The Ethics of Scalability

Constantine Sandis[†]
Nassim Nicholas Taleb[†] [‡]
[†]University of Hertfordshire , [‡]Tandon School, New York University
Forthcoming: *Philosopher's Magazine*

Scalability converts qualitative statements into quantitative ones. Without an adequate understanding of scalability, a system of ethics is incomplete, at best.

In early 2020 –before the epidemic's multiplicative effects kicked in – the average person was more likely to die in a car crash than of COVID-19. But car crashes and road deaths do not scale. Individual problems don't blow up into group problems. After all, no individual car crash begets further car crashes. In fact, a car crash may even reduce the risk of future collisions, for example by motivating the introduction of additional traffic lights and other such measures. By contrast, any person who catches a virus is likely to pass it on to several people, each of whom will in turn pass it to several more, and so on. In early 2020 it was already far more likely that 10,000 people would eventually die of COVID than by a car crash, even though for any single one of them a road death was more likely.

This phenomenon of scalability raises serious ethical concerns that are critical to decision-making. In crossing the road carelessly, I risk my own life and no other. In driving recklessly I might additionally expose any passengers in my car, as well as the driver and passengers of any cars I might collide with. But to willingly expose oneself to COVID is to put a vast number of people at risk. This is the equivalent of willingly letting vast numbers carelessly cross the road at the same time.

Collective interest thus requires high individual risk avoidance, even when this conflicts with our individual self-interests. The latter are insignificant by comparison to the former. The risk of a car accident in early 2020 may have been greater for an individual, but it wouldn't scale up into a huge group problem. By contrast, the risk for an individual to catch the virus was very low, but its scalability is great. This low individual risk makes it appear irrational to react immediately and take (supposedly) "extreme" measures. Yet an individual who fails to act in such an ultra-protective manner will contribute to the spread of the virus and it will become a major source of systemic harm. It becomes dangerously selfish to act according to what is deemed to be "rational self-interest" when one's own immediate self-interest generates risks for society. This is the tragedy of the commons on steroids.

As the tragedy scales to the group level, even one's own life will eventually be at risk, either directly or indirectly (e.g. through the complete inundation of hospitals and their intensive care units). The prudent and ethical course of action for all individuals is to enact systemic precaution at the individual and local scale. Indeed, the mere possibility of scalability requires us to prioritise the collective over the individual without hesitation.

There are more distinctions relevant to decision-making, however, than the dichotomy of individual versus group. Between the concrete individual and the abstract collective there are a certain number of tangible fractal gradations. Hegel's appreciation of this fact motivated him to establish three distinct stages of ethical life (in Philosophy of Right): (i) from the individual to the family; (ii) from the family to civil society; (iii) from civil society to the state. But there are numerous micro-gradations: from nuclear family to wider family, from one's direct neighbours to the local village; and from village to town to city, province, and so on, until we reach the oxymoron of a so-called "global village." Politics is not scale-free. One may, for example, be libertarian at the federal level, Republican at the state level, Democrat at the county level, socialist within the commune, and communist at the family and tribe level without contradiction.

Moreover, there exist additional circles of collectivity, in the form of friendship groups, professions, religion, and even sport allegiance. The defeat of stereotyping is that an individual may belong to more than one group. Indeed, what appears as a collective in one context, presents itself as individual of another e.g. via the appropriation of the first-person plural "we", which reached an apotheosis of absurdity in Stalinism.It is a common mistake to conflate differences between groups and differences between individuals. Scaling prevents inferring group preferences from individual preferences, and vice versa. A group of people with a very weak preference for not being in the very small minority produces clustering. For example, a collection of Southern Italian Americans with a weak preference for living within reach of Italian grocery stores might end up creating what looks like a segregated neighbourhood, without anyone having any preference to exclude others from it. This does not mean that homogeneous neighbourhoods never involve widespread preferences to exclude others: some fundamentalists in hyper-monotheistic religions actively exclude others on religious grounds (e.g. Salafis in some neighbourhoods of Tripoli, Lebanon). But they don't always.

Scaling is complicated. What is hospitality? What is racism? And how can the same people be committing both hospitality and racism? Traditional Arab tribes exhibit high hospitality towards individual strangers that venture into their territory, yet

Ethics, Philosophy of Action, Risk Management

would slaughter marauding groups. Hospitality risks can thus be lower for an individual and higher for a collective, and vice versa, depending on context. Scalability converts qualitative statements into quantitative ones.

While there are contexts in which it makes sense to see oneself or others as a member of a certain group, the conflation of individual and group is ultimately a category mistake of confusing the scalable with the non-scalable. This can have grave consequences, accounting for various forms of prejudice, stereotyping, chauvinism, and racism. We cannot begin to tackle these without an ethics of scalability. At the core of such an ethics is the thought that what appears to be a "rational" decision from the point of view of an individual may not be when the group level is taken into account. Likewise, what appears "rational" at a local level may not be so at a state level, and vice versa. The same is true with regard to decisions involving individuals as individuals, versus those relating to individuals as members of a certain group. Without an adequate understanding of scalability, a system of ethics is incomplete, at best.