

RICH MAN, POOR MAN: PROSPERITY, POVERTY, AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NEED

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Jordan Arthur Dale Thomson

May 2016

© 2016 Jordan Arthur Dale Thomson

# RICH MAN, POOR MAN: PROSPERITY, POVERTY, AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NEED

Jordan Arthur Dale Thomson, Ph.D.

Cornell University 2016

**Abstract:** In this work, I investigate the moral import of preventable human neediness. Specifically, I am concerned with the issue of how the world's relatively well-off ought to live, given that they must do so against a pervasive background of poverty. Traditionally, this question is posed in a quantitative guise: How much must one give to poverty relief? How much can one be expected to sacrifice for the sake of helping others? While these are important questions, I argue that we can only find adequate answers to these "how much?" questions in the context of "how so?" questions that have been largely neglected in the literature. How should we see ourselves in relation to those stricken by poverty? What significance should we ascribe to the satisfaction of basic human needs? I argue that the answers to these questions present us with a moral landscape more nuanced than it appears to those who argue for a very demanding duty of aid. Once we get a handle on these nuances, we can see that basic human needs have a dual significance which informs a duty of beneficence more moderate than that described by those who regard potential benefactors as rescuers and those who believe that facts about the effects of material deprivation and personal sacrifice exhaust the space of morally relevant considerations.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jordan Arthur Dale Thomson received a B.A. (2007) in philosophy from Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia before pursuing a doctorate in philosophy at Cornell University.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the generous support, encouragement, and insight of my supervisor, Richard W. Miller. I am also greatly indebted to Derk Pereboom and Nicholas L. Sturgeon for their help and advice.

Nobody has contributed more to the ideas and arguments expressed here than my impossibly insightful and supportive wife, Shruta Swarup, to whom I am forever grateful.

I received much valuable feedback at department workshops at Cornell University and from participants at a conference on the ethical and empirical dimensions of poverty relief held at Stanford University. I thank the Cornell Graduate School and the Sage School of Philosophy for funding my travel to this conference.

Finally, I would like to thank our department administrator, Pam Hanna, for her mad competence and contributions to graduate life.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Chapter 1: Famine, Affluence, and Common Sense: Peter Singer & Richard Miller .....	1
Chapter 2: Close Encounters of the Morally Relevant Kind .....	23
Chapter 3: Shelly Kagan, Impartiality, and the Promotion of Human Well-Being.....	50
Chapter 4: Moral Moderation and the Humpty Dumpty Problem.....	69
Chapter 5: Having it Good Without Being Bad: Toward a Defense of Moral Moderation .....	89
Chapter 6: How Should We Live? .....	117
Bibliography .....	145

## CHAPTER 1

---

### Famine, Affluence, and Common Sense: Peter Singer & Richard Miller

#### Introduction

Accounts of our duty of beneficence in the face of global poverty range along what we might call a dimension of demandingness. Let *moral extremism* be the view that the duty is very demanding. If extremism is true, even people who give a large percentage of their income to charity lead unjustifiable lifestyles, given the amount of preventable neediness in the world and their ability to relieve that neediness through further charitable donations. Let *moral moderation* be the view that the duty is not so demanding as to require us to sacrifice independently worthwhile personal projects and goals.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I will examine two influential appeals to common sense morality on the question of moral demandingness: Peter Singer's defense of extremism and Richard Miller's defense of moderation. I hope to accomplish two goals. The first is simply to introduce the terminology, intuitions, and concepts that will figure into later, more detailed analysis of the debate between extremists and moderates. The second is to illuminate why a satisfactory answer to the question of morality's demandingness requires such an analysis — why, that is, common sense morality lacks the resources to provide a satisfying answer.

#### Peter Singer

In 1972, Peter Singer published an article that set the tone for philosophical discussion about the demands of beneficence in a world abound with systemic poverty.<sup>2</sup> He argues that reflection on common sense moral convictions delivers a demanding duty of beneficence, provided that we start with a fundamental background commitment to moral “impartiality, universalizability,

---

<sup>1</sup> I borrow these labels from Shelly Kagan.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (April 1, 1972): 229–43.

equality, or whatever.”<sup>3</sup> In aid of his case, Singer offers the following “surely undeniable” principle.

**Sacrifice:** If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do so.<sup>4</sup>

In support of this principle, Singer offers a famous example which, when combined with the initial *prima facie* plausibility of Sacrifice, creates a strong case for its truth.

**Toddler:** While walking down the street, you come across a toddler drowning in a shallow pond. Saving him would come at a cost to you of a pair of muddy trousers.

Clearly, Singer rightly believes, we must save the toddler. Armed with this argument for the truth of Sacrifice, Singer argues that we must make drastic changes to our way of life. In particular, thinks Singer, the truth of Sacrifice renders impermissible the purchase of frills or luxuries: “When we buy new clothes not to keep ourselves warm but to look 'well-dressed' we are not providing for any important need. We would not be sacrificing anything significant if we were to continue to wear our old clothes, and give the money to famine relief.”<sup>5</sup>

Of course, fashion does not exhaust the reach of Sacrifice. If Singer is right, any possible purchase or expense that is not made to satisfy a pressing human need will be out of moral reach, for we must always weigh the benefit of such expenditures against the potential benefit those resources could realize in the lives of people in great need of basic human necessities. In such circumstances, the scales never tip in our favor. Indeed, Singer's view entails that the vast majority of us could literally count many moral failings by peering into our closets, driveways, and living rooms. Each stereo, autographed baseball, and designer suit represents a failure to act on a general moral obligation we have in virtue of our common humanity.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 235.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Singer's conclusion is the innocuous route he takes in arriving at it. From a plausible principle, a simple example, and a moderate dose of reflection, Singer demonstrates that our background commitment to moral equality commits us to doing far more in the name of others than we had realized.

Or does he? There are at least two ways of contesting Singer's claims. One could mount a case against the truth of Sacrifice. Alternatively, one might grant its truth but deny that its practical import is as Singer claims. It seems to me that Sacrifice is ambiguous in a way that renders these tactics equivalent in the following sense: a reading that maintains the intuitive plausibility of Sacrifice requires an interpretation that the moderate will happily endorse. Conversely, I will argue, a reading of Sacrifice which supports Singer's conclusion about the demands of beneficence forsakes the intuitive plausibility that Singer claims for it. I will say more about this below. First, however, I want to examine Richard Miller's response to Singer's case, both because he presents a compelling alternative to Singer without straying any further outside the confines of common sense morality and secure moral intuitions, and because I intend to recruit some of his insights in making a case for the ambiguity of Sacrifice.

### **Richard Miller**

Surprisingly, Miller does not explicitly contest either the truth of Sacrifice or Singer's claims about its practical import. Instead, Miller's strategy is to deny that Singer can really get as much as he thinks he can by way of reflection on common sense morality. Despite the fact that we are committed to duties of nearby rescue and moral equality, Miller argues, Singer's derivation of a demanding principle of beneficence "neglects the role of relationships to others, to oneself and to one's underlying goals in shaping the demands of equal respect for persons" that we find in ordinary, common sense morality. Here, Miller explicitly adopts the language of respect and

invokes our general commitment to respecting all persons equally. He is concerned to argue that the type of behavior that Singer's view forbids is consistent with this commitment. On its face, this might appear odd as Singer never explicitly invokes the concept of respect. However, there is no reason to be worried that Miller will end up talking past Singer.

Clearly, Singer is concerned to trace the contours of a very general duty, his argument advertent to no grounds of obligation over and above a commitment to moral equality and general facts about personal well-being. Such is the territory upon which arguments over the demands of moral equality and respect are offered. So, by invoking the concept of equal respect, Miller is simply framing the debate, not changing the subject. If he can show that Singer's conclusion is inconsistent with our common sense convictions about the demands of moral equality understood as respect for persons *qua* persons, he will be meeting Singer on his own terms — remember, Singer believes that we need only be committed to “impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever” to generate his conclusion.

Of course, one might worry that any such argument would beg the question. After all, Singer takes himself to be arguing for a drastic revision in the way we morally appraise ourselves. Indeed, he thinks the effect of his argument is to “upset” our moral categories in such a way that we must redraw the line between “duty” and “charity” in a place that is likely to make us morally uncomfortable with our current lifestyles. One might worry, then, that any counter-argument from the moral convictions of common sense morality would be founded on commitments that Singer has shown to be untenable or depend upon a distinction between duty and supererogation that Singer has shown to be misdrawn, if not illusory.

The worry is well-founded, but Miller can push back without begging the question. His strategy is two-fold. In the first place, he argues that Singer's conclusion is inconsistent with

certain strongly held convictions about our commitment to equal respect. Importantly, these convictions are not convictions about our general duty of beneficence, but of the role and normative status of the special relationships we enter into. Strictly speaking, then, Miller is not assuming the falsity of Singer's conclusion. Instead, Miller is intent to show that Singer's conclusion is not merely at odds with our convictions about our duty of beneficence, but also with respect to our convictions about the normative force of the close relationships that we cherish. Secondly, Miller supplements this line of criticism by offering an alternative to Sacrifice which he takes to accommodate these convictions as well as those regarding the demands of equal respect. In essence, Miller is offering an alternative proposal, one he takes to preserve (at least to great degree) the entrenched moral convictions that Singer challenges while also preserving our commitment to moral equality.

Miller's central claim is that our commonsense understanding of equal respect is not at odds with many of the ways we express our valuation of the special relationships we enter into with one another.<sup>6</sup> One of the ways we express the deep valuation of our relationship to our children, for example, is to prioritize their interests over those of stranger's children. That one should always donate one's time or money to children needier than one's own is neither a precept of common sense morality nor at odds with our conviction that all persons are deserving of equal respect. Instead, favoring the interests of one's own children is a way of properly valuing one's special relationship to them; it does not entail the conclusion that one thereby fails to respect the lives of the world's needy children or that one regards their lives as less valuable than those of one's own children. So (the story goes), equal respect does not entail equal concern.

---

<sup>6</sup> Richard W. Miller, *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2010), 18.

If Miller is right, common sense allows that facts about *whose* interests are implicated in deliberation can, and often do, make a moral difference. This leaves open the possibility that an interest's being *mine* might be relevant in determining the moral justifiability of *my* satisfying it in a given context. After all, if I may permissibly prioritize the interests of my children over those of others, at least to some degree, then whether I may prioritize my own as well (or some subset thereof) is an open question. Once the door to permissible favoritism is open, we must examine why and with respect to whom favoritism is permissible.<sup>7</sup>

Miller's case against Singer is illuminating insofar as it both exposes and challenges the the commitment from which Singer's demanding conclusion follows, namely his appeal to impartial cost-benefit analysis in interpreting his principle. However, Miller's case fails to be illuminating insofar as it fails to explain the "uncontroversial appearance" of Sacrifice and the enduring appeal it lends to Singer's case. After all, not only does Sacrifice seem plausible on its face, but if you're anything like me, you are likely to have the sense that you have appealed to it (or something very much like it) in making up your own mind about what morality demands in certain contexts. A full case against Singer, then, will include a diagnosis of the uncontroversial appearance of Sacrifice and an explanation of how Singer manages to employ it in an argument to a conclusion deeply at odds with secure, common sense convictions.

---

<sup>7</sup> Singer doesn't offer an account of permissible favoritism because he doesn't think it necessary. As Singer sees things, moral equality entails that the nature of human interests exhaust their moral significance. Those interests which are more important (i.e. the ones for which nonsatisfaction is "very bad") have priority over others, regardless of whose interests are at stake. As we will see, this is a recurring theme in the debate between moderates and extremists.

## **Diagnosing the Appeal of Sacrifice**

As a defender of a moderate morality, it may come as a surprise that I believe the appeal of Sacrifice is not to be explained away at all. In fact, I believe it is well earned. To see why, we must work our way through Singer's drowning toddler example.

Two clear aspects of this example lend support to Singer's conclusion. The first is that thinking it through really does seem to involve an "application" of Sacrifice, just as Singer claims: The reason we have strong reason to help is that something very bad will happen if we do not, and the cost of providing this help is not significant, either in absolute terms or relative to the benefit. The second reason this example lends support to Singer's extremism is that nothing about the case suggests that we are not entitled to generalize the particular cost-benefit analysis at work in the example to general rules of moral deliberation. Why not think that we should always reason about neediness by comparing costs and benefits impartially? Clearly, Singer thinks that this extrapolation is legitimate. If he's right, morality really does demand a drastic re-organization of our lives in the way Singer suggests, calling upon us to redirect all of our resources in the name of satisfying the "important need" of others. (By "important need", Singer evidently means something like basic need for food, shelter, medicine, and so on.)

Singer would be entitled to this inference if the toddler example proved that abstract considerations of cost and benefit always exhaust the deliberative relevance of material deprivation. But, as I argue in the following chapter, the drowning toddler example (and those like it) do not sanction this conclusion. For now, I want to focus on Singer's strategy within the constraints set by common sense morality and the argumentative line that Singer explicitly pursues.

For Singer, the toddler example is meant to provide support for the truth of Sacrifice. In his words, the case is meant to be "[a]n application" of the principle. But insofar as it is, the only

taxonomic descriptions we are entitled to apply are those we find in the principle itself, namely “very bad” and “morally significant.” But when we restrict ourselves to these categories, Sacrifice does not obviously have the demanding practical implications that Singer claims.

The objects (and perhaps activities) that Singer is asking us to forgo may very well be embedded in certain life goals or projects which are intimately tied up with our well-being in significant ways. Having to sacrifice a particular pair of stylish trousers (to save a child, say) may amount to an insignificant loss, but a life in which one has to forego stylish trousers altogether may not. For example, having a particular fashion sense may be an important component of one's sense of self or a part of a larger project of self-expression. Of course, such a self-conception may be impermissible to pursue, but this is not obviously so, nor is it clear that giving it up wouldn't be a morally significant loss. To the extent that the loss would be morally significant, it seems even Singer must agree that it is protected by Sacrifice.

Miller does a fine job of highlighting the ways in which objects and activities can be embedded in our lives. Shifting his focus from familial relations, Miller is concerned about the way in which we are related to our own well-being, a relationship mediated by certain ground projects and goals that we set for ourselves. He argues that certain luxury items are related to our projects and goals in such a way that giving up on them would amount to making a great sacrifice, one which would worsen one's life in a significant, meaningful way. Writes Miller, “[m]y worthwhile goals include the goal of presenting myself to others in a way that expresses my own aesthetic sense and engages in the fun of mutual aesthetic recognition... [m]y life is

enriched, not stultified, by this interest ... [a]nd to pursue this goal enjoyably and well, I must occasionally purchase a luxury or frill, namely some stylish clothing...”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, Miller does not deny that the permissibility of expressing one’s aesthetic sense entails that one may permissibly refrain from saving the drowning toddler. (Presumably, Miller believes that one must rescue the toddler even if doing so would ruin one’s favorite pair of trousers.) What he *does* deny is that owning an expensive pair of trousers is, *in general*, morally impermissible.

The general issue is this: Many (if not most) of the goals and projects we identify with — projects which give our life shape and meaning — do not satisfy important needs in the sense that Singer understands the phrase “important need.” We would not starve or die if we stopped caring about aesthetic self-expression or expressing our love for our children with gifts and attention. However, the mere fact that these projects enrich our lives makes them morally significant. At least, it is plausible to believe as much. Miller gets at this significance via talk of sacrifices leading to the worsening of one's life. But perhaps the most straightforward way to make the case for the moral significance of personal goals and ground projects is to reflect on what we aim at with charitable beneficence.

Consider the postcard I recently received from CARE, a well-respected NGO dedicated to fighting poverty with a focus on empowering women in some of the world's poorest countries. The card tells the story of Meera, a fifteen year old girl from a poor family in India.

Meera's future seemed certain... She'd only attended school until 3rd grade. Since then, 15-year old Meera had been responsible for chores at home and working in the fields to earn money for her family. Then one day she learned about a group of girls in her village who met regularly to hear stories read aloud and to learn. It was CARE's Power Within program just for girls.

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Meera attended one meeting and loved it. She pleaded to join the group, but her father worried about the impact the time spent at meetings would have on her work. With her brother's help, her father finally agreed. Before long, empowered by what she learned, Meera convinced her father to let her return to school. "Am I born to only work and not to study and live happily," she asked? [sic]

This inspiring tale can teach Singer and the rest of us an important moral lesson. When considering the potential objectives of charitable beneficence, it is all too easy to come down with a case of moral tunnel vision. That is, we can become so fixated on the satisfaction of basic needs for food, shelter, etc. that we lose sight of the bigger picture.

This is not to suggest that hunger pangs, the sting of exposure, and the symptoms of disease are not inherently bad things. We must agree with Singer that they are very bad. But the reason we have to stamp them out is not restricted to their phenomenological effects. Rather, the very reason we think it a morally good thing to share resources with the needy is that such resources will enable them to enjoy and pursue the very things we are disproportionately concerned about in our own lives. That charitable aid has enabled people to pursue worthwhile goals, give gifts to their children, and engage with personal projects which characterize, define, and enrich them is a mark of moral *success*, not evidence that our moral outreach has been abused.

The brochures provided by charitable organizations are rife with tales like Meera's. These are tales of once destitute or struggling individuals who have gone on to become entrepreneurs, musicians, poetry lovers, and so on. These are *success stories* precisely because these people have been enabled to develop lives characterized by personal projects and expressive pursuits through which they flourish. Importantly, such lives would not be possible if those living them had lived in the manner Singer believes Sacrifice requires of us. Being a musician requires an instrument, being a poetry lover requires books, and so on.

Suppose that Meera's father had denied Meera's request to follow her dreams and return to school, citing the following consideration: staying home and using the time she would spend in school working the fields would result in a surplus which could then be exported to a nearby village in the name of reducing the malnutrition experienced there.

There is a sense in which this course of action strikes us as a noble, good-hearted gesture. But it also strikes us absurd and wrong. However, if we push Singer's commitment to impartial cost-benefit moral reasoning as far as it will go, it seems like we must agree that this is precisely what Meera's father morally ought to do. At least, it seems as though something like this is what Meera herself ought to do.

According to Singer's way of thinking, as soon as the lives of people who receive charitable aid are no longer "very bad" (i.e. when none of their important human needs go unsatisfied), they must immediately turn their attention and resources to helping those whose lives *are* very bad, so long as their available resources make this possible without returning them to their previous state of neediness. Thus, for Singer, Meera's success story must be bittersweet. It is sweet in the sense that she is enabled to pursue goals that make her happy, bitter because such pursuits occupy time and resources that could be used to help others whose lives are very bad.

This bittersweet analysis demonstrates that Singer's view requires us to adopt an odd stance towards the people that he implores us to help. Specifically, the attitude of wishing lives like ours upon the destitute individuals we would seek to help would be wrong because such a lifestyle is itself wrong, by Singer's lights. Insofar as one identifies with Singer's attitude toward the moral import of human need, the (morally) best thing we can hope will become of those we help with charitable donations is that they go on to do the same, sacrificing their own fulfillment

in the name of satisfying the important needs of others. Insofar as they do not employ their resources to this end, we may claim but a very narrow moral victory: while the lives of those we helped are no longer very bad, they have gone on to lead lives that are morally impermissible. This is counterintuitive. It seems as though Singer's way of thinking limits the moral significance of charitable aid to its potential role in creating links in a beneficence chain, at least until the point at which there are no persons leading lives that are very bad.

Of course, despite its oddity, this line of thinking may very well be correct. I do not take myself to have proven that it is not. At this point, I merely intend to shed light on the fact that Singer's reasoning is at odds with common sense in more ways than those to which Miller directs us. Tales like Meera's are genuine success stories and it is difficult to see how Singer can accommodate this judgment.

These appeals to common sense help us in another way, as well. Tales like Meera's and considerations like those adduced by Miller in the name of defending stylish clothing and disproportionate concern in special relationships go a long way towards explaining why Sacrifice has such an intuitive hold on us. Specifically, Sacrifice enjoys a practical ambiguity to which many moral principles are subject, at least as they are explicitly stated by their proponents. By 'practical ambiguity' I mean a susceptibility to multiple practical interpretations. Unlike descriptive claims, moral principles are intended to guide our behavior, and insofar as they do, adherence to them places constraints on our deliberative lives. Adherence to principles of romantic fidelity, for example, precludes sexual attraction as a reason to strike up a conversation with a stranger. Adherence to principles of honesty precludes financial gain as a reason to dissemble, and so on.

On Singer's interpretation, Sacrifice precludes any consideration but needs satisfaction as a reason to expend resources on oneself.<sup>9</sup> But this is merely one way to interpret the principle and it is hardly one which lends it the uncontroversial appearance Singer claims for it. Insofar as it is uncontroversial, I conjecture that it is due entirely to the fact that it appears, on its face, to be a paradigmatically *moderate* principle. Miller has shown us that that many of the resource expenditures forbidden by Singer's interpretation contribute to ends that enrich our lives. Intuitively, such enrichment is morally significant. Since the principle protects the morally significant, we have an explanation for the principle's uncontroversial appearance: considered in the abstract, it would appear to protect the worthwhile goals and pursuits protected by common sense moral convictions.

So, how did Singer manage to wrench a demanding conclusion from his principle? In contrasting Sacrifice and Sympathy, Miller offers the following explanation: "The crucial difference between the principles lies in what gets scrutinized by each: the impact, on particular occasions, of particular choices, or the impact of an underlying attitude on life as a whole."<sup>10</sup>

It is certainly true that Sacrifice *can* be applied as Miller claims; Singer explicitly applies the principle in this way in the toddler case. But, particular occasions of choice are not the only contexts in which we can apply the principle. If it were, Singer's view would be very odd indeed; it would be a view according to which we should change nothing about the way we currently carry on, save for the facts about where our money actually ends up. However, Singer does not believe that we should, for example, continue to browse upscale clothing shops but, at the last second, drop our money into the UNICEF box next to the register instead of handing it to the

---

<sup>9</sup> Of course, this constraint is contextually dependent in that it applies only against a background of preventable human deprivation.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 21.

cashier holding the sweater we've picked out. Rather, he believes we should never have made the trip to the mall in the first place. Singer is as concerned with people's underlying attitudes as is Miller, and I see no reason to think that Sacrifice cannot be applied at this more general level.

Unfortunately for Singer, Sacrifice appears to be a moderate principle when applied at this general level. That is, we have intuitively compelling reason to think that the objects and experiences Singer believes Sacrifice precludes can be embedded in (and necessary components of) morally significant pursuits and projects.

On more than one occasion Singer inconspicuously equates the idea of moral significance with the satisfaction of important human needs (which, for him, are things like nutrition, medicine, and shelter). But if this is what he *means* when he uses the phrase “morally significant”, then Sacrifice doesn't have nearly the *prima facie* plausibility he claims for it, as is clear if one merely takes the time to make the explicit substitution. Insofar as Sacrifice is “surely undeniable”, it is only with respect to a far more liberal sense of moral significance than Singer is willing to countenance.

Of course, this is not to say that Singer is wrong about our duties of poverty relief. As we will see, there are other powerful ways of making a case for a stringent duty, all of which depend on the sort of deliberative methodology employed, albeit somewhat implicitly, by Singer.

The methodology I have in mind is borne of a commitment to an authoritative moral perspective according to which a moral agent must impartially assess alternative ways of allocating her resources, devoting them this way or that depending upon the type and degree of need they could be used to satisfy. Such a perspective is sensitive only to needs *per se* and is thus unaffected by the relationship an agent bears to the recipient of her resources. Consequentialists of various stripes have been pushing such a line for decades. However, we will see that there are

other ways into this way of thinking. The point I wish to make here is simply this: the mere fact that Singer's attempt to marshal Sacrifice in aid of such a deliberative methodology is suspect does not rule it out of contention; it just means he needs a better argument. I will examine some such arguments in later Chapters. I turn now to examining Miller's alternative to Sacrifice.

### **Sympathy**

Miller attempts to formulate a principle of general beneficence that both delineates the general contours of the demands of equal respect while accommodating the common convictions about entitlement and discretion that Sacrifice ostensibly fails to reflect. The following is Miller's alternative to Sacrifice.

**Sympathy:** One's underlying disposition to respond to neediness as such ought to be sufficiently demanding that giving which would express greater underlying concern would impose a significant risk of worsening one's life, if one fulfilled all further responsibilities; and it need not be any more demanding than this.<sup>11</sup>

For Miller, a significant risk of worsening one's life amounts to “a nontrivial chance that one's life as a whole will be worse than it otherwise would be.”<sup>12</sup> One's life is worsened by additional responsiveness to need if it “deprives him of adequate resources to pursue, reliably and well, a worthwhile goal with which he intelligently identifies and from which he could not readily detach.”<sup>13</sup>

Here, Miller is concerned to weave two important threads into his principle. The first is the common sense commitment to the permissibility of pursuing one's own fulfillment. The second is an outline of a positive duty in the name of equal respect. For Miller, one who truly regards each person's life as equally valuable must do more than refrain from harming others.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 14.

Respecting persons qua persons requires genuine, active engagement with the lives of those threatened by great need. This aspect of Miller's view is his attempt at making good on what is likely to strike us essentially correct about Singer's view, namely the idea that a commitment to moral equality can entail positive duties of aid, particularly when need is great.

One thing we can say on behalf of *Sympathy* is that it does a better job of preserving our common sense moral convictions than does *Sacrifice*, at least when we read the latter as Singer thinks we ought. However, the moderate who hopes to hang his position on *Sympathy* is in a tough spot.<sup>14</sup>

Any plausible defense of a moderate duty of beneficence will protect certain resources from the grasp of distributive principles. A *complete* account will specify the grounds of these protections in a way that moral agents can make informed, reliable judgments about how they ought to organize their lives and resources in order to make good on these protections without overstepping them. As it stands, *Sympathy* and Miller's case in support of it do not satisfy this requirement. While *Sympathy* protects worthwhile projects already undertaken and certain relationships already established, it offers no guidance in terms of what to do in the face of certain possibilities.

Consider lottery winners. Suppose a middle-class person living up to the demands of *Sympathy* comes to win a sizable jackpot. Supposing she is, at the time, living a reasonably fulfilling existence in terms of expressive activities, a satisfying career, a close group of friends, and so on, does *Sympathy* require that she donate the entirety of her winnings to charity? Could she, instead, use all or some of the winnings to undertake goals and projects she did not even

---

<sup>14</sup> In what follows, I argue that Miller's defense of moral moderation is importantly incomplete. In his defense, Miller does not proclaim to provide a complete defense of moderation. His stated goal is simply to demonstrate that Singer is wrong to think that common sense moral convictions deliver an extremist duty of beneficence. In this respect, Miller has achieved his aim.

bother to consider at an earlier time in her life simply because she could not afford them? These are questions about which Sympathy provides no guidance.

Recall, Sympathy calls for a disposition to be responsive to need just to the extent that being any more responsive would likely “worsen one's life.” On Miller's account, one's life is worsened by such responsiveness if “it deprives [one] of adequate resources to pursue, reliably and well, a worthwhile goal with which [one] intelligently identifies and from which [one] could not readily detach.”<sup>15</sup> This detachability criterion protects worthwhile goals to which agents are already attached, but there is no corresponding criterion with respect to the permissibility of taking up new worthwhile pursuits. As things stand, then, Sympathy seems to imply that no one can permissibly trade in or supplement her worthwhile goals with more expensive ones should the opportunity arise. Thus, it would seem, one's opportunities for self-expression, personal fulfillment, and the like, are fixed by the resources one has and the various possibilities open to one at a particular point in one's life. This problem is perhaps best elucidated by considering the prospects of a relatively poor person coming in to a great deal of money.

Despite the tendency of many to operate under assumptions to the contrary, poor people can and often do lead dignified, fulfilling lives. One should not underestimate the human spirit, the power of religion, special relations, and good company in making a life worth living. However thankful we should be for this cosmic mercy, it poses a problem for Miller. If Sympathy is the complete and final word on our general duty of beneficence, it would appear that persons are precluded from seizing particular avenues of personal fulfillment simply because they are not already attached to them.<sup>16</sup> A poor person may have never considered attending

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, it is possible to be attached (in some sense) to a goal without being *engaged* with it at any point in time. I may be attached to the goal of being a musician even though I cannot afford to rent or own a musical

college or exploring the myriad opportunities that a college education opens up. But surely it doesn't follow from the fact that she is already pursuing worthwhile goals that she cannot use some of an unexpected windfall in order to explore these opportunities, particularly when such activities undertaken by others are protected by Sympathy, as a college education presumably is.

The second reason the detachability criterion seems problematic is a more general one: It is plausible to suppose that one's ability to detach from a project or goal will be, at least in part, a function of the strength of one's disposition to respond to neediness as such. The stronger one's disposition to respond to neediness, the more likely it is that one would be able to detach from one's personal projects and pursuits without significant psychological distress. Similarly, the stronger the disposition to respond to neediness, the less likely one is to be distressed at the prospect of not being able to explore new avenues of personal fulfillment. But what we need from an account of our duty of beneficence is an account of how responsive to neediness we *ought* to be. If our ability to detach from projects or pursuits with which we are already engaged is a function of the degree of our *actual* disposition to respond to neediness, then we end up with the troubling result that the degree to which we are *required* to respond to neediness will depend, at least in part, upon how disposed we *already are* to so respond.

These worries raise some deep questions about the relationship between moral obligation and motivation as well as responsibility for one's own moral attitudes and dispositions. Perhaps only with a complete moral psychology can we answer them fully. Nonetheless, a complete defense of a moderate morality will have to say something about these issues.

---

instrument. In this sense, then, the detachability criterion may not be so problematic. For many people, however, there exists a wide array of possibly fulfilling, worthwhile pursuits they have never considered simply in virtue of their social or financial situation, goals and pursuits that are presumably protected by Sacrifice for those who are already engaged with them.

Another set of worries present themselves when one considers Miller's exclusive appeal to worthwhileness in protecting certain pursuits. The simplest worry of this type is that Miller does not offer an account of what makes a project or pursuit worthwhile. Presumably, projects such as having more money than everyone else and owning a gold-plated yacht collection are examples of goals that do not satisfy the standard, no matter how attached a person may be to such pursuits. On the extreme end of the spectrum, we can consider a man who has as his life goal the literal burning of as much cash as he can accumulate. Clearly, this goal cannot be protected by any plausible morality. Any person who carries out the project of burning cash exhibits an attitude that can only be described as contemptuous with respect to those who live in want of basic human necessities.

So, why is this an issue for Miller's account? Perhaps they are not. Miller could plausibly preclude cash-burning and the like by appeal to some non-moral standard of worthwhileness: such pursuits are pointless, or stupid, or fail to exercise a valuable human capacity, or something of the sort. The problem is that the adoption of some projects which are not pointless or stupid can plausibly be regarded as insulting to those in great need. They thereby serve as evidence of an insufficient responsiveness to neediness and it is not clear how a non-moral standard of worthwhileness will furnish a means of ruling them out.

Consider the goal of scientific discovery. On any plausible account of worthwhileness, this goal has to qualify. Not only is scientific discovery often touted as a paradigmatic example of a pursuit with intrinsic value, it is for many the most important and fulfilling aspect of their lives. However, one can plausibly go about pursuing goals of this kind in a manner that is callously disrespectful to the needy. Here, I am not referring to projects that can easily be ruled out by independently plausible moral considerations, such as dangerous, painful experiments on

poor people. Rather, I have in mind scientific pursuits which involve no obvious moral transgressions. Consider the following.

Given the atmospheric conditions and the presence of great methane lakes on the surface of Titan (Saturn's largest moon), there is a great deal of speculation about the possibility of life either thriving there or having done so in the past. Discovering whether there is or has ever been life on Titan would, in itself, be a worthwhile goal. However, discovering whether life has ever thrived on Titan also has broad and important implications for astronomy in general, the nature of which need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that this fact makes the discovery about the history of life or lack thereof on Titan even more worthwhile.<sup>17</sup>

Suppose now that Nina, an intrepid young woman gripped by the spirit of scientific discovery, adopts the goal of discovering the truth about life on Titan. Suppose further that, at present, the only means of making this discovery is by way of designing, building, and sending a sophisticated probe out to make physical contact with the moon. As it happens, Nina has recently won the lottery and is in possession of the fifty billion dollars it would cost to design, build, and launch the probe. Would she be morally justified in doing so? I can't help but think that anyone who would be willing to spend 50 billion dollars on such a personal project is thereby insufficiently responsive to neediness as such. If this is right, we have encountered a constraint on the plausibility of moderate morality that Sympathy cannot seem to accommodate. While we may have something to say about the yacht collector or the cash-burner, we can't reprimand Nina on the grounds that she is engaged in a pursuit that is vapid or senseless or harmful.

---

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps this is not the sense of "worthwhile" that Miller has in mind. In fact, I suspect he is more concerned with projects which are worthwhile from the perspective of the person engaged in them, projects which enhance a person's own well-being. This is why I go on to consider the project in question from the perspective of an individual scientist.

The general problem seems to be this: On one hand, Miller is clearly concerned to protect personal projects which are conducive to or constitutive of a person's well-being. On the other hand, he is clearly concerned with doing justice to the idea that human deprivation gives rise to very powerful reasons to aid. But, as the case of Nina shows, Miller is holding his hands too far apart. If contributing to one's life in certain meaningful ways is the only constraint on the justifiability of one's projects, it seems as though Sympathy offers way too much in the way of discretion.

One (admittedly flippant) way to characterize the issue is by seeing Miller as demanding merely that those engaged in worthwhile pursuits be willing to provide the needy with their left-overs. If a moderate morality is to do better, it must be more comprehensive than Sympathy.

So, what *should* we say about Nina? I take up this question in Chapter 5. Here, it must suffice to say that the case of Nina demonstrates that the moderate must find some principled means of tempering the pursuit of the types of ends he wishes to protect from the grasp of transfer principles. That a project or end meets some abstract criteria for being worthwhile (or fulfilling, or enriching, etc.) may plausibly contribute to its justifiability, but there must be some further standard(s) that we can apply in reaching a final judgment.

### **Beyond Common Sense Morality**

We've seen that the principle Singer defends is not as intuitively plausible as he claims, unless we interpret it in a way that is friendly to the moderate. Miller's principle seems to better reflect our common sense commitment to the fact that embracing moral equality does not commit us to being equally concerned about everyone. Unfortunately, both Singer and Miller leave us with questions that we must venture beyond common sense morality to answer. If moral moderation is

true, we need to know what limits there are to the pursuit of our own well-being. But investigating this question now would be premature because we are still in Singer's shadow.

It will take more to dispatch Singer's case than simply pointing to the fact that an extremist-friendly interpretation of Sacrifice is not intuitively plausible. There is still the pesky matter of the toddler example. As rhetorical devices, examples like this are perhaps the extremist's most powerful dialectical tool. After all, for any goal the moderate thinks it permissible to pursue against a background of poverty, the extremist can construct a case in which one would have to sacrifice a necessary means of pursuing that goal in order to rescue a person she encounters in dire need of rescue. (Suppose the guitar you purchased in the name of pursuing your musical dreams is the only object long and light enough to extend to a man in danger of being swept away by violent floodwaters.) This fact sets the moderate a powerful challenge: explain why a person can be morally required to sacrifice something in this type of rescue scenario but is nonetheless entitled to it otherwise, despite the fact that the resources used to obtain it could feed or clothe a distant stranger. I turn my attention to this challenge in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### Close Encounters of the Morally Relevant Kind

---

#### Introduction

At the end of the previous chapter, I outlined a route to moral extremism so compelling and straightforwardly simple that no defense of moral moderation would be complete without addressing and defusing its intuitive appeal. The argumentative strategy has its roots in Peter Singer's famous "Famine, Affluence, and Morality,"<sup>18</sup> but finds a rhetorical maturity in Peter Unger's more recent work.<sup>19</sup> Both Singer and Unger argue for their extremist views by leveraging seemingly undeniable intuitions about how much an agent can be morally required to sacrifice in the name of rescuing a person she encounters close at hand. In this chapter, I aim to demonstrate that this argumentative strategy is not open to the extremist. Specifically, I aim to demonstrate that the moral duty implicated in the context of global poverty is distinct in kind from the duty implicated in the context of interpersonal encounter. If this is so, the extremist's attempt to read off the content of our duty of beneficence from intuitions about rescue scenarios is not a viable means of settling the demandingness of our duty of beneficence in the face of global poverty.

I begin by laying out the extremist's strategy in some detail. I then examine various reasons one might think the strategy fails, including some suggested by the moderate accounts of beneficence offered by Liam Murphy and Barbara Herman. I argue that these strategies for avoiding the extremist's conclusion are unsatisfying. In the penultimate section, I offer my own account of how the moderate can resist the extremist's conclusion. By demonstrating that the moral claims engendered by poverty have a different content from those which arise in the

---

<sup>18</sup> Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (April 1, 1972): 229–43.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1996).

rescue scenarios appealed to by extremists, I show that the duty to respond to poverty-related neediness is *distinct in kind* from duties to particular persons. The latter is a duty to relieve neediness *per se*; the former is a duty to *contribute to a cause*. Thus, we cannot extrapolate the content of our duty to contribute to poverty relief from intuitions about standard rescue scenarios. These distinct duties appropriately impinge on our practical deliberations in unique ways. The question that faces an individual in the context of encounter is “What should I do *right now*?”; the question that confronts her in the face of global poverty is “How should I live my life?” In the final section, I draw out the implications of this difference in deliberative import and suggest a way of reframing the moral question raised by the prevalence of great human neediness.

### **The Extremist Argument from the Context of Interpersonal Encounter**

Peter Singer's case for moral extremism begins with a drowning toddler and the presumption that we share his conviction that a person in a position to rescue the child ought to do so, even at some cost to himself. He uses this example to defend a general moral principle according to which potential benefactors must impartially assess the relative significance of the human interests at stake in any given situation and act in a way that accords priority to those interests whose neglect would lead to something very bad happening. If this is right, it is difficult to see how our duties to the global poor could be anything but extremely demanding given the amount of material deprivation we are in a position to prevent via charitable donations.

Peter Unger deploys this strategy in a way that renders the challenge above explicit. Unger presents the case of Bob, a wealthy man with his eye on a comfortable retirement.<sup>20</sup> To that end, he has sold the majority of his assets and invested the proceeds in an uninsurable

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 135–136.

Bugatti automobile worth three million dollars, an investment he expects to appreciate in value over the five working years he has left. Soon after purchasing the Bugatti, Bob finds himself in a classic trolley situation. Parking his Bugatti at the end of a track, he comes upon a switch. If he does nothing, an oncoming trolley will travel down the left side of a fork in the track and kill a young boy trapped there. If he pulls the switch, the trolley will travel down the right side away from the boy, but will crash into his uninsured Bugatti, destroying it and leaving him relatively poor. Intuitively, Bob is morally required to pull the switch.

Unger goes on to contrast Bob's situation with that of Ray, an equally wealthy man approached by UNICEF with a request that he donate 99% of his fortune to their cause. Were he to do so, and work the five years he has before retirement, he would retire in a position much better off than Bob would be, were Bob to pull the switch.

Here, Ray is meant to represent a wide range of well-off persons. What we're supposed to take away from the example is this: If we agree that Bob should pull the switch, we should also agree that Ray ought to donate 99% of his material assets to UNICEF. After all, not only would Ray be left better off than Bob would be, Ray's sacrifice would facilitate the saving of at least thousands more lives than Bob's would. So, how could we possibly maintain that Bob ought to pull the switch but that Ray needn't honor UNICEF's request?

This juxtaposition of Bob and Ray is meant to pose a problem for the moderate, and surely it does. But, it is worth noting that the problem cuts both ways. We are meant to find it obvious that Bob is morally required to pull the switch and save the child. However, notice that the extremist can accommodate this intuition only so long as he ignores a salient fact about the world in which Bob acts. Once this fact is acknowledged, it becomes clear that the problem

posed for the moderate is equally a problem for the extremist when we look at it the other way around, starting with the extremist's conviction that Ray ought to honor UNICEF's request.

Recall that Bob's Bugatti is worth three million dollars, a sum that could effectively save thousands of lives in the hands of an efficient charity. So, from the point of view of human welfare, it would seem that Bob morally ought to *refrain* from pulling the switch, given that he could instead sell his Bugatti and donate the proceeds to UNICEF. Indeed, it would seem that pulling the switch and rendering his car all but worthless is, in fact, one of the *worst* decisions Bob could make. From the extremist's point of view, Bob's automobile represents an enormous, unmet moral responsibility which any ethic committed to principles of value aggregation must regard as squandered were Bob to sacrifice it in the name of saving just *one* life. In short, the moderate seems to be in a position to employ Bob and Ray in a way that makes the extremist equally uncomfortable. If Ray must donate 99% of his fortune to UNICEF, how could Bob possibly be *obligated* to pull the switch when an option similar to Ray's is open?<sup>21</sup>

True, these observations provide the moderate no immediate relief in terms of explaining why the judgment that Bob ought to pull the switch does not thereby commit her to holding that equivalently great sacrifices are required to save or improve the lives of the world's poorest. My point here is just that insofar as the extremist and moderate share the conviction that Bob must pull the switch, they are confronted with the very *same* difficult task, namely explaining why the case of Bob's Bugatti is somehow special. The moderate must explain why the judgment that Bob must pull the switch doesn't spill over into underwriting a demanding general principle of beneficence. The extremist must explain how he can render the judgment in the first place.

---

<sup>21</sup> It is true that Bob, unlike Ray, has received no explicit request from UNICEF, but it is difficult to see how this fact could be relevant.

There are several ways one might try to draw a morally relevant distinction between the cases of Bob and Ray. Some are based on facts about the threats involved, and some on the relationship between the needy persons and their potential benefactors. Let us turn to examining them.

### **Potential Distinguishing Grounds**

#### **A) Distance**

People in extreme need are often far away from those of us with enough resources to make a meaningful difference. However, given how well-organized and widespread charitable organizations have become, it is difficult to see how physical proximity to those in need could help us distinguish Bob's case from Ray's in a morally relevant way. But perhaps it can.

Richard Miller argues that people we encounter in need of our help implicate a special principle of aid, at least partly in virtue of being close by. Moreover, he is keen to preserve our intuition that great sacrifices can be morally required in cases like Bob's. But defending a principle consistent with this intuition will be no easy task given that Miller is also committed to Sympathy, a principle of beneficence which explicitly precludes a moral agent's having to do anything which involves a "significant risk of worsening [his] life." By any reasonable account, Bob's loss will have just this effect. So, if Miller is going to accommodate our intuitions about the potentially high demands of beneficence in encounter scenarios, he will need to offer a principle that is both free of the proviso about life worsening and consistent with Sympathy.

Here is Miller's principle.

**Nearby Rescue:** One has a duty to rescue someone encountered close by who is in imminent peril of severe harm and whom one can help to rescue with means at hand, if the sacrifice of

rescue does not involve a grave risk of harm of similar seriousness or of serious physical harm, and does not involve wrongdoing.<sup>22</sup>

This principle is clearly consistent with Sympathy. Essentially, we can read Nearby Rescue as Sympathy's exception clause. Needy persons fall within its scope only if they are close by. Moreover, a proviso about life-worsening is conspicuously absent from this principle — it places an extremely high upper-bound on the degree of sacrifice one can be called upon to make. But why think that we should have one principle with such a high upper bound for some situations and another significantly less demanding principle for others? Isn't this principle just an *ad hoc* concession to intuitions about rescue cases? In short, no. Miller provides a compelling defense of the principle that obviates this worry.

The case for Nearby Rescue appeals to broad considerations of a contractualist nature. In reflecting upon what a person who sufficiently appreciates the equal worth of everyone's life would be like, Miller asks which moral principles an *ex ante* moral contractor with such a commitment would have to accept and, conversely, could not reject.<sup>23</sup> The case for Nearby Rescue's acceptance is three-fold.

In the first place, people disposed to respect the equal worth of everyone's life naturally feel a strong impulse to aid those in urgent peril, an impulse one could ignore or quell only at “the height of arrogance” in the relevant *ex ante* context. The second reason offered in support of accepting Nearby Rescue is that a willingness to come to the aid of those one encounters in peril plays a significant coordinative social role. A disposition to act as Nearby Rescue directs us reduces the likelihood that those in dire need of assistance will be passed over or not attended to

---

<sup>22</sup> Richard W. Miller, *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2010), 26–27.

<sup>23</sup> For reasons that do not concern us here, Miller believes that the relevant *ex ante* context is one in which persons abstract from their actual, current circumstances, but not to a degree that would place them behind a veil of ignorance as opaque as that made fashionable by John Rawls.

in time. The final consideration is born of a social interest in a sense of community or camaraderie engendered by the acceptance of Nearby Rescue. Being able to count on others to help us should we find ourselves in a perilous situation “makes us much less alone, much more at home in our social world.”<sup>24</sup>

Such is the case for the *acceptance* of Nearby Rescue. The case for its nonrejectability leans on a statistical fact about the world in which we act. Put simply, our world is such that the chance of anyone finding themselves in a position like Bob's is so remote that the expected cost of accepting Nearby Rescue in the relevant *ex ante* circumstances is “no more than trivial.”<sup>25</sup> Supposing for the sake of argument that the expected costs of accepting the principle is the only strike against it, the case seems pretty clear cut: there are good reasons for any person committed to moral equality to accept the principle and a very thin case to be made against it.

To be sure, if an agent finds herself in a situation where Nearby Rescue becomes operative, she may be called upon to make sacrifices of great moral significance. However, such considerations, for Miller, are only relevant at the level of the justification of principles. Specifically, because an *ex ante* deliberator has very good reason to doubt that he will ever be obliged under Nearby Rescue and even less likely to find himself in a situation in which acting in accordance with the principle requires a great sacrifice on his part, he cannot reject it on the grounds that it places undue burdens on him.

Miller's argument is compelling, but I am not yet convinced. Recall that Miller appeals to facts about physical proximity in distinguishing the principle's domain of application. That this is a problem can be seen by considering the following case.

---

<sup>24</sup> Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

**Edwina's Encounter:** Edwina is rushing to catch the only available flight to a job interview that she correctly believes represents her last chance at pursuing a career in philosophy. Her PhD is fast growing stale, she has only one prospect, and she has acquired a reputation for being unreliable because she has had to reschedule her interview several times for serious personal reasons. The selection committee has grown impatient and is granting her one last chance.

As she is running through the airport parking lot, Edwina is stopped by Rajeev, a man who correctly and convincingly identifies himself as a zoologist from the Nehru Zoological Park in Hyderabad, India. Having just received a call about a dire situation developing at the zoo, he implores Edwina to examine the video stream he has playing on his mobile phone. What Edwina sees, the man correctly and convincingly informs her, is a live video feed of a boy who has fallen into the tiger pit. As Edwina notices, the tigers are closing in and, unless something is done soon, the boy will surely be attacked.

Rajeev informs Edwina that the tigers have been trained in such a way that the sound of a soothing female voice will stop them in their tracks and even lull them to sleep, provided the sound is sustained long enough. Unfortunately, the tigers' female trainer is stuck in traffic and will not make it to the zoo in time to save the boy. Rajeev has managed to get the feed from his telephone patched into the PA system at the zoo and pleads with Edwina to spare a bit of her time in the name of saving the boy. Edwina looks around and finds nobody else to whom Rajeev can turn for help.

Clearly, I think, Edwina must do what she can to save the boy, even though this means missing her flight. So, unless there is a plausible reason to distinguish Edwina's Encounter from Bob's Bugatti at the level of moral principle (I see none), it follows that whatever principle governs behavior in the one ought to govern it in the other. Hence, we must widen the scope of Nearby Rescue in order that it capture cases in which potential benefactor and beneficiary are separated by great distance. Here it is, stripped of its condition that the person in peril be close by:

**Imminent Peril:** One has a duty to rescue someone who is in imminent peril of severe harm and whom one can help to rescue with means at hand, if the sacrifice of rescue does not involve a grave risk of harm of similar seriousness or of serious physical harm, and does not involve wrongdoing.

One question that Miller now faces is whether Imminent Peril is as well supported as Nearby Rescue in the relevant *ex ante* circumstances. I have my doubts, particularly with respect to Miller's appeal to social coordination and camaraderie. However, there are three reasons I do

not wish to push these doubts here. First, the idea of a universally inclusive moral community in which an ideal of camaraderie prevails has undeniable intuitive appeal, even with respect to persons separated by distances so great that they are not likely to influence one another's lives in any tangible way. Second, the fact that a person one is in a position to save is far away seems unlikely to have any effect on the "strong impulse" to render aid that a suitably respectful agent is likely to feel. This fact, combined with the extreme unlikelihood of finding oneself in a situation like Bob's or Edwina's might just be enough to make Imminent Peril nonrejectable.

If it is, then Miller faces a rather more difficult problem: It is not clear how Imminent Peril is consistent with Sympathy. Nearby Rescue was clearly consistent with Sympathy because its domain of application was circumscribed by considerations of distance. However, since Edwina's Encounter forces us to remove this delimiting element, Miller must find some new means of limiting its scope, else all duties to respond to neediness as such will fall within the scope of a principle which places an extremely high upper bound on the degree of sacrifice one can be called upon to make.

So, we are back to the problem we started with, namely locating a property of situations like Bob's Bugatti (and now, Edwina's Encounter) which distinguishes them in a morally relevant way from situations like Ray's. Two possible distinguishing grounds naturally present themselves.

## **B) Imminence**

One prominent feature of the Bob's Bugatti case is the immediacy of the relevant threat. The boy on the tracks is in *imminent* danger and will surely die if something isn't done *very soon*. However, if UNICEF were to use Ray's money to provide desperately needed medicine for those on death's door, imminence is arguably a property of Ray's situation as well. Still, perhaps the

fact that it takes time for donated money to work its way through a complex financial network renders Ray's a case in which the people he stands in a position to help are not in imminent peril. Thankfully, we need only address the question of whether imminence is a property of Ray's situation if the moderate can provide reason to think that imminence would be a morally relevant distinguishing ground.

I don't see how it could be. Disease and malnutrition may not be as *quick* to kill as a speeding trolley, but they are just as *efficacious*. Why should the speed with which a potential threat bears down be relevant? Here, one possibility jumps out.

### **C) Uniqueness**

One might think the immediacy of the threat to the boy's life relates Bob to him in a special, morally relevant way. After all, if *Bob* doesn't do something, nobody will. According to this line of thinking, because Bob is in a *unique position* to render the necessary aid, he stands in a special relationship to the boy which grounds a duty that he would not otherwise have or which would not otherwise be so demanding. Ray, in contrast, is not in such a situation. It is *possible* that the people his aid money would help could receive the aid by some other means. Unfortunately for the moderate, it's not immediately clear that the uniqueness relation can do the work that she needs.

Suppose that a little further up the track between Bob and the child, there is another agent standing next to a second switch. If pulled, this switch would direct the trolley down a third length of track where it would come to a harmless stop in an empty field. Suppose further that Bob knows all of this but cannot determine what the other person will do. There are now two

people in a position to save the child's life, but it still seems that Bob must pull the switch over which he has control, sending the trolley hurtling towards his beloved car.<sup>26</sup>

While uniqueness doesn't seem necessary to generate the demanding duty, it may be that we have a matter of degree on our hands. If we keep adding potential rescuers and switches between Bob and the child, my intuitions give way at some point.

Suppose that there are one hundred people between Bob and the child, each of whom could pull a switch that would send the trolley down the third length of track where it can do no harm. Is Bob still obliged to pull *his* switch? I just don't know. But, it seems undeniable that if Bob reasonably believes that *no one else* will pull a switch, a strong case can be made that he is obliged to pull his, despite the fact that many others are in a position to render the necessary aid. If so, the prospects of escaping Unger's challenge seem bleak.

Ray is likely to know that most people in a position to help the poverty-stricken do little or nothing. With so few people contributing to poverty relief efforts and so many in need of relief, Ray is faced with a situation such that there are people in desperate need of life saving assistance who will not get it if *he* does not give. That is, when we hold fixed certain facts about the propensity of others to contribute to poverty relief efforts, Ray must make his decision about whether to oblige UNICEF's request under the reasonable assumption that a donation from him is *necessary* to save many lives. Like Bob, Ray is in a situation in which people will likely die if *he* does not act.

---

<sup>26</sup> I suspect that this claim enjoys less intuitive support than the claim that Bob must pull the switch in the situation as first described. Nonetheless, I think it important to grant this claim for the sake of discussion if only because the moderate should not be satisfied to hang her position on the claim that Bob need not pull the switch in this re-imagined scenario.

## D) Fairness

One intuitively appealing way of distinguishing the cases of Bob and Ray is suggested by a conception of beneficence offered by Liam Murphy in the name of moral moderation.<sup>27</sup> Murphy is concerned with distributive considerations that arise from the ideal of fairness. In his view, we ought to regard beneficence as a cooperative project in which each of us is concerned with the promotion of human well-being. The upshot of regarding beneficence this way is that, like other cooperative projects, we have good reason to think that the burdens of seeing it through ought to be fairly distributed among the cooperators. According to Murphy, fairness dictates that people cannot be expected to sacrifice more than would be necessary under conditions of full compliance. That is, no one can be asked to sacrifice more than would be necessary if everyone were doing her part in the name of poverty relief.

The benefits of Murphy's way of thinking are clear. It may be true that people will die if Ray fails to donate the bulk of his fortune to UNICEF, but this is only (or in part) because others in a position to help haven't done so. Asking Ray to give more than his fair share is to ask him to bear the burden of the non-compliance of others, and that would be unfair. Indeed, we can extend the appeal to fairness to a defense of uniqueness as a morally relevant property which distinguishes Bob's case from Ray's in the following way: In Bob's Bugatti, there is but a single person in a position to render assistance. Bob is the only person who *can* help the person in need. So, there is just no sense in talking about shares here. Bob has found himself in a situation such that the burdens of doing what ought to be done cannot be spread around.

---

<sup>27</sup> Liam B. Murphy, "The Demands of Beneficence," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22, no. 4 (October 1, 1993): 267–92.

This is an interesting line, but I have my doubts about its plausibility. While there is nothing obviously wrong in thinking of basic human welfare as the object of a cooperative project, poverty relief is importantly disanalogous from projects that we intuitively think ought to be governed by fairness.

Typically, cooperative projects are entered into by a group of people in an effort to confer a joint benefit upon the members of the cooperating group, each doing his part to reap his share of the resulting benefit. If enough people fail to do their fair share, the members of the group will not receive the benefit, or will receive a lesser benefit than under conditions of full compliance. In such scenarios, whether the other members choose to forgo the benefit or take on a larger share of the burden is properly a matter of discretion. For example, suppose that the members of a housing community decide to work together to build and maintain a community garden. In the interest of fairness, each neighbor is assigned a small patch of land and a type of vegetable to plant, tend, and harvest. Suppose now that Tamal, who has been assigned tomatoes, decides he really can't be bothered with the whole gardening thing any longer and abandons the tomato patch. This places a burden on his fellow community members. Importantly, however, this burden is borne *only* by his fellow community members. As such, it would seem, whether they bear this burden of an increased workload or forgo the benefit of tomatoes in their meals is properly a matter of discretion. No cooperator is *required* to do anything in the name of providing the group with tomatoes, though one or more may opt to step in and bear the necessary burden. The case of poverty is importantly different from the community garden case in this respect: If the community members really want tomatoes, they can have them, provided they are willing to put in the requisite work. If not, they can opt out of bearing this burden. But the benefits of poverty relief (unlike tomato-rich meals) are not something that the very needy can

simply opt into, nor are the burdens of poverty something they can simply opt out of. One reason poverty is a pressing moral issue is precisely that the poverty-stricken cannot help themselves.

Poverty is not a discretionary matter.

The cases are disanalogous in two other ways that should lead us to question Murphy's appeal to fairness. First, the main reason we think burdens should be distributed fairly in cooperative projects is because we think free-riding is objectionable. If Tamal refuses to do his fair share in maintaining the community garden but partakes in the harvest nonetheless, he free-rides on the work of others. But there is no danger of free-riding in the case of poverty relief. A person who does not give his fair share to poverty relief efforts does not benefit from the fact that others give to poverty relief efforts.

A lack of possible free-riders makes Murphy's appeal to fairness seem out of place, though a second difference between the cases makes the appeal to fairness inappropriate. In the community garden case, the stakes are relatively low. If Tamal doesn't do his part, the community members will enjoy a lesser variety of vegetables than they otherwise would.

However, in the case of a cooperative project in which the benefit sought is the basic welfare of other people, the stakes can be life and death. When the stakes are this high, the benefits of cooperation have a moral significance which makes it difficult to see how a distributive ideal such as fairness can bear the moral weight that it must on Murphy's view.

Suppose that Neal and Sam are walking to a nearby park on their lunch break. As they turn a corner, they hear the cries of Timmy, a young boy who has become trapped in an old well. Finding a strong rope, Neal lowers one end down the well and talks Timmy through the process of tying it around his waist. Neal tugs on the rope, but just as Timmy is about half way up, it becomes clear to Neal that he is at serious risk of pulling a muscle if he continues to exert

himself to the extent necessary to free the boy. Sam refuses Neal's request to pull Timmy the rest of the way, or even to assist in doing so, citing the danger of injuring himself before his upcoming squash game.

Clearly, it would be wrong for Neal to respond by tying his end of the rope to a nearby tree and walking away, citing the fact that he had done his part. Doing so would be to saddle *Timmy* with the burden of Sam's noncompliance, something he is not at liberty to do.

One might argue that this situation is not relevantly analogous to Ray's request from UNICEF in the following way: Being trapped, dangling halfway down a well is at least as bad as being trapped at the bottom. Sam's noncompliance leaves Timmy as badly off as he would be were Neal to have likewise done nothing. But, in the case of global poverty, things seem different. One might plausibly think that even if everyone but Ray were to ignore the solicitations of charitable organizations, a contribution from Ray which amounted to his fair share *would* make a tangible difference. In fact, one might think, it would have precisely the same effect that it would were everybody else complying fully. If so, the practical import of Ray's fair share is not affected by the compliance or non-compliance of others.

I'm not convinced that this is true. In fact, Ray's fair share is likely to be minuscule given that any plausibly fair distribution of charitable burdens will reflect the relative wealth of those upon whom they fall. If so, the wealthiest will be called upon to give more, in absolute terms. Combine this with the fact that the estimated cost of achieving and maintaining universal access to basic education, health care, safe water, and an adequate diet for all is less than four percent of the combined wealth of the world's two hundred twenty-five richest people, and it's just not clear that Ray's fair share would be enough to make any tangible difference, despite the fact that he is

a millionaire thrice over.<sup>28</sup> Even if Ray's share of the burden *is* enough to make a tangible difference, however, we need only alter the above example in a minor way to demonstrate that this fact cannot save the plausibility of Murphy's appeal to fairness.

Suppose the well contained two Timmies. Now, Neal's share of the burden is the rescue of one boy and Sam's the other (assuming for the sake of convenience that Neal and Sam are equally strong and would be equally affected by the physical strain of pulling a boy from the well). But, if Sam refuses to do his part, Neal is obligated to pick up the slack, even if he must strain his muscles to do so. To saddle a Timmy with the burden of Sam's failing to do his fair share is clearly wrong.<sup>29</sup>

If fairness can't save the moderate, perhaps a proposal advanced by Barbara Herman can. She agrees with Murphy that we can only be asked to contribute a "fair share," but for her, this has nothing to do with fairness *per se*. According to Herman, our duties to the global poor are relatively weak because they are, in an important sense, secondary.<sup>30</sup> That is, our duties to the global poor turn out to be duties of beneficence only in a derivative way.

Typically, claims Herman, the world's poor and destitute live outside our framework of social and political institutions. In this sense they are less "local" to us than those with whom we share such institutions. The needs of the far away poor, moreover, first impose a duty on *their* local institutions. They therefore give rise to claims of justice. It is only because these needs go unmet as a matter of justice that they bear on us as a matter of beneficence. Thus, claims Herman, our duty to meet the needs of such people is a duty of "secondary beneficence."

---

<sup>28</sup> United Nations Development, *Human Development Report 1998* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 30.

<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that Murphy entertains and struggles with a similar example but does not provide a definitive response, opting instead to speculate that "[p]erhaps a special obligation to rescue is in operation in these cases" (292). However, he does not offer any considerations which might ground such a special obligation.

<sup>30</sup> Barbara Herman, "The Scope of Moral Requirement," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 30, no. 3 (July 1, 2001): 227–56.

The significance of the fact that we inherit this duty is that it “must fit with the structure of relational duties we already have, and also with our morally required concern for ourselves.”<sup>31</sup>

For these reasons, Herman adverts to public and social institutions, claiming that, with respect to distant strangers, they can (ought?) do the work of beneficence for us. Discharging our duty to the poverty stricken is therefore a matter of providing these institutions with our “fair share” of support.

Essentially, Herman is appealing to the existence of a hierarchical normative order in which duties are parceled out in a particular way. When and where this order breaks down, the unmet responsibilities can be inherited by others, but they become attenuated as they trickle down. Unfortunately, Herman does not provide a direct argument for these claims about secondary beneficence. Instead, they are a product of an account of beneficence informed by Kant's doctrine of obligatory ends, an account which is partly constituted by duties to oneself that require significant time, attention, and resources. Perhaps we have such duties, but since their existence and demandingness is controversial, it would be best if the moderate could defend her position without having to posit them.

### **A Duty of Contribution**

The normative considerations to which Murphy and Herman appeal cannot serve to ground a distinction between situations like Ray's and the context of encounter. Murphy's appeal to fairness seems out of place given the gravity of the costs imposed upon third parties who bear the burdens of non-compliance. Herman's position, though not without intuitive appeal, lacks direct argumentative support. I propose a different approach. Rather than working from normative claims or intuitions, I suggest that the moderate should distinguish the context of poverty from

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 253.

the context of encounter on non-moral grounds. (This will ultimately help motivate the common-sense intuition that extremism is too demanding). If the moderate can demonstrate that our duties to the global poor are of a relevantly different *kind* from our duties to individuals we encounter in imminent peril, then the stringency of the duty to relieve poverty will be an open question that cannot be answered merely with reference to the stringency of duties we may have to individuals we encounter who desperately need our help. With this approach, the moderate effectively clears a space in which she may treat the cases differently. In effect, I believe the moderate should begin with ontology and work *up* to normative conclusions, rather than the other way around. If she can get a handle on the relevant non-moral characteristics which distinguish the context of encounter from the context of global poverty, then she may have better luck with the ethical argumentation. In this section, I take up the first part of this task. I argue that our duty to respond to the neediness of the global poor is a duty to *contribute to a cause* and that this duty is distinct in kind from duties to particular persons.

One striking feature of the context of interpersonal encounter is that it involves people stumbling upon the plight of others. As such, its deliberative impact is distinctly different from that of the problem of global poverty. Poverty is an entrenched, pervasive aspect of the moral landscape that presents itself as a *broad constraint* at a very general level of practical deliberation. Rather than something we stumble upon, poverty constitutes a background condition against which we must make and justify our life choices.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, the moral import of the context of encounter functions as a constraint on what an agent may do at a particular moment in time, given that something very valuable is at stake. The question that faces

---

<sup>32</sup> This is not to say that someone who decides not to purchase a pair of designer sunglasses because he is moved by the appeals of a charity worker standing outside the store has thereby made some sort of deliberative mistake. It is, however, to say that a person so moved has a further compelling reason to think about whether he is morally justified in being the type of person who indulges in luxury consumer items.

the potential benefactor in the context of encounter is not, “How should I live my life?”, but, “What should I do *right now*?”<sup>33</sup>

To put the point another way, poverty presents itself in a manner akin to other widespread problems such as global climate change, destructive political fanaticism, and acute economic crises. These issues devolve upon us as collective problems requiring collective, coordinated action. This, I maintain, marks a distinct way of conceiving of moral concerns—a certain characteristic mode of representing them. It is because poverty presents itself in this way that it even *makes sense* to talk about parceling out the burden of responding to it in accordance with distributive ideals such as fairness or to conceive of individual actors as playing but a supportive role in a cooperative relief effort. Seen this way, poverty relief is a *cause* to which the appropriate moral response on the part of an individual is *contribution*. I think this fact serves the moderate well in that it suggests that our duty in the face of poverty may be different in kind from our duty to relieve the neediness of particular people on particular occasions.

To be sure, the extremist can adopt the language of cause and contribution as well. Nothing to which the extremist is committed precludes him from referring to poverty relief as a “cause” or from talking about the sacrifices he asks as a “contribution” thereto. Peter Singer, for instance, would have us view the world as a giant pond in which many are drowning. He thinks each person confronted by this scenario ought to save as many as she can short of risking her own life, but because it will take many people working together to eradicate poverty, referring to

---

<sup>33</sup> Violetta Igneski argues that the deliberative immediacy of encounter scenarios can be attributed to the fact that they generate determinate duties (i.e., duties which specify who should act and when). This determinacy, she argues, explains why a person must perform rescues in encounter scenarios but need not aid any particular needy person she happens to know about. In what follows, I hope to show that these two cases differ not only with respect to the structure of the duties involved, but also more fundamentally with respect to the moral claims which give rise to the respective duties. See Violetta Igneski, “Perfect and Imperfect Duties to Aid,” *Social Theory and Practice* 32, no. 3 (July 2006): 439–66.

this enormous sacrifice as an individual's contribution to a life-saving effort seems all but natural. However, this use of the term “contribution” belies an important issue. The idea that global poverty presents itself as a cause to which the correct response is contribution is not merely a matter of contingent facts about a single person's ability to make a difference. Rather, it is a matter of morally relevant ontology. One way to make this point is to demonstrate how this pond metaphor misses the mark.

Rather than viewing the world as a giant pond in which many are drowning, we should regard it more like a giant vat that is slowly filling with water because the intricate network of valves needed to maintain a comfortable depth are either failing or were never installed correctly. The moderate fully agrees with the extremist that people not threatened by the rising water have a duty to do *something* about the situation. Pulling people out of the vat is one way one could discharge that duty, but it is not the *unique* way to do so. In the case of poverty, the threats to human life are the result of forces numerous, persistent, predictable, and intertwined. They are like so many broken valves. Institutions have failed in their duties of justice, people lack the knowledge and means to sustain themselves or contain population growth, extreme weather threatens crops, and so on. While pointing to the causal sources of our duty in the face of poverty is not to distinguish that duty in any relevant way from our duty to save particular persons we may encounter, this is not the relevant point. Rather, the point is that a person who fails to rescue any currently imperiled person, despite being in a position to do so, does not thereby run afoul of her duty of beneficence. Instead, she may discharge her duty by contributing to or spearheading efforts to address the *causes* of poverty. If this is right, then the moral duties generated by poverty are not specifiable in the same way as our duties to save particular imperiled persons whom we may encounter. Let me explain.

Both the moderate and extremist agree that, in the context of encounter, the imperiled person I come upon has a moral claim upon me that I can deny only where the cost of satisfying it is roughly comparable to the cost to her of not doing so. Where it is not, denying her claim on the grounds that the sacrifice required is too high would essentially involve a comparative value judgment that is degrading to her in the sense of failing to acknowledge her value as a person. But, such comparative judgments do not seem to be involved in refraining from doing as much as possible in the name of poverty relief. While the poverty-stricken have a moral claim, it is different in kind from the claims of individuals I may encounter in need of rescue. It is not a claim to the effect that I must do what I can to save their lives (short of endangering my own). Rather, it is a claim to live in a world in which people do not suffer for the reasons they are suffering. That is, it is a claim to which people may permissibly respond by taking measures to address the systemic causes of poverty as opposed to the manifest neediness of particular persons who must suffer through it.

This position is bound to be controversial, but I think it can be established. When people talk about duties to the global poor, they often have in mind a duty to donate to charitable organizations which provide targeted aid, such as food and medicine, to those who need it, thereby saving their lives. No one will deny that this is *an* appropriate way to respond to poverty-related neediness. But saving the lives (i.e. performing rescues) of those imperiled by poverty is not the only way to discharge the duty engendered by such neediness.

Consider the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) headquartered at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. J-PAL's mandate includes researching ways to implement and maintain the type of social and political policies required to correct and prevent the systemic problems that underlie poverty. It does not deliver food, build schools, or fund

medical programs. Rather, it takes a large-scale approach to poverty relief, gathering data and researching the effectiveness of policies and relief programs with an eye to long-term, sustainable solutions to poverty. The money it spends could save many lives if it were devoted to providing medicine, food, and shelter to those in great need. Clearly, however, that J-PAL does not devote its resources to these ends does not constitute a failure to discharge its duty in the face of poverty, nor is it a failure to satisfy whatever moral claims those affected by poverty can legitimately press. Likewise, it seems clear that an individual does not fail to discharge *her* duty to the poverty-stricken if she chooses to donate to J-PAL instead of a charity like OXFAM which provides targeted aid to those in need.

But so what? The extremist does not complain about exercising discretion in this way. He will happily admit that donations to J-PAL are appropriate. What he *does* complain about is exercising discretion in the name of benefiting *oneself* when the means of doing so could be put to use by organizations like OXFAM or J-PAL.

A moderate must eventually justify her belief in such discretionary latitude. But, first things first. At this point, my goal is to drive a wedge between rescue scenarios like the one Bob has found himself in and the context of global poverty. This I take to be the first important step in a two step approach to defending moral moderation. The second step, which will have to wait, is to argue that this difference makes a difference in terms of the demandingness of the moral principles implicated in each context. The point of the vat analogy and discussion of the propriety of donating to J-PAL has been to drive a wedge between duties in the context of encounter and duties in the face of global poverty, thus blocking the extremist's appeal to the first in the name of defending demanding principles in the latter. I have been attempting to

demonstrate that the duties are distinct in kind. A version of a familiar example will, I hope, make the distinction vivid.

Suppose that the boy trapped on the trolley tracks in the Bob's Bugatti case is an instance of a larger problem facing the community. The trolleys are a new addition to the town whose budget was just adequate to cover the costs of construction. Unfortunately, the town did not foresee just how alluring the trolley system would be for young children in the community. Despite the best efforts of their parents, children keep slipping away to “watch the trolleys.” This problem has led to a rash of serious injuries and a few unfortunate deaths. The town has begun a campaign to raise the funds necessary to construct a fencing system that will prevent these tragedies.

Bob is aware of all this. So, when he encounters the boy stuck on the trolley tracks, he is not terribly surprised. Suppose now that, in coming face-to-face with the boy, Bob is struck by an intense realization of the moral importance of the proposed fencing initiative. With a heavy heart, he turns back toward his car, resolving to sell it as soon as possible so he can provide the city with the three million dollars it needs to build an adequate fencing system.

Now, notice: If the extremist is right and our duties in situations like Bob's are of a piece with our duties to the global poor, then Bob acts permissibly in walking away; we should regard his decision to abandon the boy in the name of donating to the community's fence fund as akin to my donating to J-PAL instead of CARE. But that is surely absurd. It is difficult not to regard Bob's action as deeply wrong. He is not morally permitted to turn his back on this boy in order to address the systemic cause of his neediness. But, in the case of poverty relief, one *may* permissibly choose to address the systemic cause instead of the neediness itself. Donating to broad, systematic approaches to poverty-relief is one appropriate way of responding to the

correspondingly broad “How should I live my life?” question that poverty forces upon us. Such a response is never appropriate with respect to the “What should I do right now?” question one faces in the context of encounter. In these cases, our duties are *directed* in a way that we cannot ignore. This shows that the claims which the poverty-stricken have on us in virtue of their neediness have a *different content* from the claims which imperiled individuals may press in the context of interpersonal encounter. Thus, the extremist is not entitled to straightforwardly draw conclusions about the demandingness of our duties in the one case from intuitions about the demandingness of our duties in the other.

### **Looking Forward**

The extremist deploys encounter scenarios as a kind of dialectical bait. A moderate is likely to take such bait only where relieving the neediness in these scenarios doesn't require the sacrifice of certain important *types* of goods to which a moderate believes all individuals are entitled. Typically, the goods a moderate is concerned with protecting from the purview of general principles of beneficence are meaningful personal projects aimed at self-realization, relationships like love and friendship which demand disproportionate concern, the types of fulfillment involved in meaningful careers, and so on.

It is important to be clear about this point, particularly in light of the fact that Edwina's Encounter is so compelling.<sup>34</sup> Edwina's obligation to save the trapped boy entails that she will miss out on her last chance at the philosophy career she deeply desires, has worked hard to obtain, and that would be a source of great meaning in her life. Importantly, however, performing the rescue in this situation does not deprive her of the ability to obtain *a* meaningful

---

<sup>34</sup> Here, I appeal to Edwina's Encounter instead of Bob's Bugatti because the nature of the sacrifice is much better specified in the former case. In the Bob's Bugatti case, it is not exactly clear just what Bob's sacrifice entails, save for the fact that he will not have the sort of retirement he had planned.

career or its goods. While she may lose the opportunity to pursue one *particular career path*, rescuing the boy does leave open the possibility of her pursuing some other career path which comes bundled with the types of meaningful goods that characterize the philosophical life. Consider how much less intuitively appealing the example would be if the sacrifice necessary to save the boy were to preclude the very possibility of an intellectually stimulating life. If saving the boy's life required Edwina to take an action which involved the likelihood of even a minor brain injury, it is far from clear that the sacrifice would be morally required. The reason such a case lacks the intuitive force of a case like Bob's Bugatti is that the sacrifice required precludes the possibility of realizing certain *types* of goods to which we are intuitively morally entitled.

These considerations are what make mode of presentation relevant. It is because poverty is a pervasive, predictable background condition which normatively constrains decisions at a very general level of practical deliberation that it makes sense to consider sacrifices in terms of types of goods rather than particular vehicles of their realization, and thus why the context of global poverty has a different moral character than the context of encounter. In forcing us to ask very general questions about how we will shape our lives, the deliberative impact of global poverty brings the demandingness of various answers to such questions into sharp relief.

The mode of presentation of the context of global poverty changes the normative character of the situation in another important way, as well. As the appeal to J-PAL demonstrates, one can successfully discharge one's duty in the context of global poverty by addressing the systemic cause of neediness. What this shows is that what we are related to in the context of global poverty is general, pervasive neediness *per se* (or humanity itself) as opposed to particular needy persons. This relationship generates a duty we can discharge in many ways

and over an extended period of time. Our duty is thus one of *contribution* as opposed to straightforward rescue.

One way to get at the moral significance of the distinction between particular persons and neediness *per se* is to examine how many charities make their solicitations compelling by blurring it. Often, charities that provide targeted aid will grip us by showing us photographs or video clips of the communities in which they operate, informing us that the people we are seeing will continue to suffer greatly if we do not donate. What makes this strategy so compelling is that it has the effect of making the situation seem like the context of encounter. (“These are people *you* can help!”).<sup>35</sup> Charities do this by making claims of an interpersonal causal dependence between them and us.<sup>36</sup> While there is a sort of dependence relationship here, it is no different from the relationship that exists between us and those suffering off-screen in different countries and communities, or those of future generations whose neediness we can address via donations to organizations like J-PAL. The people we see in these campaign ads are thus importantly *representatives* of a larger ethical issue which impinges on us at a very general level of practical deliberation, a level at which we must justify how we are going to organize and structure our lives in terms of the types of goods at which we aim and how we will go about realizing them, given that we must do so in the midst of human neediness. An important aspect of doing this well will involve a commitment to relieving neediness, but, plausibly, this commitment can take many forms and may be fulfilled over the course of one's life, shaped by and complimentary to one's other commitments.

---

<sup>35</sup> I do not mean to suggest that this strategy is somehow nefarious or underhanded. On the contrary, it is a powerful means of reminding us all what is at stake. What we need to sort out is the practical import of these stakes.

<sup>36</sup> For an insightful discussion of this kind of case (with interesting variations), see Ignieski, “Perfect and Imperfect Duties to Aid,” 451–54.

Thinking about poverty as a series of encounter scenarios in which we must perform rescues reduces it to a finite set of discrete occurrences, each of which has a determinate moral structure which grounds obligations with clear fulfillment conditions. But this is not how poverty presents itself to individuals who stand in a position to help. Instead, poverty is a pervasive, general facet of the human condition, one of the myriad aspects of our collective existence which encroaches on our general evaluative outlook. Once we see that it threatens to jeopardize our ability to realize certain *types* of goods, we can see that the pressing issue we must tackle is that of determining the relative normative significance of human neediness on the one hand and, on the other, the types of goods which those of us not in great need have independently compelling reason to pursue.

It is hard to imagine that the relatively well-off are not morally required to make sacrifices in the face of global poverty. Perhaps these sacrifices must be significant. But, if I am right, the question that global poverty presents us with cannot be answered by examining standard rescue scenarios. Instead, we must approach it as a question of how a commitment to relieving neediness should manifest itself within the life of an individual who is in a position to make a difference and must shape her life and priorities against a backdrop of material deprivation. Seen this way, it is not a question of how many rescues a person ought to perform. Rather, it is a question of how an individual can weave herself into the fabric of humanity in a morally appropriate way. I devote the final chapter to answering this question.

## CHAPTER 3

### Shelly Kagan, Impartiality, and the Promotion of Human Well-Being

---

#### Introduction

If we are to determine whether our duty of beneficence is moderate or extreme, we must look beyond the common sense considerations we have been working with. But where? In this chapter I want to examine what is perhaps the most straightforward route to moral extremism, a route which begins at our most general ethical commitment.

In essence, the most prominent proponents of demanding moralities claim that moderates endorse a morally pernicious favoritism with respect to their own lives and interests. Shelly Kagan, for example, argues that any justification for failing to act on the universal reason to impartially promote the general good is nefariously *ad hoc*.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, we've seen how Peter Unger argues from carefully crafted examples to the conclusion that failure to provide resources to poverty relief agencies marks a selfish irrationality, given our firm convictions about our duty to save those close at hand. In both cases, we can regard these extremists as charging moderates with failing to appreciate the practical import of a commitment to moral equality.

Any plausible ethic must be consistent with our conviction that no person's life matters more than that of anyone else's. In this sense, at least, morality is an impartial affair. One plausible desideratum for an ethic of need, then, is that it not pick anyone out for special treatment. This fact suggests that when we are theorizing about what morality requires (or deliberating about what we ought to do) we ought to do so from a completely impartial point of view.

---

<sup>37</sup> Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

The second consideration in favor of regarding the impartial point of view as authoritative is that it offers us objectivity. Human beings have a long history of being blinded by their own prejudice and self-favoring biases in a way that precludes a complete or correct understanding of all kinds of matters. One plausible reason to think that we must examine the normative world from an impartial or impersonal point of view is a general one that applies to most forms of serious inquiry: we must step outside ourselves if we are to avoid falling victim to our epistemic shortcomings. As Thomas Nagel describes it, taking up the impartial point of view is a transcendent experience relevantly analogous to the transcendence required to achieve objectivity in science. Getting out of our own heads and beyond the limits of our own perspective requires that we “form a new conception of reality that includes ourselves as components.”<sup>38</sup> Nagel believes that a similar act of transcendence is necessary to achieve objectivity in ethics, if only because claims about what reasons we have “can be true or false independently of how things appear to us,”<sup>39</sup> where these appearances may well be the result of “egocentric distortion.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite what these claims may suggest on their own, Nagel is not an extremist. In fact, he is one of the most prolific defenders of moral moderation. However, Nagel believes that if the impartial point of view were morally authoritative, extremism would be true. It should come as no surprise, then, that his moral moderation is founded on the claim that there is another point of view — the personal point of view — to which morality must answer. But I am getting ahead of myself. I will examine appeals to the personal point below and in the following chapter. For

---

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 138.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 197.

now, let us focus on why a commitment to impartiality and objectivity seem to speak in favor of moral extremism.

### **Extremism: The Path of Least Resistance**

The path of least resistance from commitments to impartiality and objectivity about value seems to lead directly to extremism (extremism of a consequentialist stripe, more specifically). From the impartial point of view, the question of how one ought to act seems to reduce to the question of what good one is in a position to do, at least when it comes to questions of beneficence. And because an interest's being one's own gives it no special standing, the relative strength of the reasons one has to act seems to simply be a function of the nature of the interests one is in a position to satisfy or promote. Combined with a plausible normative hierarchy of human interests ranked in order of impartial significance, we get a straightforward moral accounting procedure. Here's what I mean.

It is plausible to suppose that some human interests are of greater moral significance than others. In making their case, it is no coincidence that extremists appeal to the fact that the very needy lack food, shelter, and medicine rather than, say, ballet tickets, custom furniture, and domestic help. While the very needy have none of these things, the fact that they lack the former lends the extremist's appeal an urgency that would be lacking if they focused on the latter. In short, the case for extremism is compelling in large part because many people lack what we might call *basic needs*. Following David Copp, let "basic needs" refer to those things a person

requires regardless of his goals or desires.<sup>41</sup> Though it is not obvious what this description picks out, it is enough for my purposes that some things obviously belong to the set and some do not.<sup>42</sup>

Because basic needs plausibly occupy the place of highest impartial moral significance, the extremist can plausibly claim that basic needs ground the weightiest reasons for action. Thus, the world's relatively well-off individuals fail to act in a morally justified way wherever they prioritize their-own non-basic interests over the basic needs of others. In sum, the extremist has access to a straightforward, well-packaged view informed by fundamental and compelling ethical commitments combined with plausible evaluative accounting.

To be sure, this is a very hasty derivation of extremism from a bare description of basic commitments. Though I don't think it works, there is no denying its intuitive plausibility. Peter Singer, for one, is optimistic, though does not ultimately fill the argument out more thoroughly. Instead, he offers the decidedly more modest claim that a commitment to the impartial point of view recommends at least that we start with a "broadly utilitarian" position. "If we are going to move beyond utilitarianism," he says, "we need to be given good reasons why we should do so."<sup>43</sup> For the reasons adduced above, I believe Singer is correct. A very strong *prima facie* case can be made for the claim that "at least at some level...ethics points towards the course of action that has the best consequences, on balance, for all affected."

The debate over the truth of consequentialism is as long-standing as it is polarizing. I do not intend to wade deeply into it here. I would be remiss, however, if I didn't address it in some

---

<sup>41</sup> David Copp, "The Right to an Adequate Standard of Living: Justice, Autonomy, and the Basic Needs," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 9, no. 1 (1992): 250.

<sup>42</sup> Not only is any account of the contents of this set bound to be controversial, the definition of "basic needs" is likely to be controversial as well, at least insofar as one reads the term "basic" normatively. It is, after all, plausible to think that some things we could technically live without should be regarded as basic (e.g., for the purpose of social provision). Nothing I say hangs on these controversial issues.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 11.

way, if only because it is widely regarded to be the very embodiment of normative impartiality and, partly for this reason, a plausible theoretical home for an extreme duty of beneficence.

### **Shelly Kagan's Extremism**

Shelly Kagan offers the most thorough consequentialist defense of extremism.<sup>44</sup> The general outline of his overall argument is this:

- 1) There is a pro tanto reason to promote the overall good.<sup>45</sup>
- 2) The pro tanto reason to promote the overall good is morally decisive.
- 3) Therefore, we are always morally required to promote the overall good.

Most of the action in Kagan's book is aimed at defending the second premise. Specifically, Kagan is keen to demonstrate that no convincing case can be offered in defense of “constraints” or “options.” A *constraint* is a restriction which forbids certain action types, regardless of their consequences (common examples include harming the innocent and breaking promises). *Options* are spheres of permissibility within which we may permissibly act in ways that do not promote the overall good.

At roughly four hundred pages, most of them aimed at defending the second premise, a full treatment of Kagan's case falls outside the scope of this work. Instead, I will focus on those aspects of Kagan's view that challenge our moderate intuitions about the demandingness of morality. Let us start with the first premise.

---

<sup>44</sup> Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*.

<sup>45</sup> For reasons of style and efficiency, I will often use the shorter phrase “the pro tanto reason” to refer to the pro tanto reason to promote the overall good.

## The Pro Tanto Reason to Promote the Good

Kagan's case against moral moderation grounds out in his claim that there is a pro tanto reason to promote the overall good. I'll let him explain what this claim amounts to:

...the claim that there is a pro tanto reason to promote the good is a convenient way of asserting that there is a pro tanto reason to promote each individual good. When no one reaction will promote all of the individual goods that are at stake in some situation, a reason will be generated corresponding to each individual good. The more important the particular good, the greater the reason that is generated; similarly, when a single act will promote several goods, these may cumulatively generate a stronger (combined) reason. Since, on balance, the strongest reason will be generated in favor of the reaction that will promote the greatest amount of good overall, I have often spoken of the pro tanto reason to promote the overall good. But this does not mean that the pro tanto reason to promote the good only generates a reason in favor of the reaction that leads to the greatest good overall. On the contrary, reasons are also generated in favor of reactions that would lead to a smaller amount of good overall, although these reasons are, of course, outweighed.<sup>46</sup>

For Kagan, human well-being is a central component of "the good" (though Kagan is open to their being other goods which inform moral requirements). This fact is why the moderate cannot simply dismiss Kagan's argument at the first premise. Instead, it is precisely why the moderate must pay attention. Because human well-being is central to the good as Kagan understands it, the existence of the pro tanto reason is arguably the best explanation of "various judgments the moderate wants to make."<sup>47</sup> For example, it explains why the moderate thinks we ought to save the drowning toddler in Singer's favorite example, and why, in forced choice situations, one ought to save more lives rather than fewer, all else being equal. But, says Kagan, even in cases where not all else is equal, the moderate is still compelled to accept the existence of a pro tanto reason to promote the good on pain of commitment to a very strange account of reasons. Even the moderate who believes it impermissible to harm one innocent person in order to save two

---

<sup>46</sup> Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, 57.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

others from the same harm must agree that it is implausible to think that there is *no* reason to harm the one. Clearly, there is such a reason, namely that two would be saved. It is not as though the reason to act in a way that saves the two fails to obtain, but somehow pops into existence when we change the scenario in such a way that saving the two no longer involves harming anyone.

One worry worth flagging here has to do with Kagan's focus on the relationship between something's being valuable or good and the idea that it thereby ought to be promoted (where promotion is a quantitative notion, a matter of increasing). Thomas Scanlon, for one, has convincingly argued that promotion is not always an appropriate response to value and, even where it is *an* appropriate response, it is often not uniquely so.<sup>48</sup> However, when it comes to the value of human well-being, it is plausible to think that promotion is at least *an* appropriate response. We really do seem to have compelling reasons to increase the amount of well-being in the world, as is the case when we rescue people from peril or help them in less dramatic ways. For this reason, we ought to grant Kagan the existence of the pro tanto reason to promote the good, where "the good" is understood to be human well-being. But what does this mean for the question of the extent to which we are required to donate to poverty relief or, more generally, sacrifice our own interests for those of others? Does accepting the existence of the pro tanto reason commit us to the view that we ought to donate our resources to the point of marginal utility? The answer is not so clear. What if, instead, we used some of our resources to pursue artistic dreams and shared our artistic creations with the world? It is at least not obvious that this is not what is called for by the pro tanto reason, even if we make some concrete suppositions.

---

<sup>48</sup> T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 79–94.

Suppose a move to marginal utility on my part means that I am fairly well nourished, sheltered, and in decent health, but that I forsake all other ends which require resources that I could direct towards helping others who are worse off. Suppose that these sacrifices enable ten people who otherwise would have gone hungry or cold to lead a life that is basically enjoyable to live. Does this state of affairs contain more well-being than one in which I didn't make these sacrifices, but instead helped to create a community art space for underprivileged youth? The answer is not nearly as obvious as it is in more narrowly specified cases.

Kagan himself worries about this question. In his own words, "We must take seriously the possibility that some of the goods which are resource expensive nonetheless actually make a greater contribution to the overall good than a hasty appraisal might recognize."<sup>49</sup> Here, Kagan is considering the possibility that universal adherence to his view would leave the world a very "grey" place, a place without "splashes of color" such as ballet. While he is ultimately skeptical that a grey world is worse than one which contains splashes of color (at the expense of some great suffering on the part of those for whom the existence of ballet means a life of poverty), he is confident that he can avoid the objection, essentially by absorbing it: if a world which contains ballet and some great suffering is better than a world without ballet (and correspondingly less suffering), then that is what the pro tanto reason to promote the good directs us to bring about. According to Kagan, his brand of extremism is neutral with respect to the truth about which states of affairs are better than others.

Unfortunately for Kagan, this neutrality is inconsistent with his view about the nature of the pro tanto reason to promote the good precisely because that notion is essentially *additive* with respect to *individual* goods. Recall, for Kagan, "the claim that there is a pro tanto reason to

---

<sup>49</sup> Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, 359.

promote the good is a convenient way of asserting that there is a pro tanto reason to promote each individual good...The more important the particular good, the greater the reason that is generated.”<sup>50</sup> Unless Kagan is willing to countenance the idea that enjoying or participating in ballet is more important than having enough to eat, he simply cannot take seriously the idea that a grey world may not be what the pro tanto reason directs us to promote, for any promotion of ballet would be the promotion of a good less important than some other that one could promote.

Importantly, Kagan cannot merely reconceptualize the pro tanto reason in a more holistic fashion in order to avoid this problem. That is, he cannot redescribe the pro tanto reason to promote the good as a reason for an agent to perform whatever action would lead to the state of affairs which contains the most good, a reason according to which some particular agent(s) ought to fund a ballet company whereas others should donate to poverty relief, given facts about their individual circumstances and how many ballet performances are currently scheduled. At least, he cannot do so without giving up significant dialectical leverage.

One of the reasons the moderate must take Kagan's argument seriously is that the pro tanto reason to promote the good (as Kagan actually describes it) marks a point of agreement between he and the moderate. As he rightly says, it is a plausible candidate for various judgments the moderate wants to make. This is, essentially, Kagan's baited hook. His general strategy is to argue that once the moderate has taken this bait, no amount of argumentative thrashing will be sufficient to free her. The problem with a more holistic conception of the pro tanto reason is that it no longer constitutes compelling bait for the moderate.

The reason that the pro tanto reason explains the various judgments that the moderate wants to make is that it is an aggregate of individual reasons that the moderate seems compelled

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 57 (emphasis mine).

to recognize, such as reasons to promote the well-being of individual persons. In the case of the drowning toddler, for example, one has a reason to promote the overall good *because* one has a reason to save the toddler. The pro tanto reason is reducible to a reason to save the toddler's life. But, if Kagan were to recast the pro tanto reason as a reason to perform whatever available action would make the world as good as one could make it, where this reason is not the aggregate sum of individual reasons that the moderate must recognize, then he is merely banging the drum of consequentialism.

This is not to say that consequentialism is an implausible view. Rather, it is to say that consequentialism is not very enticing bait for the moderate. The moderate need not appeal to consequentialist considerations in explaining the various judgments she wants to make about the cases Kagan adduces in order to get her on board with the pro tanto reason. While the moderate can agree that the world is made better when a toddler is saved at little cost and that the world is made better when two are saved rather than one, the moderate can plausibly deny that one ought to perform actions with these consequences *because* such actions make the world a better place. There are plausible and decidedly non-consequentialist explanations for the rightness of these actions. Of particular interest for Kagan is the plausible explanation that these actions respond appropriately to the relative impartial weight of the values at stake in the given situations: A child's life is more valuable than a pair of trousers; two lives are more valuable than one. It is by arguing *from* these reasons *to* consequentialism that Kagan can get the moderate to see that consequentialism ought to be taken seriously from the outset.

So, if Kagan is to keep his hook baited, he must be committed to the superiority of a "grey" world and the controversial notion that a world in which people give to the point of marginal utility is better than a world in which they do not. I don't expect Kagan to be worried,

however. It is, after all, quite plausible to think that helping the very needy is the impartially best thing that the relatively affluent could do with their resources. Insofar as this is correct, and it is plausible to think of this pro tanto reason as an aggregate of individual reasons to promote the well-being of individual persons, it seems like Kagan has a good case for the first premise of his argument. If the moderate is going to get anywhere, it seems, she will have to turn her attention to the second premise.

### **Normative Decisiveness and the Nature of Persons**

Kagan moves from his case for the *existence* of the pro tanto reason to the claim that this reason is *morally decisive*. This latter claim is actually shorthand for the following conjunction: no set of reasons “outweighs” the pro tanto reason to promote the good and no countervailing considerations undermine the force of the pro tanto reason. This leads us naturally to ask: what is the “weight” of a reason and what more could matter in terms of its normative force?

With respect to the first question, Kagan doesn’t offer anything that could qualify as an account. I suspect that this is largely because a plausible account is ready at hand, namely the one with which I opened this chapter. Recall that facts about the good one is in a position to do seem to exhaust the considerations relevant to moral choice from a completely impartial point of view. When it comes to well-being, these facts seems to be nothing more than facts about the significance of the human interests one is in a position to promote. If so, it seems, the weightiest reasons one has to act are those grounded in the most significant human interests one stands in a position to satisfy.

Again, nowhere does Kagan offer this account. However, I am comfortable attributing it to him for two reasons. First, the account is both consistent with and conducive to Kagan’s extremism, grounded as it is in the pro tanto reason to promote the good. This reason, recall, is

additive with respect to individual goods: “When no one reaction will promote all of the individual goods that are at stake in some situation, a reason will be generated corresponding to each individual good. The more important the particular good, the greater the reason that is generated.”<sup>51</sup> Second, much of Kagan’s remarks suggest that this is the account of the weight of reasons he has in mind. For example, in talking about promoting the good by way of wealth redistribution, Kagan says, “Presumably promotion of the good will involve taxing the well-to-do so as to provide for the essential needs of the poor and handicapped.”<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Kagan talks about how great physical distance can cause us to fail to give “due weight” to the interests of starving strangers. Here, he means to imply that the starvation of the stranger implicates interests with greater “weight” than those interests of our own that we are disposed to satisfy instead.

So much for the weight of reasons. I will not challenge Kagan’s claim that the pro tanto reason to promote the good is the weightiest moral reason we have. Though this is not because I believe Kagan is correct — I don’t. Nor is it because I maintain that basic needs are less important than Kagan believes them to be. In fact, I believe there is a clear sense in which extremists are correct to think that basic needs are the most important type of human interests there are. My issue with Kagan’s claim about the relative weight of the pro tanto reason is that I disagree with his view of the relationship between facts about the relative significance of human interests and facts about which reasons carry the most weight. As he (and other extremists) see things, the weight of a reason is a straightforward function of the relative significance of the human interests to which it answers. I believe this view is mistaken. But this is only a disagreement about the “weight” of reasons insofar as it is a disagreement about the correct way

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 395.

to determine the moral status of actions. Extremists tend to do it in the straightforward, additive way we are now familiar with; I believe it ought to be done another. Because this stands at the very heart of our disagreement, it deserves a lengthy treatment that I cannot give it here. Instead, I devote much of the remaining chapters to this issue. Before we get there, however, I want to examine the second half of Kagan's second premise, namely the claim that there are no countervailing considerations which undermine the force of the pro tanto reason to promote the good. By this Kagan means that there are no considerations beyond those of relative weight that undermine its normative authority. Of course, if the normative force of a reason were merely a matter of its weight, then it would be nonsensical to entertain the possibility that some consideration might undermine one's weightiest reason. But there *is* cause to entertain the possibility.

### **The Argument from Internalism**

Both Thomas Nagel and Samuel Scheffler argue for moral moderation by plausibly insisting that morality ought, in some sense, reflect the nature of persons. After all, morality is a theory about how beings like *us* are to live. They argue that reflecting the nature of persons requires that a moral theory recognize and make room for a point of view distinct from the impartial point of view. That is, moral theories ought to recognize and accommodate the fact that each of us has our own *personal* point of view from which our own projects, goals, relationships, and desires have a hold on us in a way that those of others do not. So, the story goes, any theory which does not adequately reflect this fact by way of incorporating options is thereby incomplete or otherwise off the mark.

In the literature, one finds two general, distinct appeals to the nature of persons in defending moral moderation. The first is a claim about the personal point of view's effects on

motivation. The second is a bolder claim about the normative role of the personal point of view. I devote the next chapter to discussing the latter. Here, I wish merely to examine Kagan's defense of the pro tanto reason against the first type of appeal.

Thomas Nagel's appeal to the personal point of view is meant, at least in part, to draw our attention to the ostensible relevance of facts about human motivation. He writes, "[t]he personal standpoint must be taken into account directly in the justification of any ethical or political system which humans can be expected to live by."<sup>53</sup> The expectations Nagel invokes here are not probability-based; he is not concerned about the demands of impartial reasons because he feels that people are *unlikely* to act on them. Rather, he is concerned about people's *ability* to do so. Specifically, Nagel believes that people could not come to be moved by the deliverances of the impartial standpoint, at least not to the degree required by the relative significance of the values perceived therefrom. Moral theories that derive their prescriptions entirely from the impartial point of view (like Kagan's) are "utopian" in the sense of being nonviable — we cannot possibly live by them. Because the pro tanto reason to promote the overall good cannot move us (at least, cannot always move us) in the requisite way, any moral theory which required us always to act on this reason is a non-starter.<sup>54</sup> If Nagel is correct, such views ask more of us than we can give and, in this sense, fail to reflect the nature of persons. Call this the argument from internalism.

It is important to be clear just what this claim amounts to. It is not a claim challenging Kagan's assessment about the weight of reasons. That is, it is not the claim that because people cannot be motivated to act on the pro tanto reason to promote the overall good, it thereby fails to outweigh every other reason or that it fails to appropriately track the relative weight of the values

---

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>54</sup> Nagel does not explicitly mention Kagan or the pro tanto reason he defends. However, views like Kagan's are clearly his target.

at stake. Rather, it is the claim that it fails to ground a moral requirement because it lacks some *further* feature necessary for such a requirement to hold, despite the fact that it better tracks the relative weight of impartially considered value than any other practical reason. What it lacks is motivational force: People are (at least often) not sufficiently *compelled* to act on this reason, given their nature as creatures for whom their own relationships, goals, and projects hold significant motivational sway.<sup>55</sup>

Questions about the relationships between reasons, motivation, and practical requirements are at the heart of deep philosophical controversies quite apart from debates about morality. I am not interested in treating them here. Rather, I am interested in the general character of Kagan's reply to the argument from internalism and what it says about both his commitments and dialectical position. In what follows, I hope to demonstrate two things. First, I hope to show that Kagan's reply to the argument from internalism is, at best, suspect, for it relies on a degree of psychological speculation too insecure to support the view. But, as we will see, so does the moderate's best reply to Kagan's challenge. This results in a speculative standoff that should leave neither side satisfied. The second reason to examine Kagan's argument is that by doing so we can come to see why the moderate should abandon the argument from internalism.

In order to defend extremism against the claim that reflecting the nature of persons requires options, Kagan first draws a distinction between two ways a theory could reflect a set of facts:

... a system minimally reflects a set of facts if it does only what it must about those facts; it fully reflects the facts if it does all that it can. In the former case the

---

<sup>55</sup> There are other ways to phrase this point. One might say that, because the considerations which ground the pro tanto reason to promote the good are not sufficiently compelling to move people to action, they thereby fail to generate a reason for them to act. This way of putting the point is more in line with the language of contemporary debates about reasons internalism.

system is something of an adversary—taking on only those features which are forced upon it by the recognition of the facts. In the latter case, however, the system is freely and more thoroughly shaped by the facts: it takes on not only those features which are necessitated by the recognition of the facts, but also those various optional features which might put the system more fully in harmony with the facts. We might say that a set of facts often implicitly involves both demands upon a system and appeals to it. If the system recognizes the facts, the demands cannot be neglected; and provided that they are met, the system can be said to minimally reflect the facts. The appeals, however, can be neglected; the mere recognition of the facts does not force the system to comply with the appeals. To fully reflect the facts, however, the system must go beyond what is forced upon it: the appeals too must be met.<sup>56</sup>

Kagan is happy to grant that minimal reflection of the nature of persons is a condition of adequacy for any moral theory. However, he denies that the pro tanto reason fails to satisfy this condition, despite our tendency to favor our own interests over those of others. Kagan's argument begins with an examination of prudence.

Consider people's tendency to favor their present interests over their future interests. When people act to obtain short term gains at the cost of comparatively greater long-term or future rewards, even when cognizant of the relative pay-offs, we want to be able to say that they make a practical mistake — such decisions are imprudent. But, says Kagan, if the internalist is to be able to make this judgment, he will have to admit that whether an agent is *actually* motivated to act on certain considerations cannot be the relevant test for the normative decisiveness of a reason. The fact that an agent was not, in fact, sufficiently motivated to act in accordance with his more significant future interests clearly does not preclude or undermine our judgment that he acted imprudently. According to Kagan, this shows that we must recognize the “semi-objective standpoint” as authoritative when it comes to questions of prudence. This is the standpoint from which an agent's interests are weighted without regard to whether they are future or present.

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 263–264.

This seems right. But this fact, by itself, does not help Kagan because internalists like Nagel recognize the problems that irrational bias pose for their views. Nagel avoids such problems by appealing to facts about motivational *capability*. Instead of focusing on what an agent is *actually* motivated to do, Nagel appeals to facts about what an agent *could* be motivated to do, provided deliberative and epistemic distortions are removed.

Armed with such concessions, Kagan goes on to argue that the motivational inefficacy of the impartial standpoint can be attributed to a kind of epistemic distortion which, when removed, will sufficiently increase the motivational efficacy of the considerations which ground the pro tanto reason to promote the good. If he is correct, he will have a strong argument for the conclusion that his view minimally reflects the nature of persons.

One natural way to account for our bias in favor of our present interests is in terms of the intuitive distinction between pale beliefs and vivid beliefs. When we are thinking about our future interests, we do so in a pale sort of way. We can acknowledge that a decision made today will leave us in some unsatisfactory position later without thereby feeling the full force of that dissatisfaction at present. For example, consider the person who spends so frivolously now that he will have very little saved for retirement. Such a person can truthfully say that he knows that his spending habits set him up for an uncomfortable future. But, if he made the relevant belief vivid — if he took the time to really imagine being elderly and cash-strapped — he could come to see the compelling nature of what is at stake and thereby become “better able to give opposing considerations the influence they merit.”<sup>57</sup> The idea here is that making certain beliefs or considerations vivid can have profound effects on an agent's motivational profile. The spendthrift who sets himself up for an uncomfortable retirement deliberates under conditions that distort his

---

<sup>57</sup> Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, 288.

appreciation of the relevant considerations. If a lack of vividness explains this distortion and we want to be able to say he is imprudent, we must admit that any motivational requirement we impose on reasons must be applied only with respect to beliefs or considerations that are vivid.

Kagan moves from this compelling assessment of imprudence to the case of morality in predictable fashion. While it is true that we are not (or are often not) *actually* motivated to act on the pro tanto reason to promote the good, we are arguably *capable* of being so moved. If we made our beliefs about the suffering of others more vivid, says Kagan, we would “find it easier” to sacrifice our own interests for the sake of others.

There is definitely a great deal of plausibility to all of this. After all, it seems that we can attribute the effectiveness of poverty relief campaigns involving graphic images of starving children at least partly to their making vivid our beliefs about human suffering. As such, it would be silly to doubt that vividness can affect one's motivational profile, even with respect to the suffering of strangers. But can it take us so far as to be pure and effective instruments of impartial beneficence? That is, could making our beliefs about the suffering of others vivid be sufficiently motivating that we could forgo all of our resource-intensive personal projects and ends in the name of securing better lives for the world's poor? I'm skeptical.

Kagan suggests that were all of our beliefs maximally vivid, we could be moved to act on the pro tanto reason to promote the good. I find it hard to share Kagan's intuitions here. For one thing, I find it difficult to see how I could make simultaneously vivid my beliefs about the suffering of others and, for example, my beliefs about the effects of not buying my wife a

wedding ring.<sup>58</sup> Even if I could, however, I find it difficult to believe that I would thereby be motivated to donate the money set aside for a ring to OXFAM.<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps I'm wrong. Either way, neither the extremist nor the moderate should be satisfied to find that their debate simply grounds out in competing intuitions about the truth of speculative psychological claims. Indeed, even if my intuitions are on the mark here and the internalist can extract something by way of concession from Kagan, such a concession goes only so far as internalism will take it. But that's hardly a win for the moderate. Instead, it shows that the moderate ought to abandon the internalist strategy, for in sticking to it, she has betrayed the spirit of her position. That is, absent some further considerations which could moderate moral demands, she is now in a position of having to admit that morality requires that we do all that we can motivate ourselves to do for others, and that sounds a lot more like an extremist position than it does a moderate one. (Though, again, I can only speculate about the practical requirements of such a view.)

The lesson here is this: If the moderate is going to make something of the personal point of view, she ought to look beyond its effects on motivation in arguing that it moderates the demands of morality. In the next chapter, I examine just such an appeal. Unfortunately for the moderate, changing gears doesn't seem to help much.

---

<sup>58</sup> Kagan cannot reply here that it is enough that I could be moved to act on the pro tanto reason provided that I made vivid *only* my beliefs about the suffering of others. Such selectivity rigs the game in his favor.

<sup>59</sup> Of course, concurrent vividness may lead me to buy her a less expensive ring than I otherwise would have done. I see no reason why the moderate should not welcome this result.

## CHAPTER 4

### Moral Moderation and the Humpty Dumpty Problem

---

#### Introduction

For the most part, moderates and extremists are happy to conduct their debate within a mutually accepted (though woefully underspecified) theoretical framework which makes heavy use of the notion of a “point of view” from which reasons are “generated” or take on a significance they otherwise would not have, and from which moral justification proceeds. We are said to be capable of occupying both a “personal” or “subjective” point of view on the one hand, and an “impersonal” or “impartial” point of view on the other.<sup>60</sup> Roughly, the personal point of view is the point of view from which one's own projects, close relationships, and group affiliations have a firm motivational hold on one's life, guide one's deliberations, and provide an evaluative lens through which one judges the relative significance of benefits and harms. The impersonal point of view is said to be a point of view one can take up by transcending one's own situation.

Thomas Nagel famously refers to this point of view as “the view from nowhere” and suggests it can be achieved by breaking free from “the specific contingencies of one's creaturely point of view.”<sup>61</sup> From the impersonal point of view, one is forced to regard oneself as merely one among many since facts about one's identity and aims are stripped away. This leaves one to consider the normative landscape from the outside, rather than from a distinguished place within it. From this point of view, deliberation necessarily proceeds impartially, and it is natural to conclude that, for the relatively well-off, the weightiest reasons for action are other-regarding, given the amount of human neediness we are in a position to relieve.

---

<sup>60</sup> Throughout, I will use the phrases “impartial point of view” and “impersonal point of view” interchangeably.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 9.

Extremists insist that the impartial point of view enjoys a moral priority over the personal and is thus the evaluative standpoint from which moral justification must proceed. Moderates defend their position against extremists by charging them with ignoring or failing to appreciate the normative significance of the personal point of view. They argue that extremists fail to see that the personal point of view is a legitimate and pressing source of reasons which sanction the pursuit of personally fulfilling projects and relationships, even where doing so entails neglecting the needs and interests of others which, from the impartial point of view, are more important.

The trouble with current moderate accounts of morality is that they fail to marry an account of the significance of the personal point of view with a compelling general account of moral justification that vindicates the moderate's claim that we may permissibly pursue the satisfaction of our non-basic interests. This is not to say that there is no good explanation for this state of affairs. The moderate who champions the personal point of view seems faced with two unsatisfying options. First, she could deny that the impartial point of view is a source of normativity. But, as we saw in the previous chapter, a commitment to moral equality not only speaks in favor of recognizing the impartial point of view as a source of normativity, but of regarding it as having priority over the personal for the purposes of moral justification and deliberation. The moderate's second option is to appeal to a further evaluative standpoint as a source of normativity, a source which undermines the authority of the impartial point of view. She must then provide a general account of how to reconcile two evaluative standpoints which seem to pull us in opposite directions, a task so challenging that it has agonized Thomas Nagel over the span of two books. My goal in this chapter is to argue that this project is both hopeless and poorly motivated. So long as we recognize the dichotomy, the extremist simply has a better case. But we shouldn't recognize the dichotomy. My second goal, then, is to argue that the

moderate ought to abandon the framework constituted by competing points of view. There are, I think, two good reasons to do so. First, the dichotomy implies a bifurcated account of moral agency that is just not true to our experience of moral life. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the dichotomy resists unification in such a way that it becomes impossible for the moderate to offer a unified account of moral justification that is both plausible and conducive to her view. To see why, we must first become acquainted with the moderate's dialectical tool: the personal point of view.

### **The Personal Point of View**

The most prolific and influential moderates defend their position by arguing that the extremist fails to appreciate the normative significance of the personal point of view, the evaluative standpoint we occupy most of the time and from which our personal projects, commitments, and relationships have a claim to our attention that those of others do not. Unfortunately, it is difficult to get a handle on what the personal point of view really *is*. In fact, it is difficult to get a handle on what a point of view is in general, at least as the notion figures into the debate between moderates and extremists. Those who rely on the notion provide little in the way of specification and seem happy to accept that they are talking about the same thing, despite the fact that the terminology used to reference and characterize points of view varies, and no one seems bothered to provide an account. Instead, what one finds is an uninterrogated consensus.

In fact, it's not even clear whether the moderates who appeal to the normative significance of the personal point of view share a common understanding of that notion. For a notion that is expected to bear so much weight, moderates provide it surprisingly little by way of foundation. While they converge in arguing that extremists attribute too great a significance to the impartial point of view and too little to the personal, they characterize the personal point of

view differently. Nagel himself offers different characterizations in different places while providing no hint that he has changed his mind about how we ought to conceive of a point of view. In his earliest writing on the subject, Nagel characterizes the personal point of view in terms of motivation. Specifically, he characterizes it as the point of view from which a person is “powerfully motivated by the independent claims of his own life.”<sup>62</sup> In a later work, he characterizes it in terms of values, though here it is a negative characterization according to which it is a point of view from which some values are either imperceptible or unappreciable, given that taking up the impersonal point of view is a way of coming into contact with a “new or extended set of values.”<sup>63</sup> Nagel eventually comes back around to describing the personal standpoint primarily in terms of motivation and desire in his final sustained treatment, characterizing it as the point of view from which our individual experiences and desires move us in various ways.<sup>64</sup>

Samuel Scheffler characterizes the personal point of view as the point of view of an individual's interests, where this can be spelled out roughly in terms of both motivation and value. It is the point of view from which a person has a “special concern for his own projects and plans,” which constitutes “a locus relative to which harms and benefits can be assessed.”<sup>65</sup>

While Nagel and Scheffler's characterizations are *consistent* with one another, this can be attributed to narrowness of specification rather than convergence in conception. It is just not clear whether they understand the notion of a personal point of view in the same way, despite the

---

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 203.

<sup>63</sup> Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 138.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>65</sup> Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, Revised Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 56.

fact that Nagel is happy to accept that they do.<sup>66</sup> Both are convinced that the notion is key to defending moral moderation, yet they say very little more about what it is than what I have sketched here, leaving us —well, me, at least— with more curiosity than hope that the notion of a personal standpoint might profitably be employed in the name of defending moral moderation.

Despite the question as to whether Nagel and Scheffler converge in the way they *conceive* of the personal point of view, they explicitly converge when it comes to *deploying* the notion, at least at a general level. Both point to the personal point of view in a common appeal to facts about the nature of persons and the claim that morality must somehow reflect these facts.

In his most influential treatment of the matter, Scheffler argues that because the personal point of view is indispensable in understanding facts about human motivation and personal agency, granting it a degree of independent practical influence is a theoretically respectable means of acknowledging its role in the determination of human fulfillment and accounting for the fact that the reasons grounded in our personal projects and relationships are “naturally generated” by them.<sup>67</sup> In other words, because morality ought to reflect the nature of persons, it ought to reflect the “natural independence” of the personal point of view by granting it *moral* independence rather than allowing the impersonal point of view to subsume it. For Nagel, morality must take the personal point of view seriously because we moral agents have no choice but to do so ourselves. In his own words, one “cannot sustain an impersonal indifference to the things in [one's] life which matter to [one] personally.”<sup>68</sup>

In their own ways, Scheffler and Nagel seek to establish that devoting significant time and attention to one's own projects, goals, and relationships is consistent with living a morally

---

<sup>66</sup> See *Equality and Partiality*, 49n.

<sup>67</sup> Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, 11–15. For more on Nagel's appeal to the personal point of view, see the section titled *The Argument from Internalism* in the previous chapter.

justified life. But, as I will argue in the next section, the personal/impersonal dichotomy distorts facts about moral agency and deliberation in a manner inconsistent with a realistic psychological portrait of a unified, morally active agent. In the following section, I will argue further that the dichotomy presents an insurmountable difficulty for the project of providing a coherent account of moral justification with which we could assess the justificatory status of private choices, at least insofar as the dichotomy is taken to have straightforward normative implications. This difficulty points to the need for a new framework within which the moderate can make her case.

### **How the Dichotomy Distorts Practically**

I care a great deal about the fate of strangers and this fact often significantly affects my deliberations and choices. Importantly, this seems to be something I do from my personal point of view. That is, a commitment to promoting and securing the well-being of others seems to me to be just as much an end of mine as any other. Indeed, that I care about the fate of strangers from my personal point of view is very important to me. Moreover, I would be surprised if others did not join me in this. Caring about others is the type of thing that all morally decent people seem to do from their own point of view.

To be sure, thinking impartially can lead some people to see that they ought to act in the interest of strangers on occasions where they didn't recognize as much beforehand. However, at least much of the time, caring about strangers seems to be something that is as "naturally generated" (to borrow Scheffler's terminology) as concern for one's own well-being. In fact, *that* such caring comes from one's personal point of view lends it sincerity and an immediacy the absence of which might plausibly be seen as a regrettable deficiency, if not a defect of character. But caring about strangers or seeing that one ought to act for their sake is something that we ostensibly ought to attribute to taking up the impersonal point of view, a point of view that is, by

definition, distinct from the personal. It is the point of view one can take up *in addition* to one's own. Moreover, it is the impersonal point of view that ostensibly leads us to evaluate the motivational pull and reason-giving force of our own interests in light of the realization that we are but one among many and no more important than others. The interests of other people are said to be among the “new or extended” set of values we come to perceive in stepping outside ourselves; the act of taking up the impersonal point of view is ostensibly an act which *opens us up* to the values which “arise” from lives other than our own.<sup>69</sup> Presumably, then, this new set of values is one I could *not* perceive, have, or acquire from my own point of view.

But, I *do* see these values. When I am deliberating about what to do under circumstances in which I know that my actions will or could have an effect on the well-being of others, my deliberations are unified in a way that this dichotomy suggests they cannot be. I do not feel as though I am (or need to be) vacillating between distinct evaluative standpoints, ultimately selecting one for the occasion. This is not to say that decisions with morally significant repercussions never present themselves as a clash of compelling reasons. But it is to say that such cases of conflict do not just seem to disappear when I adopt one evaluative standpoint or the other. At least, when I am thinking about how to live my life from within it, the interests of strangers don't just fall away. The personal/impersonal dichotomy is just not true to my experience as a moral agent.

Perhaps I am just not conceiving of the points of view in the way that Nagel and Scheffler do. Or, perhaps they would explain the apparent unity of my moral agency by distinguishing *my* point of view from *the* personal point of view in such a way that *my* point of view is constituted by an amalgamation of the impersonal point of view and a private, token instance of the personal

---

<sup>69</sup> Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 147.

point of view, defined as the point of view of my individual interests.<sup>70</sup> That is, perhaps my point of view is personal *only* insofar as the reasons I consider acting upon stem from my own interests or of those people to which I have cultivated emotional ties. On this understanding, the distinction between the personal and impersonal point of view is just a useful theoretical fiction. I really only occupy one point of view, but it can be theoretically useful to use standpoint metaphors to distinguish between reasons which flow from my own desires and commitments and those which do not. But, this way of understanding things seems at odds with the characterizations on offer, if only because the impersonal point of view is ostensibly achieved by an act of personal *transcendence* from one's own, actual point of view. Nagel, at least, takes very seriously the idea that I can change my point of view by way of this transcendent act. Moreover, as I discuss below, there is evidence from moral education which suggests that we really can take up the impersonal point of view in roughly this way.

If we are to be realists about these points of view (insofar as that's possible), the characterizations on offer are undermined by facts about what it is like to be a moral agent. My concern for the fate of strangers does not seem to be a step removed from my concern for myself or loved ones; it seems to me to come from within, as it were. I just do not feel as though my concern for strangers is something I have assimilated alongside a more innate concern for myself and loved ones. While the *degree* to which I am concerned about others varies depending upon circumstance and context, and is perhaps sensitive to whether I engage in an act of transcendence, my concern for others seems to be as “naturally generated” as my concern for my own projects and loved ones.

---

<sup>70</sup> Nagel seems open to something like this. About the moral agent, he says, “even if he manages to achieve an impersonal view of his situation, whatever insights result from this detachment need to be made part of a personal view before they can influence decision and action.” See Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 205.

I am not an especially virtuous person, and I suspect that my experience of moral agency is different in kind from that of others. Many people *naturally* care about the interests of strangers. The problem with the personal/impersonal dichotomy is that it *disunifies* this caring in an odd, disfiguring way that strikes me as psychologically unrealistic in the sense that a great deal of the caring we experience seems *prior* to any realization that this caring is called for by a special impartial standpoint that we can come to occupy in transcendent moments of moral reflection.

Perhaps proponents of the dichotomy could accommodate this fact by telling a plausible story about how this natural, other-regarding concern is the result of a seamless, imperceptible shift between standpoints followed by *another* imperceptible act of psychological integration, or a story according to which a constitutive feature of the morally decent person is that her personal point of view is more expansive than most in such a way that it overlaps rather than butts up against the impersonal point of view. Such a story would be interesting, but I've no idea how it would go beyond the sketch I've offered here. Nor should I have to speculate. In any event, the story I'm most interested in is the one about why the moderate needs to abandon the dichotomy for theoretical reasons.

### **A Case for Ditching the Dichotomy**

The moderate seeks to establish that people can be morally justified in acting in ways that further their own interests even where doing so seems unjustifiable from the impartial point of view. Surprisingly, however, moderates say very little in general about when someone is morally justified in acting this way or that. Instead, they rely on indirect strategies which appeal to the nature of persons. Nagel, for instance, appeals to the fact that the personal point of view is somehow unavoidable or inescapable for us in such a way that any purely impersonal morality

would be unrealistically “utopian.” As we've seen, Scheffler appeals to the fact that the personal point of view is “naturally independent” of the impartial point of view, given that we naturally care about our projects and close relationships independently of their impersonal significance and that we do so to a greater degree than an impartial assessment of their significance would warrant. Thus, he claims, a moral theory which reflects this fact about the nature of persons by granting the personal standpoint a degree of moral independence is at least intellectually respectable, if not uniquely appropriate given the plausible Rawlsian thesis that “the correct regulative principle for anything depends on the nature of that thing.”<sup>71</sup>

The general problem with these strategies is that they don't really explain how we can be justified in acting as the moderate thinks we may, if only because they are not accompanied by an account of *what it is* to be morally justified in a theoretical framework comprised of two independent evaluative standpoints. It is one thing to say that the personal point of view grounds genuine reasons for action, quite another to say that we are all-things-considered morally justified in acting on those reasons. Such personal reasons often *conflict* with the reasons grounded in the impartial point of view, reasons which have greater “weight” from that standpoint. If this strategy is going to bear fruit, we need an account that can adjudicate cases of conflict.

To be fair, extremists tend not to speak explicitly about justification either. But this is understandable, given that extremists have a plausible account at the ready: Reasons with the most impartial weight always trump.<sup>72</sup> If they're right, moral justification is a fairly straightforward quantitative affair. One is justified in acting when one acts on the weightiest impartial reasons one has. Not only is this view plausible on its face, given our commitment to

---

<sup>71</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 25.

<sup>72</sup> For explanation, see the section titled *Extremism: The Path of Least Resistance* in the previous chapter.

moral equality, it lends itself particularly well to the standard way in which we tend to think about reasons and justification.

As a matter of course, we have come to think about reasons and justification in terms of quantificational metaphors: An action is justified when the “balance” of reasons recommend it, or when it is recommended by the reasons which “weigh” the most. From the impartial point of view, facts about the human interests one is in a position to promote seem to exhaust the space of morally relevant considerations, making it all but obvious which reasons weigh the most, namely those grounded in the most significant human interests at stake in a given context or situation. Once the case for the authority of the impartial point of view has been made, the actions moral extremism requires seem obviously recommended by the familiar scales of justification.

Of course, these scales are metaphorical, and the moderate would be well-advised to keep this in mind. To see why, we need only look a bit closer at Scheffler's influential appeal to the personal point of view in the name of defending moral moderation.

### **Scheffler's Agent-Centred Prerogative**

Scheffler's case for moral moderation is grounded in the fact that a person's concerns and commitments are “naturally generated and sustained from [his] point of view quite independently of the weight of those concerns and commitments in an impersonal ranking of overall states of affairs.”<sup>73</sup> This fact generates a rationale for the incorporation of an “agent-centred prerogative” in moral theory according to which every agent can justifiably “assign a certain proportionately greater weight to his own interests than to the interests of other people.” The prerogative would allow the agent to promote the impartially suboptimal outcome of his choosing, provided only

---

<sup>73</sup> Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, 9.

that “the degree of its inferiority to each of the superior outcomes he could instead promote in no case exceeded, by more than the specified proportion, the degree of sacrifice necessary for him to promote the superior outcome.”<sup>74</sup>

There is much to unpack here. First, notice this about Scheffler's employment of the familiar quantitative terminology: it sounds as though he accepts the extremist's normative scales according to which the weight of reasons is a function of the abstract general significance of the interests which give rise to them. After all, he does not argue that a person's own interests sometimes *are* weightier than those of others, but rather that he may permissibly act *as though* they are. That is, rather than claim that the relationship between a person's well-being and his own interests in fact determines the normative weight of those interests for him, he claims that a person may “assign” a greater weight to his own interests. For Scheffler, the personal point of view is a license to pretend. This fact, I suspect, may just be a matter of Scheffler opting for what he takes to be the best of the available options. After all, to claim that one's own interests *actually* weigh more than those of others (or ground reasons which do) would seem to put him on a fatal collision course with moral equality. The natural way to recruit the personal point of view in avoiding this collision is to do exactly what Scheffler does, namely accept that the normative scales impartially track a hierarchy of human interests and argue that the natural independence of the personal point of view grounds a discretionary latitude when it comes to *reading* those scales. In this way, Scheffler can avoid having to say that one's own interests are morally more important than those of others.

But this way of arguing for moderation leads to a serious practical problem. It is one thing to talk roundaboutly when it comes to the “weight” of reasons or the “strength” of claims,

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 19–20.

but implementing Scheffler's prerogative seems to require quantification and calculation to a degree that is just too fine-grained for such metaphors to bear. How exactly are we to assign weight to our interests in relation to those of others? Is my interest in owning a guitar only one eighth as important as a stranger's interest in receiving a mosquito net? Does it matter whether my interest is grounded in the goal of becoming a professional musician or merely the goal of participating in a friend's weekend jam sessions? When reading the scales, can I triple the impartial weight of this interest or merely double it?

Let me make something clear. I'm not objecting to the quantificational talk *per se*. It is difficult to see how any normative theory could do without quantificational metaphors entirely. (If we can't talk about the *weight* of reasons or the relative *strength* of considerations, how are we to make any claims about what agents ought to do?) The terminology itself isn't the problem. Besides, we can easily generate problem cases for the extremist as well: If given the choice, is it better to spare ten people from moderate discomfort or two from acute pain? Nevertheless, the problem at issue is simply never going to be as acute for the extremist. For the most part, it's going to be pretty clear what one ought to do if extremism is true. Perhaps the extremist cannot tell you whether the reason to spare ten from a moderate headache weighs more than a reason to spare two from an acute ulcer, but he's going to have no trouble determining whether one has a weightier reason to feed a malnourished stranger or increase the size of one's stamp collection. Scheffler, in contrast, can *never* get away from the problem. Rather than challenge the interest-relative account of the weight of reasons, Scheffler seems to implicitly accept it, opting to deny that the weight of reasons exhausts their deliberative significance without supplying an alternative, practically useful account of that significance. *This* is the source of the difficulty.

Can this problem be overcome? Any solution which could make Scheffler's prerogative action-guiding within the personal/impersonal framework seems to require a further metric, namely a metric of deliberative significance that could be applied *after* the relative weight of one's reasons has been established. At best, the project of providing such a metric seems difficult and messy. At worst, it seems poorly motivated. If the deliberative significance of a reason isn't a function of its weight, then what is it? To think that that a supplementary quantitative scale should be applied seems tantamount to admitting that the extremist is correct in his assessment about what's most important, and only goes wrong in thinking that these facts must be reflected in deliberation. This is both odd and, arguably, a violation of a commitment to objectivity.

Perhaps I am being too hard on Scheffler. One might think that while the prerogative may not be practicable, it is not nonsense, either. In an importantly unavoidable sense, it may seem as though the claim that there is an agent-centred prerogative really *just is* the moderate position. In fact, it's difficult to see how it could be stated any better within a framework circumscribed by the personal/impersonal dichotomy. Unfortunately, to accept the dichotomy is to take on the impersonal point of view, a standpoint from which a normative hierarchy of human interests seems clearly visible. But, look: If this is the best we can do with the dichotomy, then there is a justified worry that the dichotomy prevents the moderate from even getting into the game. If he cannot even *state his position* within this framework in such a way that it yields action-guiding consequences, then there is good reason to think that he should approach things in an entirely new way, pulling himself completely out of the shadow cast by the impersonal point of view instead of stumbling around within it. What the moderate needs to do is break free from the personal/impersonal framework, at least to the extent that its evaluative component consists in

assigning weight to reasons according to a hierarchy of human interests. The moderate must replace the familiar scales of moral justification, not supplement them with a second set.

To further illustrate the difficulty with defending moderation within the dichotomous framework, consider Nagel's view that a central problem in ethics is answering the question of how we are to “put ourselves back together” once we come to appreciate the opposing normative forces generated within the personal standpoint on the one hand and the impersonal on the other. Both standpoints, according to Nagel, must be given their due and it is our job as theorists to reconcile them in a harmonious way. But this seems impossible. From any *single* perspective, the question of what we have weightiest reason to do seems at least answerable. From the personal standpoint, for instance, it seems natural to talk about which projects ground weightier reasons than others, given the interests they implicate. As we've seen, when we're talking about the impersonal standpoint, it seems plausible to think that we can talk about which impersonal reasons are weightier than others, given a more-or-less straightforward hierarchy of needs and interests. The problem for the moderate who believes that the personal standpoint generates morally relevant reasons for the agent whose standpoint it is seems to boil down to the fact that these quantificational claims of relative weight are exceedingly difficult to make—let alone justify—*across* standpoints. This is a quintessential feature of the framework. Without it, the framework wouldn't be at all theoretically interesting. But it is also why it seems so difficult to “put ourselves back together.” Nagel's project, like Scheffler's, seems to require a supplementary set of scales. I am pessimistic about his finding them.<sup>75</sup> The reason the extremist seems to have an easier time is that he is working with a single evaluative standpoint, namely the impartial one.

---

<sup>75</sup>As is he. Nagel explicitly doubts that we could find “general principles governing both agent-relative, personal reasons and agent-neutral, impartial reasons, and their combination, which are acceptable from all points of view in light of their consequences under all realistically possible conditions.” See Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, 49.

If the moderate is to have a chance, it seems to me, she mustn't allow the dichotomy to pull her apart in the first place. She needs a new way to look at things.

### **Looking Forward**

If we are not to rely on the impartial scales the extremist is fond of using, what are we to do? What will our theory look like? These questions are pressing because it may seem as though there is nowhere else to go, but also because it is tempting to think that we really *shouldn't* be looking elsewhere, at least if doing so means abandoning the impartial point of view. This standpoint is so intimately connected to the ideas of equality and objectivity that its allure is difficult to shake, both in theory *and* practice.

For instance, the notion of an impartial point of view figures prominently in moral education and debate. We encourage children to think impartially when teaching them about fair play, the virtue of sharing, or more generally in our attempts to sharpen their empathic awareness into principles of action. For adults, too, an appeal to the impartial point of view can be a powerful way to demonstrate to someone that he is acting selfishly, or unfairly, or that his proposed course of action would be wrong. That the impartial point of view is such a potent corrective tool lends it an independent air of authority because a natural explanation of its effectiveness is that, by taking it up, one gets a complete, unbiased view of reasons and value. It seems, then, that the moderate must be able to say something about the impartial point of view's pragmatic efficacy. I think she can, and I think she can do so without being forced into the extremist-friendly account of the relationship between reasons and justification.

To see how, we must take care to distinguish the perspectival from the normative in thinking about the impartial point of view. It is one thing to imagine that one occupies no distinguishable place within the world or to regard oneself as merely one among many, quite

another to say that, from this point of view, what one ought to do is always clear, let alone a function of the relative significance of the interests one is in a position to promote. Evidently, this point is not lost on Nagel. He writes:

There are so many people one can barely imagine it, and their aims and interests interfere with one another; but what happens to each of them is enormously important — as important as what happens to you. The importance of their lives to them, if we really take it in, ought to be reflected in the importance their lives are perceived to have from the impersonal standpoint... Given this enormous multitude of things that matter impersonally, values positive and negative pointing in every conceivable direction, the problem for the impersonal standpoint is to determine how the elements should be combined and conflicts among them resolved... my belief is that the right form of impersonal regard for everyone is an impartiality among individuals that is egalitarian not merely in the sense that it counts them all the same as inputs to some combinatorial function, but in the sense that the function itself gives preferential weight to improvements in the lives of those who are worse off as against adding to the advantages of those better off...<sup>76</sup>

Here, Nagel implicitly distinguishes the perspectival from the normative in discussing the impartial point of view. He describes what we *see* (as it were) in terms of “values positive and negative pointing in every conceivable direction” but leaves open the question of what we ought to *do* once we “really take it in.” Nagel thinks the answer to the open question is priority for the worst off, though he suggests that such a commitment doesn't follow from the facts one comes to observe.

By distinguishing the perspectival from the normative in this way, the moderate can make room for an explanation of the pragmatic efficacy of the impartial point of view that does not commit her to the normative conclusions that the extremist is keen to draw. In fact, the moderate need not even deny that the impartial point of view's pragmatic efficacy is owed to the fact that its effectiveness is a function of helping people to see that, when it comes to others, “what

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 11–12.

happens to each of them is enormously important—as important as what happens to [me].” Call this decidedly normative claim (dare I call it a standpoint?) the perspective of moral equality. While normative in the sense of being constituted by facts about the relative value of people's lives and experiences, notice that this normativity is the product of moral commitments present in any decent person prior to her taking up the impartial point of view; it is not obviously a *consequence* of doing so. A selfish and uncaring person could conceivably transcend himself to the point of detachment from his own personal concerns and commitments without finding himself occupying the standpoint of moral equality. “To each according to his own luck” is, after all, an impartial principle — why think that some people don't come to believe *it* when they transcend their own point of view? That is, why should we believe that taking up the impersonal point of view is *sufficient* to engender a commitment to the view that everyone's interests matter equally, let alone prove that the relative strength of our reasons is a reflection of the relative abstract significance on various human interests ?

Thankfully, most of us tend to find ourselves occupying the point of view of moral equality when we find ourselves thinking impartially. From here, certain moral conclusions are obvious: We should do our fair share in cooperative pursuits, we should reform practices which discriminate on arbitrary grounds, we should cut the cake evenly, and so on. But, from the fact that taking up the impartial point of view renders certain moral truths obvious to most of us, it does not follow that it does so in virtue of being a window onto a normative landscape according to which the strength of our moral reasons is a function of the nature of the interests we stand in a position to promote. That is, the conviction that we should cut cakes evenly or contribute equally to cooperative endeavors does not obviously imply that the extremist's normative accounting procedure is correct. A run-of-the-mill (even somewhat imprecise) general

commitment to fairness or justice, or a capacity for empathy, is all we need to explain how the impartial point of view can engender a commitment to moral equality or relieve us of an epistemic distortion which clouds this commitment. The point I mean to make here is that the impartial point of view does not do any normative work on its own. It is only against a background of normative commitments (or perhaps morally salient emotions) that it can lead us to normative conclusions. Absent such a background, transcending our own concerns and commitments may plausibly lead a person to the view that nobody's interests matter at all!

If the impartial point of view only works its moral magic in conjunction with normative commitments external to it, the moderate can explain how it can be recruited in revealing to people how they ought to act without having to admit that it does so by revealing to us the truth of the extremist's account of the weight of our moral reasons. Insofar as we can get people to see the truth of moral claims merely by asking them to visit the impartial point of view, we need only be committed to the idea that such a trip helps orient people with respect to a commitment they already have.

The impartial point of view opens us up in important ways, but equally important is the way in which it directs our attention inward. In taking up the impartial point of view, we put ourselves and the relationships we stand in on display in a way that occasions a private reckoning, forcing us to square ourselves with a prior commitment to moral equality. Sometimes doing so is straightforward. A commitment to moral equality has clear implications about how one ought to cut a cake or to what extent one ought to contribute to a cooperative pursuit, but it does not obviously imply anything about the moral import of global poverty. Just taking in the facts implicated by global poverty from the impersonal point of view is enough to smother any morally decent person in feelings of great sorrow, frustration, helplessness, and anger. What does

one do with that? What *can* one do with that? A conception of oneself against a background of overwhelming human need marks a unique occasion to reflect, both personally and theoretically. Personally, because we are reminded of our nature as *effective*, that is, as potential agents of change. Theoretically, because, well, we need to think seriously about the way in which *we ought to be* agents of change. Figuring this out will be a matter of thinking about what reasons we have, where they come from, and how much they “weigh”. The extremist has his story and, for the reasons I’ve laid out, I believe the moderate must write her own. I take up this task in the remaining chapters.

## CHAPTER 5

---

### Having it Good Without Being Bad: Toward a Defense of Moral Moderation

“Live simply that others might simply live.”

— *St. Elizabeth Ann Seton*

“Men can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as they can from a lack of bread.”

— *Richard Wright*

#### **Introduction**

Extremism is a response to the fact that the great need of others seems to pale in comparison to the concerns which animate the relatively well-off. *They* struggle to obtain enough to eat, *we* struggle to agree with our friends about where to do so. While this juxtaposition gives us good reason to evaluate our lives and priorities, it overlooks an important fact: both the very needy and relatively well-off strive to live good, meaningful lives with the resources available to them. This fact, I will argue, can profitably be recruited by the moderate in making her case.

One way we can conceive of the moderate’s argumentative burden is in terms of reconciling the insights about value captured in the epigraphs above. Elizabeth Seton directs our attention outward, imploring us to rein in our desires, expectations, and sense of entitlement in the face of the great neediness of others, a cause to which she dedicated much of her life and for which she lived in relative poverty. Richard Wright, on the other hand, directs our attention inward, toward the value of a self fully realized via meaningful activities that embody and express a sense of who we are and might be. Unfortunately, there is a potential tension here: a simple life of meager means and single-minded devotion to charitable activity is not typically

conducive to self-realization.<sup>77</sup> To this extent, living simply would be a kind of self-inflicted tragedy. But avoiding this tragedy seems to require complicity in another, namely the material deprivation of those who cannot meet their basic needs without the assistance of potential benefactors who could provide it, were they only willing to live more simply.<sup>78</sup>

Moral extremists resolve this tension by arguing that Seton's directive is overriding — morality demands that one sacrifice the satisfaction of one's own non-basic interests wherever doing so can help to secure another person's basic needs. If the extremist is correct, we must choose between acting rightly and acting in accordance with a non-moral ideal.<sup>79</sup>

I do not believe we confront such a choice. In what follows, I argue that we can reconcile the insights of Seton and Wright in a single ideal that is both plausible and appropriately sensitive to the normative significance of material deprivation. If I am right, we can have it good without being bad.

### **The Ethics of Need: A Relational Affair**

As we've seen, the pressure toward extremism comes from both inside and outside of moral theory. From the outside, plausibility constraints require that a moral theory express the fact of moral equality while being “objective” in the sense of deriving its prescriptions from sources unlikely to be coloured by personal bias or other epistemic distortions. When it comes to the question of what morality demands of us in terms of poverty relief, the conjunction of these constraints seems to entail that moral deliberation ought to proceed impartially, bypassing people's natural disposition to care more about their own interests.

---

<sup>77</sup> Of course, it *may* be. Whether an activity or lifestyle is conducive to one's self-realization depends upon the type of person one is.

<sup>78</sup> As I explain in Chapter 3, I understand “basic needs” to mean those things a person requires regardless of his goals or desires. For further discussion, see pp. 3-4 in that chapter.

<sup>79</sup> That we face this choice is essentially Susan Wolf's view. Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (August 1, 1982): 419–39.

When we combine these constraints with the plausible evaluative claim that basic needs represent the most important type of human interest, the weightiest moral reasons we appear to have are those grounded in the basic needs of others who cannot meet these needs without assistance. If this is right, determining our duty is easy: to the extent that we can enable others to meet their basic needs without sacrificing our own, we ought to do so.

According to this way of thinking, the nature of the moral relationship between the very needy and the relatively well-off is merely that of potential benefactor to potential beneficiary. If this is so, all that matters are facts about the material conditions of the people so related and what a potential benefactor is in a position to do, *qua* potential benefactor. Determining the permissibility of resource expenditure is thus a simple matter of determining whether a potential benefactor is in a position to satisfy the pressing needs of another without sacrificing any similarly significant interests of his own.

I believe that this way of looking at things distorts the morally relevant facts by reducing the moral import of poverty to a matter of imbalance, as though the issue is merely one of emptying full pockets into empty, out-stretched hands. We are presented with a moral landscape devoid of the *people* who deserve our moral attention and the people in a position to help. In ways that matter morally, we are more than potential benefactors and they are more than empty stomachs.

One of the reasons empty stomachs matter morally is that they threaten people with empty lives. To lose sight of this is to lose sight of morally relevant considerations, removing people from the normative landscape in the sense of reducing them to facts about neediness and its immediate effects. Of course, these facts are morally relevant. But, as I will argue, poverty implicates morally relevant facts over and above facts about material deprivation. By thinking of

the issue merely as an imbalance, we invite a narrow approach to the problem that elides the fact poverty is a multi-faceted *relational* phenomenon that calls for a more nuanced treatment.

Consider, for instance, the case of Tamara Ecclestone, an English billionaire who recently made the news with her purchase of a \$1,500,000 bathtub carved from a slab Amazonian crystal. Her justification: “I spend a lot of time in the bath so it's worth it.”<sup>80</sup> Presumably, she would offer similar justifications for her \$150,000,000 yacht and \$175,000 shoe collection.

It is difficult to see how these purchases could fail to be morally wrong, given that they were made against a background of great human neediness that Tamara is in a position to help relieve. But, there is more to this wrongness than facts about her material circumstances and the degree of neediness she could have relieved with her money. Tamara's purchases are deeply *disrespectful* in a way that cannot be captured by claims about what good the money could have done in the hands of a competent charity, or claims about how the interests which would be served by such a charity are “weightier” than the interests which informed Tamara's purchases. Tamara’s purchases are *insulting* in that they manifest a profound lack of concern for those her money could help. To the extent that Tamara's actions are insulting, they constitute a relational offense which eludes capture by way of the quantitative concepts germane to the way extremists theoretically contextualize matters of inequality and material deprivation. What makes Tamara’s purchases disrespectful and insulting is not that she could have given her money to charity instead, or merely because the interests people have in being fed and sheltered are “weightier” than whatever interests of Tamara’s are satisfied by her luxury goods. There is more going on here.

---

<sup>80</sup> Amelia Gentleman, “What Is It like to Live on Britain’s Most Expensive Street?,” *The Guardian*, accessed June 12, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/money/2014/apr/07/londons-most-expensive-street-kensington-palace-gardens>.

By way of illustration, consider how the fact that many are starving motivates many of us to avoid wasting food. As dinner guests, we'll do our best to finish what we're served, knowing that what we don't eat will be thrown out. If we're serving ourselves, we try to ensure that we take only what we can eat, so as to avoid having to throw the left-overs in the trash. Where possible, we save our left-overs for later.

Now, these actions do nothing by way of alleviating the hunger of others. We do not make anyone's life any better by acting in this way, nor would we make anyone's life worse if we threw unwanted food in the trash (it's not like shipping it to the needy or even donating to a local soup-kitchen is an option). But it hardly seems like these facts make it morally acceptable to waste food. Tossing perfectly good food in the trash is disrespectful in a way that is insulting to those who must struggle for the food they manage to obtain. We thus have a compelling, poverty-related reason to avoid wasting food, a reason that does not ground out in facts about how we can help relieve neediness or satisfy human interests by distributing resources in a particular way. If this is right, the ethics of poverty relief—and thus the character and content of our moral reasons—is, at least in part, a matter of reckoning with *people* as opposed to facts about the relative weight of their interests and our ability to satisfy their interests. After all, people (but not interests) are the objects of disrespect. To put the point another way, the deliberative “weight” of the reason I have to avoid wasting food cannot be a function of the abstract relative significance of the human interest in being fed, if only because refraining from wasting food does not serve this interest. My reason to avoid wasting food is importantly interpersonal, but has nothing to do with the fact that I stand in the relation of potential *benefactor* to the very needy. At least, it has nothing to do with the fact that I could act in such a way as to provide them with food that they would not otherwise receive.

Like those who wantonly waste food, people like Tamara Ecclestone act in ways that manifest an attitude of detachment from humanity at large. This attitude has a moral valence and suggests a new way in which we might approach moral evaluation in the face of global poverty. Instead of focusing our search for moral reasons in facts about the relative significance of human interests, we should be looking for a way of determining the moral status of choices that does not centrally rely on weighing different interests against each other.

As we've seen, both Thomas Nagel and Samuel Scheffler attempt to avoid this type of weighing in defending moderation by proposing constraints on the degree to which the weight of moral reasons must reflect the impartial standpoint. For Nagel, the constraint is psychological: one cannot expect people to be motivated to promote human interests in strict proportion to their abstract significance. For Scheffler, the constraint is a function of the fact that many of our reasons are "naturally generated" within (by?) an evaluative standpoint that is insensitive to objective facts about relative value. In both cases, these moderates paint a picture according to which facts external to our relationship to the very needy partly determine the moral character of that relationship. The problem is that neither of them give us a positive picture of this relationship which might help us make decisions about how we may permissibly live.

The moderate must do better. If we are justified in pursuing our non-basic interests, we must have a better understanding of the moral character of our relationship to the very needy, an understanding that can help us determine the extent to which we are morally permitted to pursue our non-basic interests against a background of unmet basic need.

As I see it, success in moral justification is a matter of being able to reconcile ourselves with the very needy insofar as they have reason to be concerned about the content of our choices. That is, we must examine the extent to which the needy have compelling reason to resent us for

our choices, and what this means for the prospect of reconciling their concerns with our own interest in self-realization and the other goods which help give a life shape and imbue it with meaning.

That the ability to justify oneself to others is a valid test for wrongness is not novel. The idea goes back as least as far as Adam Smith and has recently been re-invigorated in prominent accounts of moral reasons and justification defended by Thomas Scanlon and Stephen Darwall. My approach involves significant departures from both Scanlon and Darwall, and it is worth examining them to see why such a departure is worthwhile.

### **To Darwall, with Apologies**

Darwall is attracted to Kant's idea that a person's dignity licenses her to “exact” respect from her fellow rational creatures.<sup>81</sup> For Darwall, people are a source of other-regarding reasons in virtue of being related to one another as both authority figures and subjects of authority. According to this way of looking at things, morality is a matter of equal accountability between free and rational agents whose authority is to be recognized from what Darwall calls the “second-person standpoint.” This is the standpoint from which people (can) address each other directly, lodging complaints and making demands. Moral obligations amount to decisive “second-personal reasons” — reasons which make essential reference to what moral agents (can) *demand* of one another. In this sense, moral reasons “always derive from agents’ relations to one another”.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

What's driving Darwall here is the idea that our moral obligations are a matter of responding to other persons directly, *qua* authority figures. The possession of this authority is the source of human dignity; acknowledging this authority in others is the distinctively moral kind of *respect*.

Darwall illustrates his view by way of a simple example. If I've stepped on your foot, you can legitimately demand that I remove myself. Because all free and rational persons have the authority to make claims on others in a framework of mutual accountability, demanding that I get off your foot is to *give* me a reason to do so. Your demand *generates* a decisive reason to act, a reason which owes its existence to the nature of our relationship.

This isn't to say that the second-personal reason is the *only* reason I have to get off your foot. Pain is objectively bad, after all. But, thinks Darwall, the second-personal reason you give me is that in virtue of which I am morally *obligated* to get off your foot. It is your *authority* to demand that I remove myself that accounts for the *decisive* moral reason I have to get off your foot. Presumably, however, I have this reason whether you make the demand or not (the fact that you are in too much pain to make the demand surely does not entail that I am not obliged to remove myself). Still, Darwall's view is that my decisive reason to get off your foot is grounded in your authority to make such a demand.

This view is appealing for a number of reasons. For one, it gives moral equality a central place without relying on an account of moral reasons according to which their weight reflects the abstract relative significance of various human interests. For Darwall, all persons *qua* persons are equal in the sense of being equally deserving of respect in virtue of having second-personal authority over others. All persons are both authority figures and subjects of authority, and all to the same degree in the sense that no one has more authority than any other and no one is exempt from interpersonal accountability relations. Moreover, the reason-generating authority we all

have is derived from *personhood*. That people exercise (or could exercise) their *agency* in a particular manner explains why others have compelling reasons to treat them in certain ways and not others, reasons that do not owe their force to the goodness or badness of states of affairs.

Darwall's view also seems to get us what we want insofar as we think that a moral theory ought to be objective. Recall Nagel's point that we need objectivity because claims about what reasons we have "can be true or false independently of how things appear to us."<sup>83</sup> We must get outside our own heads lest we fall prey to egocentric distortions. Darwall's view locates reasons squarely in the space between persons addressing one another in a relationship defined by accountability to each other's authority. It's difficult to see how one could get any further out of one's own head than by regarding oneself as subject to the authority of others and taking oneself to have reasons grounded in this very authority.

Despite these virtues, however, there is something very unappealing in all of this. According to Darwall's view, everyone is, in effect, a moral prosecutor and defendant. Reasons to act (or refrain from acting) in certain ways are the product of an authority to make people accountable both *to* others and *for* themselves. While we do tend to think that morality is, at least in part, a matter of obligation and that people can leverage claims against others, Darwall's address/response model strips moral relationships of something important that renders them cold and empty in a dissatisfying way.

One of the things that makes Darwall's account so interesting and compelling is the fact that it connects convictions about how we morally ought to act with terms of moral address. However, by examining a central feature of moral life in which this connection cannot be merely

---

<sup>83</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 139.

hypothetical, we can see how Darwall's treatment of this connection leaves something to be desired.

Apologies and the practice of apologizing are central to moral life. According to Darwall's second-personal account, being obliged to apologize is not unlike being in debt. Your decisive reason to apologize to me is grounded in my authority to demand that you do so. In fact, my authority to do this (or my actually doing so) is what *explains* your having a duty to apologize to me — it is what gives you a second-personal reason to do so. But Darwall's account renders an apology something to be exacted, as opposed to a sincere gesture of good will and a plea for forgiveness. This seems wrong, both as an account of why people ought to apologize, and because it seems to imply something false about the practice of apologizing.

While we often talk about apologies as things that are “owed,” reducing them to a moral debt payment disvalues their moral currency. Insincere apologies, for instance, are empty and can be positively insulting. But isn't this all it is possible to *exact* from someone? That is, insofar as moral obligations are a matter of complying with the *demands* of an authority figure, isn't the bare act of uttering “I'm sorry” all that a view like Darwall's can lead one to expect or direct one to do insofar as apologies go?

To the extent that an apology is *sincere*, it must come from a place of good will, not of mere recognition of a debt or a duty to comply. Indeed, expressing regret and good will is the point. Apologies function as signifiers; they are not moral currency in themselves. Of course, Darwall might say that because insincere apologies are of no moral value, one does not actually discharge one's obligation in providing one. But, so what? If an apology must be sincere to qualify as being what is owed, what work does the (hypothetical) demand or authority relationship do here? One cannot *exact* good will.

For Darwall, second-personal authority is what gives moral reasons their distinctive claim on our will. Such authority explains why there are moral *requirements* and why these requirements centrally implicate specific persons with respect to whom our moral reasons refer.<sup>84</sup> When it comes to apologizing, my authority to demand an apology purportedly explains why you are morally *required* to apologize *to me*. But this account strips the relationship between the relevant parties of the very properties which could make it a compelling ideal. When it is the case that you morally ought to apologize to me, what matters is not so much that I am *owed* something, but that what I receive is *worth receiving*. That is, what matters is that someone respond to me not as an authority figure but as a *person who has been wronged*. A proper apology requires, above all else, the recognition of one's own wrongdoing and the recognition of the object of one's wrongdoing *as* the type of thing that can be wronged, i.e. a *person* as opposed to an authority figure or collector of moral debts. In other words, sincere apologies require persons on both ends.

Being a person who can offer a sincere apology requires knowledge, understanding, sensitivity, attention, and grace. To be this kind of person, we must be attentive and receptive in particular ways which require a sense of empathy and the ability to assess situations clearly. Indeed, the reason we even have a practice of apologizing is that we value relating to people in harmonious ways. But, because we are not perfect, we value apologies as a means of repairing these relations when and where they break down. Again, one cannot create the attitudes or relationships implicated by sincere apologies by way of demands, even if every person is a reason-giving authority. What we need is mutual *understanding*, not mutual accountability by way of demands. At best, such demands are morally relevant as signals to facts about

---

<sup>84</sup> Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint*, 10, 27.

relationships which may have been overlooked. To put the point another way: from the fact that I owe you an apology, it doesn't follow that this debt explains *why* I ought to apologize to you. While we may be able to derive “owes” from “ought”, we miss something important if this is all we get.

So, Darwall puts people before reasons, but he does so in a way that renders them authority figures as opposed to objects of respect and dignity in a way that would furnish a worthy ideal of relating to one another.

The point about apologies generalizes. To give someone a reason by way of demand, on Darwall's view, is to provide him with an impetus to make and execute a particular choice. But the moral character of a plea or demand that another act in a particular way is (at least often), more than that, *richer* than that. Such moral claims often appropriately imply something about how people are and ought to be related to one another in a way that goes beyond facts about particular actions they may perform (or fail to perform). I shouldn't stomp on your feet, hurt your feelings, or steal your property. The decisive reasons I have to refrain from doing such things have got to ground out in facts other than your authority to demand that I not do so. A jerk isn't a jerk because he fails to *recognize my authority* to demand that he act in non-jerky ways, nor is it because he has failed to act in accordance with a reason I serve up to him in demanding that he comply. He is a jerk because he *doesn't care* about how I am affected by the way he chooses to relate to me or how it is appropriate for me to *feel* about how he has done so.

To sum up, Darwall's appeal to second-personal address seems to go some way towards capturing the compelling idea that morality is a matter of relating to others appropriately.

However, in seeing moral address and response in terms of plaintiffs and defendants, Darwall

ends up looking for verdicts where we should be looking for better relationships and the kind of interpersonal concern which makes them possible.

But what kind(s) of relationships should we be looking for? This is an important question if only because there are all kinds of morally relevant relationships one can stand in. The relationship I have in mind can be understood in terms of the ideal that informs Thomas Scanlon's contractualism.

### **Scanlonian Community**

If you were to ask Thomas Scanlon why he believes that an action's being wrong furnishes him with a reason not to do it, he'll tell you it's because he couldn't justify such actions to others on grounds that he could reasonably expect them to accept.<sup>85</sup> Scanlon famously appeals to this idea in founding a distinctive version of contractualism, a view according to which an action is wrong just in case any principle that permitted it would be one that could reasonably be rejected by people who are motivated to converge on mutually acceptable principles. Scanlon thus offers us an interpersonal account of what it is for an action to be morally justified. Instead of being recommended by the "balance" of reasons or the "weightiest" reason, morally justified actions are those that are in accordance with principles that no one could reasonably reject.

I am optimistic that some development of the ideal at the heart of Scanlon's contractualism can redeem a relational account of moral justification from the issues that beset Darwall's juridical approach. In fact, I intend to ground an account of moral justification in an ideal of moral community inspired by Scanlon's appeal to the spirit of mutual acceptance. However, I will not be defending a version of Scanlon's contractualism in the name of moral

---

<sup>85</sup> T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 4.

moderation. For one thing, doing so would involve a host of significant interpretive burdens. In introducing his view, for example, Scanlon says that “an act is wrong if and only if any principle that permitted it would be one that could reasonably be rejected.” He then offers the ostensibly equivalent claim that an action is wrong “if and only if it would be *disallowed* by any principle that [nobody could] reasonably reject.”<sup>86</sup> Elsewhere, Scanlon claims that an action is wrong if it would be *excluded* by principles that are not reasonably rejectable.<sup>87</sup> As David McNaughton and Piers Rawling argue, it is far from clear that these formulations are equivalent.<sup>88</sup>

More importantly, however, I believe that Scanlon’s emphasis on moral principles is unduly restrictive. Conventionally, we think of moral principles as implicating particular acts of will at particular times. That is, we tend to think of principles as requiring or forbidding specific types of actions in specific types of circumstances, such as those in which we may be tempted to lie, or steal, or refrain from helping others. According to this conception, moral principles prescribe or forbid discrete actions, where “discrete action” refers to behavioral performances carried out at a determinate time and place (e.g., the telling of a lie).<sup>89</sup> But, as I argue in Chapter 2, questions about the practical import of poverty impinge upon us at a very general level of practical deliberation, a level at which we think about the general shape and character of our lives. Because poverty is a pervasive background condition against which we must make general decisions about how we are to organize our lives and priorities, reckoning with it from within an individual life is thus not a matter of making a choice at a particular time and place, but of making oneself a contributor to a cause. This involves a complex conception of ourselves as

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>88</sup> David McNaughton and Piers Rawling, “Can Scanlon Avoid Redundancy by Passing the Buck?,” *Analysis* 63, no. 280 (October 1, 2003): 328–31.

<sup>89</sup> It is worth pointing out that Scanlon does not explicitly commit himself to the idea that moral principles essentially implicate action in this narrow sense.

extended in time and space which includes others, many of whom are in desperate need and whose struggles will be fruitless unless people like us extend ourselves in appropriate ways. The question of what we ought to *do* in terms of contributing to the cause of poverty relief is thus not so much a matter of which action(s) we must perform here and now (or then and there) as it is a matter of figuring out how we can shape our lives and priorities such that we end up living a life in which we express an adequate degree of concern for the very needy. While one might think of this as a *kind* of action, it is neither the type of behavior commonly associated with the term ‘action’, nor is it the type of behavior one commonly finds moral philosophers discussing in terms of principles.

Even Scanlon’s idiosyncratic understanding of moral principles as “general conclusions about the status of various kinds of reasons for action” is too narrow for my purposes, at least insofar as he understands action in the narrow sense just outlined. But even if we understand action in some broader sense, Scanlon’s emphasis on principles threatens to misplace our focus, at least in some cases. Consider again our reason to avoid wantonly wasting food. Such behavior does not *harm* the very needy in any way. The wasted food is neither taken *from* them, nor is it possible to make it available *to* them. In fact, they are not even aware of the waste. How, then, can we explain the fact that we seem to have a compelling moral reason to avoid wantonly wasting food? To put the point in Scanlonian terms, on what grounds could the very needy reject any principle that allowed it? To explain the *prima facie* wrongness involved in wasting food, we must look past the actions to the people who perform them. The fact that the very needy would rightfully be *insulted* by such actions hasn’t so much to do with the action as what it says about the person who performs it. Wantonly wasting food is *disrespectful*, though it is not obvious which attitudes (or lack thereof) this disrespect consists in. Focusing on the action as opposed to

facts about the actor misses the point because it focuses our attention on the epiphenomena.<sup>90</sup>

While it seems plausible to say that the very needy could reasonably reject any principle which allowed the wanton waste of food, this seems beside the point. More pertinent is the fact that the very needy could reasonably *resent the people* who engage in this behavior.

Nonetheless, I am convinced that Scanlon's concern with rational reconciliation is a promising path to moral moderation. Rather than employ the ideal of reconciliation in the name of defending a method of determining the status of moral principles, I employ it in the name of constructing an ideal of a moral community of equals in which all members aspire to avoid being the object of reasonable resentment and thereby belong in good standing. In doing so, I avoid the limitations imposed by dealing in moral principles while retaining Scanlon's intuitively compelling notion that moral justification is importantly a matter of rational reconciliation among concerned parties. Instead of thinking of moral justification in terms of whether a principle could be reasonably rejected, I will be thinking of it in terms of the conditions under which a person can reasonably be resented.

### **The Lives of the Poor**

If we are to get what we need from thinking of morality interpersonally, we will need an account that is sensitive to facts about how it is appropriate for the very needy to feel about the actions of others as well as what the very needy need and want in their own lives. Of course, the extremist does not deny that morality should reflect the needs and wants of the very poor. In fact, Peter Singer explicitly acknowledges that understanding these needs and wants is precisely why reason is so important in thinking about what those in a position to help others ought to do. "[R]eason," he says, "helps us to understand that other people, wherever they are, are like us, that they can

---

<sup>90</sup> Cf. apologies in Darwall's account of moral reasons.

suffer as we can... and that just as our lives and our well-being matter to us, it matters just as much to all of these people.”<sup>91</sup> I think Singer is right about this. But, as I will argue, not only should we be sensitive to the fact that the well-being of needy persons matters as much to them as ours does to us, we should also be sensitive to facts about *what* matters to them and *why*. To do so, we must become acquainted with how they relate to their own neediness.

When we pay attention to the way the very needy relate to their own neediness, we see that material deprivation does not always manifest itself in the lives and minds of those who must deal with it in the way one might expect, given how fundamentally important basic needs are thought to be.

Recent findings compiled from information derived from household surveys conducted in 13 developing countries suggests that impoverished persons who are forced to choose between acting on reasons grounded in their basic needs and those grounded in other interests often act in accordance with the latter.<sup>92</sup> Even the extremely poor pursue recreation, cultural activities, and gustatory pleasures despite significant risk to health and general food security.<sup>93</sup> Among the extremely poor in these 13 countries, food expenditure ranges from 56% to 78% of consumption, even though many are moderately to significantly undernourished. Moreover, about half of every 1% increase in food expenditure is dedicated to increasing caloric intake, whereas the other half is devoted to more expensive food items.<sup>94</sup> Those in the bottom decile (in terms of per capita expenditure) consume slightly fewer than 1400 calories per day, just about half of what is

---

<sup>91</sup> Peter Singer, *The Why and How of Effective Altruism*, TED Video, 2013, [https://www.ted.com/talks/peter\\_singer\\_the\\_why\\_and\\_how\\_of\\_effective\\_altruism?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/peter_singer_the_why_and_how_of_effective_altruism?language=en).

<sup>92</sup> Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo, “The Economic Lives of the Poor,” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21, no. 1 (2007): 141–67.

<sup>93</sup> Here, “extremely poor” refers to people living in households in which consumption per capita is less than \$1.08 per day.

<sup>94</sup> Banerjee and Duflo, “The Economic Lives of the Poor,” January 1, 2007, 147.

needed for healthy living. Among the extremely poor in Udaipur, 65% of adult men and 40% of adult women are underweight, per WHO guidelines. Even so, extremely poor households spend roughly 66% of their grain budget on millet, which has the highest calorie per rupee ratio of available grains. The remaining 30% of the grain budget is devoted to tastier, though less caloric alternatives, such as rice and wheat. Moreover, roughly 10% of the total food budget is spent on sugar, salt, and processed foods.<sup>95</sup> But tastier food isn't the only thing for which the extremely poor are willing to sacrifice precious calories.

Among the most important expenditures for the extremely poor is festivals, including weddings and funerals (both of which call for special clothing and adornments). In Udaipur, for instance, the median household expenditure on festivals is 10% of the total budget. In South Africa, 90% of households living on under \$1 per day spend money on festivals.<sup>96</sup> In places where festival expenditure is relatively low, one finds expenditure on things such as radios and television sets.<sup>97</sup> In many parts of the world, giving gifts as tokens of love and appreciation for hospitality is valued so highly that people are willing to sacrifice material assets necessary to meet their basic needs in order to be able to participate in the practice. One also finds that jewelry and other means of self-expression are among people's most prized possessions despite the fact that the resources used to procure them could have been used to procure food instead.

These findings offer a glimpse into what happens when reasons backed by basic needs and reasons backed by non-basic interests conflict within individuals and families. Evidently, reasons backed by basic needs do not trump other reasons in a wholesale fashion. When it comes

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

down to it, people are willing to sacrifice their basic interests to some degree in order to act on reasons grounded in pleasure, social participation, and self-expression.

How should we think about this fact? We might judge that people who make these trade-offs thereby make a normative mistake. In fact, many come to just such a conclusion. Consider john q. public's response to the follow image posted to the Twitter account of a major international brewery:

**Stella Artois** @StellaArtois

Retweet & @StellaArtois will donate 1yr of clean water to @Water to help solve the world water crisis #WorldWaterDay

**WITH A WATER TAP AT HOME,**  
Anita has time to run her own business  
and build a future for her children.

Promoted by Stella Artois  
7:40 PM · 20 Mar 15

2,337 RETWEETS 378 FAVORITES

**john q. public** @Necromancer54  
@StellaArtois @Water  
Hm mmm, maybe she should put her jewelry towards plumbing? Priorities? Just sayin'.....

This image features a photograph of Anita, a beneficiary of a charity that provides access to clean water. She is wearing (and presumably owns) some jewelry. If we read John Q. Public *very* charitably, we might conclude that he is worried about Anita, thinking her imprudent and unfortunately ill-equipped to manage her own well-being. But, this is difficult to do. Quite clearly, his comments are condescending, even contemptuous. Unfortunately, this type of attitude is commonplace. For instance, many in India's upper classes take a similar view of the poor spending money on things like weddings and jewelry, condescendingly deriding such behavior as stupid, foolish, or otherwise improper. But is it? If it's true that a person ought always to prefer the satisfaction of her basic needs, even at the expense of her social, cultural, or aesthetic interests, then people who fail to do so thereby make a normative mistake. But why think the very poor make such a mistake? They believe the sacrifices they endure for the satisfaction of their non-basic interests make their lives better than they would be if they did not make these sacrifices. I see no reason to doubt them. Absent some compelling reason to believe that the very poor all over the world routinely make considerable normative mistakes with respect to their own well-being, we ought to join them in endorsing the view that their sacrifices are conducive to their quality of life. We ought, that is, to recognize that whatever the very poor achieve by their sacrifice is at least *comparatively significant* to whatever they give up.

If facts about how the poor allocate resources are not evidence of foolishness or stupidity, what, if anything, is their relevance? As I will argue, they undermine the strict hierarchy of normative significance relied upon by extremists who argue that it is always more important to satisfy basic needs. The fact that concern for satisfying basic needs does not dominate the lives and deliberations of the very poor suggests that they need not dominate our moral theory in the way extremists think they should. In the real world — that is to say, in the lives of actual people

— reasons grounded in basic needs often give way to other considerations. But these specific considerations are not the only non-basic ends which concern the very needy. They also have general opinions about human well-being and corresponding aspirations about how they would like their own lives to unfold.

Survey results demonstrate that while the very poor worry about a lack of bread, they join Richard Wright in his concern for avoiding the kind of starvation constituted by a lack of self-realization. Specifically, the very poor tend to list as significant burdens of their poverty the inability to achieve the following:<sup>98</sup>

- Education and other forms of personal development
- Means to travel
- Rest and recreation
- Social interaction with friends and family
- A sense of control over the direction of their lives
- Dressing their children and grandchildren well
- Giving their children opportunities to develop their capacities

One striking thing about what we find in this list is that they are all things that we should expect to find in any sensible account of human well-being. Because they are general hallmarks of a good human life, it should come as no surprise that they are the types of things to which people aspire and the types of things we intuitively regard as goods to which all human beings are entitled.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, the fact that the very poor strive for such things even at the expense of their basic needs suggests that the moderate can plausibly charge extremists with failing to appreciate what we might call the dual significance of basic needs.

---

<sup>98</sup> Robert Chambers et al., *Crying Out for Change: Voices of the Poor* (Oxford ; New York: World Bank Publications, 2000), 22–30.

<sup>99</sup> It is no surprise that when I explain extremism to people, they tend to cite the things on this list in decrying the burdens that extremists call on us to bear. The challenge, of course, is to explain why such burdens are sufficiently significant to undermine the extremist's case.

### **The Dual Significance of Basic Needs**

There are two general reasons for thinking that basic needs are morally significant. On the one hand, basic needs deprivation involves a number of things that are as intrinsically as they are obviously bad. Hunger, disease, and exposure are terrible things to have to experience. But basic needs are important in a fundamental, forward-looking sense, as well. Unless one's basic needs are met, it is difficult, if not impossible, to avail oneself of the goods which serve to make a human life enjoyable, fulfilling, and enriching. Among other things, hunger and sickness stand in the way of self-realization, basic forms of enjoyment, and other facets of a good life. In this sense, material deprivation is bad in the same way that obsessive compulsive disorder and social phobias are bad: it prevents people from realizing or participating in the valuable things which can make a human life rich, exciting, and meaningful for the person whose life it is and for those with whom she might share it.

While the extremist may be right to think of basic needs as a kind of normative natural kind, thinking of them as delimiting the extent of entitlement claims, even in a world like ours, betrays a failure to appreciate the significance of what lies on the other side of basic needs satisfaction and is out of touch with the concerns and attitudes of the very poor. By their own lights, the very poor recognize that the normative significance of meeting basic needs is, in large part, a function of what their satisfaction makes possible. This fact, it seems to me, has striking evidentiary value when it comes to questions about the moral significance of the interests which give rise to needs and desires.

I do not deny that the interests grounded in basic needs are the *most important* human interests. Rather, my claim is that this fact settles nothing. The moral landscape is a complex place, in part because the moral significance of basic needs satisfaction is multi-faceted. This

fact presents us with a difficult question: What is the practical import of the dual significance of basic needs?

This question might be regarded as a question about the form or content of a moral principle. But it is not, at least insofar as we understand moral principles in the traditional way. For reasons I outline above, we need to think more broadly about these issues. In the context of global poverty, the question “What should I do?” is more a question about disposition and patterns of choice than it is about particular choices on particular occasions — it is about making good on a *general commitment* to good willing.

For example, consider how the process of interpersonal justification might unfold between Joni, a middle class Canadian concerned to fulfill her dream of becoming a professional musician, and Amina, a hungry woman with few prospects in one of Mali's remote villages. If Joni is concerned to lead a life that is justifiable to Amina, the *mere fact* that the money Joni has saved for a guitar could feed someone in Amina's position for a month does not settle the question of whether purchasing a guitar is morally permissible. Because what matters is whether Joni's *dispositions and way of life* can be justified to Amina, the question Joni must worry about is whether she *lives* in a way that expresses an appropriate degree of concern for the fact that other members of the moral community lack the resources to pursue the value of self-realization.

In Joni's case, she is concerned to pursue an artistic dream and develop a talent aimed at self-expression, goals which are respected and pursued for aesthetic and cultural reasons even by the very poor. Hence, Joni's guitar purchase is not inconsistent with the ideal of mutual justifiability on offer. Such a choice may be a component of a permissible way of life. Then again, it may not. It all depends upon what else Joni does.

Suppose, for example, Joni's guitar purchase is part of a pattern of behaviour which constitutes a lifestyle aimed exclusively at her own development and happiness. She becomes a musician and devotes the remainder of her time and resources to becoming a hockey player, accomplished gardener, gourmet cook, and ballet dancer. To her credit, she never bathes in a crystal tub. Still, if she *never* turns her resources or attention to the needy, makes *no* attempt to seek out alternative, less resource-intensive paths to her personal enrichment, and never settles for anything less than the most expensive tools or instruments, she fails to appreciate the moral significance of the fact that her life is extended against a backdrop of great human need.

Importantly, Joni's moral failure isn't that she has pursued her non-basic interests at the counterfactual expense of the basic needs of others. Rather, it is that by focusing exclusively on her own life, Joni has left people like Amina behind. That is to say, Joni fails to be sufficiently responsive to the fact that others are entitled to meaningful lives themselves. People like Amina may therefore reasonably resent this selfish version of Joni, though not for any *particular* choice she has made or particular avenue of self-realization that she has pursued. None of Joni's individual choices, taken in isolation, constitute grounds for reasonable resentment. What makes Amina's resentment reasonable is something more general: Joni could have helped people like Amina achieve meaning in their own lives without sacrificing her own ability to do the same. In pursuing self-realization in the way she has, Joni's pattern of choices reflects inadequate concern for others whom she could have helped, others who cannot lead a full human life without assistance. Reflection on Joni's case motivates what I call the *Consignment Constraint*.

**The Consignment Constraint:** One ought, morally, to endeavor to live one's life in such a way that one contributes to others' chance at a fulfilling life.

Joni's case confirms that we must think in broader terms than we are accustomed to when it comes to moral evaluation — we must look beyond individual choices to patterns and

dispositions. Of course, *some* individual choices are, by themselves, wrong against a background of neediness. Tamara Ecclestone's purchase of a \$1,500,000 bathtub seems like a good candidate. This is clearly luxury for its own sake, a purchase aimed at an end which does not promote Tamara's well-being in any significant way. As such, it is an action which plainly reveals a lack of requisite moral concern on Tamara's part. Choices like this give rise to what I call the *Valuable Ends Constraint*.

**The Valuable Ends Constraint:** One ought, morally, to refrain from devoting resources to the pursuit of ends which do not advance a compelling human interest.

While this constraint *precludes* luxury for its own sake, it does not go so far as to *sanction* the pursuit of any end which serves a compelling human interest. To see why, let us revisit Nina, the cosmologist we met in Chapter 1.

Nina has always been fascinated by science and discovery, a passion that drew her to pursue cosmology as a profession. Recently, she has discovered evidence suggesting that there is life on one of Saturn's moons. Fortuitously, she wins four billion dollars in the lottery — the very sum she needs to build and launch a probe that would settle the question.

Clearly, financing and launching the probe is a way for Nina to express and further the goals which define and give her life meaning. On the other hand, four billion dollars is a lot of money, money which could do a lot of good for humanity. This fact brings the permissibility of Nina's project into serious doubt. But, does it settle the matter? That four billion dollars is *a lot* or that it could help *many* are morally relevant facts, but in thinking about the permissibility of Nina's project, we must also reflect on the relationship of the project to Nina and to the values at which it is aimed. Specifically, we must recognize that the moral claim one has to a meaningful life does not extend to any particular end that one could reasonably expect the very needy to recognize as worthy of pursuit.

Building the probe would be a way in which Nina could exert control over the direction of her life in a way that would be fulfilling, given facts about her character. But the fact that it would be unreasonable for someone to resent Nina for the mere fact that she aims at this *type* of value does not entail that she may permissibly pursue any particular *means* of realizing it. Surely, Nina could be a successful scientist, even cosmologist, on a budget of far less than four billion dollars. There are all kinds of ways Nina might realize the values of scientific exploration and discovery, but to do so by such expensive means would be *insulting* to the very poor, given the availability of alternatives. If nothing else, adequate concern for others must involve a constraint on the way in which we structure the pursuit of meaning in our lives. Call this the *Efficiency Constraint*.

**The Efficiency Constraint:** Where multiple means are available to realize a type of good the pursuit of which could not reasonably be resented, one ought, morally, to adopt means of pursuit that are conducive to one's ability to relieve neediness.

The efficiency constraint leaves us with some difficult questions, some of which stem from its apparent indeterminacy. As stated, it is fairly weak. In its strongest form, it would require us to adopt means which are *maximally* conducive to our ability to relieve neediness. In that form, it would render impermissible all but the least resource-expensive means of advancing justifiable ends. But, even so formulated, its practical import is unclear.

The efficiency constraint is a *structuring* principle in the sense that it constrains *the way in which* one may pursue a type of good or value, though it does not entail any conclusions about *which* goods or values one may permissibly pursue. Unfortunately, it's not always clear whether some particular activity is merely one of many ways in which one might pursue a justifiable end or whether it constitutes a kind of justifiable end in its own right.

Consider dining with friends at a restaurant. If this kind of activity is merely a particular avenue to the general value(s) bound up with friendship and social interaction, then the efficiency constraint implicates this activity. But, if dining with friends at a restaurant is an end worthy of pursuit in its own right (say, because public dining is of significant cultural significance), then its permissibility will be a function of a different kind of constraint, namely a constraint which limits values one may pursue as opposed to *how* one may go about doing so. In this case, the efficiency constraint would apply only in the sense of limiting the type of restaurants one may patronize, perhaps precluding the very expensive.

I'm inclined to think that socializing with friends in ways typical for one's culture is both a means to realizing a more general type of good and a kind of good in itself. But, even if I am wrong, surely many of the personal and social goods we pursue have this dual significance. If so, the question of their permissibility is multifaceted in interesting and complicated ways which would require a companion theory of value to digest. I do not have such a theory on hand, nor am I confident that such a theory would be sufficient to draw boundaries clearly enough to give the efficiency constraint a precise practical import. Not only would we need a theory of value to sort out very general issues, but context is likely to be very important in terms of determining whether a person has adequately observed the constraint. For example, a serious photographer is likely to have a stronger moral claim to more expensive and capable photographic equipment than is a mere hobbyist whose skill level is insufficient to make any use of the capabilities, however much he may desire the best equipment for the sake of having it. Doubtless, many other such examples could be adduced, each with its own contextual variations. In philosophy, as in life, sometimes there is no recourse but to the examination of possibilities with a dose of good judgment.

Nevertheless, some version of the efficiency constraint must be true. Only by observing it can one demonstrate one's commitment to the equal value of persons, where this conviction grounds out in the idea that nobody deserves a meaningful life any more than anybody else. If we are to be able to justify ourselves to the very needy, we must be able to demonstrate that concern for their neediness constitutes one of our most general commitments, a commitment which regulates our choices and contributes to the distinctive character of our lives. In the next chapter, I examine how this commitment and the constraints which give it a practical shape ought to inform the way we live. For now, I hope to have shown at least that a plausible alternative to extremism is available.

Though few of the relatively well-off observe the constraints I defend here, none of them preclude one's having a fulfilling life, either in terms of self-realization or close relationships characterized by disproportionate concern. They are not nearly so restrictive as the shackles of extremism. In reflecting the dual, universal normative significance of basic needs at a very general level of practical deliberation, these constraints embed the fates of others in our lives as we shape them. This, I think, is the only way to plausibly reconcile the insights of Elizabeth Seton and Richard Wright.

## CHAPTER 6

### How Should We Live?

---

#### **Introduction**

At the most general level, moral moderation is the view that a person may permissibly pursue some of her non-basic interests against a background of unmet basic need, even though refraining from these pursuits would make her better equipped to address that need. This general description is, of course, consistent with many possible departures from moral extremism. In the last chapter, I took the first step in specifying a distinctive version of moral moderation. I did this by defending three individual constraints which, together, accomplish two important goals. First, they function to satisfy three desiderata of a plausible account of moral moderation. Any moderate account which does not require the relatively well-off to commit themselves to neediness relief would, for this reason, be implausible. Hence, the Consignment Constraint. Moreover, any plausible version of moral moderation has to recognize that certain pursuits are morally off-limits in a world like ours (crystal bathtubs come to mind). Hence, the Valuable Ends Constraint. Finally, any plausible version of moral moderation must recognize that an end's permissibility does not extend to every possible means of its pursuit. Hence, the Efficiency Constraint.

The second role of the constraints is to make the view practically viable in light of the interpersonal account of justification which gave rise to them. By furnishing the account with an internal structure, the constraints can help guide our choices by making salient the ways in which we can go wrong. This chapter is dedicated to making that guidance more specific. But it is important to have realistic expectations. For reasons that will become frustratingly clear as we go along, it would be unreasonable to expect these constraints to jointly entail anything like a set of specific rules or statements we might consult for determinate moral guidance. The very

considerations which lend moderation its plausibility force us to glean practical conclusions under conditions as variable as human nature itself. But this does not mean that the moderate must be silent on the question of how we ought to live or how we can live well without thereby living wrongly.

### **What is the Question?**

When we ask ourselves how we ought to live against a background of world poverty, we probably have specific, quantitative questions in mind: Given my salary, is an annual donation to OXFAM of five hundred dollars sufficient to discharge my obligation? What about five thousand? Notably absent from my discussion thus far are principles or constraints that set out hard quantitative limits or requirements that could serve as answers to these questions. But, given the efficacy of charitable organizations in converting transferable resources into goods for others and the fact that donating money to such organizations is arguably the most effective way for an individual to contribute to poverty relief, these “how much” questions seem to be the very type of questions we must answer if we are to make informed judgments about the permissibility of our choices. But appearances mislead. These “how much” questions miss the point in an important way that makes straightforward answers impossible.

So far, I've been employing examples in which resource expenditure is financial (the price of a guitar, bathtub, space expedition, etc.). Because money is a commutable resource and generic good, it serves as a convenient stand-in for moral currency. But it is important not to read too deeply into this convenience. Instead of asking “how much?” questions, we should be asking “how *so?*” questions: How has the preventable neediness of your fellow human beings shaped your life and priorities? How has your concern for your fellow human beings informed your dispositions and goals? Because the moral claims engendered by poverty cannot be represented

as moral debts in a spreadsheet, we cannot approach our moral duties in the face of poverty as a straightforward accounting question. Instead, we must focus on qualitative descriptions of the ways in which an appropriate degree of concern for neediness must shape one's life, priorities, and outlook.

To see why, consider James and Olivia. James is a successful hedge-fund manager who makes an annual donation to UNICEF in an amount that far exceeds most people's annual salary. But James is so successful that his donation amounts to a miniscule percentage of his annual income, the rest of which he spends on himself. James does a great deal of good in terms of the amount of neediness he relieves. In fact, he ends up doing much more good than Olivia, a woman who donates a significant proportion of her time to raising awareness of her government's feeble international aid policies, running for political office, and trying to organize grass roots movements. Even if Olivia is ultimately unsuccessful at bringing about significant institutional reform, it is clear that she does more than James in the sense relevant to the interpersonal standard of justification on offer, despite doing less in terms of the amount of neediness she relieves with her efforts. While James makes a moral *gesture*, only Olivia makes a *commitment* in a sense which could preclude the reasonable resentment of the very poor. One might think that this just goes to show that the ideal I am defending is the wrong one. Isn't it morally better to do more good? And if so, how could it be that resentment of James is more reasonable than resentment of Olivia?

I do not deny that it is morally better to do more good. Clearly, when it comes to poverty relief, one ought to do more rather than less, all else being equal. But we cannot reasonably conclude from this fact that judgements of moral merit ought to track accomplishments. Instead,

this quantitative consideration is appropriately constrained by facts about what individuals actually care about.

What makes resentment of James reasonable is that, like the selfish version of Joni from Chapter 5, he can do a lot more without sacrificing anything morally significant. This is not true of Olivia, despite the fact that she could do a lot more good than she does and that her poverty relief efforts have comparatively little effect. Indeed, this is true despite the fact that Olivia could do significantly more if she were willing to radically change her life in ways that she would not find fulfilling, say by becoming a successful hedge fund manager. But a person who would not be fulfilled by a career that makes her a more capable neediness reliever cannot reasonably be resented for not choosing one, given the sheer amount of time and attention one's career demands. To see why, we must look beyond James and Olivia to the larger picture.

### **Revisiting the Reasonable Resentment Criterion**

The extremist maintains that the ethics of need is fundamentally a straightforward matter of weighing human interests against each other according to a metric which assigns the greatest weight to basic interests. In effect, the extremist issues the following challenge: How could it possibly be the case that moral reasons grounded in the deprivation of basic needs fail to outweigh whatever reasons the relatively well-off have for withholding their resources? If we are committed to respecting the equal value of all persons, a straightforward weighing procedure seems to be the obvious way to settle competing claims objectively.

I answer the extremist's challenge not by rejecting the metaphorical appeal to weight but by providing an alternative to the weighing procedure.<sup>100</sup> As I see things, moral justification is

---

<sup>100</sup>As I mentioned in Chapter 4, it is difficult to see how one can engage in any normative theorizing without resorting to the metaphoric language of weight — some things matter more than others, some reasons are stronger

neither a property nor procedure that can be adequately characterized by such quantitative metaphors.

Socrates famously remarked that the central question of philosophy is “How should one live?” While metaphysicians and epistemologists may balk at this assertion, many moral philosophers would agree that this question is central to *their* inquiry. As it stands, however, the question is open to a narrow, individualistic interpretation according to which it might be construed as a question about how one can make one’s life as good as it can be. But this is not the central question in moral philosophy. Instead, we want to know the answer to a broader question: How should *we* live, given that we do so together? It is in the context of this question that I offer the reasonable resentment criterion as a plausible test for moral permissibility. In this light, moral justification consists in the possibility of rational reconciliation.

When it comes to the ethics of need, the relevant parties are the relatively well-off and those whose neediness grounds strong moral claims to assistance. By demonstrating that it would be unreasonable for a person to resent another for withholding resources, even where those resources could be used to satisfy basic needs, the moderate can answer the extremist’s challenge in a way that does not run afoul of commitments to moral equality and objectivity.

In order to satisfy the constraints imposed by these commitments, moral extremists look past people and their concerns to bare facts about their interests. But we needn’t do this. According to the interpersonal account I favor, no person’s life is bypassed in this way, but neither is anyone’s privileged. In this sense, the view treats everyone equally. Moreover,

---

than others, and so on. The extremist doesn’t go wrong in appealing to the metaphorical weight of things, he goes wrong in believing that assigning different weights to different types of interests and consulting the scales is the way to adjudicate the relevant moral claims. In fact, the data from Chapter 5 arguably undermines the view that the moral claims of the very poor are grounded in their basic needs at all. Recall, studies show that the very needy devote much of their resources to non-basic interests even though these interests are not fully satisfied. If I am right in what follows, a lack of fulfillment is the actual ground of their moral claims.

reasonableness of resentment is independent of facts which could make the account perniciously subjective. After all, the facts which determine the reasonableness of resentment are objective facts about the significance of the benefits and burdens involved in withholding or transferring resources, facts gleaned from examining the choices of people who make decisions structured by their own material deprivation. As we've seen, this examination yields interesting results: the very poor will sacrifice their basic needs in order to fulfill other interests, including interests that extremists explicitly argue are morally off-limits for us.

For instance, Peter Singer argues that we act wrongly when we “buy new clothes not to keep ourselves warm but to look ‘well-dressed’,” because, in doing so, we are not “providing for any important need.”<sup>101</sup> But why think this? The very poor often sacrifice basic needs satisfaction for the sake of fashion. In doing so, they implicitly endorse the view that a life in which they get to express an aesthetic sense of style is better than a life in which they do not, even if this means being hungrier than they otherwise would be. I see no reason to doubt them. Aesthetic self-expression isn't the only important need that clothing can serve. As Adam Smith notes, certain types of clothing may be required to achieve an important degree of social standing:

A linen shirt... is, strictly speaking, not a necessary of life. The Greeks and Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably, though they had no linen. But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty, which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct.<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup> Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (April 1, 1972): 235.

<sup>102</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Atlantic Publishers & Distributors LTD, 2008), 821–822.

Here, Smith offers us two important lessons. The first is that the conditions of dignity are culturally relative. The second, which follows from the first, is that we cannot answer simple “How much?” questions about our morally requisite response to neediness without first determining what we are entitled to hold on to, and why. No one can be reasonably be expected to live an undignified life. For some people, that will mean that they are morally entitled to a (relatively expensive) linen shirt. For others, it will not. *Ceteris paribus*, the latter is morally required to give more (in absolute terms) to poverty relief.

One might argue that the shame associated with not having socially or culturally appropriate attire is morally irrelevant because one ought to have sufficiently high self-esteem that one does not feel such shame. But even if people *could* simply work up the requisite self-esteem, people are often socially *ostracized* on the basis of presentation. This was true for 18<sup>th</sup> century day-laborers. It is no less true for children in contemporary Moldova.<sup>103</sup> High self-esteem is no defense against social exclusion.

But the extremist can happily grant that shame, ostracism, and aesthetic self-expression are morally important considerations. What he will deny is that they are *important enough* to justify resource expenditure when these resources could be used to satisfy another’s basic needs.<sup>104</sup> The extremist will make similar arguments with respect to the other types of goods that the moderate seeks to protect from the grasp of transfer principles. How can we determine who is right?

---

<sup>103</sup> Deepa Narayan et al., *Can Anyone Hear Us?: Voices of the Poor* (World Bank Publications, 2000), 45.

<sup>104</sup> Well, perhaps some extremists would be willing to yield some ground in light of Smith’s revelation. That is, one might maintain that a person is morally entitled to enough resources to meet her basic needs *and* live according to certain cultural standards for dignity. Whether this is an extremist view depends upon where we draw the taxonomic lines. There is a continuum here and I am not nearly as concerned with the taxonomic questions as I am with the theoretical ones. My goal here is to undermine the *methodology* which yields extremism, not to criticize any particular version of it.

No account of how to settle this question is likely to convince everyone. In Chapters 2 and 3, I examined the most compelling argumentative strategies for the claim that basic needs always trump and found them wanting. Perhaps there are better arguments yet to be made. There certainly seems to be something to the idea that, when it comes to the ethics of need, our moral deliberations ought to be governed entirely by general facts about which things matter more than others. In fact, it can be tempting to take this for granted, as Thomas Scanlon seems to do in one of his well-known examples:

The strength of a stranger's claim on us for aid in the fulfillment of some interest depends upon what that interest is and need not be proportional to the importance he attaches to it. The fact that someone would be willing to forego a decent diet in order to build a monument to his god does not mean that his claim on others for aid in his project has the same strength as a claim for aid in obtaining enough to eat (even assuming that the sacrifices required of others would be the same). Perhaps a person does have some claim on others for assistance in a project to which he attaches such great importance. Whether such a claim has significant weight can be debated. All I need maintain is that it does not have the weight of a claim to aid in the satisfaction of a truly urgent interest even if the person in question assigns these interests equal weight.<sup>105</sup>

Scanlon's claim about the relative "strength" of the claims *seems* right. But why? At a general level, this is simply a bald appeal to the intuition that gets extremism going, namely that basic needs are morally more important than other interests. To this extent, the intuitive appeal seems to pose a serious problem for a view like mine. But it doesn't.

Scanlon's general point here is surely correct: the strength of moral claims to assistance do not vary in strict proportion to the importance people attach to their various interests. What I deny is the force of the example that Scanlon employs in making his point. Why think a person's

---

<sup>105</sup> T. M. Scanlon, "Preference and Urgency," *Journal of Philosophy* 72, no. 19 (1975): 659–660.

claim to assistance in building his monument is necessarily weaker than a claim for food assistance?

I suspect that the appeal of Scanlon's example can be explained by some combination of the fact it implicates the rationality of religion and our intuition that the worst off ought to be prioritized. For those inclined to think that religious ends are an irrational waste of time, a claim for food is going to seem more compelling for obvious reasons. My claim that an intuition about priority for the worst off is at work here may seem odd in light of the fact that Scanlon's example involves a single person. However, it is at least plausible to believe that a person is worse off for not having enough to eat than he is for not having enough to build a religious monument. But this I deny as a simple variation on the misguided intuitions that get extremism going. Consider the following recast version of the case (changed to control for the potentially distracting issue of the rationality of religious ends).

Kumail and Sunny are equally needy and neither have enough to meet their dietary needs. If given aid money, Kumail would spend it all on food whereas Sunny would use it to buy a drum in full knowledge that doing so will leave him undernourished. In this two-person scenario, it's far from clear that we have a stronger reason to give our money to Kumail. Such a view is insultingly paternalistic. Of course, if Sunny would die of starvation in order that he be able to pursue his interest in musical self-expression, we must question his psychological health (and with it the propriety of paternalistic action). Barring this possibility, however, I see no reason to doubt that these men have an equal claim to a stranger's aid. The very needy are far better positioned than we are to know how resources can be best set against improving their lives.

Again, I do not deny that some things are morally more important than others or that considerations of “weight” have a place in practical deliberation. All I claim is that the ethics of need are sophisticated in a way that we cannot hope to approach with a simple, abstract appeal to these facts.

My alternative proposal is informed by looking to those whose choices are structured by material deprivation of a kind that threatens their basic needs. What I found is that such people are willing to sacrifice their basic needs in order to obtain non-basic goods. Of course, they did not sacrifice their basic needs *entirely*.<sup>106</sup> Nor did they all make the same trade-offs.

Nonetheless, the very fact that people make trade-offs at all suggests that we must take seriously the idea that the ethics of need is not as cut and dry as moral extremism suggests. When people who have endured the hardship of being unable to meet their basic needs are willing to forego relief of this hardship in the name of realizing other types of value, we must take seriously that there are non-basic goods that matter, period. We must recognize that some things matter in a way that the extremist’s scales are ill-suited to measure and thus that there are non-basic goods that nobody should have to give up, even if they could significantly relieve the neediness of others by doing so.

To return to the example of clothing, the very needy are often willing to pursue the aesthetic and cultural goods made available by fashion. Such goods come at the expense of calories: those who pursue fashion *could* have more to eat if only they were willing to settle for cheaper clothing that is merely adequate to keep them warm. But they don’t. I see no reason to believe that this is not the correct decision from the standpoint of their overall well-being.

---

<sup>106</sup> Doing so would mean death. I suspect this fact is largely responsible for the intuition that basic needs morally trump all other considerations.

As I mention in Chapter 5, the point of canvassing facts about how the very needy choose isn't to expose them as would-be hypocrites for resenting our pursuit of non-basic good. Rather, the point is that such behavior is an important kind of evidence regarding facts about value.

Excepting some reason to believe that the very needy are incompetent valuers or judges of value, we should regard their behavior as evidence for the claim that the fulfillment of some interests is comparatively significant to the fulfillment of basic needs. The challenge I have set myself here is turning this lesson into actionable moral guidance: Given these facts about comparative significance, how should we live?

### **From Comparative Significance to a Practical Standard**

The actions of the very needy teach us that some aspects of our well-being are comparatively significant to basic needs satisfaction. Unfortunately, it's not immediately clear how this fact helps with questions about the permissibility of the pursuits and projects that concern us. How do we get from the general claim of comparative significance to something that will help us determine what it is permissible for us to pursue against a background of global poverty?

Perhaps the most straightforward thing we could do is populate a "permissible pursuits" list by surveying all of the things that the very needy choose at the cost of satisfying their basic needs.

While this method would be welcomed for its simplicity, it would be misguided for obvious reasons. The point isn't that token pursuits are *made permissible* by the very needy's having undertaken them, as though Joni's guitar purchase is permissible only because someone, somewhere purchased a musical instrument at the cost of her nutritional needs. Instead, we must examine the *significance* of such trade-offs. If we are to learn a practical lesson, we need to know *why* such choices are worth making.

Any attempt to account for the worthiness of these choices must look to what people who make them accomplish in doing so.<sup>107</sup> At the most general level, we might say that they improve their own well-being. But this answer is too general for my purposes. For one thing, appealing to well-being itself fails to distinguish the goods in question from the goods required to meet basic needs. Both millet and sweet treats are conducive to a person's well-being, but those who sacrifice the former for the latter have different reasons for pursuing them. What we need to know is what makes the latter worth pursuing at the cost of the former. Why spend one's resources on sweeter, less calorific dessert foods when one is undernourished and in need of calories? The answer must be less general than 'well-being' if it is to be informative. 'Happiness' seems like a good candidate. At least, it seems like a plausible explanation of why someone would choose dessert over a millet-based meal. But it doesn't fit when it comes to some of the other things for which the very poor are willing to sacrifice the means to meeting their basic needs, such as funerals.

When we take stock of the myriad pursuits for which the very poor are willing to sacrifice, it becomes clear that no single, specific type of good will furnish a compelling answer to the question at hand. Instead, we find a plurality of goods for which the very poor are willing to make significant sacrifices: gustatory pleasure, aesthetic expression, rest and recreation, social/cultural participation, and the ability to express love and appreciation, among others. On its own, the list reads like a good recipe for a complete, fulfilling human life.

---

<sup>107</sup> Why not look to what the people who make such choices are *aiming at* rather than what they accomplish? My argument turns on the claim that the relevant choosers are competent judges of value, not that they consciously or explicitly *endorse* the relevant value judgments. That is to say, it is important that the relevant choices *actually* promote their well-being in some respect, not that the people making these choices consciously entertain the judgment that a particular choice is good for her, let alone good for her in a particular way.

A fulfilling human life is a complex thing that requires effort, time, and resources to realize.<sup>108</sup> As we've, it can also require considerable sacrifice. The fact that it seems callous and wrong to criticize the choices of the very needy is precisely because doing so cuts against our conviction that people have a right to such a life. This fact makes it unreasonable for us to negatively judge the very poor for pursuing things like aesthetic expression, social goods, and recreation at the expense of their basic needs. But this same conviction makes it unreasonable for the very poor to resent us for doing the same, even though doing so requires resources which could be devoted to poverty relief. Ultimately, we are striving for the same thing. Recognizing this fact will help us in answering the practical question about how we should live in a world in which many of us lack the resources to pursue a fulfilling life.

Unfortunately, however, we still have an important issue to resolve, namely reconciling the fact that we are morally obliged to respond to the neediness of the very poor on the one hand and the fact that we cannot reasonably be resented for living a fulfilling life on the other. On the face of things, these claims seem to be at odds, save perhaps when it comes to people like Elizabeth Seton who can find fulfillment in a nearly single-minded devotion to poverty relief. If we are to make sound judgments about the moral permissibility of our life choices, we need to know something about the justificatory limits of human fulfillment. This is where the constraints I defend in the previous chapter come in.

Recall the selfish version of Joni, a relatively well-off individual who leads a life aimed exclusively at her own fulfillment. She devotes every last resource at her disposal to chasing a wide range of experiences and pursuing an array of ends aimed at developing her skills and tastes

---

<sup>108</sup> A fulfilling life may be more or less complex. Elizabeth Seton's devotion to charity came at the exclusion of many valuable pursuits, but it hardly follows that her life wasn't a fulfilling one. Whether a life is fulfilling depends, in part, on what a person actually cares about.

in everything from music to gourmet food. Despite her wealth, however, she never turns her attention to the needy. Reflection on this case gave us the Consignment Constraint.

**The Consignment Constraint:** One ought, morally, to endeavor to live one's life in such a way that one contributes to others' chance at a fulfilling life.

This constraint reflects what the extremist gets right about the ethics of need, namely that some forms of neediness ground indefeasible moral claims to the resources of others. The reason Joni is subject to the reasonable resentment of the very needy is that she does not *need* nearly as much as she has (or to do as much as she does) in order to lead a full, rewarding life.

Importantly, this isn't to say merely that Joni could live a good life if she pursued fewer expensive ends, as though her life is *so good* that it would still be *quite* good if she did less with it. The idea is rather that Joni could lead a life that is *just as good* while at the same time devoting some of her resources to poverty relief. It is not as though the value of one's life increases in direct proportion to the sheer number of activities and pursuits it contains.

Of course, variety is important — single-minded devotion to one type of end or value is unlikely to be conducive to fulfillment. But at some point, doing more is simply doing more. And when doing more *costs* more, it takes on a moral significance. We can lead very good lives without sacrificing our ability to help the very needy. A conscientious person with good life prospects will recognize that she is very lucky in this respect and respond accordingly. She will acknowledge that material deprivation is a bad thing that grounds strong moral claims to her resources. But she need not respond to these claims to a degree which undermines her ability to make good on her fortunate prospects. Instead, she will endeavor to form sound prudential judgments informed by self-knowledge, formulate medium and long-term plans in light of these judgments, and do her best to budget her resources in a way such that she need not worry about

being able to realize her worthwhile goals. In short, she will endeavor to meet the following standard.

**The Fulfillment Standard:** One's responsiveness to neediness *per se* ought to be sufficiently great that a greater response would undermine one's ability to lead a fulfilling life.

There is much to discuss and unpack here. Keen readers will notice the similarity between the Fulfillment Standard and Richard Miller's principle of Sympathy.

**Sympathy:** One's underlying disposition to respond to neediness as such ought to be sufficiently demanding that giving which would express greater underlying concern would impose a significant risk of worsening one's life, if one fulfilled all further responsibilities; and it need not be any more demanding than this.<sup>109</sup>

I examined Miller's principle in Chapter 1, finding it compelling for its sensitivity to the considerations I have been discussing in this chapter. Miller and I agree that one cannot be morally required to forego a fulfilling life in the name of helping others.

While similar, the Fulfillment Standard differs from and improves upon Sympathy in important ways. In Chapter 1, I criticized Sympathy for making the current state of an agent's life the point relative to which improvement and diminishment are to be morally evaluated. This focus on the status quo is a problem for two reasons. First, privileging the status quo precludes the principle from providing practical guidance to agents whose circumstances change in such a way that new possibilities for personal fulfillment become open to her. If these new opportunities are not forbidden on independent grounds, the fact that a person was not in a position to seriously consider pursuing them before should not foreclose the possibility of pursuing them now. To borrow my own example, the fact that a person who previously could not

---

<sup>109</sup> Richard W. Miller, *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2010), 13.

afford a university education leads a good life should not morally preclude her from pursuing such an education should she suddenly find herself able to afford one.

The second problem with privileging the status quo is that doing so is arbitrary. Why should the fact that doing more for others would *worsen* one's life be the relevant standard? Surely, a change for the worse is relevant only to the extent that such worsening makes one's life bad in a way that matters independently of one's starting point.<sup>110</sup>

Joni helps bring this problem into focus. For Miller, a person's life is worsened (in the sense relevant to Sympathy) to the extent that she lacks "adequate resources to pursue, reliably and well, a worthwhile goal with which [s]he intelligently identifies and from which [s]he could not readily detach."<sup>111</sup> Each of Joni's pursuits, we can imagine, is worthwhile in this sense. But Sympathy gives her no reason to abandon some of her goals in the name of responding to neediness. As far as Sympathy is concerned, a relatively well-off person does nothing wrong in devoting *all* of her resources to worthwhile goals with which she identifies. This is because one has "a prerogative to refuse to do violence to who one is, radically changing one's worthwhile goals."<sup>112</sup>

I am sympathetic to the intuition Miller is drawing upon here. However, I am suspicious that it can take him as far as he thinks it can. In recruiting support for the intuition, Miller draws upon the undeniable claim that it would be inappropriate to deny that the poverty of poor people in the United States worsens their lives even if they could adopt the life goals of hermit monks

---

<sup>110</sup> It might be that facts about whether a person's life is objectively bad in a morally relevant way depend upon how his life used to be, but this is neither obvious nor inconsistent with what I say here.

<sup>111</sup> Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 14.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. Of course, Miller could respond along the lines that I suggest below, but this would require giving up or altering his account of what it is for a life to be worsened. In his sense, I regard myself as advancing and developing a Millerian account beyond its promising foundation.

and nuns “through some strenuous project of self-transformation.”<sup>113</sup> This has got to be right. But there is a difference between, on the one hand, radically altering oneself in a wholesale exchange of one’s goals for a novel set and, on the other, abandoning *some* of one’s worthwhile goals in the name of becoming more responsive to neediness. The latter hardly seems to involve doing violence to oneself. Such a sacrifice might be very difficult, but this fact alone does not imply that such changes cannot be morally required. We should not expect that living a morally justifiable life will always be easy.

Suppose that Leela gives generously to poverty relief efforts and, like Joni, has a wide array of worthwhile goals. She has no free time, which is just as she likes it. Leela cannot be run off her feet. If she is not learning to dance, she is learning to yodel. When she is not introducing her palette to new things at her favorite experimental restaurant, she is buying what she needs to try her own hand at molecular gastronomy. How she manages to do all this while training for marathons, keeping her music library fresh, participating in epistemology debates online, and all the other things she manages to fill her life with mystifies her friends.

If Sympathy were true, Leela would act permissibly in eliminating her charitable aid rather than her restaurant budget in order to balance her checkbook in the face of an unexpected demotion, provided that savoring and exploring cuisines were a goal with which she truly identified. This can’t be right. The extremist says that this is because the interests served by Leela’s gustatory pursuits are less important than the interests served by poverty relief efforts. But this isn’t right, either. I’ve taken great pains to show that such interests can be comparatively significant. The problem is that in eliminating her poverty relief budget, Leela effectively undermines her good standing as a member of the global moral community. In

---

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

failing to satisfy the Consignment Constraint, Leela detaches herself from the fate of her fellow human beings in a way that invites their reasonable resentment. Whatever other goals the relatively well-off are committed to, relieving neediness *has* to be one of them, even if being a neediness reliever isn't a goal we can work into our conception of who we are.

The Fulfillment Standard does better with Leela because it doesn't set the bar for permissibly quite so low — the mere fact that a sacrifice would be significant does not mean that Leela cannot be morally required to make it. Not all sacrifices of significant, worthwhile goals involve doing violence to oneself in the relevant sense. But this raises a difficult question: doesn't the Fulfillment Standard imply that we should work toward single-minded devotion to neediness relief by giving up one worthwhile goal after another in a series of significant sacrifices, none of which amount to the self-inflicted violence of wholesale substitution of one's goals for a novel set?

The answer is simple, if frustratingly vague. The Fulfillment Standard draws the line at fulfillment, a line which falls somewhere between having no worthwhile goals with which one identifies and having a great many such goals. Joni is meant to elicit our intuition that a greater number of worthwhile goals doesn't always translate into greater fulfillment. But it doesn't follow from this that fulfillment doesn't require some varied set of worthwhile goals. At some point, giving up a worthwhile goal *would* involve worsening one's life as a whole in a way that it would make sense to describe as doing violence to oneself. Just where that point is will depend upon a number of factors, including the nature of the goals one has, the number of these, how one became attached to them, the way in which they contribute to one's life, and so on. There is no obvious way to characterize this line in a way that will be applicable to all, if only because fulfillment is realized in such a wide variety of ways across persons.

In order to make the Fulfillment standard more precise, I would have to defend a detailed general account of human fulfillment and perhaps a metric for measuring it. These are issues that it would take a book to fully address. Moreover, such account is bound to be very controversial. Even if it were not, I doubt that even a comprehensive view of this kind would be sufficient to wring specific directives from the claims and insights which make moderation plausible. Nonetheless, I am hopeful that I can provide an account that is sufficiently general to avoid relevant controversies, yet specific enough to make the Fulfillment Standard practically useful.

### **Giving, Living, and the Grounds of Choice**

Whether a life is fulfilling depends upon many factors, including what a person cares about and the social context in which she finds herself. Adam Smith does a fine job of illustrating the cultural-relativity of facts about dignity. What about the agent-relativity of preference?

One person's favorite pastime may strike another as dull, indecent, or otherwise worthless. Some people find nothing more gratifying than the company of family. Others are glad to keep theirs at arm's length. Any account of personal fulfillment must be significantly general if it is to be universal enough to inform moral standards. Here, I think Scanlon can point us in a profitable direction. In a discussion about how he cannot offer a general account of human well-being, Scanlon (ironically) offers us a sensible starting point: "success in one's aims, at least insofar as these are rational, is one of the things that contribute to the quality of a life."<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>114</sup> T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 118.

This is a good start, though one might question Scanlon's appeal to success, at least if it is meant to be a necessary condition of fulfillment. (If a person never becomes as talented a musician as she sets out to be, the endeavor may nevertheless be very rewarding.)

That being said, having a set of goals and the resources to pursue them does seem like a very good candidate for inclusion in a general account of human fulfillment. We might add the following to create a reasonably comprehensive list: happiness, self-realization, rest and relaxation, strong and stable social bonds, self-esteem, self-respect, experiential variety, self-expression, altruistic activity, and frivolity. For lack of a better term, call these *fulfillment goods*.

I suspect the final two items on the list of fulfillment goods are likely the most controversial. I include altruistic activity for two reasons. The first is simply that, for many people, helping others is a deeply rewarding experience. Moreover, the inability to help others is one of the most oft-cited burdens of poverty. For example, survey participants in Nigeria conceive of the ability to help others as intimately tied up with dignity.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, an anonymous survey respondent in Pakistan offered the following rhetorical question in response to a query about the burdens of his own poverty: "If one man is hungry and does not have any food, then how can he help another hungry man?"<sup>116</sup> More generally, having the ability to help others is often cited by the very poor as a central feature of their conception of the good life.<sup>117</sup>

Of course, not everyone finds altruistic activity rewarding. But this list is not meant to capture a set of necessary conditions for human fulfillment. Any list which contained only necessary conditions would certainly be too short to constitute a sufficient set for any individual, given facts about human variability. Not only does variation in temperament and talent vary

---

<sup>115</sup> Deepa Narayan et al., "Voices of the Poor : Crying out for Change" (Washington D.C.: The World Bank, January 1, 2000), 27, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2000/01/1047447/voices-poor-crying-out-change>.

<sup>116</sup> Narayan et al., *Can Anyone Hear Us?*, 116.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

across individuals, but human fulfillment is multiply realizable even *intrapersonally*. Thus, as far as a general account goes, the best we can hope for is a wide-ranging list which captures most of the important determinants of fulfillment for most people.

So, why is frivolity on this list? Aren't frivolous pursuits irrelevant to fulfillment and well-being by definition? I'm happy to concede that they are, in the narrow sense that no individual frivolous pursuit is likely to be important in the sense that is at issue here. But this doesn't entail that such pursuits are not an important component of a fulfilling life. It just means we are not thinking in terms broad enough to appreciate their significance.

As we've seen, the very poor will sacrifice comparatively more nutritious food for sweeter and more expensive alternatives. Arguably, no individual sweet snack, dessert, or other frivolous good really matters all that much from the standpoint of their well-being. However, a life in which one *never* indulges in frivolity surely lacks something significant. Such indulgences can be a means of escaping the gravity of our concerns and balancing our lives with a levity that makes them better on the whole. Presumably, this levity and subsequent balance is ultimately what the very poor are striving for in making sacrifices for sweet foods, though they may not conceive of themselves as doing so.

Perhaps the list of fulfillment goods should be longer, though I doubt anything of great significance has been left out. Not only are these the things we tend to strive for, they are the things that people everywhere are willing to fight for. If I am right, we cannot be morally required to sacrifice them, even in the face of great material deprivation. However, this is not to say that any attempt at striving for them is morally permissible. Recall the Efficiency Constraint.

**The Efficiency Constraint:** Where multiple means are available to realize a type of good the pursuit of which could not reasonably be resented, one ought, morally, to adopt means of pursuit that are conducive to one's ability to relieve neediness.

Of all the constraints I defend, the Efficiency Constraint is at once the most practically useful and frustrating to implement. At a general level, it is a reminder that living as we morally ought requires a healthy amount of self-discipline. Part of this involves simply refocusing ourselves in such a way that we become more concerned about others (or at least more responsive to the neediness of others). Not only will this end be difficult for many to adopt, it will also be difficult to pursue well. The Efficiency Constraint is meant to help in this latter regard by providing structure to the requisite self-discipline. I will have more to say about this below. First, however, I'd like to linger a bit upon a potentially contentious presupposition of the Efficiency Constraint, namely that the goods which comprise human fulfillment are multiply realizable intrapersonally.

The Efficiency Constraint only makes sense to the extent that it is possible to realize fulfillment goods in more than one way. If the constraints of culture and psychology entailed for each a unique path to fulfillment, the moral landscape would be much simpler, at least theoretically. But this is not case. Many of the fulfillment goods can be obtained or achieved in multiple ways. As with many of our choices, moral considerations recommend some over others.

Our cosmologist friend Nina's love of science and passion for discovery manifests itself in excitement at the prospect of discovering life on one of Saturn's moons. I argued that the cost of making this discovery was too great to be justified in light of the fact that there are many less costly ways to express one's love for science and satiate one's passion for discovery. It might be true that Nina would be unfulfilled (or significantly less fulfilled) in a profession which didn't offer the type of goods that draw her to cosmology, but surely her fulfillment does not require something as specific as a token space mission.

By way of further illustration, consider gift-giving. Given its social significance as a means of expressing love, appreciation, and gratitude, it is difficult to see how one could reasonably be resented for engaging in the practice.<sup>118</sup> However, one could reasonably be resented for the choices one makes *within* the practice. The adage, “It’s the thought that counts,” is often used to remind us that we ought to be grateful for a gift we’ve received, even when we do not care for it. But it is just as morally relevant as a reminder about *giving*: gifts are meant to be tokens, and they need not be expensive to serve this function. One can express one’s love with baking as well as one can with a BMW (or a bicycle, for that matter).

I could go on giving examples, but I trust the point is clear, even if the practical import of the Efficiency Constraint often is not. Many questions about fungibility will be difficult to answer. While there are likely to be some cases in which trading one goal for another will make no difference in terms of how fulfilling one’s life is on the whole, there are just as likely to be cases in which the qualitative consequences aren’t quite identical. What should one do then? Do we even have a metric of fulfillment fine-grained enough to make reliable comparisons among relatively fungible goods or goals? What if one could do something a *little* less fulfilling but a *lot* less resource-intensive?

These questions worry me. And they should worry you, too. As morally conscientious individuals, we should always be open to analysis, self-criticism, and possibilities for moral improvement. But living in accordance with the fulfillment standard does not require that we

---

<sup>118</sup> One might think that this is false if only because there are less resource-intensive ways that we can express ourselves to one another. This is certainly true, but not immediately relevant. It’s true that ‘we’ could do without gift-giving altogether in the sense that there is a possible world (or culture) in which gift-giving is not done, or not done for significant reasons. However, the moral permissibility of individual behavior does not straightforwardly reflect facts about such possibilities. As things stand, gift-giving is expected of us as a matter of cultural propriety. Perhaps there are sufficiently strong moral reasons to abandon the practice as a culture, or at least to relax the expectations surrounding it. But as long as the cultural norms are in place and enforced by shame and social exclusion, no individual could reasonably be resented for engaging in the practice.

know the answers to these questions. At least, it doesn't require that we have the ability to make judgments sufficiently fine-grained to answer these questions in their most narrow form. For one thing, we are fallible and limited in ways that make us poor at judging the costs of alternatives or increased frugality. But this isn't a license to avoid trying or making a good faith effort to do our best. So long as we do, we can hardly be resented for making choices that are less efficient than they could have been.

Thankfully, when it comes to the big decisions such as career choice, whether or not to increase the size of a family, and so on, we are likely to know ourselves well enough to make the morally appropriate decision. Where we do not, we can hardly be resented for endeavoring to learn, perhaps by trial and error combined with earnest self-reflection. More to the point, it's this big picture that really counts. Here's what I mean.

I've been arguing for an ideal according to which we should do our best to be members of the moral community in good standing, where this standing is determined by the reasonable judgements of others. This ideal compels us to aspire to live our lives such that we could not be subject to the reasonable resentment of the very needy. In attempting to live up to this ideal, we are almost certainly bound to make mistakes. But good people make mistakes. As such, making mistakes does not make us bad members of the moral community, worthy of reasonable resentment. To be sure, some decisions are beyond the pale (crystal bathtubs come to mind), but that doesn't mean that any miscalculation makes us vicious or insufficiently conscientious. As we gain experience and shape our lives, we learn more about ourselves and become better positioned to know who we are and what we need in order to construct a good, fulfilling life for ourselves. While fallible and imperfect in other ways, I see no reason to doubt that sincere, well-motivated people can be very good at satisfying the Efficiency Constraint.

This is not to say that doing so will be easy. We *want* things, after all. Sometimes, we *really* want things that do not contribute to our fulfillment in significant ways. This is where the Valuable Ends Constraint comes in. Let's talk about it.

**The Valuable Ends Constraint:** One ought, morally, to refrain from devoting resources to the pursuit of ends which do not advance a compelling human interest.<sup>119</sup>

This constraint might seem problematic for me because not getting what we really want makes us unhappy and surely happiness is an important component of human fulfillment. I do not deny that it is, though I deny that the mere fact that not having something makes someone unhappy suffices to secure an entitlement claim. Clearly, for instance, the adapted preferences of the entitled upper class are of no moral significance.

Consider the hedge fund manager who speaks truly when he says that he would be miserable without his Ferrari. While unfortunate in some sense, the fact that giving up his Ferrari would make him unhappy does not ground a moral claim to it any more than being a spoiled brat entitles one to the objects of one's desire, however unhappy one is for not having them.

A rich person may be very attached to his Ferrari. Indeed, having one may be an important component of his self-conception. But any plausible moderation must be sensitive to the fact that there are validating and nonvalidating ways of becoming attached to things. Growing up with (or growing accustomed to) life among wealthy individuals who fill their lives and driveways with status symbols is not a validating way of becoming attached to things. Having to give up these things up may be frustrating, even embarrassing in certain company, but these facts cannot be morally decisive. Status symbols are not morally significant precisely

---

<sup>119</sup> As Dick rightfully points out, this constraint "sounds rather grim." I go on to clarify its import in ways that (I hope) dispel this grimness, but I struggle to find a means of rephrasing it to the same effect.

because they do not serve any significant need.<sup>120</sup> A life without a Ferrari cannot, for this reason, be a bad one in a way that is morally significant. To some degree, we are morally responsible for facts about what we need to be happy. At least, there are some explanations of attachment that we can't reasonably expect the very needy to accommodate.

Just how much control we have over the grounds of our own happiness is an empirical question that I cannot hope to answer here. However, it is clear that we are capable of taking stock of and reasoning with ourselves, gaining new perspectives on our lives, and subsequently (re)orienting our priorities. Arguably, motivating us to do these things is what sets the best literature and moral philosophy apart from the rest. Presumably, however, there are hard limits to the possibility of change in light of self-assessment and criticism. I do not know what these are, but it hardly seems controversial to suppose that the wealthy can lead very good lives without crystal bathtubs and Ferraris.

Does this entail that a person could never be morally entitled to a Ferrari? No. The mere fact that a person could lead a fulfilling life without some possession does not entail that he, or anybody else, is not morally entitled to that possession. Suppose our hedge fund manager works in the financial sector because he is animated by a desire to maximize his ability to relieve neediness — given his individual talents and dispositions, managing a hedge fund is the most effective way he can earn money for poverty relief. If he reasonably believes that owning a Ferrari makes him even better at this than he would be otherwise (say because such status symbols help him lure the wealthiest clients), then his Ferrari ownership does not make him the

---

<sup>120</sup> Perhaps one could tell the story in such a way that losing a Ferrari could have morally significant consequences. If giving up his Ferrari would cause a man to suffer a mental breakdown or some other kind of significant trauma, then clearly the stakes are significant. But this doesn't imply that he is morally entitled to his Ferrari. If anything, it implies that he ought to receive psychological treatment for what is clearly an obsessive attachment to his car (or more generally, a life of luxury).

object of reasonable resentment. (Consider this another reminder of the importance of looking beyond actions to the people who stand behind them.)

### **Bringing it Together**

In their own ways, all three constraints call upon us to take stock of our lives and priorities. As difficult as this might be, we cannot escape the reasonable resentment of others simply by neglecting to do so. Unlike children, we are in a position to spoil ourselves. I wish that I could offer a formula for determining the line between doing so and not. Temptation and self-deception are potent sources of moral error, particularly when they collude. This is especially true given that we live in a culture that encourages self-indulgence. Not only are we led to believe that consumerism is a path to fulfillment (it isn't),<sup>121</sup> but the prevailing view is that earning money is tantamount to being entitled to it.

I began this chapter with a seemingly simple question: How should we live? I have not been able to answer it as thoroughly or as specifically as I would have liked. Given the complex, agent-relative nature of human fulfillment, no answer to this question can be both universal and specific enough to provide a straightforward guide to living well against a background of world poverty. Instead, we each of us have work to do.

One of the significant differences between the relatively-well off and the needy is that it is not difficult for us to live well. I am convinced that the truth of his claim is not nearly as obvious as it may appear. In this context, we owe extremists like Peter Singer our gratitude for demonstrating that our entitlement claims are not nearly as strong as they seem to us. As I hope to have demonstrated, however, extremists are wrong to think that our entitlement claims end

---

<sup>121</sup> In fact, research shows that materialism is correlated with negative outcomes, even for the rich. See Tori DeAngelis, "Consumerism and Its Discontents," *Monitor on Psychology*, June 2004, 52.

where the good things in life begin. We do not go wrong in pursuing good lives, though we must be committed to structuring our lives in ways that may leave us frustrated in the wake of the sacrifices we must make in the hard light of self-reflection. The onus is on us to pursue our own fulfillment in ways that facilitate the ability of others to do the same.

The very needy are likely to think that living as we morally ought in a world of great need is an insignificant price to pay, given the degree to which they must sacrifice in the name of realizing their own fulfillment. They would be right. We've no grounds to complain about the difficulty involved in sacrificing things we can do without, even if doing so requires a considerable degree of soul-searching in the name of self-understanding and calibration. The needy can reasonably expect this much of us, and that is precisely the point.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Banerjee, Abhijit V., and Esther Duflo. "The Economic Lives of the Poor." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21, no. 1 (2007): 141–67.
- . "The Economic Lives of the Poor." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 141–67.
- Chambers, Robert, Deepa Narayan, Meera Shah, and Patt Petesch. *Crying Out for Change: Voices of the Poor*. Oxford ; New York: World Bank Publications, 2000.
- Copp, David. "The Right to an Adequate Standard of Living: Justice, Autonomy, and the Basic Needs." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 9, no. 1 (1992): 231–61.
- Darwall, Stephen. *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- DeAngelis, Tori. "Consumerism and Its Discontents." *Monitor on Psychology*, June 2004.
- Gentleman, Amelia. "What Is It like to Live on Britain's Most Expensive Street?" *The Guardian*. Accessed June 12, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/money/2014/apr/07/londons-most-expensive-street-kensington-palace-gardens>.
- Herman, Barbara. "The Scope of Moral Requirement." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 30, no. 3 (July 1, 2001): 227–56.
- Igneski, Violetta. "Perfect and Imperfect Duties to Aid." *Social Theory and Practice* 32, no. 3 (July 2006): 439–66.
- Kagan, Shelly. *The Limits of Morality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- McNaughton, David, and Piers Rawling. "Can Scanlon Avoid Redundancy by Passing the Buck?" *Analysis* 63, no. 280 (October 1, 2003): 328–31.
- Miller, Richard W. *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2010.
- Murphy, Liam B. "The Demands of Beneficence." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22, no. 4 (October 1, 1993): 267–92.
- Nagel, Thomas. *Equality and Partiality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- . *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- . *The View From Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Narayan, Deepa, Raj Patel, Kai Schafft, Anne Rademacher, and Sara Koch-Schulte. *Can Anyone Hear Us?: Voices of the Poor*. World Bank Publications, 2000.
- Narayan, Deepa, Meera K. Shah, Robert Chambers, and Patti Petesch. "Voices of the Poor : Crying out for Change." Washington D.C.: The World Bank, January 1, 2000. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2000/01/1047447/voices-poor-crying-out-change>.
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Scanlon, T. M. "Preference and Urgency." *Journal of Philosophy* 72, no. 19 (1975): 655–69.
- Scanlon, T.M. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Scheffler, Samuel. *The Rejection of Consequentialism*. Revised Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Singer, Peter. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (April 1, 1972): 229–43.
- . *Practical Ethics*. 3rd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

- . *The Why and How of Effective Altruism*. TED Video, 2013.  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/peter\\_singer\\_the\\_why\\_and\\_how\\_of\\_effective\\_altruism?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/peter_singer_the_why_and_how_of_effective_altruism?language=en).
- Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors LTD, 2008.
- Unger, Peter. *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*. Oxford University Press, USA, 1996.
- United Nations Development. *Human Development Report 1998*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Wolf, Susan. "Moral Saints." *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (August 1, 1982): 419–39.