Klocksiem (2016): How to accept the transitivity of *better than*

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Overview

Spectrum Arguments

Positions

Klocksiem's Approach

Problems

Wrapping it up

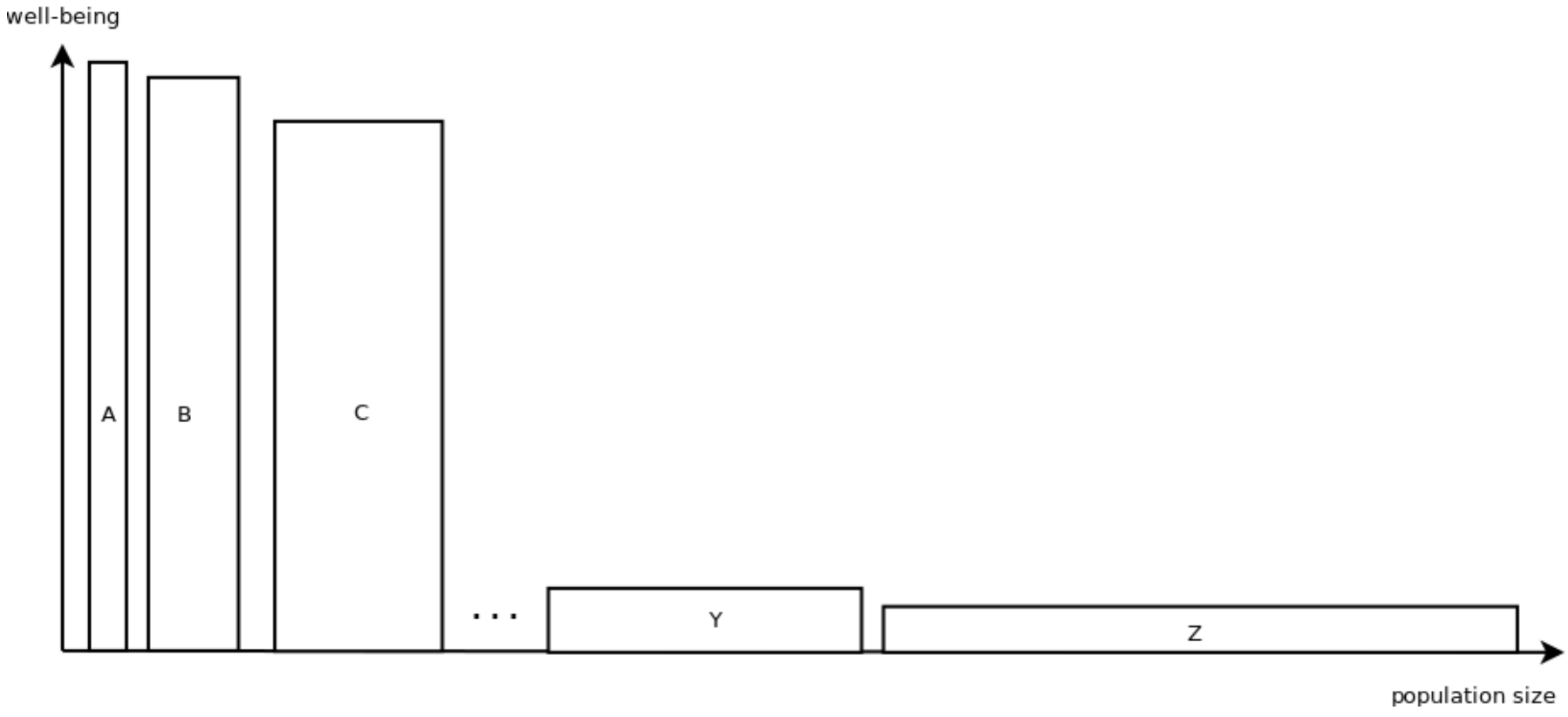
A Caveat About Terminology

- Some authors, including Klocksiem, Rachels, and Chang, talk of the *intransitivity* of *better than*.
- This is completely at odds with standard parlance in mathematics: A relation may fail to be transitive without being intransitive.
- What these authors mean is that if a is better than b, and b is better than c, then it may be the case that a is not better than c. (If there is at least one such case, then the relation is not transitive.)
- I will talk about nontransitive relations and nontransitivity or failure of transitivity whenever these authors talk about intransitivity.

Klocksiem's Goal

The goal of Klocksiem's paper is to show that by presuming *absolute lexicographic thresholds* in the structure of *better than*, it is possible to maintain the transitivity of *better than* while at the same time doing justice to *Spectrum Arguments* against the transitivity of *better than* that were defended by Temkin and Rachels.

The Repugnant Conclusion (Population Ethics)



$B \succ A$ (more total well-being), $C \succ B$, ... But: $A \succ Z$

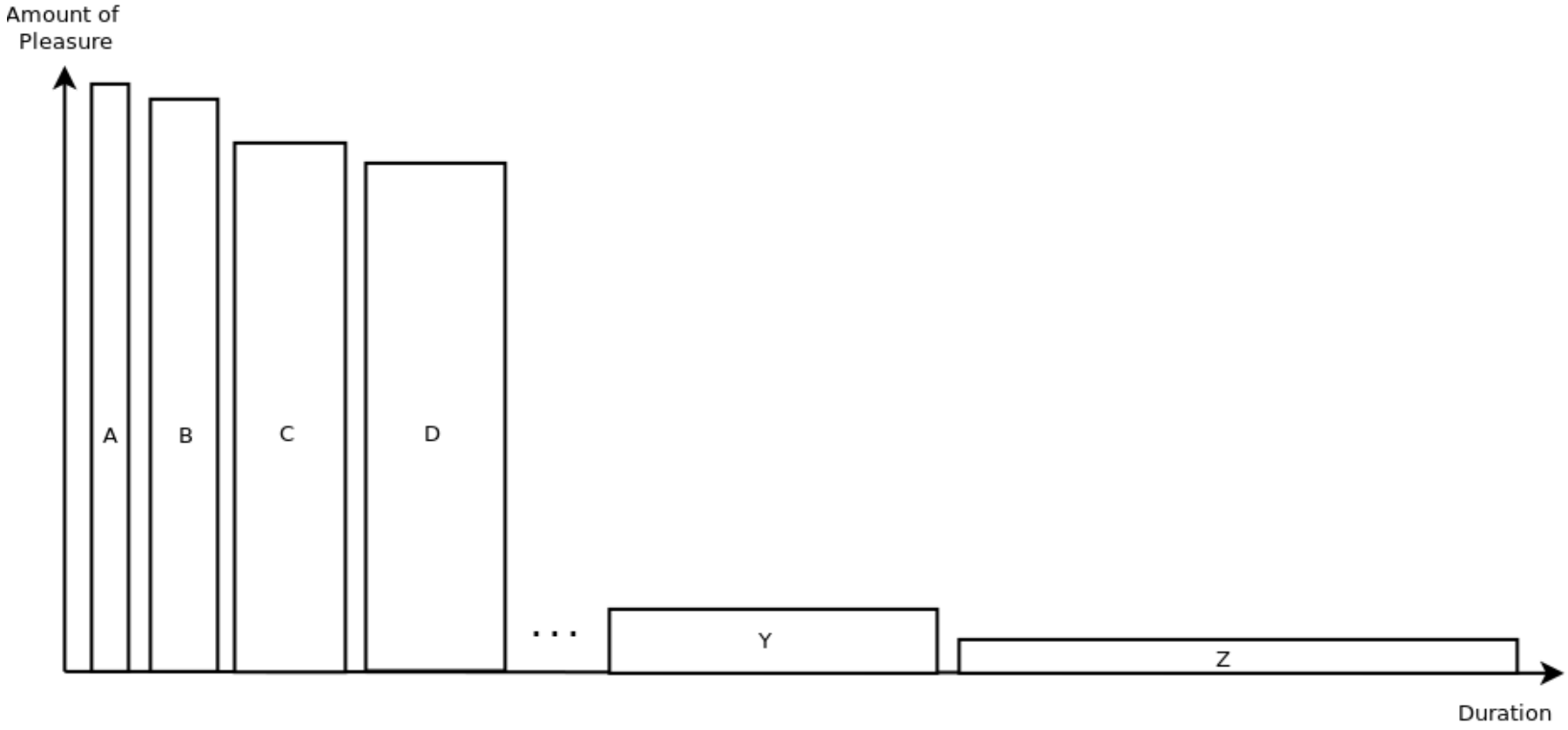
(According to Parfit, the repugnant and obviously unacceptable conclusion would be $Z \succ A$. Z is 'the live of muzak and potatoes'.)

Rachels on Badness (Individual Hedonic)

Based on Rachels (1998), cf. Temkin (2012: Ch. 3&4):

A: one year of extreme agony
B: 100 years of slightly less agony than A
C: 300 years of slightly less agony than B
⋮
Z: millions of years of extremely mild pain (e.g. pinprick, mosquito bite)
$A \succ B \succ C \succ D \succ \ldots$ But: $Z \succ A$

A Spectrum Argument (Individual Hedonic)



$B \succ A$, $C \succ B$, $D \succ C$, ... But: $A \succ Z$

Rachels (2001)

The Quasi-Maximizing Theory

Conflation principle. "One state of affairs is hedonically better than another if and only if one person's having all the experiences in the first would be hedonically better than one person's having all the experiences in the second." [214]

(Relative) Lexicality. "Pleasures sufficiently different in intensity differ *lexically*." [215, original emphasis]

Duration. "Someone's feeling pleasure for time t is hedonically better than someone's feeling pleasure which is slightly more intense but lasts 1% of t." [216]

Intransitivity. Transitivity may fail for overall better than comparisons. [216]

Temkin's Standard Views

First Standard View

Trade-offs between quality and number are sometimes desirable.

Second Standard View

Trade-offs between quality and number are sometimes undesirable even when vast numbers are at stake.

Taken together, to maintain consistency these require giving up transitivity. (and similar for the other standard views he discusses)

Transitivity and Gradability

Temkin: Gradability does not imply transitivity

Define:

x is larger than $y \Leftrightarrow x$ is taller than y or x is heavier than y

$\rightsquigarrow$ This is a comparative of the corresponding definition of 'large', but the relation is not transitive:

aLb	bLc	$\neg(aLc)$
$aTb \ \& \ \neg(aHb)$	$\neg(bTc) \ \& \ bHc$	$\neg(aTc) \ \& \ \neg(aHc)$

Klocksiem's reply is interesting: He claims that many value concepts are, from a metaphysical point of view, *quantitative*. With a few additional assumptions, this requires transitivity. (Recall e.g. that a function $u : D \to \mathbb{R}$ is transitive by the structure of $\mathbb{R}$, the definition of a function, and the meaning of '$>$'.)

Two Types of Lexicality Principles

Relative Thresholds ("Sufficient-difference Lexicality")

"[. . . A]ny two populations whose difference with respect to degree of well-being is sufficiently large must differ lexically with respect to value[.]" (Klocksiem 2016, p. 1319)

Absolute Thresholds ("Threshold Lexicality")

"[. . . T]ere is a threshold on the intensity scale such that sufficiently long-lasting hedonic episodes whose intensity lies above the threshold are lexically better than those below it, which means that no episode at an intensity under the threshold, however long-lasting, can meet or exceed the value of a sufficiently long-lasting episode at an intensity above it." (ibid.)

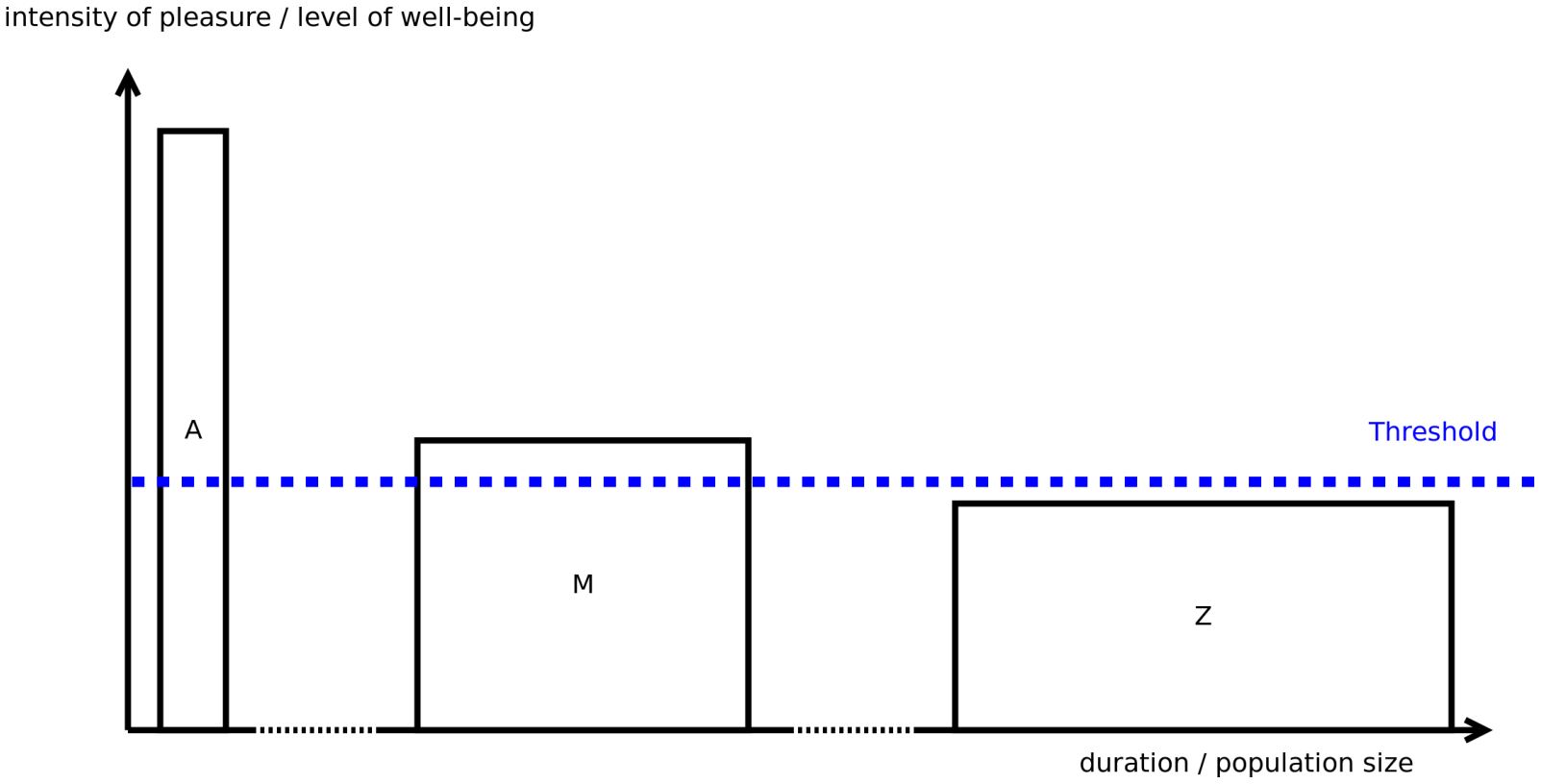
How Absolute Thresholds Work

Klocksiem argues that if lexical thresholds are *absolute*, then overall *better than* remains transitive.

Example for Individual Hedonic Better Than [1319]

- Suppose that M is slightly above a threshold, A is above the threshold, and Z slightly below the threshold.
- Let $A \succ M$ in intensity, but M has longer duration than A.
- Then: Either (A, M, Z) or (M, A, Z) but no violation of transitivity.
- Z is simply below the threshold for the quality/intensity to count.

Illustration of Threshold Lexicality



$A, M \succ_{lex.} Z$ and either $A \succ M$ or $M \succ Z$ depending on duration vs. intensity. No violation of transitivity! This also provides a solution to Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion. The life of 'muzak and potatoes' is outranked lexicographically.

Explanation of the Difference

Relative Thresholds - "Sufficient-difference Lexicality"

$A \succ_{lex.} B \Leftrightarrow \text{intensity}(A) - \text{intensity}(B) > \text{threshold}$

Absolute Thresholds - "Threshold Lexicality"

$A \succ_{lex.} B \Leftrightarrow \text{intensity}(A) \geq \text{threshold and intensity}(B) < \text{threshold}$

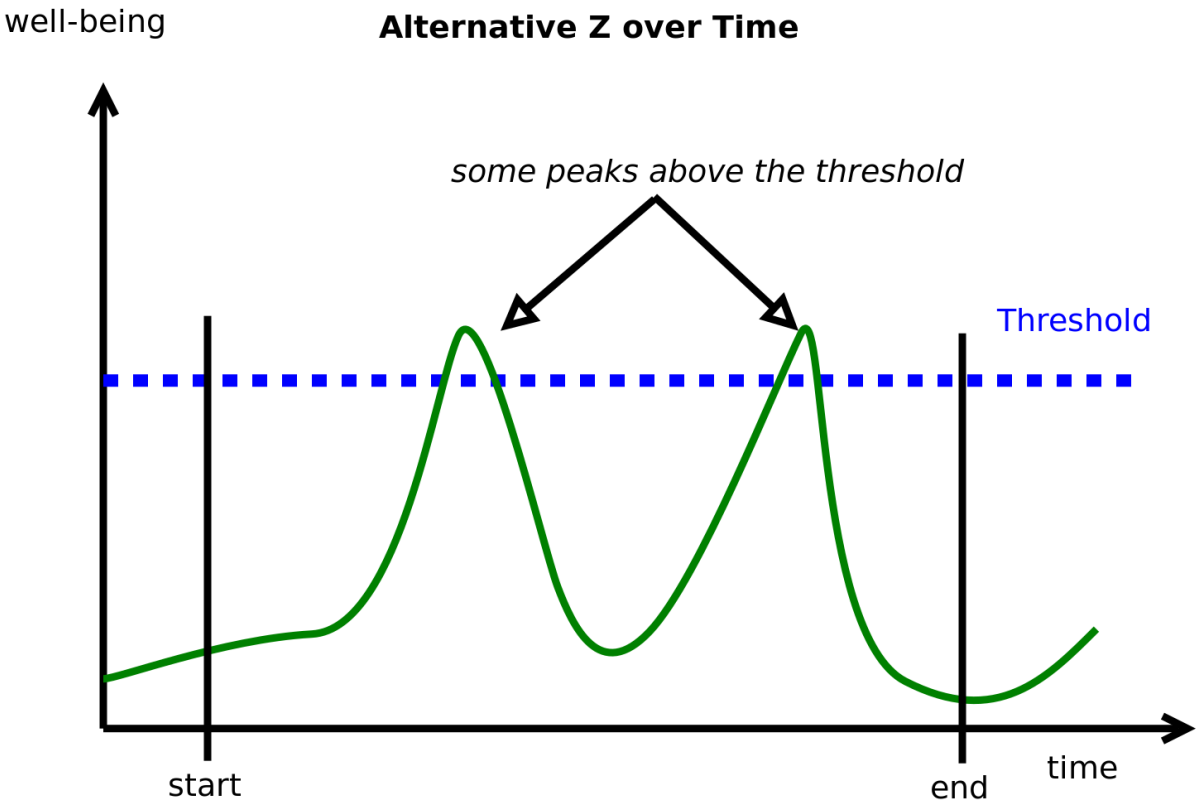
Why Transitivity?

1. Transitivity is needed for maximizing and satisficing normative theories.
2. Ordinality (a) requires transitivity, and (b) is a condition for stronger scales.
3. Transitivity is required for "average utilitarianism", e.g. Parfit's *impersonal average principle*.
4. Expected Utility requires at least an interval scale, which only works if the underlying qualitative relation has no cycles.

Why Transitivity?

1. Transitivity is needed for maximizing and satisficing normative theories. ✗ only partly true
2. Ordinality (a) requires transitivity, and (b) is a condition for stronger scales. ✓ true (with reservations)
3. Transitivity is required for "average utilitarianism", e.g. Parfit's *impersonal average principle*. ✓ correct
4. Expected Utility requires at least an interval scale, which only works if the underlying qualitative relation has no cycles. ✓ correct

P1. Repugnant Conclusion: Fine-grainedness of Analysis



Replies: 1 - the 'drab view' is more adequate (everything below threshold); 2 - other views have the same problem.

P2. Is LT motivated by contingent psychological facts?

Problem

If the phenomenology of pleasure and pain and our intuitive assessments of well-being thresholds motivate threshold lexicality, does this mean that the transitivity of 'better than' only holds as a contingent fact? Shouldn't 'better than' be transitive analytically and necessarily? (e.g. Broome)

Reply: The psychological motivation remains compatible with the view that it is an analytic and necessary truth that 'better than' is transitive.

This passage is a strawman. We know from experimental psychology that 'better than' judgments and preferences often fail to be transitive.

P3. Lexical Thresholds and Real Numbers

Problem

✓Lexical threshold evaluations cannot be directly represented by value functions into real numbers.

Replies: 1 - Nontransitive value relations also cannot be represented directly by utility functions. (Rast: Well, some of them can, but not in the usual way.); 2 - Lexical threshold views can be represented using hyperreal numbers.

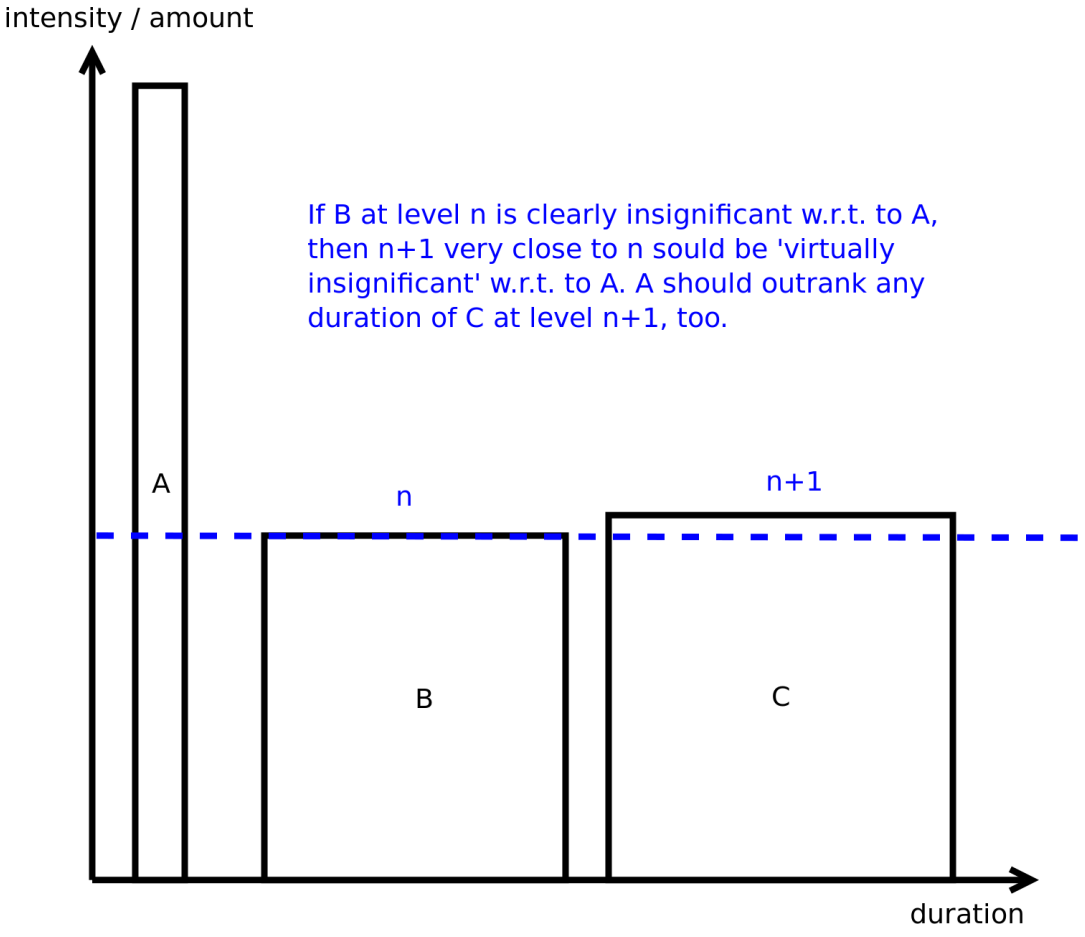
P4. Sudden Value Changes Near to the Threshold

Problem

Threshold lexicality with absolute thresholds imply sudden extreme changes in value when some parameter crosses the thresholds. Some extremely near alternatives will be evaluated in radically different ways.

Reply: Bite the bullet.

P5. Anti-threshold Argument



Reply: virtually insignificant $\neq$ insignificant; maybe these cases only indicate that the wrong threshold was chosen.

Conclusions & Opinions

Pro Lexical Thresholds

- Klocksiem has reached his goal. Lexicographic thresholds allow him to maintain the transitivity of 'better than' without explaining away Spectrum Cases.
- Other proposals by Broome, Voorhoeve, Nebel, Handfield, Rachels are in my opinion less convincing. (We can talk about them in the discussion if there is interest.)

Conclusions & Opinions (continued)

Quibbles

- What Klocksiem says about scales and cardinal value needs to be taken with a grain of salt.
- Semiorder representations lack transitivity of 'equally good' but allow for transitive 'better than', not all value is cardinal, there are alternative numerical representations, etc.
- Biggest remaining problem: How would you normatively justify a particular threshold?

Lexical thresholds may be a 'solution' to Spectrum Cases, but it is hard to see how this fact, that they kind of explain these cases, could be turned into a normative justification of threshold lexicality, let alone of some particular threshold.

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