continuously for immense periods of time. But other people have different intuitions.

#### 4.2. *Why Denying Betterness is Transitive Does Not Solve the Puzzles Entailed by Spectrum Arguments*

There are reasons to reject that the challenge that Spectrum Arguments present should drive us to reject the conclusion that transitivity does not apply to them. The main reason for this is that rejecting that betterness is transitive does not solve the problems implied by the conflict between different standard views.

Suppose we granted that in Spectrum Arguments comparisons must be essentially comparative, and that betterness can be intransitive. I may know that I intuitively prefer A to B, B to C, C to D... and then Y to Z and Z to A. And I can decide accordingly which outcomes are better when I compare two options in turn. But what happens if I do not only need to compare two options, but more? What happens, in particular, if I want to know what is the best option among all the available options? Rejecting transitivity may allow us to make the choices we find more intuitive when it comes to pairwise comparisons between different alternatives. But it offers no guidance whatsoever regarding what we may do when we have to choose *one* outcome in the whole spectrum. It leaves us without any way to look for a global maximum in which the harms we suffer are minimized (see Elster 2000; McClellenn 1990: 231). If anything, it makes things far more complicated, since transitivity offers at least a possible method to solve the problem.

We may consider that this is not really crucial to the problem we face here. Having trouble finding the best outcome is surely a problem. But the fact that some outcomes such as Y and Z seem to be better than others such as A and B, which in turn seem to be better than others such as C and D, is also very problematic. So we could think that while the problem of which is the best outcome is one everyone faces, this other problem is one that only those who accept the Internal Aspects View have to face. In this way, rejecting transitivity would at least allow us to make some progress.

This, however, does not seem correct, because the problems we face when we have to choose the best option in the spectrum have the same origin as the problems we face when we compare alternatives that seem to be intransitive. The reason we have problems identifying the best option is that A appears to be better than B, B appears to be better than C and Z seems to be better than A. It is all about the conflict between the prevalence of two different standard views. This is the reason why, in the spectrum, it seems that  $Z > A$  while it also seems that  $A > B > C > \dots > Y > Z$ . It is also the reason why we are at a loss to identify the best option. In addition, we may take into account something Temkin considers when he wonders: “[w]ouldn’t the *best* alternative be the one that was best in comparison with *all* other *possible* alternatives, whether or not we might ever actually face them?” (2012: 470). This is a reasonable view, and if it is right, then in comparing two outcomes it makes perfect sense

to compare them considering all the different options that there may be in a spectrum within which these two outcomes can be included.

We might believe that even if this is so, the problems we will have to face to do this will not be exactly the same ones that those faced by advocates of the Internal Aspects view. We may think that if we reject the claim that betterness is transitive we will have more alternatives available among which we can choose what solution is the best. But this is not so. To see this, let us examine what reasons we may have to support as sound candidates to the best outcome in the spectrum.<sup>10</sup>

- (a) *Duration prevails.* We may hold that the worst pain is always the one that lasts more. According to this A is the best option. This view will solve the whole spectrum problem by rejecting the applicability of the two standard views.
- (b) *Quality prevails.* We may also hold that the worst pain is always the most intense pain. If so, Z is the best option. Again, this would solve the spectrum problem by denying the applicability of the two standard views.
- (c) *Expected utility.* We may also hold that expected utility theory tells us how good or bad is each option in the spectrum. We would then choose A. Unlike in the case of the two other possible solutions we have just seen this criterion does not immediately dissolve the spectrum problem. On this view it makes sense to claim that there is intuitively less utility in A than in Z. But expected utility theory assumes that betterness is transitive. Due to this, it can revise this first judgement by acknowledging that it is in contradiction with agreeing that A is better than B, B better than C, and so on until we agree that Y is better than Z, and therefore conclude A is also better than Z.
- (d) *Critical level.* We may accept a capped model according to which there would be a certain critical level that ruled out as bad any outcome in which pain became too intense, if the critical level was set to rule out outcomes according to quality, or too persistent if the critical level was set to rule out outcomes according to duration. Accordingly, we could choose a point of the spectrum such as M, for example, at which the pain was not too intense or too long. We may think that rejecting transitivity makes it easier for us to accept this, because it would make it easier for us to accept any option different from A. But the fact is that we can accept any of those options even if we do not reject transitivity. Suppose we do this in the case of M. This will imply that we will have to accept that M is both better than

10. See on this Handfield (2013).



L and N ( $L < M > N$ ). This is very counter-intuitive and thus a high price to pay for holding this position. It is hard to see how M may be better than L and N, since the same reasons for M to be better than N seem to make it worse than L. But both advocates of transitivity and advocates of intransitivity face the same problem here.

- (e) *Strength of preference in pairwise comparisons.* We may also decide to choose the option for which our preference over the immediate next option in the spectrum is the strongest one. In that case we would choose Z, it seems, because our preference for Z over A is stronger than our preference for A over B, from B over C, etc. We may think that this solution is easy for advocates of intransitivity. But it is not. The reason is that if transitivity does not apply, then there is no reason to assume a certain ranking according to which a certain outcome comes after another one. So the whole idea of having an immediate next option in the spectrum ceases to make sense. But then, for advocates of intransitivity, the intuitive initial preference for Z over A is weaker than that for Y over A, and that of X over A. And, as I have just said, if transitivity does not apply, then there is no reason to assume that Z, and not Y or X, is the relevant outcome we must compare with A. And mind that both Y and X are clearly better than Z, yet similar enough to Z to make the distinction in quality between Z and A, and between Y to A trivial. So if we reject transitivity we will be at a loss about how to solve this problem.
- (f) *Special preferences.* We may just maintain an arbitrary view according to which some solution such as, say, G, is the best one just because it is. For instance, we may maintain that there's something special about mild torture for 10 years that makes it less bad both than a slightly worse torture for fewer years and a slightly milder torture for more years. Again, there is no reason why we may accept any solution if we reject transitivity but not if we accept it. As it happened when we considered critical levels, advocates of transitivity have to bite the bullet that some option is better than both the previous and the following option in the spectrum (which they may find preferable than having to reject transitivity). But advocates of intransitivity need to do so as well if they are to give a solution to this problem at all.

There is only one way in which advocates of intransitivity can avoid all these difficulties which is not available to advocates of transitivity: by claiming that there is just no fact of the matter as to what outcome is the best one in the spectrum. But this is certainly not a way to solve the problem; rather, it is a way to claim (i) either that the problem has no solution or (ii) that we cannot solve it, both of which are odd replies.

In all these cases, *rejecting transitivity fails to facilitate a solution*. In fact, it makes it harder, if not impossible, to do so. To be sure, there can be other solutions to this problem apart from the ones I have presented. But it seems that the abovementioned problems both for advocates of transitivity and intransitivity persist.

## 5. WE DO NOT NEED TO REJECT THE INTERNAL ASPECTS VIEW

If my arguments above are correct, we have reasons to maintain transitivity and the Internal Aspects View. We have seen that some principles that appeal to person-affecting reasons are essentially comparative. But the intuitions supporting these principles can also be accommodated by means of other principles which are not essentially comparative. In addition, the argument will have no force for those who hold an impersonal view.

We have also seen that it is possible to try to explain our intuitions in Spectrum Arguments by rejecting transitivity. But this does not solve the problems these arguments pose, in light of which we may simply opt for not rejecting it and not accepting the Essentially Comparative View.

We can thus conclude that we do not need to reject the Internal Aspects View to find apt solutions to the challenges pressed against it. Moreover, rejecting transitivity fails to yield better solutions.

## 6. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN TEMKIN'S NORMATIVE AND METAETHICAL VIEWS

### 6.1. *Can Inconsistent Moral Intuitions Track an Objective Reality?*

The problems discussed thus far are normative and methodological, but may entail also metaethical consequences. This need not be so, since, strictly speaking, normative claims need not depend on metaethical views. Temkin's arguments, however, may give us reasons against moral realism (even though Temkin is a realist himself).

This is so because if there are some substantive moral claims that are true regardless of what we think, we have no epistemological access to the moral reality other than our intuitions. Moral realists thus claim that our intuitions somehow track moral reality. Temkin's attack on the Internal Aspects View, however, shows that the intuitions most of us have are inconsistent and chaotic. Could it be that moral reality is also inconsistent and chaotic? This seems implausible. Given this, it seems that either moral realism is also implausible or our moral intuitions do not really track any moral reality, in which case moral realism is indefensible (since we have nothing to back the claim that some moral reality exists).

Temkin argues that rejecting transitivity need not imply an inconsistent viewpoint (2012: 500). This, however, is besides the point. The issue is not the inconsistency involved in rejecting transitivity, or the Internal Aspects View. The issue is that Temkin's arguments show that most of us have inconsistent intuitions. To see this, consider the way Temkin argues that intransitivity does not entail inconsistency:

Suppose that there are three alternatives *A*, *B*, and *C*, such that we come to believe that it really *is* the case that, all things considered, *A* is better than *B*, *B* is better than *C*, but, all things considered, *A* is *not* better than *C*. Would this mean that we have inconsistent beliefs or that we thought the world was inconsistent?

No! It *would* mean this if we *also* thought that “all-things-considered better than” was a transitive relation.

Temkin's argument is not necessarily implausible. The problem, however is that many of us *do* think that “all-things-considered better than” is a transitive relation. I have presented several arguments defending this view. We can accept them and yet feel the strength of the intuitions Temkin appeals to when he claims, for instance, that in spectrum cases  $A > B > C > D > \dots > Y > Z > A$ . But that means we have inconsistent intuitions. This means that if our moral intuitions tracked the world, such world would also be inconsistent.

Temkin defends the compatibility of his normative position and realism, claiming that moral reality could be inconsistent. He writes that “[o]ur theories should reflect the world as it actually is, and on my view, whether or not the normative realm is vague, incomplete, or even inconsistent depends on facts about the normative realm, not on what is useful for us” (2012: 521). He adds to this: “[o]n my realistic conception of the normative realm, it is not [...] up to *us* to simply *decide* which positions should be accepted and which revised or rejected” (*ibid.*). Such statements leaves us without guidance to accept or reject any kind of normative or metaethical views. Moreover, we are the only ones who can decide which views to accept or reject, and we have nothing but our intuitions and our capacity to compare them to make such decisions (this is the case of both realists and antirealists). Finally, the idea that there is an inconsistent moral reality appears to many of us both hardly conceivable and at any rate less likely than the falsehood of realism (regardless of other reasons we may have to doubt this).

## 6.2. *Our Intuitions Towards Metacriteria*

How is it possible that there is this radical disagreement about the requirement of consistency between Temkin and (surely) many Temkin readers like myself?

To answer this question we can examine the kind of intuitions with which we can appraise the apparent paradoxes that Temkin presents.

It seems that most of us have intuitions both about whether certain particular outcomes are better than others and towards certain general axiological principles. Similarly, we have intuitions about what we should do in some particular cases and about general normative principles. Some of us, however, have *also* intuitions about metacriteria concerning our axiological and normative theories. Some of us have a very strong intuition that betterness must be transitive. We also have a very strong intuition that our axiological and our moral views must be consistent. These are not the same; and it is possible that rejecting transitivity does not entail any kind of inconsistency. But they are both strong intuitive metacriteria for many of us. These are not, moreover, the only intuitions about metacriteria we have: many of us also have the intuition that there is something wrong with a theory that is very complex and includes lots of exemptions and provisos. In fact, many of us find these intuitions so compelling that when we have to decide between abandoning them or abandoning the claim that a year of torture must be worse than a very large number of mosquito bites we give up the claim about mosquito bites. However, Temkin and others find that decision unacceptable. This is because their intuitions regarding consistency, transitivity and simplicity are weaker or even nonexistent. Temkin is not only willing to give up transitivity and simplicity, but also consistency if it clash with his intuitions about pairwise comparisons of outcomes (2012: section 14.6). He argues that “[n]othing can *force* someone to give up a set of inconsistent views” (2012: 520).

Because we have inconsistent views, Temkin suggests we give up our aspirations to have a consistent approach, so we can keep all our views. This can help Temkin not only to hold the normative views he finds intuitive, but also to do so without abandoning moral realism. If we strongly believe all our views must be consistent, however, the problem continues, and consistency remains a requirement we do not want to drop. Moreover, we probably do not want to drop other metacriteria such as transitivity and simplicity. This gives us reasons to resist Temkin's attack on the Internal Aspects View, and, if the argument presented above is correct, it also present a serious challenge to his realist views in metaethics.

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