Defending Limits on the Sacrifices We Ought To Make For Others

VIOLETTA IGNESKI
McMaster University

How much are we morally required to do to aid others? After articulating some of the main contributions to this debate, I defend the position that we are sometimes morally permitted to spend our time and resources satisfying our own interests and needs rather than using them to aid others who are in desperate need. I argue that the duty to aid the needy should not always take priority over every other end we have. Whatever else we value, we most highly value the ability and opportunity to live our lives on our own terms; this grounds both our obligation to aid others and places limits on how far these obligations ought to extend. Persons ought to respect others and fulfill their moral obligations but they must also be given the moral space to set ends and pursue those ends just because they are theirs.

There are many excuses that people give for not devoting (more of) their time and resources to help persons in need. Here are a few common ones. 'Helping others is a good thing, but it isn't something we are obligated to do.' 'I've already donated a significant amount to charity this year.' 'I need to use (or save) my resources to ensure that my dependants and I will live fulfilling and meaningful lives.' Are any of these legitimate? This article has two main purposes. The first is to articulate some of the main contributions to this debate and categorize the main views – the consequentialists and the Kantians, the extremists, minimalists and the moderates in between. The second is to articulate my own view and in so doing defend the position that we are sometimes morally permitted to spend our time and resources satisfying our own interests and needs rather than using them to aid others who are in desperate need. I will argue that while there are moral obligations we ought to fulfill, including the duty to aid the needy, these obligations should not always take priority over every other end we have. Whatever else we value, we most highly value the ability and opportunity to live out our lives on our own terms; this grounds both our obligation to aid others in true need and places limits on how far these obligations ought to extend. Persons ought to respect others and fulfill their moral obligations but they must also be given the moral space to set ends and pursue those ends just because they are theirs.

doi:10.1017/S0953820808003257
Utilitas Vol. 20, No. 4, December 2008
Printed in the United Kingdom

I approach these issues from a non-consequentialist perspective. Thus, the limits on the duty to aid that I explore encompass more than efficiency considerations. Morality is about more than maximizing good states of affairs. I do not deny that we should care about happiness (and welfare), but this does not entail an obligation to make people as happy as possible. Rather, we ought to be concerned about providing persons with the tools they need to make themselves happy. On this view, the individual bears much of the burden and responsibility for organizing and living her life, but only within the context of a society that respects her autonomy both by refraining from unlawfully restricting her freedom and by providing her with the necessary conditions for autonomous agency. These cursory remarks are not intended to convince anyone of the correctness of this moral view; rather they are meant to sketch a starting point from which it makes sense to defend limits on the sacrifices individuals have to make for the sake of others.[1] Moreover, we shall see that the very justification for the moral obligation to aid is inextricably connected to its limits.

There is a limit on the amount of sacrifice any individual is required to incur in the course of fulfilling her obligation to the needy – this threshold is a function both of our views of human nature and what it is we value about lives, and of the way we conceive of the role each individual ought to play in addressing situations of poverty and need. Articulating the threshold and making a case for where to set it is useful for both the moral moderate who seeks to justify limitations on the demands of morality and the moral extremist who accepts that morality is very demanding but acknowledges that some omissions are more blameworthy than others.[2]

But first, two points of clarification about scope. The limits I explore are limits on how much is required of each individual in her effort to aid the truly needy. I distinguish aiding the needy from general beneficence. There are many ways we can benefit others. Certainly, we all need help from others for one thing or another. I need the help of my teaching assistants to return my students' graded assignments promptly; I need the help of my chiropractor to relieve the pain in my shoulder; I need the help of an IT expert to help me figure out why the message filters I set up in my email don't work. The type and amount of help we need (and want) is endless. It is not an exaggeration to say that we depend on others to help us achieve most of our ends. But this is not the kind

[1] Larry Temkin takes an interesting approach in 'Thinking about the Needy, Justice and International Organizations', *The Journal of Ethics* 8.4 (January 2005), pp. 349–95, where he adopts a combination of consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics to ground the duty to aid.

[2] I borrow the terms 'moderate' and 'extremist' from Shelly Kagan's *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford, 1989).

of aid that I am interested in here. The duty to aid is a duty to help persons who require the basic necessities of life or whose very status as an autonomous agent is under threat.[3]

The scope is further limited because I am leaving to one side cases of emergency rescue. Elsewhere, I have argued that the duty to rescue is a special type of obligation to aid. It is not special in terms of its justification but rather in terms of its structure. That is, the structure of our obligations to aid in rescue cases is different from the structure of our obligations to aid the needy in all other circumstances. A consequence of this structure is that the duties have different fulfillment conditions and different limiting conditions. Rather than repeat and defend those arguments here, I will leave aside cases of rescue and focus instead on all other situations of need.[4] The implication for those who agree that there is a morally significant difference between the duty to rescue and the duty to aid the needy is that the account of limiting reasons I develop will not be complete since I do not provide the necessary explanation for how the limitations function differently in rescue situations. However, restricting the scope this way does not weaken the practical importance of the account of limiting reasons, especially since the focus is on the wider category of aid that confronts most of us daily. Those who reject the distinction outright can apply these limiting reasons to all cases of need.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE EXTREMES

More than thirty years ago, Peter Singer made a compelling case that we should be doing much more to aid the needy than we are.[5] To this day, his position on this issue has not changed much. In the intervening

[3] For an excellent discussion of a Kantian justification, see Barbara Herman, 'Mutual Aid and Respect for Persons', *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 45–72. For a consequentialist justification of the distinction between basic needs (or urgent needs) and preferences see Thomas Scanlon in 'Preference and Urgency', *Journal of Philosophy* 72.19 (1975), pp. 655–69. Thomas Nagel appeals to the same idea in his famous example of climbing Mount Kilimanjaro (*The View from Nowhere* (Oxford, 1986), ch. 8). Martha Nussbaum argues that there are certain necessary functionings or capabilities for functionings that we must have to live a decent human life in 'Aristotelian Social Democracy', *Liberalism and the Good*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass, Gerald M. Mara and Henry S. Richardson (New York, 1990). In *Spheres of Justice*, Michael Walzer argues that there is a baseline level at which persons are enabled to be equal democratic citizens or have full membership in society.

[4] See Igneski, 'Perfect and Imperfect Duties to Aid', *Social Theory and Practice* 32.3 (July 2006), pp. 439–66.

[5] Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (Spring 1972), pp. 229–43. Not all have found it compelling. For vigorous arguments against Singer, see Garrett Hardin, 'Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor', *Psychology Today* (September 1974); Jan Narveson 'Welfare and Wealth, Poverty and Justice in Today's World', *The Journal of Ethics* 8.4 (January 2005), pp. 305–48; and John Kekes, *The Illusions of Egalitarianism* (Ithaca, 2003).

years, his project has been taken up and defended by many others, including Peter Unger, Richard Arneson and Thomas Pogge, and has sparked numerous criticisms from both moral minimalists who reject the existence of any such obligation and moral moderates who argue for limits.[6]

Singer's main principle is that 'if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it' and so we ought to aid the needy when we can do so without sacrificing anything *comparably morally significant*.[7] Given the amount of suffering and need in the world, a significant amount of sacrifice is required of each of us:

> it follows that I and everyone else in similar circumstances ought to give as much as possible, that is, at least up to the point at which by giving more one would begin to cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents – perhaps even beyond this point to the point of marginal utility, at which by giving more one would cause oneself and one's dependents as much suffering as one would prevent in Bengal.[8]

According to Singer, we ought to bring ourselves to the point of suffering at which the Bengali refugee is at and not further. To do more would bring about a worse state of affairs. On this reading, we need not sacrifice our lives or our most basic needs for the needs of others. This seems to be a reasonable way of interpreting 'comparable moral significance'.[9] Notice that even this extreme version of the principle acknowledges that there are limits on what we must do for others.

I will not defend this minimally limiting reason since it is acceptable to even the most demanding moral theorist. If what we are concerned with is ensuring that persons have, at the very least, their basic needs met, I cannot see any good reason why we should not prefer satisfying our own basic needs before the needs of a stranger. The challenge

[6] Pogge ought to be distinguished from the rest as his argument does not depend on a successful argument for the existence of a positive duty to aid but rather turns on his claim that the duty to aid can be captured as a negative duty of justice because of our responsibility for the need in the world which is a direct consequence of the unjust global economic order. For his argument to that effect, see '"Assisting" the Global Poor', *The Ethics of Assistance*, ed. D. Chatterjee (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 260–88. The moderate responses are too many to list. Among those that have influenced me the most, I include Onora O'Neill, Thomas Nagel, Samuel Scheffler and Liam Murphy. For an excellent and sustained attack against all of these approaches see Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*.

[7] Singer, 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', p. 231.

[8] Singer, 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', p. 234.

[9] Though not the only way if giving up everything I have helps several people; my desperate need is not comparable to helping several people recover from a similar situation.

becomes more difficult when we want to justify preferring to satisfy our wants and desires over the basic needs of strangers.[10]

Consider also the more moderate version of Singer's principle of aiding the needy. In this modified version, the demands on moral agents are less stringent. We are only obliged to aid the needy when we can prevent their suffering without sacrificing *anything morally significant*. Singer, himself, does not specify what counts as significant and leaves it up to the reader to determine for herself. While the answer to what counts as morally significant will vary depending on the agent's moral principles and commitments, I take it that Singer expects that there will be some agreement that spending our resources on luxuries and indulgences such as fashionable clothes, gourmet meals and entertainment does not count as morally significant on any moral theory. While my own views are closer to Singer's on this point, a response by Colin McGinn shows that there is certainly no agreement on this matter.

In 'Our Duties to Animals and the Poor', McGinn argues that the threshold of sacrifice should be set at the point at which something is meaningful to us.[11] His ad hoc principle states: 'we should help out the distant poor when and only when their need is desperate and we will not sacrifice anything in our own life that makes it meaningful to us'.[12] On his account, the agent herself determines what is meaningful or what adds value to her life. An uncharitable interpretation would see this as being effectively equivalent to having no obligation to the needy at all (or at the very least a very minimal requirement). I can imagine many people thinking that everything they do and buy is valuable to them and so meaningful in some way. What if we think Singer's formulation requires too much sacrifice and McGinn's does not demand enough? Is it not legitimate to think that we ought to make some sacrifices for others but that there is a reasonable limit? Is it ever legitimate to claim that helping in a particular instance is too difficult or too costly?

It is difficult to make the case that morality demands too much of us when it demands that we sacrifice our interests, even those very important to us, if we compare the value lost to us and the value gained by the person being aided. If you compare the value of the lives of persons in need against almost any other end or commitment we hold, none of our ends will measure up. I do not think that doing this value comparison from an impartial standpoint is appropriate as I do not take

[10] Peter Unger forcefully challenges our common intuitions on these matters in *Living High & Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (New York, 1996).

[11] Colin McGinn, 'Our Duties to Animals and the Poor', *Singer and his Critics*, ed. D. Jamieson (Oxford, 1999), pp. 150–61.

[12] McGinn, 'Our Duties', p. 158.

it to be the appropriate way of conceiving of our projects and our ends. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a defense of agent-relative value and I do not think it is necessary to make my point. Another way of putting this difficulty, that is, other than in terms of it not giving the appropriate moral weight to the agent's perspective, is to say that it does not treat persons with the respect they deserve.[13] To ask people to sacrifice (almost) everything that is important to them is not to respect their autonomy to live their lives on their own terms.

For example, McGinn responds to this kind of weighing rather harshly and thinks that the sacrifices required of accounts such as Singer's are 'absurd' because they treat persons as mere means for the satisfaction of others.[14] Consider his example of the gambler:

> Consider a feckless gambler you know of who is rapidly sliding into bankruptcy but whom you can save by spending several hours in the local pub talking about horse racing and drinking beer. Unfortunately this will involve neglect of your own family and you will not be able to finish the degree you are working toward in the evenings; still, this loss to yourself and your family is not so great as that will result for him if he keeps up his reckless gambling (his pub-related suffering will not be anywhere near as great as his gambling-related suffering). Should you make the sacrifice? Clearly not . . .[15]

While McGinn's response will surely resonate with some, it does not go far enough in capturing morality's demands.[16] We may not have a duty to distract the gambler, but this does not undermine the possibility of there being a duty to help the needy. What interests me, is McGinn's invocation of Kantian-type reasoning. It is true that on Kant's view, we ought to respect and treat each other as autonomous agents and not as mere means for the benefit of others, but Kant reaches a very different conclusion about our duties to others than McGinn does. One important difference is that the duty to aid is a duty concerned with providing persons with the necessary conditions of autonomous agency, and so would not kick in at the level of requiring that we always do what we can to make persons better off. Another important difference is that the existence of moral obligations, including the duty to aid, is necessary for

[13] This point has been made in different ways. A good anthology to look at is *Consequentialism and its Critics*, ed. Samuel Scheffler (Oxford, 1998). The following are some examples: Bernard Williams argues that it is an attack on our personal integrity (pp. 20–50); Thomas Nagel argues that it does not recognize the agent-relative point of view (pp. 142–72); Peter Railton argues that it may end up being self-defeating and alienating (pp. 93–133); Samuel Scheffler argues that it does not take account of the agent-centered prerogative (pp. 243–60).

[14] McGinn, 'Our Duties', p. 155.

[15] McGinn, 'Our Duties'.

[16] There is an obvious disanalogy between helping the gambler kick his harmful and addictive habit and providing someone with the basic necessities of life. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to consider his argument.

treating persons as ends in themselves and is not incompatible with it. Once we adopt the end of aiding the needy, as the duty requires, acting in ways to fulfill it are not instances of being used as mere means since we, ourselves, endorse and commit to the end. Contrary to what we read in McGinn, rejecting consequentialist reasoning for Kantian reasoning does not necessarily relax the demands of morality and get us off the hook.

While there is disagreement among Kantians as to what exactly the duty to aid (or the duty of beneficence) requires, one need only look to Barbara Herman's view to see that the duty may indeed be quite demanding. Herman acknowledges that there are limits on the sacrifices we ought to make but they are very different from McGinn's. She argues that

> We may refrain from helping only if such action would place our own rational activity in jeopardy. Excuses that look to the ordinary difficulties encountered when help is given or that look to other helping actions recently done to get the agent off the hook therefore provide good evidence that the principle of the agent's particular maxims in the circumstances where help is needed is not that of mutual aid.[17]

This is certainly not the only plausible reading of the Kantian imperfect duty of beneficence. While I will not provide a comprehensive comparison here, we can see significant differences if we consider Thomas Hill Jr.'s account which lacks the rigor for which Herman argues. Hill also interprets Kant's imperfect duties as requiring the adoption of general maxims to promote certain ends, and so he puts these principles in the following form: 'one ought to do *x* sometimes, to some extent'. He cites the following from the Doctrine of Virtue: 'the duty is only a wide one: since no determinate limits can be assigned to what should be done, the duty has in it a play-room for doing more or less' (DV 54: 393).[18] The imperfect duty of beneficence (or aid) does not determine how the agent should act but it does require that she adopt the end of aiding others. It follows that if someone seriously adopts an end she will sometimes act accordingly. In working out just what kind of latitude is present in imperfect duties, Hill favors a somewhat lax interpretation that even if we know an imperfect duty applies to a situation 'we may still do something we would rather do which is not commended by a principle of duty, provided that we stand ready to do acts of the prescribed sort on other occasions'.[19] Hill's account

[17] Herman, 'Mutual Aid', p. 67.
[18] Thomas Hill Jr., *Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Moral Theory* (Ithaca, 1992), p. 149.
[19] Hill, *Dignity*, p. 157.

shows that the agent has a significant amount of latitude in deciding how she will act and how much she will do. It should be clear by now that there is wide disagreement between consequentialists and Kantians and also amongst Kantians. In what follows I will explore the Kantian interpretation more fully in order to show that the theory has resources to help us defend the limits on the sacrifices we must make for others. The limits I defend fall somewhere in between Herman's rigoristic approach and Hill's more lax one.

DEFINING THE THRESHOLD

When we say our obligations to the needy are too demanding, I take that to mean that we think that helping others is often incompatible with pursuing our own ends. If it was not, helping others would not cost us very much. Given that there will be a cost in terms of the projects and ends we must sacrifice, our next question is how much cost is reasonable? When are we permitted to pursue our own ends and when must we put our own ends aside to help others?

In fulfilling the duty to help the needy, there are many different means we may pursue to fulfill our obligation. Any particular choice we make is not likely to interfere excessively with our life plans. This is because we have the opportunity to choose which interests to sacrifice. How much we must do to fulfill our imperfect duties depends on how our maxim to help the needy is formulated. It should be uncontroversial to say that the duty is not a duty to help all needy people all of the time since finite beings with finite resources cannot possibly adopt that end. And even if it was possible, it would be putting too much responsibility on the shoulder of each particular individual. Thus, there are limits on what and how much we must do. But if help to all is impossible, to whom must we give and how much? There are two more reasonable ways of formulating the policy maxim: 'help as many people as you can as much as possible' and 'help some people sometimes'.

Formulating the maxim in terms of helping as many people as you can as much as possible seems to come to a similar conclusion that Singer and Unger reach. Many arguments can be found in the literature that reject this based on its extreme demandingness.[20] One recent compelling argument against the extremely demanding duty is made

[20] Scheffler, Nagel, Murphy and McGinn are among many who make this claim. Libertarians, such as Jan Narveson, reject the duty altogether because they claim that aid is not something we owe to others and so there is no moral obligation to sacrifice any of our interests for the sake of others. See Narveson, 'Welfare and Wealth, Poverty and Justice in Today's World' and 'We Don't Owe Them a Thing', *The Monist* 86 (2003), pp. 419–33.

by Garrett Cullity.[21] In 'Asking Too Much', he argues against what he calls the 'severe demand' to continue to contribute to aid agencies until either:

(a) there are no longer any lives to be easily saved by those agencies, or
(b) contributing another increment would itself harm me enough to excuse my failing to save any single life directly at that cost.[22]

He notes that following the severe demand would likely make the pursuit of all sources of personal fulfillment morally impermissible. He then argues that the reasons we have for saving persons' lives in the first place is that it is in other people's interests to have their lives saved. Moreover, it is important to us that our lives are a means to fulfillment. And these fulfillments or 'life-enhancing goods' such as relationships, accomplishments and self-expression are damaged by poverty and can be secured by aid from others.[23] This explains both why we ought to help others and why others ought to reject the 'severe demand' and accept limits on the 'life-enhancing goods' we ought to sacrifice.[24]

Arguments against the extreme view are plentiful and varied; rather than review the merits of them directly, my strategy will be to give reason to support the more moderate formulation of the maxim instead.[25] The reason we ought to limit our sacrifices to others is related to the very justification of the duty to aid them. We have a duty to provide persons with their basic needs or to restore their agency so they can go on to lead autonomous meaningful lives. Agents have the capacity to set goals and priorities and define their life plans. In order to ensure that we can interact with one another on fair and equal terms, we must enable agents by ensuring that they have the necessary tools. This accounts for why we have obligations to others and just as importantly shows why we have obligations to ourselves. Minimally, this means that we should not be required to sacrifice any of

[21] Garrett Cullity, 'Asking Too Much', *The Monist* 86 (2003), pp. 402–18. Once I fill out my position further, it will become obvious that there are many similarities between Cullity's argument against the 'severe demand' and my argument for a more moderate understanding of the duty to aid.
[22] Cullity, 'Asking Too Much', p. 404.
[23] Cullity, 'Asking Too Much', p. 404.
[24] Cullity, 'Asking Too Much', p. 404.
[25] Singer, himself, responds to arguments made by Urmson and Sidgwick that our moral code should not be too far beyond the capacities of an ordinary man because there would be a general breakdown of compliance with the moral code ('Famine, Affluence and Morality', p. 237). Other forceful responses to the 'moderate' position are made by Peter Unger, Shelly Kagan and Richard Arneson.

the necessary tools for having meaningful lives ourselves because such a requirement would be counterproductive and would contravene the reasoning behind the duty. But there are further implications we can draw.

While our obligations to others and to ourselves are grounded in similar ways and while they require that we treat ourselves and others as autonomous agents, this means something very different when applied to others and when applied to our own case. In the case of others, it requires that we provide persons with the tools that are necessary for them to live autonomous independent lives. Our job is to provide persons with their basic needs; their job is to act as agents by adopting life plans and pursuing them. In our own case, it is not enough to merely secure our basic needs (and in some cases this will be beyond our control), we must also use these tools and resources as we live out our lives since this is the very reason we care about agency. Others cannot act on our own behalf; they can help prop us up and ensure that the right background conditions exist, but we are the ones who must act. In order to do this, we have to have our basic needs met, but we also have to be given the space to live our lives. We would not have the space to do this if we were expected to give up all of our interests and projects that, objectively speaking, were not as valuable as meeting the basic needs of others. Thus having the moral space to choose our ends and pursue them is essential to respecting our agency and treating ourselves as ends. It does not follow that there is no obligation to help others or that we do not have to sacrifice any of our interests or ends for the sake of others. What I take this reasoning to point to is both that Singer requires too much sacrifice of us, as his account does not allow us the moral space to live our lives as autonomous agents; and that most of us are not doing enough, as we are not taking our obligations to ensure that others have their basic needs met seriously enough.

The strategy then, is to understand both what grounds the duty and what it is about human life that we ought to protect. On the Kantian interpretation it is our autonomous agency that we ought to protect. If bare existence is what matters, then I doubt if one could argue against a duty that requires extreme sacrifice. Certainly existence and basic physical well-being are necessary conditions of our agency. But they cannot be all that matters. Onora O'Neill makes this point: a commitment to preserving persons' capacities for autonomy requires two things – preservation of biological life and preservation of biographical life. The first requires that persons not be deprived of life since 'the dead (as well as the moribund, the gravely ill, and the famine-stricken) cannot act'; the second requires that 'persons be preserved in forms that offer them sufficient physical energy, psychological space,

and social security for action'.[26] She claims that 'to act in the typical ways humans are capable of we must not only be alive, but have a life to lead'.[27]

One need not adopt an explicitly Kantian justification for the duty to aid to adopt a similar view. This general approach underpins our common-sense understanding of what is important about human lives and why they matter. To illustrate a practical implication of this common-sense view, consider the mandate of the Red Cross. When delivering aid, the Red Cross goes beyond providing the basics such as food, clean water, medical care and shelter. We can see their two-pronged approach to aid in their responses to natural disasters such as the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. The first prong is emergency response and includes locating the missing, rendering first aid, distributing food and safe drinking water, providing shelter and preventing the spread of disease – the second prong deals with long-term priorities for recovery such as community health and disease control, disaster preparedness, community restoration and rebuilding which includes psychosocial support (e.g. community-based activities such as singing and creating art).[28]

At the very least this gives us reason to reject the extreme version of the maxim – help as many people as much as possible – and I contend that it makes the more moderate version – help some people sometimes – more plausible.[29] In itself, this does not provide much guidance as the maxim is very vague and can be interpreted in many different ways. Does it mean that by helping one person a year, we will have done enough? Or perhaps, one person a week? It is not possible to put this in terms of the number of people one must help or the amount of money that one must give as these particularities will vary with the particularities of each individual. Someone with greater resources will be obligated to do more than someone with very few resources. The principle of helping some people sometimes may on the surface seem not to demand much from us, but that is not necessarily the case. In Kant's discussion of imperfect duties, he says that the agent has 'playroom' to decide what to do. But how much playroom? Thomas Hill Jr., Mary Gregor and Marcia Baron argue for a more lenient interpretation in

[26] Onora O'Neill, 'The Moral Perplexities of Famine and World Hunger', *Matters of Life and Death: New Introductory Essays in Moral Philosophy,* ed. Tom Regan (New York, 1986), p. 330. As I mentioned earlier, there is much disagreement among Kantians as to the how demanding the duty is.

[27] O'Neill, 'Moral Perplexities', p. 330.

[28] For a more in-depth description of their services see their website, www.redcross.org.

[29] I take it that this interpretation of the maxim and has the widest support in the literature amongst Kantian scholars. See Thomas Hill Jr., Onora O'Neill, Barbara Herman, Christine Korsgaard, Marcia Baron, Daniel Statman, among others.

which we are sometimes permitted to allow our own ends to take precedence; whereas Barbara Herman argues that, unless aiding puts our autonomy (or our true needs) at risk, only other moral principles could take precedence over the duty.[30]

If the duty to aid the needy is a duty to aid some people sometimes, what is required of the agent? A good place to begin is with the approach Singer suggests in *Practical Ethics*.[31] He suggests that we have a social policy of tithing which requires that each individual give 10 percent of her income (reminiscent of the ancient tithe collected by the church). The money collected will go to help the needy. Exactly how much we must give varies with our wealth and not the particular situation we are in.

This way of formulating the end to help the needy can be interpreted so that it tells us the same thing as Singer's more moderate principle – that we must help others unless it entails that we sacrifice something morally significant. So, we must help some people sometimes, or even all of the time, when we can do so without sacrificing something morally significant. And of course, the exact amount that we are required to sacrifice will depend on what we count as morally significant. Surely protecting our own lives is significant, and providing for our children is significant. But there is a grey area here. Is pursuing a career significant; is taking music lessons significant; is buying books significant? I will leave these as questions here and will return to them shortly.

The formulation of the maxim to aid will also not be precise in the sense of specifying a particular act we ought to perform because the duty, as I understand it, is a duty to adopt an end and not a duty to do a specific act.[32] Certainly the end we commit to prescribes a range of actions (given our particular circumstances) from which we must select; however, it will often be the case that no particular action is obviously better and the agent has the latitude to choose from within this range. Since there is no particular act that the agent is bound to do to fulfill the imperfect duty, we do not need to say that she should only do those acts that are easy or that she is allowed to avoid those that are difficult (e.g. time-consuming, costly). We need not specify this because the agent has the latitude to choose which acts to do as a means of fulfilling her end. Demandingness is less of a problem in any particular

[30] Herman, 'Mutual Aid', pp. 65–8.

[31] Peter Singer, 'Rich and Poor', *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 218–46.

[32] I take this as the best way of interpreting imperfect duties. Contrary to some interpretations, imperfect duties are not necessarily positive duties nor are they necessarily lax or optional. I will not be arguing for this here. The Kantians I have cited throughout this article adopt a similar approach.

instance and is more of a problem when one considers the cumulative effect of making significant sacrifices consistently over the long term.[33]

Even on the most demanding accounts individuals are not required to give up their lives and what is most important to their lives, but they must give some things up. Of course, the amount the individual must sacrifice will vary with the amount of resources she has and the amount of need in the world. It may seem most obvious that she should be required to give up those things that are not important to her identity, but not her most important life projects. Since we are typically in a position to decide when and how we will aid, I am less concerned that the individual will be required to sacrifice these important things in any particular instance of aiding, but that the cumulative effect of her giving would have this consequence. To get a better grasp of the limitations on the imperfect duty to aid we must determine which interests and projects one must give up and which one is morally permitted to retain.[34]

HAVING SPACE TO PURSUE OUR OWN ENDS

In order to live a life on our own terms that is meaningful to us, it is important that we have the moral space to attach priority to our own ends, at least sometimes. But are we allowed to prioritize our ends to the extent that those ends are objectively valuable, to the extent that they are important to us and meaningful to our lives, or just because they are ours provided that we also take the duty to aid others seriously? These are three different ways of understanding this issue. The first way, which is the version Singer and Unger accept, says that the individual must prioritize all her projects and commitments and only be allowed to keep those that are most valuable (or those that are morally significant) and the rest she must give up for the sake of aiding others. On this account, one may never be allowed to go to a movie or send one's children to private school. These may never be important enough. The second way recognizes the subjective value of certain ends – so the things I most value in the world are things that I should not

[33] Herman gives a non-quantitative account in which the amount or frequency of your contributions is not relevant. She concludes that 'we might hope that the cumulative effects of past helpings would have moral weight in determining who among several helpers should be the one to give help, but the argument for mutual aid does not show that this is so' ('Mutual Aid', p. 68).

[34] Richard Miller pursues a different strategy for defending the limits of sacrifice. He develops a moderate principle of beneficence based on a 'principle of sympathy' which views fellow citizenship as a special relationship to whom 'equal respect' is owed. This account is moderate because it does not prohibit us from accumulating luxuries. For a full discussion see 'Beneficence, Duty and Distance', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32.4 (Fall 2004), pp. 357–83.

be required to sacrifice even if they do not have much objective value. But this account shares a difficulty with the first; the values of ends are to be weighed against the value of saving lives. On these views, our ends will (almost) always lose out. The third way says that each individual must do a certain amount to aid others (say for example we determine her 'fair share' based on Singer's tithing suggestion) and beyond that she can do what she pleases with her time and resources. On this account, each of her ends does not have to be weighed against the needs of others. That is, she can choose to pursue a career, send her children to private school, or go to the movies, if she has done her part to aid others. I will examine each of these in turn and argue that the third account expresses the right relationship between our projects and the duty to aid.

(i) Weighing Our Ends Against the Needs of Others

I will consider the first two accounts together as both share the idea that our ends ought to be weighed against the needs of others. Thus individuals must look at the priorities and commitments in their lives and figure out which are important and which are dispensable. Let us assume that my career and my family are the most important things in my life and that I also enjoy leisure activities, particularly going to the ballet. A person's basic needs certainly have more weight than my interest in ballet. Does this mean that I should never go to the ballet, i.e., that aiding others should always take priority over this interest? Perhaps this follows if I consider my interest in ballet to be a very peripheral interest in my life. I enjoy ballet, but my life would not really lose any meaning if I were never to spend money on ballet tickets and never see another ballet production. From this does it follow that I should never spend any money on the arts or on leisure?[35]

I think that even on the strict utilitarian account there may be good reasons to claim that it would be a bad thing overall if individuals did not have moral space to support the arts or enjoy some leisure. Perhaps without time for leisure, we would become too exhausted to be very good utility maximizers. The utilitarian certainly leaves room for this possibility. However, it is in this area of our more peripheral interests that we need to examine how we could better use our resources to help those that not only cannot afford to maintain peripheral interests, but are in danger of losing their lives and having their most basic needs met.

[35] In 'Thinking About the Needy, Justice and International Organizations' Larry Temkin claims that 'fulfilling our positive duties to others will almost certainly require most of us to address the easily preventable deaths of innocents, before contributing to the arts, scenic improvements – or dare I say it – higher education!' (p. 358).

And if I were required to give up my peripheral interests, what about those which are central to my life? May I spend money on my family or pursue a career teaching philosophy? It may seem clearer that I should be allowed to retain these important projects over others such as ballet-watching, but this common-sense view of morality is the subject of much disagreement. Unger considers what limitations there are on the duty to aid and provides a very demanding answer. Though Unger may agree that it is more obvious that we should be required to give up ballet watching over our careers, he also thinks many of us should give up our careers.

Unger is very specific about some of the costs, in particular the financial costs, associated with living a morally decent life. Unger calls this his 'Pretty Demanding Dictate': 'On pain of living a life that's seriously immoral, a typical well-off person, like you and me, must give away most of her financially valuable assets, and much of her income, directing funds to lessen efficiently the serious suffering of others.'[36] At one point he considers that a financial donation of $10,000 may be appropriate, but this figure must be calculated relative to one's income (i.e., those making a high income would have to give much more). He does not give much credence to the 'excuse' that giving so much to the needy will conflict with other moral duties we have to someone to whom we are specially obligated. He agrees that we may have strong obligations to meet the basic needs of our young children but that does not mean we have to live in good neighbourhoods, send them to private schools and buy them luxuries.[37] This requirement demands that we give up almost all of our material assets, even those that may be critical to sustaining ourselves and our dependants.

Unger considers more than the financial aid we must provide to the needy. He thinks it is imperative, not just that we give a certain amount of our actual income, but that we structure our lives so that we make more income so we can give more. About academic lawyers, he says 'it's seriously wrong not to exchange their present posts for much more lucrative jobs and, then, contribute as much as they can toward the morally most imperative ends'.[38] And about philosophy graduate students or those academic philosophers 'not yet very well established', he says that they should seek employment in fields that pay better.[39] This requirement, in a way, demands more than the last because it demands not merely that we give a portion of what we have, but that we have to organize our lives and our most important projects so that

[36] Unger, *Living High*, p. 134.
[37] Unger, *Living High*, p. 150.
[38] Unger, *Living High*, p. 151.
[39] Unger, *Living High*, p. 151.

we can earn more money so the contributions we make will be even greater.[40] Thus, Unger argues that we must give up most of our money, change our deepest projects and commitments and even sacrifice our lives if doing so brings about more good (prevents more suffering) than it costs.

Unger thinks that we ought to prioritize our projects and interests and that the less important they are the more obvious it is that they ought to be given up for the pursuit of the greater good, but he also thinks that we are obligated to give up those projects that are most meaningful to us. Thus on Unger's view, that something has value for us does not give us a good reason to give it priority; in fact, nothing takes priority over preventing the suffering of one life except for preventing the suffering of two (or more) lives.[41] Marginal utility is really the only limitation that Unger accepts. The main difficulty with Unger's position is that it treats every situation of need as an emergency rescue which takes priority over almost anything that might be thought to compete with it.

The duty to help the needy, as I have been discussing it, is a duty to provide an individual in need with the most basic necessities of life and to protect her very agency. The duty exists because we value human lives and we value lives that are worth living. A view like Unger's does not allow us the moral space to ensure not only that we have the basic necessities to live, but also that we have the necessities we need to live our lives on our own terms by choosing the projects we will commit to and by pursuing them. The duty to aid others must have a limit which does not require that we go so far as to compromise our most deeply held commitments because we have duties not only to others, but also to ourselves.[42] Unger's dictate violates these most basic duties. In his efforts to make a case that we must do more for the needy than we are currently doing, he neglects the importance and value we place on the individual.

[40] But this is not all that Unger thinks we must do. The truly serious losses we may be morally required to impose on ourselves are losses like that of 'life or limb' (p. 152). Unger notes that this should be taken as a theoretical implication of his view, since most of us are only required to give money to save lives and not to sacrifice life and limb to save lives. But nevertheless, this is an implication he accepts.

[41] Unger does not draw the distinction I draw between the duty of beneficence and the duty to aid, so on his account I suspect we may do the right thing if we bring up the welfare of 100 wealthy people (which counts for 200 utiles) instead of saving the life of one (which counts for 100 utiles). I defend this distinction in 'Perfect and Imperfect Duties'.

[42] One need not accept that we have duties to ourselves to accept my more general claim that we are permitted to give our own lives priority or that we are permitted to protect those projects and commitments most important to us.

An account that weighs our ends against the needs of others does not value individuals appropriately because it does not adequately recognize the value of the projects and interests that make individuals' lives worthwhile (no matter how important those projects are objectively, or even to the agents themselves). The problem with this account is that it demands that individuals prioritize their projects and then rank them in importance against their duties to aid the needy. But I do not think we should compare the value of any particular project against the value of saving lives. For example, we should not compare the value of going to the movies against the value of saving a life. Framing the issue this way surely does not leave much room for the individual to pursue any of her ends and it requires us to think of ourselves and our projects in the wrong way. If we were to weigh the value of our projects, even our very important projects, against the value of saving lives, I think we would agree that our projects will almost always lose out. And while this may not seem problematic (especially when we consider some of the relatively insignificant ends we do have), having the moral space to pursue our ends is essential to our conception of the person. A person's ends and projects are the things by which she defines her life. Asking her to give them up would be asking her to give up who she is. This does not mean that her ends must always take priority – that would not be compatible with taking the duty to aid others seriously – but it does mean that they should not merely be weighed against other projects and acts – that would not be taking them into account in the right way.

Perhaps one example that illustrates this point is Bernard Williams' example in which his wife and another person are drowning.[43] The common intuition is that he is permitted to value his wife's life over the stranger's life and that he is permitted to save her. However, if he has to think about his decision and weigh out his options, Williams says he has 'one thought too many'. His wife would not be happy to learn that he was mentally weighing his options, even if it did lead him to the right conclusion. Is the life of his wife just another project or end? Because if it is, it is something that could be weighed and outweighed by other projects or other persons. This is basically the way Unger views a person's projects. And this is why it ends up on his calculation that saving the lives of those in need will take priority over almost everything else in our lives.

Instead of conceiving of our lives and our projects as just another entity to be weighed against the value of the lives of those in need, we should shift our thinking. We should conceive of these as two separate

[43] See Bernard Williams, 'Persons, Character and Morality', *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 1–21.

components of an agent's life that must coexist. That is, the agent must include both in her life: she must set ends for herself and pursue them and she must aid persons in need. Thus we are morally obligated to make aiding persons in need one of our ends (a person, such as Unger, may choose to make aiding persons in need his primary end). Thus, Unger's project of aiding the needy could in fact take priority over all his other ends; but this is because this is the way he has set his priorities and not because his other ends lose out in a calculation. That is, if donating money to Oxfam (as a means of aiding the needy) is the thing Unger most deeply cares about, that is the reason why it will always take priority in his life.

(ii) Valuing Our Ends Appropriately

This brings us to the third way of framing the issue. This more promising approach shows that our duties can coexist with our projects, and so takes account of our obligations to others and our responsibility to ourselves. The way it does this is by setting an amount as the agent's fair share of the burden to aid the needy. The agent must give her share to the needy (for example, 10 percent of her income) and then she can do what she wants with the rest of her resources.[44] The virtue of this account is that it recognizes the importance projects and ends have in a meaningful life and that these ends are valuable just because they were chosen by some person. Part of being an autonomous person and having a worthwhile life is having the space to set ends for yourself and being able to value them because they are your ends. This account explains why an agent should be permitted to go to the ballet or spend money sending her children to private school even when there are so many people in need. The agent has the moral space to pursue these projects because aiding the needy is an imperfect duty and the agent has latitude in deciding which persons to help – the duty merely requires that she help the needy (i.e., that she have this as one of her ends) and as long as she is doing her share she may live her life as she wishes.

The duty to aid the needy may be a demanding duty indeed, but it is not a duty that requires that we radically alter the course of our lives. To be denied the moral space to set ends and pursue them contradicts the very rationale of the duty to aid. We must aid others to protect their agency, not merely to prevent them from dying, but so they can have the capacity to construct meaningful lives. If this is something we truly value then we should not be required to give it up ourselves. Thus the

[44] Of course there are other moral obligations the agent has, both positive and negative. A full account of our obligations would show how they all fit together. This is beyond the scope of this article.

individual is permitted, on this account, to set ends that will make her life worthwhile and pursue those ends freely as long as she is fulfilling her other obligations and doing her part to help the needy. Presumably it does not matter to the starving person if I give up going to the ballet this month in order to free up enough resources to help or if I save my lunch money each day or if I buy one less book.[45] It is up to me to choose what to give up. This way we can value the lives of those that need aid while also valuing the lives of every individual, ourselves included.

But what if I have given 10 percent of my salary (or even 50 percent if that is what we determine is the appropriate amount) and I hear of another famine, or just know that there are more people in need of aid: am I permitted to spend the rest of my resources on my own projects and do nothing more for the rest of the needy? Here, I think I am. I am doing my share and that is the extent of my obligation to others.[46] Otherwise, the demands on the individual become almost limitless and the individual does not get the moral space to live a well-rounded life. However, I do think that the needs of others always function as a reason for us to help them. And so, we have good reason to help the victims of the famine, even if we have contributed generously to tsunami victims, hurricane victims and earthquake victims. Perhaps we would say here that aiding the famine victims is supererogatory – something that is good to do but not wrong not to do.

DO THE ACTIONS OF OTHERS DETERMINE OUR OBLIGATIONS?

One way of relaxing the moral demands on individuals is to show that there are thresholds on their individual obligations. This is what I have shown above. Another way is to show that aiding others is a collective problem that we must address together and so the burden on each individual is less demanding. Liam Murphy explores this second way of limiting the moral requirements on individuals.[47]

[45] Certainly the needy person does not care about the value of the project or interest I must give up – this only matters to me. The needy person just cares about receiving the aid.

[46] I should note that it is very unlikely that the duty would require that you do nothing more. There is always more you could do to help the needy and even if we determine your share, you must give your share each year – so there is more you must do next year. My point is that as long as you are doing your part and are thus contributing to the fulfillment of your duty, you can also pursue other projects and ends. This one end does not consume your whole life.

[47] See Liam Murphy 'The Demands of Beneficence', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22.4 (Fall 1993), pp. 267–92, for a strong argument for the compliance condition. Robert Goodin also sees this as a collective action problem, one that can only be addressed collectively: see *Utilitarianism as a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1995).

Murphy argues that beneficence is a cooperative project and we must each do our fair share. Our fair share is determined on the assumption of full compliance and it does not change if there is only partial compliance. Once we have distributed the demands of beneficence fairly to each individual and determined what her share is, we have placed limitations on her obligations to promote the good of others. She need not do more even if others are not doing their part. Murphy claims that when persons object to the demandingness of the duty they are not objecting to the size of their individual share but to the fact that, on some accounts, we have to pick up the slack for others.

Just as Murphy limits the principle of beneficence by the compliance condition, we can limit the duty to aid by the compliance condition. That is, we each must do a certain amount to aid others and this amount varies with the resources we have and the amount of need in the world and not how well others are fulfilling their obligations. Thus the amount of aid we must provide does not increase if others do not comply. So, the amount we must sacrifice is limited by conceiving of aiding as a cooperative project we must all participate in and not as a burden on any particular individual. Joel Feinberg seems to accept the same sort of limitation.[48] Feinberg thinks we should desire 'some sort of scheme of coordination that would allow the starving as a class to be rescued by the wealthy as a class'; thus the burden must be shared by all of society and does not fall unfairly on the shoulders of some individuals.[49] Each of us then is responsible for her 'fair share', not more and not less.

If the compliance condition is a legitimate limit to our duty to aid, the individual will have more space to pursue her own projects. If each of us is allocated a certain share, as long as she is doing her part, she is free to pursue her ends as she sees fit. One could accept the compliance condition and still think that our individual shares of the collective duty to aid are quite demanding given the amount of suffering and need in the world. So in itself, conceiving of beneficence as a cooperative project does not guarantee that morality will not be very demanding. That said, I do think that sharing the burden among all those able to help will lessen the load on each of us.

Singer would reject the compliance condition. While he may think that coordinating our efforts would be an effective way of preventing more suffering in the world, he also thinks that we are obligated to prevent as much suffering as we can. This means that we will often be required to do more than our fair share, especially when others

[48] Joel Feinberg, 'The Moral and Legal Responsibility of the Bad Samaritan', *Freedom and Fulfillment* (Princeton, 1992), pp. 175–96.

[49] Feinberg, 'Bad Samaritan', p. 193.

are not doing their part. Singer's view is demanding not only because each individual is allocated a large share but precisely because the individual does not merely have a finite share of the burden; she must keep aiding until there is no more need and the less everyone else does, the greater her burden will be. Because there is no end to what the agent must do for others, she will have less (or no) space to pursue her own ends.

On the view I have been advancing, there are limits on the duty to help the needy; agents ought to have room to value and pursue their own ends as long as they have adopted the end of helping the needy. The actions of others have a limited effect on what we must do to help. Though we are not required to give to the point of marginal utility or even to give up living meaningful lives, it is important to remember that to actually hold the end of helping the needy, we must act to fulfill it. Whatever amount we judge to be appropriate – whether it is 10 percent or 50 percent of our income – the agent must contribute her share, otherwise she is failing to fulfill her moral obligations. Though much less demanding than what Singer and Unger argue for, this approach, if followed seriously, would lead to much more aid than is currently being given.

Now that we have explored some of the limitations on the duty to help the needy, we have a better understanding (though not a precise formula) of the sorts of actions that are required of the individual. I want to end by saying a little more about how these limiting reasons function. That is, whether they function as justifications for acting in ways that fulfill our own interests rather than the needs of others, or whether they merely function as excuses that mitigate the blame we attribute to agents.

EXCUSE OR JUSTIFICATION?

Richard Arneson, who is fully supportive of an extremely demanding duty in line with Singer and Unger's views, accepts the existence of reasons that serve as excuses which may mitigate our blameworthiness.[50] Thus in many of the situations in which we do not direct our resources to the needy but instead spend them on ourselves, we do something morally wrong, but not blameworthy. Arneson says we can imagine asking others 'Can you really blame me?' That is, can you really blame me for spending my money on my children or for my own growth and fulfillment, even if I know that the money could more effectively be spent saving the lives of needy people? Presumably

[50] Richard Arneson, 'Moral Limits on the Demands of Beneficence', *The Ethics of Assistance*, ed. D. Chatterjee (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 33–58.

since most of us are in the same situation, we can sympathize. I would understand the reasons underlying your decisions because I act on those same reasons myself.

Thus both the moderate and the extremist have an interest in limiting reasons on our obligations to aid – the difference being that the former understands the reasons as justification for not aiding and the latter accepts them merely as excuses (i.e., still wrong not to aid but not blameworthy).[51] It seems to me that Arneson goes even further than this by drawing a distinction between what is right and what we are obliged to do. For him, we are blameworthy only if we fail to do something we are obliged to do.[52] But he argues that many instances of aiding the needy, particularly when we have to make personal sacrifice, will be the right thing to do, but not necessarily something we are obliged to do or blameworthy for not doing. Though I am not altogether convinced of the distinction between moral rightness and moral obligation, this type of view requires an account of the reasons that legitimately count as excusing conditions. I propose that those I discussed can play this role. We understand and sympathize with the person who says 'I've already done my share' or 'there's only so much risk and cost I must endure' or 'I have other obligations and commitments that I must deal with'. We understand and say the same. Arneson takes this as proof that we are not obliged to act any differently and that we are not blameworthy. I take this as evidence that these are justifiable limitations on our obligations to others. Not only are we not blameworthy and not obliged, but we do nothing wrong in those cases.

CONCLUSION

Singer's initial insights were right, there is so much we can and should be doing to aid the needy. The commonly accepted distinction between duty and charity is distorted and does not take our obligations seriously enough. However, this does not necessarily mean that we must sacrifice everything we have to aid others who are in more desperate circumstances. We must balance our obligations to aid the

[51] Even Unger, in the last chapter of *Living High and Letting Die*, claims that, in practice, we may not be required adhere to his demanding theoretical dictates. Similarly, in the final chapter of his book *If You're An Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Cambridge, 2000), G. A. Cohen provides a rationale to explain why it is acceptable for us not to sacrifice everything. Many of us are in a better position to do more good for others by maintaining our current lifestyles than we would be if we were to give up all of our projects and commitments. Whether or not this is true is an empirical question; one certainly Singer would answer differently.

[52] Arneson, 'Moral Limits', pp. 51–6.

needy against our other obligations and against the other ends and commitments that make our lives worthwhile. My account does not give a definitive answer in financial terms as to how much this is, but rather suggests some places to look for good reasons that serve as legitimate limitations on our obligations to the needy.[53]

igneski@mcmaster.ca

[53] I would like to thank Arthur Ripstein for his guidance in an earlier version of this argument. And I would like to thank Samantha Brennan for her helpful suggestions.