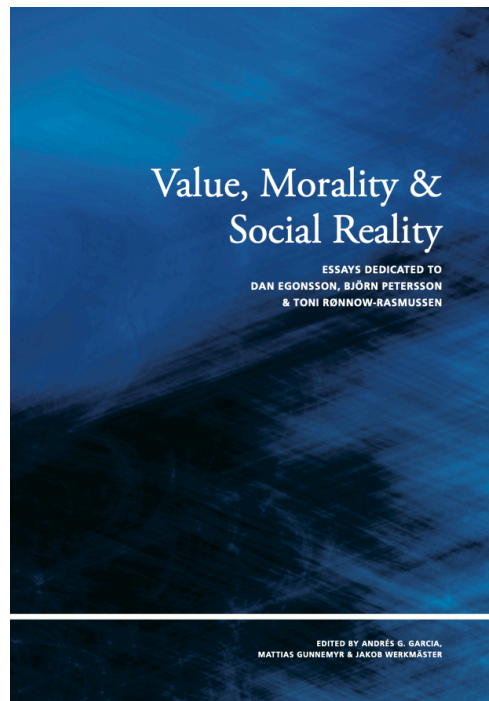


# Petersson on Plural Harm

*Jens Johansson*

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# Petersson on Plural Harm

Jens Johansson

**Abstract.** The counterfactual comparative account of harm has counterintuitive implications in cases involving overdetermination and preemption. A popular strategy for dealing with these problems appeals to *plural harm*—several events being *jointly* harmful. Björn Petersson criticizes this strategy on the grounds that it conflicts with a strong intuition that helps to motivate the counterfactual comparative account, namely, that harming someone essentially involves making a difference for the worse for her. In this paper, I argue that Petersson’s argument is unconvincing.

## 1. Introduction

Björn Petersson presents the following case:

*Recommendations:* I just had this paper rejected by the *Journal of Overdetermination Studies*. According to that journal’s strict policy, manuscripts are rejected when one of the two reviewers recommends rejection, regardless of what the other reviewer says. In this case, both reviewers recommended rejection. (Petersson, 2018: 841; wording slightly modified; name of case added.)

To avoid confusion, I am going to use ‘Björn’ to refer to Petersson *qua* character in *Recommendations*, and ‘Petersson’ to refer to Petersson *qua* actual philosopher. Petersson adds some further details to the case: first, Björn would have been better off had the paper not been rejected; second, since “the comforting effect of one positive review would have been outbalanced by the frustration created by being

rejected in spite of such a review” (2018: 842), he would not have been better off if only one reviewer—Reviewer #1 or Reviewer #2—had recommended rejection; and third, it holds for each reviewer that she would have recommended rejection even if the other one had not. It is clear from the context that Petersson also assumes, fourth, that if neither Reviewer #1 nor Reviewer #2 had recommended rejection, then the paper would not have been rejected.

As Petersson says, *Recommendations* is an instance of the widely discussed *overdetermination* problem for the *counterfactual comparative account* of the nature of harm (CCA). This account can be formulated as follows:

CCA     An event harms a person if and only if she would have been better off if it had not occurred.<sup>1</sup>

Because neither Reviewer #1’s nor Reviewer #2’s action (recommending rejection) leaves Björn worse off than he would have been had it not been performed, CCA implies that neither action harms Björn. But, Petersson suggests, intuitively each of the reviewers’ actions does harm Björn. To make this more clearly intuitive, let us add to the case the further detail that the rejection caused Björn disappointment and sadness.

CCA also faces the same kind of problem in various cases involving *preemption*. Consider this case, in which one rejection preempts another:

*Desk Rejection:* Dan just had this paper desk rejected by the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Preemption Studies*. Having the paper desk rejected, in spite of its high quality, brings Dan disappointment and sadness. If the Editor-in-Chief had not desk rejected the paper, then it would instead have been desk rejected by the Associate Editor, which would have left Dan no better off than he actually is.

Intuitively—or so many would say—the Editor-in-Chief’s action harms Dan. But CCA implies that it does not.

Much of the debate has focused on a more physically dramatic preemption case, in which Bobby Knight, a basketball coach notorious for his rage, attacks a philosopher (Norcross, 2005; see also, e.g., Boonin, 2014: 62–63; Bradley, 2012; Feit, 2015, forthcoming; Hanna, 2016; Immerman, 2022; Jedenheim Edling, 2022; Johansson and Risberg, 2019, 2022). Consider this version:

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<sup>1</sup> CCA is defended in, e.g., Boonin, 2014; Bradley, 2009; Feit, 2015, 2019, 2021, forthcoming; Klocksiem, 2012; Parfit, 1984: 69; Petersson, 2018; Timmerman, 2019. CCA is intended as an account of *overall* harm (harmfulness all things considered), as opposed to *pro tanto* harm (harmfulness to some extent, or in some respect). Like Petersson, I will be concerned with overall harm only. Correspondingly, both in the formulation of CCA and throughout our discussion, ‘better off’ is shorthand for ‘better off *overall*’—and ‘worse off’ is, of course, shorthand for ‘worse off *overall*’. Being (worse) off overall simply amounts to having a higher (lower) lifetime well-being level.

*Choking:* Bobby Knight interprets one of Toni's arguments, involving an evil demon, as an attempt to make fun of Knight's own character. One day he meets Toni and chokes him. If he hadn't choked Toni, he would have dismembered him.

Intuitively—or so many would say—the choking harms Toni. However, CCA entails that it does not. Indeed, assuming a parallel account of harm and benefit, CCA implies that the choking even *benefits* Toni, as he would have been even worse off without it.

A popular strategy for dealing with the overdetermination and preemption problems for CCA is to appeal to *plural harm*. This strategy is inspired by a suggestion made by Derek Parfit (1984: 70–72), but has primarily been developed by Neil Feit (2015, 2022, forthcoming; see also, e.g., Jedenheim Edling, 2022; Timmerman, 2019: 244, fn. 6). The basic idea is that while CCA, which concerns a *singular* event's harming someone, is entirely correct, we should add to it, roughly, that a *plurality* of several events harms a person—in other words, that several events *jointly* harm a person—insofar as she would have been better off had *none* of those events occurred. This approach, its proponents argue, yields reasonable results in the relevant overdetermination and preemption cases. For instance, while this approach does not allow us to say that each reviewer's action harms Björn in *Recommendations*, it does imply something in the vicinity—namely, that each reviewer's action belongs to a plurality that harms Björn.

Petersson (2018) argues, however, that the plural harm approach abandons part of the main motivation for CCA, namely, the intuition that *making a difference for the worse* for someone is essential to harming her. According to Petersson, we should therefore be content with CCA alone and reject the proposed addition about pluralities. The implication that many overdetermination and preemption cases involve much less harm than they initially appear to do, he argues, is in the end acceptable.

In my opinion, Petersson is right that the plural harm approach does not adequately deal with the overdetermination and preemption problems for CCA (Carlson, Johansson, and Risberg, 2023b; Johansson and Risberg, 2019). His argument for this conclusion, however, is unconvincing. That will be my main point. But I shall also briefly suggest that, ironically, CCA *itself* fails to respect the idea that making a difference for the worse for someone is essential to harming her.

## 2. Plural Harm

CCA proponents have advanced various different versions of the plural harm approach, but since Petersson's criticism is applicable to all of them he focuses on a fairly simple version. I shall call that version (only marginally modified) the *simple plural harm account*, or *SPH*, and formulate it as follows:

SPH     A plurality of events P harms a person if and only if (a) she would have been better off had no event in P occurred, and (b) there is no proper subplurality P\* of P such that she would have been better off had no event in P\* occurred.<sup>2</sup>

Feit and others have explicated the main elements of SPH and similar principles as follows.

First, a proper subplurality of a plurality of events P is a plurality that contains only, but not all, events in P (e.g., Feit, 2015: 376).

Second, talk of a “plurality” of several events should not here be taken to carry any ontological commitment to some entity that somehow has those events as constituents—for instance, a singular compound event with those events as parts (e.g., Feit, 2015: 370). Instead, it should simply be understood as a way of speaking of *those events*; saying that a plurality of several events harms someone is just a way of saying that *they* harm her.

Third, a plurality can consist of a single event—and speaking of a plurality of a single event is simply a way of speaking of *that event* (e.g., Feit, 2015: 371). Since SPH should be understood as covering pluralities of any size, and any one-event plurality trivially satisfies (b), SPH entails CCA (though not vice versa).

Fourth, talk of harmful pluralities of several events should here be given a “non-distributive” reading: saying that a plurality of several events harms someone—that *they* harm her—is to say that they harm her *together*, not that *each* of them (or even that at least *one* of them) harms her (e.g., Feit, 2015: 370). Compare: neither Dan Egonsson’s 2007 book, *Preference and Information* nor Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen’s 2021 book, *The Value Gap* is 416 pages long, but together they are 416 pages long.<sup>3</sup> A distributive reading of the harmful pluralities talk would render SPH inconsistent with, and thus unable to assist, CCA. Suppose, for example, that P is a plurality of two singular events, *e1* and *e2*, and that P satisfies (a) and (b). On a distributive reading of the harmful pluralities talk, it follows that *e1* as well as *e2* is itself harmful on SPH. But since P satisfies (b), neither *e1* nor *e2* can be harmful on CCA. Indeed, a distributive reading of the harmful pluralities talk would render SPH incoherent. For in addition to rendering SPH inconsistent with CCA, it would leave untouched

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<sup>2</sup> Petersson (2018: 842) formulates the principle on which he focuses as follows: “A plurality of events harms A if and only if that plurality is the smallest plurality of events such that, if none of them had occurred, A would have been better off.” Unlike SPH, this principle has the disadvantage of ruling out that each of several pluralities that are “tied for smallest” harms the person. See further Feit, 2015: 374–375; Jedenheim Edling, 2022: 1856–1857; Norcross, 2005: 170.

<sup>3</sup> Petersson says that the “term ‘together’ carries with it a flavour of togetherness or collectivity, suggesting intentional co-ordination, planning, we-thinking or interdependence” (2018, 846–847). In my view, that flavor is rather mild, as the book example illustrates. See also Feit, forthcoming: sect. 5.2. In any case, SPH emphatically should not be understood as invoking any kind of “intentional co-ordination, planning, we-thinking or interdependence.”

the fact that SPH entails CCA (see the third clarificatory remark above, about one-event pluralities).

Fifth, the motivation for condition (b) is that an event that has no effect at all, however indirect, on a person's well-being is not plausibly involved in harming her (e.g., Feit, 2015: 370). For example, suppose that in *Recommendations*, a bear is sleeping far away, and that this event in no way affects Björn's well-being. Although Björn would have been better off had no event in the plurality consisting of the reviewers' two actions and the bear's sleeping occurred, this three-event plurality plausibly does not harm him—the bear's sleeping seems to be not even involved in harming him. SPH accommodates this judgment, as the plurality does not satisfy (b); it has a proper subplurality, consisting solely of the reviewers' actions, such that Björn would have been better off had no event in *it* occurred.

For reasons already indicated, SPH implies that in *Recommendations*, the two reviewers' actions together harm Björn: whereas neither of them leaves him worse off than he would have been had *it* not occurred, he is worse off than he would have been had *neither* of them occurred. As for *Choking*, Feit (2015: 381) argues that there must be some mental events in Bobby Knight's mind, such as certain feelings of rage, which explain why he would have dismembered the victim had he not choked him. The plurality consisting of those events and the choking, Feit claims, leaves the victim worse off than he would have been had none of them occurred (though each of its proper subpluralities leaves him no worse off than he would have been had no event in *it* occurred).<sup>4</sup> If this is right, this plurality harms Toni on SPH. Similarly, SPH proponents can say that in *Desk Rejection*, there must be some events in the Associate Editor's mind (such as an intention to desk reject the paper if given the chance) that explain why she would have desk rejected the paper if the Editor-in-Chief had not. Arguably, whereas the plurality consisting of those mental events does not leave Dan worse off than he would have been had none of *them* occurred (since the Editor-in-Chief would still have desk rejected the paper), and the Editor-in-Chief's desk rejecting the paper does not leave Dan worse off than he would have been had *it* not occurred (since the Associate Editor would then have desk rejected the paper), Dan is worse off than he would have been had no event in the plurality consisting of those mental events *and* the Editor-in-Chief's desk rejecting the paper occurred. If this is right, the latter plurality harms Dan on SPH.

Of course, none of this blocks CCA's—and thereby SPH's—implication that neither Reviewer #1's nor Reviewer #2's action harms Björn in *Recommendations*, that the Editor-in-Chief's action does not harm Dan in *Desk Rejection*, and that Bobby Knight's action does not harm Toni in *Choking*. However, SPH proponents contend that their view delivers a result that is good enough—namely, that each of those actions is at least *involved* in harming the respective victim, by belonging to a plurality that harms him.

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<sup>4</sup> For reasons to doubt this claim, see Johansson and Risberg, 2019: 358–360. See also Jedenheim Edling, 2022: 1869–1871.

### 3. Petersson's Criticism

Again, SPH is supposed to be a way of saving CCA from the overdetermination and preemption problems. According to Petersson, however, SPH is inconsistent with part of the main motivation for CCA—namely, the intuition that harming someone essentially involves *making a difference for the worse* for her. As that intuition is a strong one, Petersson suggests, we should stick to CCA alone and deny SPH. He argues, moreover (though I shall not consider this particular move further), that the claim that there is little or no harm in the pertinent overdetermination and preemption cases has less radical consequences than one might think. For instance, he suggests, we can still claim in many such cases that the relevant agents act morally wrongly. (Petersson refrains, however, from accusing Björn's reviewers of wrongdoing in *Recommendations*.)

The reason that SPH is inconsistent with the idea that making a difference for the worse for someone is essential to harming her, Petersson argues, is that many pluralities that are harmful for someone on SPH make no difference for worse for her. Indeed, Petersson says, this is exemplified in precisely those kinds of overdetermination and preemption cases that SPH is primarily designed to handle. A plurality makes a difference for the worse for someone, Petersson apparently assumes, only if she would have been better off if the plurality had not occurred. However, according to Petersson, in the relevant overdetermination and preemption cases the pluralities that are harmful on SPH do not satisfy this condition. For any such plurality, Petersson contends, is such that if it had not occurred, then sufficiently many of the events in it would still have occurred, leaving the person no better off than she actually is.<sup>5</sup>

For instance, in *Recommendations*, as we have seen, the plurality consisting of the reviewers' acts of recommending rejection harms Björn on SPH. According to Petersson, however, if this plurality had not occurred, then one of the two actions in it would still have occurred, in which case Björn's paper would still have been rejected and he would have been no better off than he actually is. After all, a stipulation of the case is that it holds for each reviewer that she would have recommended rejection even if the other one had not. (Without this stipulation, CCA would not imply that each reviewer's action is harmless.) Hence, Petersson concludes, the plurality of the reviewers' acts makes no difference for the worse for Björn.

While Petersson does not discuss *Desk Rejection* or *Choking*, similar remarks seem to apply to them. Again, in *Desk Rejection*, the supposedly harmful plurality consists of the Editor-in-Chief's desk rejecting Dan's paper and the mental events that explain why the paper would have otherwise been desk rejected by the

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<sup>5</sup> For a closely related argument, whose target is Parfit's view of a group of *agents* harming someone, see Petersson, 2004: 297–300. Cf. Gunnemyr, 2019: 408.

Associate Editor. Judging from his reasoning concerning *Recommendations*, Petersson would deny that this plurality makes any difference for the worse for Dan. Had this plurality not occurred, the argument would go, then either the Editor-in-Chief's desk rejecting the paper or the relevant mental events would still have occurred, leaving Dan no better off than he actually is. In particular, in the absence of the Editor-in-Chief's action, the relevant mental events would have resulted in the Associate Editor's desk rejecting the paper. In *Choking*, the allegedly harmful plurality consists of Bobby Knight's choking Toni and the mental events that explain why Knight would have otherwise dismembered Toni. Presumably, Petersson would claim that this plurality makes no difference for the worse for Toni, on the grounds that if it had not occurred, then either the choking or the relevant mental events would still have occurred, leaving him no better off than he actually is. In particular, in the absence of the choking, the relevant mental events would have resulted in Knight's dismembering Toni, leaving him even worse off than he actually is.

#### 4. Response to Petersson

As I understand it, Petersson's argument can be reconstructed as follows (focusing, as he does, on *Recommendations*):

- (1) A plurality of one or several events makes a difference for the worse for a person only if she would have been better off if it had not occurred. (premise)
- (2) Björn would not have been better off if the plurality consisting of the reviewers' two actions had not occurred. (premise)
- (3) The plurality consisting of the reviewers' two actions does not make a difference for the worse for Björn. (from 1, 2)
- (4) If SPH is true, the plurality consisting of the reviewers' two actions harms Björn. (premise)
- (5) If SPH is true, then a plurality can harm someone without making a difference for the worse for her. (from 3, 4)
- (6) No adequate response on behalf of CCA to the overdetermination and preemption problems is such that if it is true, then a plurality can harm someone without making a difference for the worse for her. (premise)
- (7) SPH is not an adequate response on behalf of CCA to the overdetermination and preemption problems. (from 5, 6)



This valid argument has four premises: (1), (2), (4), and (6). While (4) is highly plausible—and is, of course, precisely what SPH proponents want to highlight regarding *Recommendations*—the other three are questionable, at least when taken together.

#### 4.1 Premise (1)

Contrary to (1), to begin with, there are many cases in which some plurality of one or several events leaves someone no worse off than she would have been without it, but in which it is nevertheless perfectly natural to say that it makes a difference for the worse for her. In perhaps the clearest such cases, the plurality in question is a singular action and there was some alternative action, which the agent *could* but *would* not have performed instead of the actual one, and which would have left the person better off (cf. Johansson and Risberg, 2019, forthcoming). To find suitable examples, we need look no further than our already familiar overdetermination and preemption cases. Consider the one-event plurality of Bobby Knight's choking Toni in *Choking*. Again, Toni would not have been better off if Knight had not choked him, as he would then have been dismembered. But given the additional stipulation that a third alternative available to Knight was to simply leave Toni alone, it seems entirely sensible to say that the choking makes a difference for the worse for Toni.<sup>6</sup>

While *Choking* might illustrate the present point especially forcefully, it is worth noting that similar remarks also apply to *Recommendations*, the very case on which Petersson focuses. Consider the one-event plurality of one reviewer's—say, Reviewer #1's—recommending rejection. Let us add to the case that one of Reviewer #1's available alternatives was to contact Reviewer #2 and persuade her that the paper deserves to be published, in which case the journal would have accepted the paper. While this is not what Reviewer #1 *would* have done had she not recommended rejection, its being something that she *could* have done renders it perfectly natural, it seems to me, to say that her recommending rejection makes a difference for the worse for Björn. Furthermore, similar remarks apply also to our other preemption case, *Desk Rejection*—just add the detail that the Editor-in-Chief could easily have convinced the Associate Editor that Dan's paper should be published.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Relatedly, in the debate on so-called *collective impact cases*, one important view—call it *Difference-Making*, or *DM*—is that if *O* is a morally significant outcome, then there is an *O*-based moral reason against an act only if the act would make a difference to whether *O* obtains (see, e.g., Nefsky, 2017: 2744). Even opponents of DM (such as Nefsky) regard it as highly respectable. But if (1) is true, surely it is also true that an act makes a difference to whether *O* obtains only if *O* would not have obtained had the act not been performed. If so, then *Choking* provides a simple counterexample to DM. Clearly, if Knight could have left Toni alone, and *O* = Toni's being hurt, then there is an *O*-based moral reason against the choking. It cannot be this easy to refute DM.

<sup>7</sup> Some might claim that one or several of *Choking*, *Recommendations*, and *Desk Rejection* show (1) to be mistaken even without the supposition of an alternative that would have left the person better off.

I have criticized (1)—one premise in Petersson’s argument for SPH’s not being an adequate response on behalf of CCA to the overdetermination and preemption problems. In a way, however, my criticism of (1) creates trouble for SPH. I have argued that in the cases at hand, the relevant action makes a difference for the worse for the victim, although it does not satisfy CCA’s condition. A natural view is that making a difference for the worse for someone is sufficient for harming her. My criticism of (1) thus provides additional ammunition against CCA—additional, that is, to the counterintuitiveness of CCA’s implication that the relevant actions are harmless—and thereby also against SPH (which, again, entails CCA). On the other hand, my criticism of (1) might also accentuate CCA proponents’ need for something like SPH. For, plausibly, the more unappealing it is to deny that an action harms a person, the more a theorist who is committed to such a denial should want to be able to say that the action is at least *involved* in harming her, by belonging to plurality that harms her. In any case, as I have already emphasized (section 1), my aim is not to defend SPH (or CCA), but to criticize Petersson’s argument.

#### 4.2 Premise (2)

Premise (2) says that Björn would not have been better off had the plurality consisting of the reviewers’ two actions not occurred. It is clear that if not both events in this plurality had occurred—that is, if it had not been the case that each of them occurs—then one of them would still have occurred, leaving Björn no better off than he actually is. But (2) is nonetheless questionable.<sup>8</sup>

Recall, to begin with, that speaking of the plurality of the reviewers’ two actions is just a way of speaking about *them* (section 2). Thus, asking whether Björn would have been better off had this plurality not occurred is just a way of asking whether he would have been better off had *Reviewer #1’s action and Reviewer #2’s action* not occurred—that is, whether he is better off in the nearest possible world, *w*, in which *Reviewer #1’s action and Reviewer #2’s action* do not occur. And there is a very natural way of understanding that question on which the answer is, contrary to (2), Yes. For it seems clear that there is a perfectly natural reading of ‘in *w*, Reviewer #1’s action and Reviewer #2’s action do not occur’ on which it is true just in case *both* events *fail* to occur in *w*—that is, just in case *neither* of them occurs in *w*. Of course, such a reading would be irrelevant if it had to be distributive—as explained in section 2, the relevant pluralities talk should be understood non-distributively. In

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I take no stand on this stronger claim. (One bad reason to accept it is that regardless of the agent’s alternatives, the action makes a difference for the worse for the victim in the sense of making him worse off *afterwards* than he was *before*. This does not concern *lifetime* well-being—see footnote 1.) In any case, the stronger claim would of course only strengthen the criticism of (1).

<sup>8</sup> My criticism of (2) is closely related to, though much less detailed than, Feit’s response to Petersson (Feit, forthcoming: sect. 5.2).

order to make sure, then, that our reading is non-distributive, let us focus on this formulation:

- (a) Reviewer #1's action and Reviewer #2's action are an interesting pair of actions, and do not occur in  $w$ .

Since neither Reviewer #1's action nor Reviewer #2's action is an interesting *pair* of actions, it is clear that (a) should be understood non-distributively. And surely there is a very natural reading of (a) on which it implies that *neither* action occurs in  $w$ . Indeed, it seems rather unnatural to read (a) in a way that allows it to be true even if one of the actions occurs in  $w$ .

The general point here has nothing in particular to do with events and their non-occurrence in non-actual possible worlds. To see this, return to one of our earlier examples (section 2). Suppose someone knows that Egonsson's *Preference and Information* is 176 pages and Rønnow-Rasmussen's *The Value Gap* is 240 pages, and says the following:

- (b) *Preference and Information* and *The Value Gap* are 416 pages long, and do not disappoint.

Like (a), (b) should clearly be understood non-distributively—neither book is 416 pages. Now, surely there is a very natural reading of (b) on which the part about non-disappointment is true just in case *neither* book disappoints. By contrast, it is rather unnatural to read (b) in a way that allows the part about non-disappointment to be true even if it is merely the case that *not both* books disappoint.

In short, even when we make sure that no distributive (and hence irrelevant) reading is being presupposed, the most natural thing to say is that contrary to (2), Björn would have been better off had the plurality of Reviewer #1's action and Reviewer #2's action not occurred. Nothing in this criticism of (2) is in conflict, or even tension, with the stipulation that if *not both* actions had been performed, then one of them would still have been performed.

### 4.3 A Possible Reply

I have criticized both (1) and (2). Of course, Petersson's argument fails even if I am partially mistaken and have only managed to show that one of (1) and (2) is false. However, Petersson might try to show that I am not only partially but wholly mistaken. In response to my criticism of (1) and (2), he might offer the following speech:

Contributing to a *Festschrift* only to provide uncharitable interpretations of one of its recipients is, to be honest, to give with one hand and take away with the other. Let me try to set things straight.

I can happily accept that there is a reading of (1) on which it is false. In particular, I have nothing against the suggestion that Reviewer #1's action, in the expanded version of *Recommendations* proposed by my critic—the version in which Reviewer #1 could have convinced Reviewer #2 to accept the paper—“makes a difference for the worse” for Björn, in some legitimate sense of that phrase. (After all, Reviewer #1's action leaves Björn worse off than one alternative action would have done.) However, there is also a reading of (1) on which it is true—and inconveniently for my critic, that also happens to be the reading that I intend. All I mean by saying that a plurality “makes a difference for the worse” for someone is that she would have been better off if it had not occurred. This renders (1) trivially true.

Similarly, I can happily accept that there is a natural (and non-distributive) reading of (2) on which it is false. In particular, I can grant that there is a natural (and non-distributive) reading on which a formulation like ‘in *w*, Reviewer #1's action and Reviewer #2's action do not occur’ is true just in case neither of those events occurs in *w*. However, there is also a (non-distributive) reading of (2) on which this premise is true—something that even my critic apparently acknowledges, despite his complaints about such a reading being “rather unnatural.” And once again, that happens to be the reading that I intend. All I mean by saying that someone would have been better off if a given plurality had not occurred is that she would have been better off if *not all* events in the plurality had occurred. (Admittedly, in the case of a one-event plurality, this might be an awkward way of putting it. But that is of no real importance; after all, it is obviously true that a one-event plurality's, that is, a singular event's, leaving someone worse off than she would have been if *not all* events in that plurality had occurred is necessary and sufficient for it to leave her worse off than she would have been if *the event* had not occurred.) On my intended reading, (2) is clearly true—again, if not both of the reviewers' actions had occurred, then one of them would still have occurred, leaving Björn no better off than he actually is.

On this line of response, then, (1) and (2) should be understood as (1\*) and (2\*), respectively:

- (1\*) A plurality of one or several events is such that a person would have been better off if it had not occurred only if she would have been better off if it had not occurred.
- (2\*) Björn would not have been better off if *not all* events in the plurality consisting of the reviewers' two actions had occurred.

Since (1\*) and (2\*) are undeniably true, Petersson's imaginary speech is indeed a way of rescuing both (1) and (2).

#### 4.4 Premise (6)

However, the above line of response seems to make a difference for the worse, so to speak, for the plausibility of the argument's final premise:

- (6) No adequate response on behalf of CCA to the overdetermination and preemption problems is such that if it is true, then a plurality can harm someone without making a difference for the worse for her.

This premise reflects Petersson's claim that the intuition that harming someone essentially involves making a difference for the worse for her is part of the main motivation for adopting CCA in the first place, and thus something that a proper defense of CCA against overdetermination and preemption worries needs to respect. Interpreted not overly narrowly, (6) is plausible. Obviously, for example, CCA proponents would have no use for a view that entails that a plurality's harmfulness has nothing to do with whether there is some reasonably nearby possible world in which the person is better off.

However, recall that Petersson's imaginary speech would have us understand (1) as the trivial (1\*), and (2) as (2\*). Given this, all we can infer from these premises, conjoined with (4)—the unproblematic premise that if SPH is true, then the plurality consisting of the reviewers' two actions harms Björn—is the following:

- (5\*) If SPH is true, then a plurality can harm someone even if she would not have been better off if *not all* events in it had occurred.

And then, in order to yield (7)—the conclusion that SPH is not an adequate response on behalf of CCA to the overdetermination and preemption problems—premise (6) must be understood in the following, narrow way:

- (6\*) No adequate response on behalf of CCA to the overdetermination and preemption problems is such that if it is true, then a plurality can harm someone even if she would not have been better off if *not all* events in it had occurred.

But (6\*) seems to me to lack support. Maybe Petersson is right that one main intuition underlying CCA is that harming someone essentially involves making a difference for the worse for her. However, it is difficult to believe that that intuition is fine-grained enough to distinguish between a plurality's leaving someone worse off than she would have been had *not all* events in it occurred, on the one hand, and its leaving her worse off than she would have been had *no* event in it occurred, on the other. In particular, with regard to a one-event plurality—which, after all, is what CCA is about—the distinction is, if present at all, subtle in the extreme. Clearly, the only way for *not all* events in a one-event plurality to occur is for *no* event in it to occur, and vice versa. As far as the alleged intuitive basis for CCA is concerned, then, it is hard to see why an appeal to the “no event” factor, as opposed to the “not all events” factor, should disqualify a view from being an adequate defense of CCA against overdetermination and preemption objections.

## 5. Concluding Remarks: CCA and Its Supposed Motivation

I want to conclude by briefly considering—without being able to go into any detail—two other cases, which illustrate problems for CCA that are not of the overdetermination or preemption kind. One reason these cases are interesting is that they present potential counterexamples to CCA. More important in the present context, however, is that these cases also suggest that CCA is *itself* incompatible with the idea that Petersson takes to be part of its intuitive foundation—again, that harming someone essentially involves making a difference for the worse for her.

The first case illustrates the so-called *failure to benefit* problem for CCA (Bradley, 2012: 397; Feit, 2019; Hanna, 2016; Johansson and Risberg, 2020, forthcoming; Klockslem, 2022; Purves, 2019):

*No Clubs*: Jörn contemplates giving a set of golf clubs to Peter, but eventually decides to keep them for himself. If Jörn had not decided to keep the clubs, he would have given them to Peter, which would have made Peter better off than he actually is. Peter never knows about any of this.

CCA implies that Jörn's decision to keep the clubs harms Peter. Intuitively, however, it merely fails to benefit Peter; it does not harm him. So, CCA has a counterintuitive implication here.

In addition, *No Clubs* suggests that CCA fails to respect what Petersson regards as part of its main motivation. Duncan Purves (2019; see also Klockslem, 2022) argues that the reason CCA goes wrong in cases like this is that it fails to take seriously the distinction between *making* an upshot happen and *allowing* it to happen. In *No Clubs*, Purves would say that although Peter would have had a higher well-being level without Jörn's decision, the decision is still harmless to Peter, as it merely *allows* him to occupy—and does not *make* him occupy—his actual, lower well-being level. Whether or not Purves's proposal is right in its details, intuitively it does seem rather attractive to say that Jörn's decision does not *make* a difference for the worse for Peter. If this is right, an event can be harmful on CCA without making any difference for the worse for the person.

The second case illustrates the *mere indicators* problem—the problem that CCA apparently entails that some mere indicators of harm are themselves harmful (Carlson, Johansson, and Risberg, 2022: 422; Johansson and Risberg, forthcoming):

*Omniscience*: Pete feels intense pain. As a result, Örn, who is an essentially omniscient being, forms the belief that Pete feels intense pain. If Örn had not formed that belief, that would have been because Pete didn't feel intense pain.

CCA implies that Örn's forming the belief that Pete feels intense pain harms Pete. Intuitively, however, this event does not harm Pete; it merely indicates that

something else does. In this case as well, then, CCA has a counterintuitive implication.

Importantly, moreover, it seems wrong to say that Örn's forming the belief *makes* a difference for the worse for Pete. After all, it is only the pain, and whatever has led up to it, that plausibly *affects* or *influences* Pete's well-being adversely. Once again, then, CCA appears to conflict with the idea that harming someone essentially involves making a difference for the worse for her.

In response to this latter charge—as well as to the corresponding charge based on *No Clubs*—Petersson might protest that in his vocabulary, an event's "making" a difference for the worse for someone does not involve anything other than the person's being worse off than she would have been had the event not occurred. (Cf. Petersson's imaginary speech in section 4.3.) Hence, Petersson might say that in his vocabulary, Jörn's decision and Örn's forming the belief actually do make a difference for the worse for Peter and Pete, respectively. If so, *No Clubs* and *Omniscience* fail to show that if CCA is true, there can be harming without negative difference-making. That 'making' can also be used to refer to something ontologically heavier, Petersson might claim, is irrelevant.

Of course, this response does not alter the fact that CCA implies, counterintuitively, that Jörn's decision and Örn's forming the belief are harmful. So that problem remains. In the present context, however, a related but more important problem is that it is simply an independently appealing idea that harming involves negative difference-making in some ontologically fairly heavy sense of 'making'—ontologically heavier, at least, than the sense suggested in Petersson's possible response.<sup>9</sup> Not only is this idea appealing when considered in isolation, it also gets support from cases like *No Clubs* and *Omniscience*. For, intuitively, Jörn's decision and Örn's forming the belief are harmless precisely *because* they do not really *affect* or *influence* Peter's or Pete's well-being negatively—they do not *make* a difference for the worse for Peter or Pete (again, in some ontologically fairly heavy sense). Hence, CCA's apparent inability to respect the idea that harming someone essentially involves making a difference for the worse for her, in some ontologically fairly heavy sense, is evidence against CCA.

In my opinion, this is only one of several mutually independent reasons to regard CCA as a seriously flawed view. (For other independent reasons, see, e.g., Carlson, 2019, 2020; Carlson, Johansson, and Risberg, 2021, 2022, 2023a; Johansson and Risberg, 2019, 2020, forthcoming.) If this is right, then CCA's being a seriously flawed view seems to be a suitable topic for the *Journal of Overdetermination Studies*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For a defense of the closely related view that for an event to harm someone is for it to affect her well-being adversely, see Johansson and Risberg, forthcoming.

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