

# **Solving a Puzzle About the Demands of Beneficence**

Leora Urim Sung

UCL

Philosophical Studies MPhil Stud

I, Leora Sung, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## **Abstract**

When it comes to our moral obligations to aid people in great need, a puzzle is generated: we have very different intuitions with regards to providing aid in emergency situations and donating to overseas charities. This is puzzling because it is surprisingly difficult to identify any morally relevant difference between providing assistance in emergency situations and providing it in the case of famine relief.

My thesis attempts to answer whether there is a morally relevant difference between emergency cases and famine relief. If there is a morally relevant difference, this allows us to preserve the different intuitions we have regarding emergency situations and poverty alleviation. Before outlining my own response to the puzzle, I examine two potential solutions: David Boonin's argument that the unique directness of aid is a morally relevant factor, and various consequentialist approaches which attempt to lessen the demands of beneficence. I argue that both attempts to solve the puzzle fail.

I suggest that differences such as physical/temporal proximity and experiential impact are morally relevant factors, not because they are relevant in themselves, but because of their correlation with our ability to empathise with the suffering of others. Placing the role of empathy at the centre of our duties to the poor not only solves the puzzle about our different intuitions but it also is able to provide new solutions to problems associated with the demandingness of beneficence.

## **Impact Statement**

I intend for this work to contribute to the literature surrounding our duties of beneficence, and provide an alternative approach to the way we respond to the needs of others.

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## Introduction

According to the 2015 Millennium Development Goals Report<sup>1</sup>, extreme poverty has declined significantly over the last two decades. Despite such progress, about 800 million people still live in extreme poverty and suffer from hunger. Over 160 million children under age five have inadequate height for their age due to insufficient food, 16,000 dying each day before their fifth birthday. Inequality is also on the rise, the gap between the rich and poor now greater than ever: the richest 1% now owe more wealth than the other 99% combined. The success of the MDG agenda prove that poverty reduction is possible, and if you are reading this, it is very likely that you are in a position to help make it happen.

When it comes to our moral obligations to aid people in great need, a puzzle is generated: we have very different intuitions with regards to providing aid in emergency situations and donating to overseas charities. This is puzzling because it is surprisingly difficult to identify any morally relevant difference between providing assistance in emergency situations and providing it in the case of famine relief. Peter Singer famously claimed that there is no moral difference in letting a child drown in a shallow pond and failing to give to famine relief. In a more recently developed version of the argument, Peter Unger essentially argues the same but using a case involving an injured bird-watcher. Both Singer and Unger reject our commonly held intuitions regarding charitable giving and embrace the demandingness of morality; providing aid to alleviate poverty is not supererogatory, it is morally required.

My thesis attempts to answer whether there is a morally relevant difference between emergency cases and famine relief. Many differences between the two cases have already been compellingly refuted in Unger's book "Living High and Letting Die" as being morally irrelevant, and his argument is now

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<sup>1</sup> The Millennium Development Goals Report. 2015. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. [ebook] United Nations.

widely taken to be the most philosophically sophisticated defence of the immorality of declining to give money to famine relief. If there is a morally relevant difference, this allows us to preserve the different intuitions we have regarding emergency situations and poverty alleviation. Of course, there may be many other grounds to defend positive duties to give to charity, but the argument from conflicting judgements can be rejected.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. In Chapter One, I outline Singer and Unger's arguments for strong moral obligations to alleviate poverty. In particular, I look at Unger's puzzle and iterate his objections to several differences between emergency situations and famine relief being morally relevant. The second chapter of the thesis examines a potential solution to the puzzle put forward by David Boonin. He provides a very plausible explanation to justify the difference in our intuitions, namely the unique directedness of aid. I offer my own objections to argue that his explanation is not able to capture what creates an obligation to provide aid in emergency situations that is different from giving aid to famine relief. The third chapter focuses on potential consequentialist solutions to the puzzle. In the final chapter, I offer my own solution to Unger's puzzle. I suggest that differences such as physical and temporal proximity and experiential impact are morally relevant factors, not because they are relevant in themselves, but because of their correlation with our ability to empathise and have compassion for the suffering of others.

Due to the constraints in the length of this project, I will be talking solely in terms of empathy's role in our duties of beneficence. More fundamentally, I believe that many of the challenges Singer and Unger face result from asking only the question of "what should I do?" rather than the question of "what kind of person should I be?", dealing with specific ethical choices rather than the entire life of the agent. Very recently, there has been an emergence in literature that move toward a more developmental, holistic account of our duties of beneficence, and I believe that philosophers are right to do so. Extending my research would involve synthesising virtue

ethics and related ideas into a single account of our duties of beneficence. Issues to address would include the importance of the emotional and motivational aspect of the moral agent when giving, and the development of the agent's psychological and moral capacity to give huge amounts without causing the self to wilt away.



## A Puzzle About the Demands of Beneficence

When it comes to our moral obligations to aid people in great need, a puzzle is generated: we have very different intuitions with regards to providing aid in emergency situations and donating to overseas charities. This is puzzling because it is surprisingly difficult to identify any morally relevant difference between providing assistance in emergency situations and providing it in the case of famine relief. In this chapter, I look at two benchmark works in the philosophical literature surrounding obligations to the needy: the argument of Peter Singer and the more recently developed argument of Peter Unger. Both claim that there is no morally relevant difference between emergency situations and famine relief that could justify our intuitions. This chapter will provide context to the thesis by exploring their arguments in turn.

### 1.1 Singer's argument

In Peter Singer's paper *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*<sup>2</sup> published in 1972, he argues that we need to radically revise our understanding of our obligations to aid others, particularly in regards to famine relief. He claims that the affluent have strong obligations to give very substantial assistance to those in poverty, a statement that is in conflict with what is granted in our society. Though Singer is a utilitarian, his argument does not appeal to the act-utilitarian principle of performing the action that produces the most net welfare. Instead, he makes factual and moral assumptions that he believes are held by most of us, and he moves from these relatively uncontroversial assumptions to a conclusion that demands huge sacrifices of the affluent.

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<sup>2</sup> Singer, P. 1972. *Famine, Affluence and Morality*. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1(3), pp.229-243.

Singer's argument is based on three premises. The first is that suffering and death from the lack of food, shelter and medical care are bad. This is a moral assumption that he believes most people would agree about. The second premise is the crux of the normative argument. He articulates a moral principle that he believes could be almost universally accepted:

*Strong Principle.* 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.<sup>3</sup>

This has considerable force and is aimed to appeal to many because it does not rely on utilitarian grounds, or any other moral theory. The third premise is a factual claim that the affluent can alleviate the suffering and prevent the deaths of those who lack these necessities. The affluent are able to meet their own needs and have excess for luxury items, and so, they can, if they choose to do so, redirect the excess resources that they have towards those in extreme poverty and lessen their suffering. These premises lead Singer to the conclusion that the affluent have strong duties of beneficence; we are obligated to give aid until we would be sacrificing something that is of comparable moral importance (comparable to the deaths of innocents). He argues that we ought to give to charity until we reach a level of marginal utility, the level at which, by giving more, we would cause as much suffering to ourselves as we would alleviate by our giving. This would mean that any resources that we may have that is over and above what is necessary for our subsistence, we ought to give to those in extreme poverty.

Although the Strong Principle is the principle that Singer endorses, he also offers a more moderate alternative which he believes will be even more difficult to resist, while also committing the affluent to strong obligations to alleviate poverty.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 231.

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

The Weak Principle is weaker than the Strong Principle in two ways: first, the obligation only arises when it is in our power to prevent something *very* bad, rather than just bad. The obligation only kicks in when we are faced with potentially *very* bad outcomes we could prevent. Second, the Weak Principle excuses us from duties of preventing harm if it involves sacrificing anything morally significant, even if it is not comparably significant.

Singer defends the Weak Principle using what is now known as the famous Pond analogy:

*Pond.* You walk past a child drowning in a shallow pond. You can save the child without risk to yourself, but your clothes will be ruined as a result.<sup>5</sup>

Almost everyone would agree that you are morally required to pull the drowning child from the shallow pond even if it means ruining your clothes, as this is an insignificant cost, whereas the death of a child is presumably a very bad thing. Singer claims that there is no morally relevant difference between providing assistance the Pond case and providing assistance in the case of famine relief. It would be a mistake to think that this weaker principle would be undemanding, and as Singer says, the uncontroversial appearance of the principle is deceptive<sup>6</sup>. If we apply the Weak Principle and act upon it, it will result in radical changes in the way we live our lives. The affluent are morally required to give away most of their money to alleviate poverty, as luxuries such as buying new clothes and eating out are not only *comparably* insignificant, but also morally insignificant *per se*. Singer's conclusion drastically conflicts with commonly held intuitions about

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

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 231.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 231.

charitable giving, since we consider these acts to be supererogatory rather than morally required.

The analogy of the child drowning in a pond is a powerful one, and if Singer is right that there is no morally relevant difference between Pond and instances of famine relief, then it seems that our obligations to alleviate poverty are extremely high. He considers two possible differences between the two cases, but dismisses them immediately. First, distance or proximity could not be a plausible difference; the fact that the drowning child is nearby whereas famine relief involves distant strangers cannot be a morally relevant difference as our obligations to people do not depend upon physical distance. “The fact that a person is physically near to us, so that we have personal contact with him, may make it more likely that we *shall* assist him, but this does not show that we *ought* to help him rather than another who happens to be further away. If we accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us (or we are far away from him)”<sup>7</sup>. The fact that it is more probable that I will provide aid to someone who is near to me does not justify that action.

Also, the fact that you are the only one in the position to save the drowning child, whereas there are millions of potential contributors in the case of famine relief is not a morally relevant difference. The suggestion that obligations only arise when we alone can prevent harm is not plausible. I am not relieved of the obligation to save the child if I see lots of other people standing by, doing nothing. Singer concludes that the example of Pond analogous to famine relief, that there is no morally relevant difference between them. If we are obligated to save the drowning child, we are also obligated to provide aid to alleviate poverty, and Singer’s moral principle explains why such obligations arise in both cases.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 232.

To sum up, Singer's argument goes as follows: as the Weak Principle states, if we can prevent something very bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of moral significance, we ought to do it. Extreme poverty is bad, and it is within our power to alleviate poverty without sacrificing anything morally significant. For instance, we can stop buying luxuries (things which are not essential for our subsistence) and give that money to famine relief instead, thereby preventing the deaths of many. Therefore, we ought, morally, to give up such luxuries and give much of the income that we have to alleviate extreme poverty.

## 1.2 Unger's argument

In a more recently developed version of this argument, Peter Unger, in his book *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*<sup>8</sup>, defends Singer's conclusion and strengthens the argument by presenting a puzzle about our different behaviour toward people in great need. Commonly held intuitions state that while we have strong obligations to aid in emergency cases, providing aid to alleviate poverty is morally praiseworthy but not obligatory. Through examining sets of case studies, Unger attempts to demonstrate that our different reactions to the two cases are unjustified. He claims that there is no morally relevant difference between them, leading to the conclusion that what we regard to be merely praiseworthy is, in fact, morally required.

Central to his argument are two cases which he calls *The Vintage Sedan* and *The Envelope*. The two cases are carefully constructed to be similar in some respects and different in other respects to highlight the puzzling nature of our intuitions. Due to the importance of these to the argument, I reproduce each in full below:

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<sup>8</sup> Unger, P. 1996. *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*. New York: Oxford University Press.

*The Vintage Sedan.* Not truly rich, your one luxury in life is a vintage Mercedes sedan that, with much time, attention and money, you've restored to mint condition. In particular, you're pleased with the auto's fine leather seating. One day, you stop at the intersection of two small country roads, both lightly travelled. Hearing a voice screaming for help, you get out and see a man who's wounded and covered with a lot of his blood. Assuring you that his wound's confined to one of his legs, the man also informs you that he was a medical student for two full years. And, despite his expulsion for cheating on his second year final exams, which explains his indigent status since, he's knowledgeably tied his shirt near the wound so as to stop the flow. So, there's no urgent danger of losing his life, you're informed, but there's great danger of losing his limb. This can be prevented, however, if you drive him to a rural hospital fifty miles away. "How did this occur?" you ask. An avid bird-watcher, he admits that he trespassed on a nearby field and, in carelessly leaving, cut himself on rusty barbed wire. Now, if you'd aid this trespasser, you must lay him across your fine back seat. But, then, your fine upholstery will be soaked through with blood, and restoring the car will cost over five thousand dollars. So, you drive away. Picked up the next day by another driver, he survives but loses the wounded leg.<sup>9</sup>

In this situation, we regard the actions of the vintage sedan owner to be seriously morally wrong. Most people would say that if you are faced in such a situation, you are morally obligated to provide assistance to the injured bird-watcher, despite the cost to yourself. Compare this to the following case:

*The Envelope.* In your mailbox, there's something from (the U.S. Committee for) UNICEF. After reading it through, you correctly believe that, unless you soon send in a check for \$100, then, instead of each living many more years, over thirty more children will die soon. But, you throw the material in your trash basket, including the convenient return envelope provided, you send nothing, and, instead of living many years, over thirty more children soon die than would have had you sent in the requested \$100.<sup>10</sup>

When faced with this kind of scenario, most people would say that while it is good to donate \$100 to UNICEF, it isn't wrong not to do so. The person

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 24-25.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

who throws away the envelope and does nothing is not morally condemnable.

This is in spite of the following factors which actually give us reason to condemn the actions of the agent in *The Envelope* more than the actions of the vintage sedan owner: first, the worst harm that is caused to any individual is the loss of life in *The Envelope*, compared to the loss of a leg in *The Vintage Sedan*; second, while the children are completely innocent of the situation that they are facing, the trespassing bird-watcher may be held at least partially accountable for his misfortune; third, the lack of action in *The Envelope* affects thirty people, in comparison to just one person in *The Vintage Sedan*; and fourth, the financial cost to the agent is fifty times less in *The Envelope* than it is in *The Vintage Sedan*, costing \$100 as opposed to \$5000. These factors suggest we have reason to judge the actions of the agent in *The Envelope* more harshly than their actions in *The Vintage Sedan*. However, while most people believe that we are morally obligated to help the injured bird-watcher, they do not think it would be immoral to not provide aid in the case of *The Envelope*. It is the difference in our responses to these two cases that generates a puzzle; on the surface, it is not clear that there is a morally relevant difference between the two cases that justify why our responses differ.

Unger argues for what he calls a 'liberationist' solution to this puzzle, meaning that our responses to the two cases cannot be reconciled, and so one should be rejected in favour of the other. His argument is an attempt to liberate us from our own 'illusion of innocence'. Unger rejects our response to *The Envelope*, arguing that if we are morally obligated to save the bird-watcher, we are also morally obligated to donate \$100 to UNICEF. A contrasting way to solve Unger's puzzle would be to provide a 'preservationist' solution, a solution which attempts to preserve our intuitive responses to the two cases and claim that our responses are reflective of our values.

To do this, one would have to show that there *is* a morally relevant difference between *The Envelope* and *The Sedan*. This is not an easy task as Unger has already provided a substantive list of potential differences which he deems are morally irrelevant. He dedicates a significant portion of his discussion to defending the thesis that there is no convincing explanation that could justify the difference in our reactions to both cases, examining a series of different factors, present in one and not the other of the two cases, which might explain and justify the difference in our intuitions of them. He rejects each of these potential preservationist objections as insufficient to ground a more lenient reaction towards *The Envelope*. For the purpose of this thesis, I will briefly explain two sets of characteristics that Unger believes are morally irrelevant in determining our obligations to aid: distance/experience and exclusivity of aid.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.2.1 *Distance and experience*

The first set of characteristics that Unger examines is to do with distance and the experience of the agent. The most obvious difference between *The Vintage Sedan* and *The Envelope* that could potentially justify our adverse reactions is physical distance. While the injured bird-watcher is only a few feet away from you in *The Vintage Sedan*, in *The Envelope*, the children who you could potentially save are many miles away from you.

Like Singer, Unger dismisses physical proximity immediately as morally irrelevant; our common sense tells us that the strength of moral force does not diminish with distance. If I have a moral duty toward someone, the duty remains the same regardless of whether they are far or near. He gives revised versions of *Envelope* and *Vintage Sedan* to illustrate his point:

*The Bungalow Compound.* On your annual trip to Haiti, an envelope arrives at your bungalow asking you to donate \$100 to save the lives

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 2 of *Living High and Letting Die* for a complete list of potential preservationist solutions that Unger addresses.



of children who live just over the compound wall, only a few feet away.

*The CB Radios.* You hear an injured bird-watcher's cry for help on the CB radio in your vintage sedan. He is stranded ten miles away and he asks you to pick him up and take him to hospital. Doing so will cost over \$5000 in upholstery bills.<sup>12</sup>

Unger refers to these altered cases to show that the physical proximity of the need makes no difference to our moral obligations. Although we are much closer to the children in need in Bungalow Compound than we are to the bird-watcher, Unger claims that most would agree that while it would be morally reprehensible to ignore the pleas for help of the injured bird-watcher, it would not be so to ignore the envelope in Bungalow Compound.

Another potentially morally relevant difference that is closely related is social distance. Again, Unger gives us an altered case to show that social distance makes no difference to the moral status of our response: imagine you are driving through South America on a road trip far from home, and you happen across a Bolivian medical student in the same situation as the injured bird-watcher in *The Vintage Sedan*. The fact that you stumble across a foreign stranger this time makes no difference to your moral obligations; you have a duty to offer him assistance.<sup>13</sup>

The next difference Unger addresses is informational directness. In *The Vintage Sedan*, we learn that there is someone in need through direct perception; you see the wounded bird-watcher with your own eyes and assess the severity of his situation. In *The Envelope*, however, the information of the children in need is acquired far more indirectly, through reading something that was written by someone, who themselves acquired this information through reports of others. Unger rejects this factor also as a morally relevant difference. As long as you are certain that the facts are right, it should not matter whether you know of people in need through

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

seeing it first-hand or through reports of others. How the information is gathered is morally insignificant.

Finally, he goes on to claim that ‘experiential impact’ – having the needy individual directly enter one’s experience – cannot be a morally relevant feature<sup>14</sup>. In *The Vintage Sedan*, the person in need has entered directly into your experience, while it is not the case for *The Envelope*. However, someone’s plight does not diminish because it has not entered your experience. In *The CB Radios*, even if the man’s plight has not entered your experience and even though the sounds you hear are only the result of electronics, most of us would agree that you have a moral duty to pick him up and take him to hospital. Even if we alter the case to move further away from any kind of experiential impact and have the injured bird-watcher signal you in Morse code, it would be seriously morally wrong to ignore his plight. This shows that experiential impact is also a morally irrelevant factor which cannot justify our different reactions to *The Vintage Sedan* and *The Envelope*.

### 1.2.2 Exclusivity

A promising difference is that in *The Vintage Sedan* you are a unique potential saviour while in *The Envelope*, there are multiple potential saviours. In *The Vintage Sedan*, since you are driving through a lightly travelled intersection, you are the only one who can save the injured bird-watcher’s leg. If you drive past, even if someone else does come along eventually, it will be too late to save his leg. In other words, you are his unique potential saviour. However, in *The Envelope*, this is not the case. There are millions of affluent people who are in the same position as you, who can donate \$100 to save the lives of these children in need. An envelope with the same plea from UNICEF was probably sent all over the country. For that reason, one might say that you have a greater

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

responsibility to rescue the bird-watcher because you are his unique potential saviour, whereas you do not have much responsibility in *The Envelope* because you are only one of very many people who all could have offered aid.

Unger argues that this is nonsense to our moral common sense. Even if people *could* give aid to needy children, you also know that most of them *won't*. So, you know that there will still be children desperately in need, and you would be acting morally wrongly if you choose not to help them. Suppose that there are multiple saviours in *The Vintage Sedan*:

*The Wealthy Drivers.* There are three other drivers in the area with CB radios, hearing the pleas from the injured bird-watcher. Each of the others is less than five miles away from him, while you are ten miles away. And, each of the others are far wealthier than you. None of them help the injured bird-watcher, and so you also decide not to, resulting in him losing his leg.<sup>15</sup>

We would all agree that it would be morally wrong to leave the injured bird-watcher, just because there were many potential saviours. We have a duty to aid him regardless of the number of other equally unhelpful drivers; the number of potential saviours does not diminish my responsibility or lessen my obligation. Similarly, the fact that there are millions of potential affluent donors is irrelevant to my obligations to donate to charity. I know that a very small percentage of affluent will donate, and that UNICEF will receive far less in donations than can be put to vital use. The money that I donate is very much needed and could be used to save the lives of many.

Another morally irrelevant difference is that the aid you offer in *The Envelope* could be targeted towards any one of thousand potential recipients, whereas in *The Vintage Sedan*, there is a particular individual who is in need. To use Unger's words, the aid you offer in *The Envelope* is 'causally amorphous aid' as opposed to 'causally focused aid'<sup>16</sup>. There would never be a child of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

whom it would be true that, had you send in \$100, she wouldn't have died prematurely. There are many donors contributing together on one end, and there are people being saved at the other end by their combined efforts. This difference is morally irrelevant because the causal relations between the donor and the recipient have no weight. All that matters, morally, is that needy get the aid they need. Our intuitive reactions confirm this: even if UNICEF assures you that your money will be directed at one specific child, so that your donation makes a big difference for the one child, we do not think it would be morally wrong to ignore such appeal. Our intuition confirms that our obligations to aid are not determined by whether the aid is causally focused; this obscure factor does not have any great effect.

### 1.2.3 *The liberationist solution*

Unger concludes from his examination of a long list of potential preservationist responses that there is no identifiable difference between *The Vintage Sedan* and *The Envelope* that could reasonably ground our conflicting intuitions. He upholds the liberationist solution of reassessing our judgements so that our intuitions are consistent. If we are to do so, we have two options: we can either say that our reaction to our moral obligations is wrong in *The Vintage Sedan*. Contrary to our commonly held intuitions, we are not morally obligated to provide assistance to the injured bird-watcher, and so it is morally permissible to allow him to lose his leg to protect your vintage sedan from damage. The other option would be to reassess our judgement of our response to *The Envelope*, and admit that we are obligated to send \$100 to UNICEF if it means that we can save the lives of others at little cost to ourselves. Contrary to our commonly held intuitions that this is praiseworthy but not morally required, we have strong duties to give aid to alleviate poverty. The first option of rejecting any obligation to provide assistance to the injured bird-watcher is untenable on any reasonable view of morality, and so Unger argues that his analysis grounds a strong obligation of the affluent to give aid to alleviate the suffering of distant strangers.

So, both Singer and Unger embrace the demandingness of our obligations to the poor, and claims that our commonly held intuitions are simply wrong. The affluent are acting immorally when they fail to contribute their resources towards those in extreme poverty. Famine relief is not a matter of charity but a moral obligation, and so we need to drastically change our understanding of the demands of beneficence. Singer and Unger's radical conclusion has, unsurprisingly, been met with strong objections. The next section of the thesis will examine two potential solutions to the puzzle, and thereby provide justification for a more undemanding view of beneficence.

## 2

### **A Potential Solution to the Puzzle: Uniquely Directed Aid**

In an unpublished lecture “Famine, Affluence and Mortality”<sup>17</sup> David Boonin provides a preservationist solution to Unger’s puzzle as an alternative, that there *is* a morally relevant difference between *The Vintage Sedan* and *The Envelope* which explains why our moral intuitions differ between them. He claims that this is the ‘uniquely directedness of the aid’, that there is a distinction between aid that is ‘uniquely directed’ to a specific recipient and aid that is not.

Not only is Boonin’s claim unexplored in the literature, his argument is very plausible and captures many of our intuitions with regards to giving to charity; we feel less obligated to give because we do not know exactly where our money is going. Unger’s argument is widely taken to be the most philosophically sophisticated defence of the immorality of declining to give money to famine relief, so if Boonin’s argument is successful it is an important contribution to the debate. In this section, I will examine Boonin’s argument and then provide three possible objections. In the final section, I will offer an alternative explanation to justify the difference in our intuitions regarding Vintage Sedan and Envelope.

#### **2.1 Boonin’s solution**

##### *2.1.1 Unique directedness of aid*

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<sup>17</sup> Boonin, D. 2006. *Famine, Affluence, and Mortality*. 28 Feb, 2006, University of Canterbury, NZ (Erskine 5 Lecture)

According to Boonin, P's act A provides aid that is uniquely directed at Q iff all of the following obtain:

1. If P does A, then Q will not suffer a serious loss
2. If P does not do A, then Q will suffer a serious loss
3. There is no one other than Q whose prospects for suffering a serious loss will be determined by P's doing or not doing A.

Boonin modifies Unger's cases to make the application of this property more noticeable, so that the cost to you in providing the aid and the benefit gained by the recipient of the aid is the same in both cases. The following are Boonin's adapted versions of *The Vintage Sedan* and *The Envelope* case:

*Vintage Sedan.* You can save the life of an injured bird-watcher by driving him to hospital, but doing so will cause \$100 worth of damage to the car.

*Envelope.* You receive a letter from UNICEF informing you that if you send them \$100, one less child will die prematurely.<sup>18</sup>

Boonin argues that in *Vintage Sedan*, you are providing aid that is uniquely directed at one individual, and there is no one other than that individual whose prospects for suffering will be determined by you providing or not providing aid. If you do not give the bird-watcher a ride, he will die, and whether you choose to give him a ride or not does not affect anyone else. *Envelope*, on the other hand, is an example of aid that is not uniquely directed. The \$100 you give to UNICEF is not a discrete sum used for a discrete purpose or an individual, and there is no particular child at whom your aid is uniquely directed. Instead, UNICEF adds the money you give to the lump of money that it already has, and how much they have will affect how the money is spent. Although it is true that one fewer child dies prematurely if you do give \$100, there is no particular child at whom your aid is uniquely directed.

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<sup>18</sup> These are Boonin's adaptations of Unger's original cases. I omit 'the' to mark the difference between the two versions.

This is well illustrated by that following case that Boonin provides:

*Two Villages.* UNICEF will deliver food supplies to one of two large villages, opposite directions from the distribution point. There are 1,000 starving children in Village A, and 1,001 starving children in Village B. The drive to Village B is slightly longer, and UNICEF currently has only enough fuel to deliver the supplies to Village A. If you send \$100, UNICEF will be able to buy more fuel and instead, go to Village B, saving 1,001 children rather than 1,000.

If you send \$100 to UNICEF, it is true that one fewer child will die prematurely. However, as this case clearly shows, it is not one particular child who will be the only one affected by your decision, but rather, your decision has an effect on a large number of children. When we give to charity, the organisations do not treat each donation as a discrete amount of money to be used to provide aid to a discrete individual, and so no donation made to them will be uniquely directed in the sense defined above. This is the difference between *Vintage Sedan* and *Envelope* which Boonin highlights.

### 2.1.2 *Unique directedness as a morally relevant difference*

In order to resolve Unger's puzzle about our contrasting intuitions and to provide a preservationist solution to it, the difference between *Vintage Sedan* and *Envelope* that Boonin points out, namely the uniquely directedness of aid, must be a morally relevant one. Boonin argues that whether the aid is uniquely directed is a morally relevant factor and he attempts to prove this both at an intuitive level and a theoretical level.

First, on an intuitive level, if we adapt the *Envelope* case so that it results in the aid being uniquely directed, our intuitions say that we ought to give the aid. For example, say that having stumbled onto the UNICEF website I learn that there is a particular child that will die soon unless someone who is logged onto the site sends \$100 to pay for her medical expenses (call this case *E-velope*). I am currently the only person logged on, and due to a sudden technical failure, I learn that no one else is able to log onto the site



until it is too late to save the child. Therefore, the aid which you can provide in this altered case would be uniquely directed at a specific recipient.

Boonin argues that when I am faced in this situation, I would be morally obligated to send \$100, and intuitively, it would be wrong to simply log off and leave the child to die prematurely. I agree that this is in line with our moral intuitions. The only salient difference between this case and *Envelope* is the uniquely directedness of the aid, and so our intuitive reaction to the cases support the claim that there is a morally relevant difference between aid that is uniquely directed and aid that is not. So, this altered case is like *Vintage Sedan* but unlike *Envelope*, in that they are both cases of aid that is uniquely directed, while *Envelope* is not. This solves Unger's puzzle because it shows that there is no inconsistency in our moral judgements. We judge that we are morally obligated to offer aid in *Vintage Sedan* and *Envelope* because they are cases of uniquely directed aid. On the other hand, it is not wrong to not help in *Envelope* because your aid will not be uniquely directed.

Boonin also attempts to show that the unique directedness of aid is a morally relevant factor on a theoretical level. He claims that there are both impersonal and personal reasons why we should save the bird-watcher in the *Vintage Sedan* case. The impersonal reason to save the bird-watcher would be that if you do not save him, the resulting state of affairs would be considerably worse than if you do not. From an impersonal point of view, *Vintage Sedan* and *Envelope* are exactly the same; you will be \$100 poorer and you will save the life of one person. Our moral intuitions, however, are not indifferent between the two cases, which suggests that the correct explanation of our response to the *Vintage Sedan* case is based on personal reasons, that the bird-watcher has a genuine claim against you, a right to assistance.

On this account, it would be wrong to not save the bird-watcher because it would be a violation of his rights if you decline to assist him. What I am

morally required to do, then, depends on whether someone has a right to my assistance. According to Boonin, this is the best explanation for our intuitive reaction to *Vintage Sedan*: B has a right to A's assistance if A can prevent something very bad from happening to B without incurring any significant cost to himself or imposing any significant cost on anyone else. It is because I can prevent the death of the injured bird-watcher at little cost to myself and without imposing costs on others that gives the bird-watcher a legitimate claim to assistance which I have a moral duty to respond to.

This means that if the case is altered so that we are not preventing something very bad, we have no moral obligation to provide aid. For instance, if you can reduce the chance of the bird-watcher suffering from a heart attack from a four in ten million chance to a three in ten million chance, you have no moral obligation to give him a ride in your vintage sedan. Being exposed to a risk of a heart attack by one in ten millionth greater is not a very bad thing, and so the bird-watcher does not have a legitimate claim against you. Unlike in *Vintage Sedan*, you are not morally obligated to give him a ride, and so you would not be acting morally if you refuse to do so.

Now consider the following case:

*Enormous Sedan*. There are ten million bird-watchers, and for each bird-watcher you can reduce each of their chances of death from  $4/10,000,000$  to  $3/10,000,000$  if you give them all a ride.

This case is exactly like *Vintage Sedan* from an impersonal view; one life is saved at the cost of \$100. If we give all ten-million bird-watchers a ride, three bird-watchers will die rather than four so we would be saving the life of one bird-watcher. However, Boonin argues that in *Enormous Sedan*, we do not have an obligation to give them all a ride. We have no moral obligation to reduce each bird-watcher's risk of death by one in ten million by giving him a ride because this isn't preventing something very bad.

From a personal perspective, there *is* a difference between *Vintage Sedan* and *Enormous Sedan*. In *Vintage Sedan*, the bird-watcher has a right to assistance which he can legitimately claim against you, but in *Enormous Sedan*, there is no individual who can legitimately claim that he will die if you do not give him a ride in your car, so no individual can legitimately claim that he has a right to your assistance. This supports the claim that unique directness is morally relevant because it is precisely the uniquely directedness of the aid that enables the bird-watcher to make a legitimate claim on you.

The *Enormous Sedan* is exactly like *Envelope*, where there is no particular person to whom it is true that their suffering a serious loss is determined by you not giving aid. In the case where UNICEF asks you to send \$100 to save a child from dying prematurely, the situation is exactly like *Enormous Sedan*. There are millions of children who face an extremely high probability of premature death, and although it is true that if you do send \$100, one less child will die prematurely, you will be reducing the risk of death of each child by a negligible amount. Being exposed to such a negligibly greater risk is not enough to invoke rights to assistance. Again, this is because the aid is not uniquely directed, and so there is no individual who can legitimately claim that he has a right to your assistance. This not only explains why our intuitions differ between *Vintage Sedan* and *Envelope*, but also justifies the difference. It is the uniquely directedness of aid that is present in *Vintage Sedan* and not in *Envelope* that creates a moral obligation to aid due to there being rights to assistance that need satisfying.

### 2.1.2 *Broadening the account of unique directedness*

In Boonin attempt to address some of potential objections that could be raised against his solution to Unger's puzzle, he broadens his account of unique directedness. This is in order to allow for cases in which the aid you provide fails to be uniquely directed in the same way as in *Enormous Sedan*

but in which most people would agree that it would be wrong not to provide it. For instance, consider the following example that Boonin gives:

*Russian Roulette.* A villain has trapped one hundred bird-watchers and is about to expose each of them to a nine in ten chance by putting bullets in nine of the ten chambers in a gun before firing at each of them. You can prevent them from being exposed to this risk by letting them into your very large sedan, but doing so will expose them to a risk of death by a second set of guns, each of which has a bullet in only one of its ten chambers. If you let them aboard, the firing of the guns will cause \$100 worth of damage to your sedan.

In this case, you are faced with the decision to reduce one hundred bird-watchers' risk of death from nine-in-ten to one-in-ten at the cost of \$100. There is no particular bird-watcher who can legitimately claim that he will die if you do not let him into your sedan. For any particular bird-watcher, if you do not give him a ride, it is quite likely that he will die, but also there is a one-in-ten chance he might not. If you do give him a ride, although it is much less likely that he will die, there is a one-in-ten chance that he still might die. So, it seems that you do not have an obligation to offer them assistance because none of them have a legitimate claim that they will face death if you do not offer them assistance.

The fact is, however, that if you do not let them on, ninety bird-watchers will die, while if you do let everyone on, only ten of them will die. You will be saving the lives of eighty bird-watchers at the cost of \$100 if you let them onto your sedan. Although the aid you could provide in *Russian Roulette* is not uniquely directed, intuitively, most would agree that it would be wrong to not let the bird-watchers into your sedan in this case. Boonin addresses this objection and argues that we can broaden the account of unique directness so that if there is a sufficiently great difference in the probabilities, then this broadened version will entail that it would be wrong not to provide aid, even if the difference is not the difference between certain death and certain survival. In *Vintage Sedan*, letting the bird-watcher on reduces his risk of death from one to zero, while in *Russian Roulette*, the risk is reduced from nine-in-ten to one-in-ten. So, in order to broaden the account of unique

directedness to include cases where you are faced with the option of significantly reducing someone's chance of death, we need to relax the first two conditions required in order for aid to count as uniquely directed. Rather than insisting that if P does A, then Q will not suffer a serious loss and that if P does not do A, then Q will suffer a serious loss, we will simply require that there be a sufficiently great difference between the probability that Q will suffer the loss if P does A and the probability that Q will suffer the loss if P does not do A. If there is a sufficiently great difference between the probabilities of Q suffering the loss, this counts as aid being uniquely directed, and so this broadened account would entail that it would be wrong not to provide assistance. So, in the case of *Russian Roulette*, if we could reduce the chances of death from nine-in-ten to one-in-ten, because the difference in the probabilities is high enough we are obligated to provide the aid.

When we broaden the account of unique directedness in this way, it is able to account for cases like *Russian Roulette*, and it also explains why we are not obligated in the same way in *Envelope*. *Envelope*, unlike *Russian Roulette*, is not a case in which there is a sufficiently great difference in probabilities. Even with the broader account of unique directedness, there is no particular individual about whom it is true that your sending \$100 would provide uniquely directed aid. No child can claim that their risk of immanent death would be greatly reduced if you do send the money, and so you do not have a moral obligation to provide aid.

However, although this broadened account of the unique directedness of aid gives us the correct intuitive results for *Vintage Sedan* and *Russian Roulette*, it also results in the strange implication that if there are a great number of starving children, then you don't have to help any of them, but if there are a much smaller number of starving children, then you do (though this depends on whether others will help even if you do not). This is because when there are many starving children, you are not reducing the chances of death of each individual by much in giving \$100, but that probability is

increased when there are less children. Boonin accepts that this is a correct implication, and argues that it is no problem for his solution, that numbers do make a difference in what we are required to do.

Another implication of Boonin's solution is that charities could simply change their strategies to ensure that any aid you provide would be uniquely directed. For instance, Boonin iterates the following case:

*Uniquely Directed Envelope.* UNICEF sends you an envelope correctly informing you that there is a particular child who will die if you do not send \$100 and that only the aid you provide will save this particular child.

In *Uniquely Directed Envelope*, it is clear that the aid you provide would be uniquely directed at a particular individual, and so Boonin's solution would entail that it would be immoral not to send the money. This means that organisations like UNICEF could make it so that you are morally obligated to give aid simply by changing the way they distribute their assistance. This could prove to be incredibly demanding as we would have to provide aid whenever our assistance is uniquely directed. If UNICEF sends a uniquely directed envelope every week, I am morally obligated to send \$100 each time.

Again, Boonin agrees that this is the correct implication of his solution, and agrees that in the case of *Uniquely Directed Envelope*, it would be wrong not to provide aid in the same way that it would be wrong not to send money in the case of *E-velope*. However, Boonin claims that restructuring charities in this way would not only be practically infeasible but also morally problematic. To ensure that my aid would be uniquely directed, charities would have to actively prevent anyone else from helping the particular child that would be saved by my giving aid, and also prevent me from helping a child whose life would have been saved by other people. Boonin overcomes the potential demandingness of weekly or even daily uniquely directed envelopes by deeming the restructuring of charities in such a way to be

immoral. I agree that it would seem to be morally problematic; it would be akin to sending out ransom notes to force individuals to pay for the life of a particular child.

## **2.2 Objections**

I now turn to three possible objections to Boonin's solution to Unger's puzzle. First, his solution is susceptible to the Demandingness objection because charities could potentially change the way they distribute aid, making the aid uniquely directed and therefore creating extremely demanding moral obligations to provide aid. Second, with Boonin's solution, what I am required to do depends on contingent facts that are morally irrelevant, such as the way charities operate or the pool size from which my recipient of aid will be chosen from. Third, we can revise cases to show that even when aid is not uniquely directed, we are still required to give aid.

### *2.2.1 Demandingness*

Despite Boonin's attempts to argue otherwise, his solution is vulnerable to the possibility of charities changing their strategies so that people could face extremely demanding moral obligations to provide aid. Boonin claims that reconstructing charities so that aid is uniquely directed would be morally problematic because to ensure that my aid would be uniquely directed, charities would have to actively prevent anyone else from helping the particular child that would be saved by my giving aid, and also prevent me from helping a child whose life would have been saved by other people.

However, this does not necessarily have to be the case. Say UNICEF sends out a letter to every home in the UK with a household income over a certain amount, each with the name of a different child they could save, and if the household gives the aid and wants to donate more to help more children, UNICEF will send them the name of another child on a waiting list, rather

than a child that has already been sent to another household. This would ensure that each request for a donation is for aid that is uniquely directed. Given how unlikely it would be that someone would demand that they be given the right to save a child whose name was sent to someone else, restructuring charities in this way does not require active prevention of anyone else giving aid.

Leaving the possibility open for someone to demand that they be given a chance to save a child sent to someone else does not harm the unique directedness of the aid, as this would mean that *Vintage Sedan* is also not a case of uniquely directed aid. There is the possibility, albeit very small, that even if I drive off and leave the bird-watcher to die, someone else will come along and save him instead. In order to make the uniquely directedness of this case completely fool-proof, even if someone else comes along, they must be forbidden to save the bird-watcher. Intuitively, even if there is a very small chance that someone else may come along to save the bird-watcher, I am still obligated to save him. The same claim can be made for *Uniquely Directed Envelope*; although UNICEF does not actively prevent people from saving children whose names are sent to other families, given the unlikelihood of the situation, it can still be considered a case of uniquely directed aid. In this way, it is possible for charities to change their strategies and make the aid you provide to be uniquely directed. And they can do this without actively preventing you from helping a child who could have been saved by others.

In any case, surely any morally problematic aspects of restructuring charities in this way is vastly outweighed if this creates moral obligations to give aid and thereby save the lives of many children. And a very great number of children can be saved, as if Boonin's solution obligates people to send one check, it also obligates them to send checks for many more uniquely directed envelopes. UNICEF may send a uniquely directed envelope weekly or even daily, and it would be immoral for you not to give the aid. Boonin argues that this is not a problem with his position, but rather



with the belief that morality could never be this demanding. There is simply no reason, he claims, to assume that morality could never demand so much of us. Even so, Boonin is unable to simply sidestep the Demandingness objection by claiming it would be immoral for charities to change their strategies so that aid is uniquely directed. As we have shown, not only is it practicable, but it is also not as morally problematic as he says it would be because it does not require active prevention of helping children who could have been saved by other people.

### *2.2.2 Contingency*

Another worry with Boonin's argument is that what I am required to do depends on contingent facts that are morally irrelevant, such as the way charities operate or the pool size from which my recipient of aid will be chosen from. I agree that contingent facts about the way charities operate can make a difference in whether I should donate to that particular charity or not. However, it is strange that the uniquely directedness of the aid, which makes absolutely no difference from an impersonal point of view, makes all the difference between whether I am obligated to give at all. For instance, if a charity plans on flushing my money down the drain, I should not donate to that charity, but my obligation to give aid still remains. If the effectiveness of a charity is a contingent fact that makes a difference, we would expect it would generate a reason to find a more effective charity, not relieve us of the obligation altogether. With Boonin's solution, however, the mere way in which charities distribute their assistance is the determining factor of whether we have an obligation to give aid, and this seems altogether strange.

It also means that whether the poor have rights to assistance depends on how charities operate as well. Whether you agree or not that the poor have a right to aid, it is a worrying implication that the very existence of such rights depends on how charities distribute their assistance. As we said before, according to Boonin, B has a right to A's assistance if A can prevent

something very bad from happening to B without incurring any significant cost to himself or imposing any significant cost on anyone else. Under his broadened account of unique directedness, we can allow that B has a right to A's assistance if A can greatly reduce the risk of something very bad happening to B. The problem is that whether A's assistance will greatly reduce B's risk of something very bad happening to him depends on the way the aid is distributed. With the current way charities are run, no-one has rights to assistance that they could legitimately claim because the reduced risk to any particular individual is negligible. But by making changes to structure of charities to make aid uniquely directed, this would suddenly give people rights of assistance where none had existed before, and therefore create strong obligations to give where there was none, equal to that of rescuing a dying bird-watcher or saving a child drowning in a pond. It seems problematic that the existence of rights of assistance could depend on such contingent factors.

It is not merely the demandingness of the implications of Boonin's solution that is the issue, but rather that the demands of morality depend on the mere manipulation of the way charities operate. Depending on whether charities change their method of distributing aid, I can have either no obligations to give to charity, or extremely demanding obligations to give until the loss of \$100 is too much for me that I would not even save an injured bird-watcher. This is especially strange as from an impersonal perspective there is no difference between *Envelope* and *Uniquely Directed Envelope*. If I give \$100, the life of a child somewhere in the world will definitely be saved. Why is it that a particular child to whom the aid will be directed must be determined before I am obligated to give?

Say a murderer has kidnapped 1,000,000 children. He will detonate a bomb that will kill all of them, but agrees to hand over one child if you pay him \$100. However, the child will be chosen at random by the murderer. For each child, until the murderer picks out which child to release, paying \$100 gives each child a 1 in 1,000,000 chance of survival, which according to

Boonin, you are not obligated to give because it is not uniquely directed aid. Not one of the 1,000,000 children have a right to assistance that he or she could legitimately claim on you, and so if all other things are considered equal, it would not be immoral of you to walk away without paying \$100. This goes against our moral intuitions. It does not matter that I do not know which child I will be saving by giving \$100 because the child is yet undetermined. What matters is that in giving the ransom money, I am able to save the life of one child at the cost of \$100, and so I should do so.

For Boonin's solution to create an obligation to give \$100 to the murderer, there needs to be more negotiation. The murderer must decrease the pool of children from which he will pick out the child to release. If it is sufficiently decreased, say to a pool of five, it would then be immoral for me to not pay \$100. Say the murderer claims that he will choose the lucky child out of those children who have a twin, vastly reducing the pool size to five. As it would be wrong for me not to give the five children a one in five chance of survival, I am morally obligated to pay the ransom money of \$100 to save one of them. It is extremely counter-intuitive that what I am required to do and the children's right to assistance depends on how the murderer will pick out which child to save.

Boonin's claim that numbers make a difference in what we are required to do is not only a "surprising" implication of his solution, as he says; it is one that goes against our moral intuitions. When there are more suffering children, we feel a greater need to provide aid, not less. For instance, when we hear news of catastrophic events, natural disasters that have affected millions of people, we feel a greater need to provide aid, than if we hear news that it affected only 10 people. We feel a stronger obligation to give when the situation is graver, not less, because the situation requires more people to contribute to alleviate the problem.

### *2.2.3 Revising cases*

Finally, we can revise cases to show that even when aid is not uniquely directed, we are still required to give aid. For instance, there are cases where there is uncertainty regarding whether your action will actually save someone. This would be a case where condition one does not hold, “if P does A, then Q will not suffer a serious loss”. With Boonin’s broadened account of unique directedness, he allows that if there is a sufficiently great difference in the probabilities, we are obligated to provide the aid, and not if that difference is low. This is his reasoning to argue that we have no obligation to provide aid in the case of *Envelope* but we do in *Russian Roulette*.

We can alter the *Vintage Sedan* case so that the aid you provide is not uniquely directed even on Boonin’s broadened account. Our intuitions, however, show that we are still obligated to offer assistance even if the aid is not uniquely directed. Consider the following altered case where the bird-watcher is so heavily so that there is a high chance that even if you do give him a ride, he is likely to die on the way to the hospital:

*Doctor’s Vintage Sedan.* The owner of the Vintage Sedan is a doctor and she stumbles across an injured bird-watcher. After checking his vitals, she correctly concludes that if she rushes this man to the hospital there is a very slim chance that he is able to make it.

This altered *Vintage Sedan* case is not a case of uniquely directed aid because there is not a sufficiently great difference between the probabilities of the bird-watcher suffering loss due to the doctor’s action or inaction. If the doctor leaves the bird-watcher on the road, he will face certain death. If she gives him a ride to the hospital, she will be able to reduce that risk of death by a very small amount (say the bird-watcher has a one in ten million chance of survival). As Boonin claimed earlier, if you can reduce the chance of the bird-watcher suffering from a heart attack from a four in ten million chance to a three in ten million chance by giving him a ride, you have no moral obligation to do so. The *Doctor’s Vintage Sedan* is identical to such example in that the reduction in the probability of the bird-watcher facing imminent

death by your aid would be the same. So, according to Boonin, you are not morally required to give the dying bird-watcher a ride in your sedan if it is likely that he will not survive.

However, I believe this goes against our moral intuitions. I think most would agree that in this case, the doctor is morally obligated to take the bird-watcher to the hospital, at the cost of \$100, even if there is high chance that he won't make it. It would be gravely wrong for the doctor to leave him to die because his slim chance of survival is not worth the damage to her vintage sedan. Under Boonin's definition of what it means for aid to be uniquely directed, the *Doctor's Vintage Sedan* is not a case of uniquely directed aid, and so this is not what makes it obligatory to attempt to save the life of the bird-watcher.

In order to account for our moral intuitions regarding this case, we could broaden the account of unique directedness further to say that even if the difference in probabilities is low, we are obligated to provide the aid. But of course, this then renders *Envelope* to also be a case of uniquely directed aid, which defeats the purpose of Boonin's solution. Alternatively, we could say that although the altered *Vintage Sedan* is not a case of uniquely directed aid, there is something else at play which creates an obligation to help him. After all, as Boonin says, his solution does not depend on the claim that unique directedness, and therefore rights to assistance, is the only thing that can make it wrong not to do an act that would provide aid. His solution depends only on the claim that unique directedness is sufficient (but not necessary) to make it wrong not to give the aid. The question remains as to what is different about *Doctor's Vintage Sedan* and *Envelope* which creates an obligation to help in one case but not the other, if it is not the uniquely directedness of the aid.

Yet another way in which the aid you provide fails to be uniquely directed would be when condition two is violated, "if P does not do A, then Q will suffer a serious loss". This would be a case where there is someone else

who can and will provide the aid if you fail to do so. We saw before that Boonin's account for the uniquely directedness of aid may allow for the slim possibility that someone else may provide the aid, but what if we again alter the rescue cases so that the probability of someone else helping is high or even 100% certain? For instance, consider the following case:

*Compassionate Colleague.* You are walking past a drowning child in a pond. You are wearing expensive clothes that would cost \$100 to replace if you jump into the pond to save the child. Reluctant to do so, you look around to see if there is anyone else who can save the child instead, and in the distance, you see a colleague of yours. You know that she is an incredibly compassionate person, and would not pass the child by. You calculate that given the child has not yet gone fully under, she would reach the child in time to save his life. Even if you ignore the drowning child, it is certain that the child will be saved.

In this case, even if you do not offer assistance, it is certain that the child will not suffer a loss, thus violating condition two of Boonin's account of unique directedness. The aid which you could provide is not uniquely directed aid. However, most would agree that it would still be immoral to walk past the drowning child, even if you are certain that the child will live. Again, if it is not the uniquely directedness of the aid that creates an obligation to help in this case, what is different about this compared to Envelope?

These two cases, *Doctor's Vintage Sedan* and *Compassionate Colleague*, show that there will be many situations in which you are morally required to provide aid even when the aid is not uniquely directed. Although this does not defeat Boonin's argument that the unique directedness of aid is a morally relevant factor, it shows that it is not the morally relevant factor that is present in these cases.

This is further demonstrated by the fact that our intuitions regarding *Vintage Sedan* and *Uniquely Directed Envelope* are different. According to Boonin's solution, the *Vintage Sedan* case is exactly like the case of the *Uniquely*

*Directed Envelope*. In both cases, you are providing uniquely directed aid, saving one life at the cost of \$100, and moreover, in both cases you are the only person who can provide the aid. Both from an impersonal perspective and a personal perspective, the cases are identical and each person can legitimately claim a right to assistance. But suppose that you only have the choice between saving one person. I still feel that you ought to save the birdwatcher over the child in *Uniquely Directed Envelope*, and it seems that this difference in our moral intuitions cannot be explained by mere the unique directedness of aid. The difference in our intuitions regarding *Vintage Sedan* and *Uniquely Directed Envelope* show that we need something other than the unique directedness of aid to explain this difference.

Although this is less intuitive, I think that when faced with the altered *Vintage Sedan* case where it is likely that the bird-watcher will die even if you try to save him, or the *Compassionate Colleague* case where even if I don't try to save the child the child will be saved, we ought to save or at least try to save the birdwatcher and the drowning child over sending \$100 to UNICEF in *Uniquely Directed Envelope*. This suggests that it is not the uniquely directedness of aid that grounds moral obligations to assist in the first place.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

In this section, we have examined Boonin's initially promising solution to Unger's Puzzle, that the morally relevant difference between famine relief and emergency situations is the unique directedness of the aid. It was argued that his solution is unsuccessful, as further revisions of the cases he provides show that it is not the unique directedness of the aid which determines our intuitions, suggesting that there is something else that grounds stronger moral obligations to assist in emergency cases in comparison to cases like *Envelope*. If Boonin is right that it is the unique directedness of aid that creates obligations in *Vintage Sedan* but not in *Envelope*, our obligations to offer aid in *Uniquely Directed Envelope* would

be equivalent as in *Pond*. However, our intuitions go against this. We feel that there is something wrong if morality dictates that it is okay to walk past a drowning child in order to save a distant stranger. Our intuitions say that when faced with only one option, we ought to save the drowning child over a distant stranger, even if both involves aid that is uniquely directed.



### 3

## Consequentialist Solutions to the Puzzle

Classical act consequentialism is the claim that an act is morally permissible if and only if it has better consequences than those of any available alternative. Agents are morally required to do the act that maximises the overall good, regardless of the sacrifices to themselves. This view endorses Singer's Strong Principle of Beneficence, that "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought, morally, to do so."<sup>19</sup> As we examined in a previous chapter, Unger presents this as a puzzle about our different intuitions regarding providing assistance in emergency situations and charitable giving. Although both Singer and Unger do not rely on consequentialist moral theory to argue for strong duties of beneficence, the implications are the same; the affluent are required to give all their wealth to the cause of poverty alleviation until they reach the level of marginal utility – the level at which, by giving more aid, they would be causing as much suffering to themselves as they would alleviate by their giving.

Philosophers have come up with different versions of consequentialism which depart from classical act consequentialism, in an attempt to lessen the demands that a consequentialist moral theory makes. These different versions attempt to make room for personal projects and commitments, and may also provide a solution to Unger's puzzle regarding our different intuitions, even though they are not directly intended to do so. This chapter will examine the implications of three versions of consequentialism with regards to the demands of beneficence: Scheffler's Agent-Centred

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<sup>19</sup> Singer, p. 231.

Prerogative, Railton and Parfit's consequentialism, Rule and Collective consequentialism.

### **3.1 Scheffler's consequentialism**

#### *3.1.1. The agent-centred prerogative*

In *The Rejection of Consequentialism*<sup>20</sup>, Samuel Scheffler offers a hybrid theory of morality, proposing what he calls *the agent-centred prerogative*. In response to Bernard Williams' concern that consequentialism's pursuit of the overall good alienates us from the pursuit of our own projects and interests, Scheffler's agent-centred prerogative is an attempt to combine consequentialism with a special status granted to the agent's own personal point of view. Scheffler justifies introducing the agent-centred prerogative by arguing, broadly, that the importance of the personal perspective is distinct from the impersonal perspective. Although he does think that morality should have an impersonal aspect, the agent-centred prerogative is needed because the most appropriate moral perspective is the one that is agent-centred, rather than impartial.

The agent-centred prerogative permits the agent to give greater weight to their own personal interests than to the interests of other people taken as a whole, deviating from the impartial, agent-neutral act consequentialist goal of producing the optimal outcome. This, in effect, gives the agent some degree of control over whether she ought to respond to the needs of others or pursue some project of her own, as in some situations the disproportionate weight of the agent's interests will outweigh the impersonal value of her actions. For example, an agent-centred prerogative might allow the agent to assign ten times the amount of value to her relationship with

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<sup>20</sup> Scheffler, S. 1982. *The Rejection of Consequentialism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

her spouse than what would be assigned from an impartial point of view. This would mean that the agent is allowed to favour the interests of her spouse over the lives of ten people.

One thing to note is that the weight an agent is allowed to put on her own interests in proportion to the interests of others will generally need to be quite high in order for the agent-centred prerogative to achieve the objective of lessening the demands of beneficence. For instance, I must value my own projects a whole lot more than the interests of others, if I am to justify pursuing my own projects rather than alleviating the suffering of many in poverty. According to Scheffler, the agent is permitted to do less than the optimal act if the total net loss of doing this less than optimal act is more than  $M$  times as great as the net loss to her doing the optimal act. More formally, someone is morally permitted to perform her preferred act  $P$  if and only if there is no alternative act  $A$  such that  $A$  would produce a better overall outcome than  $P$ , as judged from an impartial standpoint, and the total net loss to others from doing  $P$  rather than  $A$  was more than  $M$  times as great as the net loss to her of doing  $A$  rather than  $P$ , where  $M$  is a morally allowed ratio that each agent can give to her own interests rather than to the interests of others<sup>21</sup>.

Scheffler does not give a specific value for the weighting factor  $M$ , and it is not certain just how high it would have to be in order to reject Singer's Strong Principle. However, one thing is certain: it would be morally reprehensible to use the agent-centred prerogative to reject Singer's weaker claim: "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally to do it"<sup>22</sup>. If something is morally insignificant for the agent, for her to choose that over saving the life of another human being, and for the agent-centred prerogative to allow this, the weighting factor must be astronomically high. So, while Scheffler's agent-centred prerogative may allow room for interests

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 378.

<sup>22</sup> Singer, p. 231.

that already hold great value in the life of the agent, it would still be morally impermissible to value insignificant things over and above the interests of others.

For the agent-centred prerogative to match up with our moral intuitions regard emergency cases such as *Pond* and *The Vintage Sedan*, the weighting factor cannot be too high. We need the prerogative to say that when we are faced with such situations, morality requires you to offer aid to the person in need. The insignificant costs to you, like your clothes or your car, cannot outweigh the costs to the beneficiary even when multiplied by the weighting factor. The problem is, if this weighting factor is low enough to capture our intuitions about emergency cases, it will create the same obligation to give aid in cases like *The Envelope*. If the agent-centred prerogative deems it impermissible for me to value my expensive clothes over the life of a child, refusing to send \$100 to save the lives of many children will definitely be morally impermissible. So, Scheffler's version of consequentialism is not adequate to solve Unger's puzzle as the agent-centred prerogative on its own is not enough to explain why our intuitions differ between emergency cases and famine relief.

One thing it does do is it considerably lessens the demands of beneficence in comparison to a strict act-consequentialist view. There will be a limit to the sacrifices that the agent is required to make, and she will sometimes be permitted to favour her own interests even at the expense of the greater good. Projects and commitments which hold great value in our life will take priority over providing aid to others. However, the implications of Scheffler's version of consequentialism may still be regarded as very demanding by the affluent. As we said before, while Scheffler's agent-centred prerogative may permit some space for personal interests that are already of great value in the life of the agent, it would still be morally impermissible to value things that are insignificant over and above the interests of others.

Spending money on insignificant leisure activities that you can go without doing, buying bottled water when you have access to drinkable water, or, for that matter, any other luxury item which you do not highly value in your life, all these things would be morally impermissible in the face of global poverty. For instance, say that I want to watch a movie at the theatre. From an impartial perspective, I could do a lot more good by sending the money to famine relief, potentially preventing the premature death of someone. Although I would enjoy watching the movie, it adds little value to my life. I could do without watching the movie; it would not affect me in any significant way. The agent-centred prerogative cannot permit me to watch the movie, as the weighting factor cannot be too high for the reasons explained previously. So, although Scheffler's hybrid theory does not reduce us to giving until we reach the level of marginal utility, it does maintain very demanding obligations to alleviate poverty.

This is not necessarily a criticism of Scheffler's prerogative; it may be that this is the correct response, and morality *is* more demanding than our commonly held intuitions. To argue otherwise would be to embrace a more unintuitive position: "It is sometimes morally permissible to let others suffer great harms in order to secure incomparably small benefits for yourself" or "it is sometimes morally permissible to let other people die in order to secure more luxuries for yourself". However, it fails to solve Singer and Unger's puzzle regarding our different intuitions, and so it isn't clear that it makes the demands of beneficence much less demanding than classical consequentialism.

### *3.1.2 Psychological costs as a morally relevant factor*

A serious objection made against Scheffler's agent-centred prerogative is that it allows harming for self-interest. One of the objections made against classical act-consequentialism is that it permits us to cause harm in certain cases. If we are able to save many lives through the killing of one person, act-consequentialism would dictate that it would be right for us to do so.

Scheffler's agent-centred prerogative has worse implications than classical act-consequentialism because it not only permits agents to do harm for the greater good, but also permits agents to do harm in the pursuit of their non-optimal personal projects for self-interest. This problem arises because Scheffler introduces agent-centred prerogatives without also introducing moral constraints.

This objection was raised by Shelly Kagan, who asks us to consider the following two cases: in the first case, I kill my rich uncle in order to inherit £10,000 so I can spend it on my personal projects. In the second case, I already have £10,000, so I spend it on my personal projects, rather than donating it to charity and saving someone's life<sup>23</sup>. Scheffler's view cannot distinguish between the moral permissibility of acts in these two cases; in both case I have given enough weight (that amounts to £10,000) to my personal projects that it grants me the desired agent-centred prerogative. If I am permitted to let someone die in order to pursue my personal projects, I must also be allowed to kill someone to do the same. So, this is worse than classical act-consequentialism which also allows some killing. Consequentialists only allow killing when it is necessary to bring about the best outcome, but Scheffler permits killing even when it produces a worse outcome than not killing. In other words, act-consequentialism does allow for harm, but only if it produces the optimal good, but Scheffler's view allows harm for a sub-optimal good, for self-interest.

Scheffler acknowledges that his theory cannot differentiate between various ways of pursuing personal projects. However, he argues that there is difference in practice. Doing harm is different from letting harm happen, as it takes time and energy that could have been used in the pursuit of personal projects<sup>24</sup>. Letting a stranger die by failing to donate to charity does not

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<sup>23</sup> Kagan, S. 1984. Does Consequentialism Demand Too Much? Recent Work on the Limits of Obligation. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 13(3): pp.239-54.

<sup>24</sup> Scheffler, S. 1992. Prerogatives Without Restrictions. *Philosophical Perspectives* 6, p. 380.

require you to go out of your way; you can simply stay at home and work on your personal projects. However, killing the rich uncle will take active steps that will leave me with less time and energy to devote to my projects. Also, the act of killing comes at a great psychological cost to the self. The agent will suffer from guilt, self-loathing, 'profound distortions of personality and of the capacity to lead a fulfilling life'<sup>25</sup>. There is also the risk of getting caught and being put into prison. Due to these costs that come with committing murder, Scheffler argues that the pursuit of personal projects cannot outweigh the act of killing. Thus, while failing to donate is justified by the agent-centred prerogative, killing the rich uncle is not.

This line of argument might be made to solve the puzzle that Unger iterates: why we feel that it would be morally wrong to bypass someone in need, but not morally wrong to ignore a letter from a charity asking you to donate. Walking past a drowning child in a pond or an injured bird-watcher may not be the same as killing a rich uncle, but, arguably, the psychological cost of failing to provide the aid in face-to-face emergency situations is much greater, so the pursuit of personal projects cannot outweigh the act of walking away from someone in need. If we refuse to offer assistance in these emergency cases, although it may still be an act of letting die rather than killing, it will most likely have a profound impact on the agent's psychological state that does not come with ignoring letters from charities. There are several different factors between *The Vintage Sedan* and *The Envelope* which make it easier, psychologically, to not provide aid in the case of famine relief, such as experiential impact and physical distance. Although Singer and Unger dismiss these as morally irrelevant factors, they are loaded with psychological implications so that refusing to provide assistance comes at a cost to the agent. The agent who drives past the injured bird-watcher may be riddled with guilt and later come to regret driving away, incessantly wondering what happened to the bird-watcher, his pained face still vividly etched on her mind. So, these 'profound distortions of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 381.

personality and of the capacity to lead a fulfilling life' may also apply to the selfish vintage sedan-owner, as well as to the parricidal niece or nephew. Due to the costs that come with refusing to offer assistance in emergency cases, while failing to donate is justified by the agent-centred prerogative, walking away from immediate emergency situations is not.

It seems, however, to be a poor move on Scheffler's part to defend his theory by referring to psychological generalisations that do not apply to all agents. What if the agent simply does not care? There are people who are capable of committing heinous acts without feeling the slightest bit of remorse. Moreover, the agent who understands morality as it is according to Scheffler will not care more about killing her uncle than letting someone die, since she will know these things are morally on a par. Also, even if she did care, what if she considers that the benefits do, in fact, outweigh the costs? The agent may consider her personal projects to be of such importance that it is worth going out of her way to kill her uncle, worth the psychological implications and the risk of going to prison. With regards to emergency cases, the agent may consider her personal projects so important that it is worth the guilt she may feel in leaving the bird-watcher or drowning child to die. In that case, the agent-centred prerogative would both allow you to kill your uncle and walk away from the injured bird-watcher or the drowning child. Finally, it is highly unintuitive to say that the only reason why murder or leaving someone to die is wrong is simply because it is too costly. The moral difference between failing to give to charity and killing a relative is not just that murder is not worth it; there is a difference in the intentions and character of the agent which makes it a more awful act (although both may be morally impermissible). Similarly, with emergency cases, it is the intentions and the character of the agent in walking away from someone in critical danger which makes it a more reprehensive act than failing to donate to charity.

To sum up, we have examined Scheffler's version of consequentialism which attempts to lessen the demands that a consequentialist theory makes



by introducing agent-centred prerogatives. His hybrid theory, however, fails to solve Singer and Unger's puzzle because it fails to identify a morally relevant difference between cases like *The Vintage Sedan* and *The Envelope*. If the agent-centred prerogative deems it morally impermissible to ignore the injured bird-watcher, it must also make it morally obligatory to provide aid in the case of *The Envelope*. Although one may point to the psychological costs to the agent to claim that the agent-centred prerogative creates obligations to aid in *The Envelope* but not in *The Vintage Sedan*, I argue that is not an adequate justification. So, Scheffler's agent-centred prerogative is unable to provide a plausible solution to the puzzle because it cannot differentiate between the various ways of pursuing personal projects. Regardless of whether we do have strong moral obligations to alleviate poverty, it is important that a theory is able to distinguish between and explain why murder and walking away from a drowning child is a morally worse act than ignoring an envelope from UNICEF.

### **3.2 Railton and Parfit's consequentialism**

This need for a distinction between the different intentions of the agent leads us nicely onto Railton and Parfit's version of consequentialism, both of which take into account the intentions of the agent to validate why it is blameworthy to walk away from emergency situations but not necessarily so when we fail to donate to charity. Railton and Parfit attempt to defend consequentialism against the claim that consequentialism as a moral theory is self-defeating. Regarding the demands of beneficence, our attempts to make the outcome as good as possible by following Singer's advice may be self-defeating for the following reason: given that the demands of the world are limitless from the perspective of the individual, each of us would be required to give to charity until we reach the level of marginal utility. This would require that the affluent make drastic changes in their lifestyle; they would be unable to spend money on things that are not necessary for their subsistence as this could be used to produce a better outcome by sending it overseas to save

lives. This would, of course, cause a lot of misery for many affluent people, so it may be that the actual outcome results in worse consequences overall.

One could argue that a world in which lives are saved at the cost of the affluent giving up their luxuries is not a bad state of affairs, and may perhaps be the best overall outcome possible. However, the implications of consequentialism run deeper than merely affecting the affluent on a material level. Consequentialism requires us to judge the rightness or wrongness of an action from an impartial perspective, where everyone's well-being has exactly the same moral weight. This means that we must be completely impartial in our treatment of people, ignoring the fact that we have a very strong tendency for partiality. Partiality is a precondition for relationships; our relationships with our family, friends and loved ones require that we put their interests over those with whom we have no relationship. Following classical consequentialism, then, would render relationships void, and this is a strong reason for why the theory would be indirectly self-defeating as relationships are a huge source of happiness for the majority of humankind.

Another way in which consequentialism could seriously undermine people's happiness would be through its requirement to give up personal projects. People find fulfilment and experience happiness through identifying with personal projects, and all this would be made impermissible if we were to follow classic consequentialism. Considering that a meaningful life usually consists in a life of personal engagement of projects of worth, and since no agent who follows consequentialism would be able to identify with his or her own projects, many would lead meaningless lives, thereby creating a world in which the outcomes are worse than if they had an alternative set of motives that allowed for personal projects.

In this section, I examine Railton and Parfit's versions of consequentialism and consider the implications they have for the demands of beneficence and whether they could be used to solve Unger's puzzle. I will first briefly outline

each argument in turn, before providing an analysis of both arguments together.

### 3.2.1 Railton's argument

In Railton's paper *Alienation, Consequentialism and the Demands of Morality*<sup>26</sup>, he distinguishes between two kinds of consequentialism. Subjective consequentialism is the view that whenever one faces a choice of actions, one should attempt to determine which act of those available would most promote the good, and should then try to act accordingly. This is akin to classical act-consequentialism. Objective consequentialism is the view that the criterion of the rightness of an act or course of action is whether it *in fact* would promote the good of those acts available to the agent. So, while subjective consequentialism prescribes following a particular mode of deliberation in action, objective consequentialism concerns the outcome *actually brought about*, and thus deals with the question of deliberation only in terms of the tendencies of certain forms of decision making to promote appropriate outcomes. A sophisticated consequentialist is someone who has a standing commitment to leading an objectively consequentialist life, but does not necessarily seek to lead a subjectively consequentialist life. The sophisticated consequentialist would cultivate dispositions, patterns of motivation, traits of character and so on that would result in the actual overall optimal good, even if it sometimes leads him to violate his own criterion of right action.

Railton provides the following example: Juan and Linda have a commuting marriage and normally get together only every other week. Linda seems a bit depressed one week so Juan decides to take an extra trip in order to be with his wife. If he did not travel, he would save a fairly large sum that he could send to OXFAM to dig a well in a drought-stricken village. Even if we

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<sup>26</sup> Railton, P. 1984. Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 13(2), pp.134-171.

take into account Linda's continued emotional malaise, Juan's guilt, and any ill effects on their relationship, it would produce better consequences overall if Juan were to contribute the fare to OXFAM rather than take the unscheduled trip. Still, given Juan's character, he will not perform this more beneficial act but will travel to see Linda instead. Although objective act consequentialists would say that Juan performed the wrong act on this occasion, they may also say that if Juan had had a character that would have led him to perform the better act, he would have had to have been less devoted to Linda. Given the ways in which Juan can affect the world, it may be that if he were less devoted to Linda his overall contribution to human well-being would be less in the end, perhaps because he would become more cynical and self-centred.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, it may be that Juan should have (should develop, encourage, and so on) a character such that he sometimes knowingly and deliberately acts contrary to his objective consequentialist duty. Having a character to do otherwise would lead him to depart further still from an objectively consequentialist life, and so if he is to have a character that would lead him to the most beneficial overall consequences, it would result in him choosing to take the extra trip to be with Linda. In some cases, then, there will exist an objective act consequentialist argument for developing and sustaining a certain character that many would claim act consequentialists must condemn. In this way, Railton's version of consequentialism allows for prerogatives to make room for personal projects and relationships while maintaining a fully consequentialist moral theory.

### 3.2.2 Parfit's argument

Parfit's version of consequentialism, as outlined in his work *Reasons and Persons*<sup>28</sup>, is similar to Railton's in most respects. Parfit claims that on all or most of the different versions of consequentialism, the consequentialism's

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 159.

<sup>28</sup> Parfit, D. 1987. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

central aim of making outcomes as good as possible is indirectly collectively self-defeating; if several people try to achieve this aim, the aim will be worse achieved. There are many ways in which if we were all pure do-gooders, or in other words, followers of classical act consequentialism, this would not result in the optimum outcome. One way in which this is true is that happiness is usually considered to be crucial to what makes outcomes better, but our disposition to do whatever would make the outcome best would cause us to act against, or attempt to quash our strong desires, resulting in a world where the sum of happiness is greatly reduced. Although consequentialism is indirectly collectively self-defeating in this way, Parfit argues that it does *not* fail on its own terms and condemn itself because it is able to make the following claim: if it were true that if we are all strict consequentialists the outcome would be worse than it would be if we had certain other sets of motives, consequentialism would tell us that we should not to have the dispositions that would have these bad effects, but to adopt one of the best possible sets of motives. This means that if being pure do-gooders would actually produce a worse state of affairs than if we followed some other theory of morality, we ought to follow that theory instead.

Parfit gives two cases to illustrate how adopting one of the best possible sets of motives may cause us to sometimes do what we believe will make the outcome worse. Suppose the best possible sets of motives include strong partiality towards one's children, and consider the following case:

*Case One.* Clare could give her child some benefit, or give much greater benefits to some unfortunate stranger. Because she loves her child, she benefits him rather than the stranger.<sup>29</sup>

Clare believes that having the disposition to love her child are a part of what makes outcomes better, and so she is permitted to benefit her own child on consequentialist grounds even though this makes the outcome worse in this case. Parfit claims that this would be a case of *moral immorality*, or

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

*blameless wrongdoing*; what I am doing is wrong, but I should not feel remorse nor intend to try not to act in this way again as it would be wrong for me to cause myself to lose the disposition to love my child.

Consider another case:

*Case Two.* Clare could either save her child's life, or save the lives of several strangers. Because she loves her child, she saves him, and the strangers all die.<sup>30</sup>

It is more difficult to argue that loving her child is one of the best possible sets of motives because the deaths of several strangers are a very bad effect. If she had not loved her child, this would have resulted in the better outcome as she would have saved the lives of several strangers. However, Parfit argues that consequentialism is able to account for this case too, as Clare could not have foreseen that having such disposition to love her child would cause such bad effects. When she saves her child rather than several strangers, she is acting on a set of motives that would have been wrong for her to cause herself to lose, and so this is also a case of blameless wrongdoing. Also, given the nature of love, it would be impossible for her to suddenly lose her love for her child, or to adopt a disposition which enables her to switch off her love for her child in cases like these.

### *3.2.3 Analysis of Parfit and Railton's consequentialism*

Parfit and Railton's arguments show that even if one accepts a fully consequentialist moral theory, it may not require that we give up our personal projects and our relationships. Consequentialism can claim that if the outcome would be worse when we follow strict consequentialism than it would be if we had certain other sets of motives, we should adopt one of the best possible sets of motives. Therefore, it may be that I should have certain dispositions and traits of character such that I sometimes knowingly and deliberately act contrary to the duties of consequentialism. Unlike Scheffler's

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

hybrid theory, this does not make consequentialism itself less demanding with respect to our moral obligations; it still requires us to give almost everything away. However, if we follow Railton and Parfit, we can hold that people who do not give everything away are not blameworthy because although they are acting wrongly, they are acting on the dispositions that consequentialism tells them to cultivate. If we take this approach, although it does not lessen our moral obligations to alleviate poverty, it lets those who fail to donate to charity off the hook in certain situations. For instance, when faced with the decision to buy medicine for my severely sick child or to donate that money to charity to save several lives, although I would be making the outcome worse if I choose to buy the medicine for my child, adopting a set of motives that allowed for these relationships would result in the optimum outcome. My contribution to human well-being would be much less, if I were such a person that would coldly refuse to buy my child medicine in order to maximise the net welfare.

Another considerable advantage of Parfit and Railton over Scheffler's agent-centred prerogative is not only is it able to produce the same results while fully embracing consequentialism, it overcomes the objection raised previously: consequentialism does allow for harm, but only if it produces the optimal good, but Scheffler's view allows harm for a sub-optimal good, for self-interest. Parfit and Railton's version of consequentialism can overstep this objection, as the motives and dispositions of the agent *do* matter. A world in which people adopt dispositions which allow them to pursue their own projects with the money that they have may be permissible under consequentialism, while adopting dispositions to go out to kill someone in order to raise funds for my projects would most certainly result in a worse state of affairs. So, even if killing and letting die may give the same results in one-off cases, having the disposition to kill will not produce the same results overall compared to when we adopt the disposition to pursue our personal projects at the cost of saving strangers' lives. Railton and Parfit's versions of consequentialism will not allow causing harm to secure benefits for yourself.

Railton and Parfit's argument may initially seem plausible. Parfit is right that if *everyone* is a pure do-gooder, things will be worse than if *everyone* has other, non-consequentialist dispositions. However, in the world as it is, very few people are pure do-gooders. So, my choice is not whether everyone should become a pure do-gooder, but rather whether I should become one of a handful of pure do-gooders. And it is not clear why just a few of us becoming pure do-gooders would make things worse overall. Even if I adopt the disposition to be completely impartial and disregard my relationships and personal projects, at most I would be upsetting those who I am close to and sacrificing my own happiness. It is difficult to say that these negative outcomes over the course of my life would outweigh the potential good that I could produce if I follow strict act consequentialism and follow something like Singer's Strong Principle of Beneficence. In giving up to the point of marginal utility, I could potentially save the lives of very many people on the brink of death which is undoubtedly a better state of affairs overall than avoiding the prospect of offended family and friends due to my callous impartiality. Also, if I resolve to have this impartial disposition to start off with, I would not be frustrating the expectations of family and friends as I would not create these kinds of relationships in the first place. So, adopting the disposition to be completely impartial as classic act consequentialism dictates would, at most, be undermining my own happiness, which arguably must be sacrificed to save the lives of hundreds if not thousands if we are to maintain a consequentialist moral theory.

Given the current state of affairs, adopting dispositions to allow for partiality would mean that something very worse would happen; very many people would die whose lives I could have saved if I had just stuck to the classic act consequentialist view. Therefore, having dispositions to show partiality towards her own interests would not be one of the best possible sets of motives. On the surface the case of global poverty seems analogous to Parfit's *Case Two*, but with global poverty, he cannot argue that this a case of blameless wrongdoing. Clare can argue that she could not have foreseen



that having the disposition to show partiality towards her child would result in the deaths of several strangers, but the affluent are unable to make such a claim. Global poverty is not an unexpected emergency crisis, but one that is very much present and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. Instead, it is more akin to the following case:

*Case Three.* Every time Clare is faced with the opportunity to give her child some benefit, she can instead save the life of a stranger, and she is aware of this from the very start. Because she loves her child, she continually gives him benefits and so as a result, many strangers die throughout the course of her life.

Having the disposition to love her child could not possibly be one of the best possible sets of motives in this case. Knowing that she would face this decision over and over again throughout her lifetime, and knowing that embracing such disposition would result in the deaths of many people, she ought to have abandoned her motives and reverted back to classic consequentialism, but she didn't. So, her current motives are not the best possible set, and so she is completely blameworthy when she chooses to give benefits to her child at the cost of strangers' lives.

One way to overcome this objection would be to embrace a collective justification for adopting such dispositions. Although one callous impartial person may not cause enough negative consequences to outweigh the potential good, a world in which everyone was this way would certainly be much worse than if we *all* adopted dispositions to show partiality and only look after those who are near to us. It is uncertain whether Parfit endorses this view. A noticeable difference between Railton and Parfit is that while Railton only alludes to the overall negative consequences that would result if an individual were to be completely impartial, Parfit is addressing the concern that consequentialism is *collectively* self-defeating. It is when *everyone* are pure do-gooders that consequentialism actually produces a worse outcome than if we were to adopt alternative sets of motives.

It is unclear whether Parfit is arguing that these alternative sets of motives are the ones which would produce the best outcome if we were *all* to adopt them. Parfit explicitly denies that his version of consequentialism is the same as collective consequentialism; while collective consequentialism is *collective* and concerned with *ideal* effects, consequentialism is *individualistic* and concerned with *actual* effects. But given that there are very few, if any, pure do-gooders in the world, consequentialism would simply tell us to be consequentialists. Parfit says that this would be unreasonably demanding, and seems to endorse a consequentialism under full compliance, claiming “C would be much less demanding if we *all* had one of the possible sets of motives that, according to C, we ought to try to cause ourselves to have”<sup>31</sup>.

The demands of consequentialism change with the level of compliance, and if Parfit is arguing for consequentialism under full compliance, it is difficult to see how this is different from collective consequentialism in any practical sense. If indeed Parfit is arguing that we ought to adopt sets of motives that would *collectively* produce a better outcome than classic act consequentialism, this permit us to show partiality even in situations like *Case Three*, as it can relieve us of any moral duty to come to the aid of distant strangers. If everyone had dispositions resulting offering aid only to those near to them, it would create the optimal outcome as everyone will receive the help they need without sacrificing personal projects and relationships.

However, this collective view is open to the partial compliance or ideal world objection, that it is counterproductive and useless in the real world where there is only partial compliance (This objection is commonly made against rule-consequentialism which will be examined in the next section). In reality, there are very few who comply with this, meaning that there will exist huge amounts of suffering in distant countries which I can alleviate through giving

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

aid. As we said before, very few people are pure do-gooders in reality. If just a handful of us adopt dispositions to maximise goodness, it is not clear why this would make things worse overall. Parfit argues that we can change our dispositions, unless it would mean that something *very* worse would happen, in which case we would be required to revert back to making the outcome best as possible. This means that due to partial compliance, we ought to revert back to making the outcome best as possible by donating as much as we can to charity. So, both Railton and Parfit's versions of consequentialism, whether they endorse a collective or an individual standpoint, fail to lessen the demands of beneficence and provide a solution to Unger's puzzle.

### **3.3 Collective and rule consequentialism**

Although Railton and Parfit allows for us to adopt whatever dispositions result in the best overall state of affairs, if these dispositions cause us to act against our consequentialist duty, they claim that this is a case of blameless wrongdoing. In other words, although partiality and personal projects are permitted under their view, it must still be acknowledged that it is morally wrong, just not blameworthy. Even if Railton and Parfit's versions of consequentialism are successful in arguing that we may show partiality to our own interests and the interests of family and friends, if it goes against the consequentialist duty to optimise the good all the time, we are doing wrong. This means that there is nothing intrinsically good in relationships; they are just things that are permitted in order to create the best state of affairs.

Collective consequentialism and rule consequentialism, on the other hand, allows us to at least say that it is *right* to act on such dispositions, even if it results in worse outcomes. This section will examine whether these versions of consequentialism is able to provide a solution to Unger's puzzle.

### 3.3.1 *Collective consequentialism*

According to collective consequentialism, obligations ought to be determined from a collective consequentialist perspective because the consequentialist goal should be seen as a collective aim. Liam Murphy, in *The Demands of Beneficence*<sup>32</sup>, defends what he calls a Collective Principle of Beneficence, arguing that beneficence should be understood in terms of a 'shared cooperative aim'<sup>33</sup>, where we are working together to promote the greatest good.

The reason why Murphy appeals to a collective consequentialism is not necessarily because act consequentialism is too demanding. Rather, what is wrong with the extreme view is that the principle imposes huge sacrifices on people who *do* comply with it, *because* other people fail to do so. Our moral obligations should not depend on the level of compliance of others; I should not have to do more just because other people are failing to do what they ought to do. Murphy proposes what he calls the *Compliance Condition*, arguing that an acceptable principle of beneficence will not increase its demands on agents when the expected compliance by other agents decreases<sup>34</sup>.

Collective consequentialism, then, makes a normative claim about compliance; the demands of a moral theory *shouldn't* change depending on the level of compliance, because of matters of *fairness*. Instead, what the agent is required to do is limited to the level of sacrifice that would be optimal under full compliance, so that everyone has a *fair share* of the burden to alleviate poverty. One's obligations should not increase because others are failing to do their fair share. Murphy's *Collective Principle of Beneficence* satisfies this condition, maintaining that the sacrifice required of the agent is

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<sup>32</sup> Murphy, L. 1993. The Demands of Beneficence. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22(4), pp.267-293.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 285.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 278.

limited to the level of sacrifice that would be optimal under full compliance.<sup>35</sup>

This would mean that everyone would have a fair share of the burden to alleviate poverty, which will dramatically decrease the burden placed on the individual. If it would take a donation of five per cent of the income of all affluent citizens would make poverty history, I would only be obligated to do my fair share by giving five per cent of my income to charity.

Although collective consequentialism greatly reduces our obligations to aid the poor, it does not solve Unger's puzzle regarding our different intuitions to emergency cases and famine relief. Unless we can show that there is a morally relevant difference between the two cases, if the burden to alleviate poverty should be distributed equally, then it must be that we are also only obligated to help people in emergency cases according to our fair share. This is problematic because our intuitions say otherwise. Consider the following case:

*Two in a Pond.* There are two children drowning in a pond with two bystanders, a stranger and yourself. The stranger walks away, ignoring the child he is obligated to save, and so you are left alone with two drowning children.

With collective consequentialism, each bystander is obligated only to save one child, and your moral duties should not increase just because the stranger failed to do his. Contrary to our moral intuitions, then, you are not obligated to save the second child. It would be unfair to ask you to take up the slack for another's moral failings. Although you may save the child, you are not morally obligated to do so; it is supererogatory.

Murphy defends this stance, but attempts to rescue it from the reprehensible conclusion that it is acceptable to leave the second child. He claims that we should follow a 'rule of thumb', in which you should save the second child if

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 280.

it does not impose extreme costs to yourself<sup>36</sup>, and also because if you fail to do so, you would be showing ‘bad character’<sup>37</sup>. This explains why it *seems* wrong to not save the second child, when in fact, you are actually permitted to save just the one.

This defence of the *Collective Principle* is quite obviously implausible. It seems problematic to say that, by failing to save the second child, the agent is only violating a rule of thumb or demonstrating bad character<sup>38</sup>. Most would agree that if you do not rescue a drowning child, you *are* in fact failing to do what you are morally required to do. It is not just that it ‘seems’ wrong, but it would be *actually* morally wrong. This shows that our moral obligations to provide assistance does not depend on the collective, and unless we can show that there is a morally relevant difference between these cases and cases like *The Envelope*, we cannot use the Collective Principle to argue that we have a limited obligation to aid distant strangers.

### 3.3.2 Rule consequentialism

According to rule consequentialism, the rightness or wrongness of particular acts is not a matter of the consequences of those individual acts, but a matter of conformity with that set of fairly general rules whose acceptance by (more or less) everyone would have the best consequences. At first glance, although this view seems to be identical to collective consequentialism, rule consequentialism and collective consequentialism differ in their ultimate goal; rule consequentialism assumes full compliance and determines the rules which would result in the best consequences overall from this position, while collective consequentialism is concerned with fairness and the distribution of burdens.

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<sup>36</sup> Murphy, L. 2000. *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, p .131.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

<sup>38</sup> The fact that Murphy is tempted here to look at character suggests that considerations of the agent’s character are closely linked with what our ethical obligations are, which ties into my own solution offered in the next chapter.

On a practical level, for the most part, both versions of consequentialism result in the same implications when it comes to the demands of beneficence. Rule consequentialism would imply that in order to have the best consequences, the amount of aid we ought to give to alleviate poverty be limited so as to not affect our relationships and personal projects, and so we should comply to a rule by which if everyone complied to it, this would be sufficient to end world poverty. Like with collective consequentialism, if it would take a donation of five per cent of the income of all affluent citizens would make poverty history, I would only be obligated to give five per cent of my income to charity. This would not be too demanding as to affect my personal goals and relationships, so following the rule to donate five per cent would result in the best consequences overall.

However, because rule consequentialism is not ultimately about fairness or the equal distribution of burdens, it has the advantage of overcoming the objection above made against collective consequentialism. Rule consequentialism can avoid the unintuitive conclusion of the moral permissibility of leaving the second child to drown by claiming the following: we ought to have rules which encourage us to have certain dispositions which would result in the best consequences if everyone accepted them. Rule consequentialism, and consequently Railton and Parfit's versions with their reference to dispositions, can respond to the dilemma of the *Two in a Pond* by claiming that we ought to have universal dispositions of care, kindness, empathy and so on, as these are what make the world a better place (both individually and collectively). This would mean that I ought to adopt these dispositions, which will make it impossible for me to walk away from the second drowning child, considering that I could easily save them at little cost to myself.

Unger's puzzle, then, can be solved in the following way: we ought to follow rules which encourage us to have dispositions to care for those close to us, which includes people we come across in emergency situations, but does

not extend to cases like famine relief. This would result in the best consequences overall because if everyone were to follow such rules, the needs of all would be met, while also leaving room for personal projects and relationships. Not only that, but the needs of people would be met more efficiently when the aid will be focused on those close by. Moreover, as the rules are based on dispositions to *care* for those close by, even if the level of compliance is not complete, rule consequentialism is able to accommodate for this by making it impermissible for me walk away in cases like *Two in a Pond*.

So, even though formally rule consequentialism assumes full compliance, when we apply this more flexible general rule based on dispositions, what is required of you will naturally depend on the level of compliance of others. The number of people suffering and in need of your aid will depend on how many people comply with the moral code to be caring, kind, empathetic and so on. In the *Two in a Pond* case, if the other bystander saves the second child, I will only be obligated to save one child. If the bystander walks away, I will be obligated to save both.

The problem with this is, it means that with regards to global poverty, rule consequentialism would also require that I donate little if everyone complies, and a lot if not many do. This is unless rule consequentialism tells us to follow rules which encourage dispositions to *only* care for the nearby and not to care *at all* for distant strangers. It is doubtful whether this is possible, as dispositions are often multi-track. If I care about the suffering of nearby strangers like in emergency situations, it must be the case that I care to some extent about the suffering of distant strangers. Caring for the needs of others starts with a basic level of compassion for humankind.

Even if rule consequentialism permits that I only care for the people close by, it faces the partial compliance objection or the ideal world objection, that it is counterproductive and useless in the real world where there is only partial compliance. Collective and rule consequentialism are great in that



they vastly reduce the demands of morality, but the reality is that very few people comply with the moral rule they suggest. This lack of full compliance will result in devastating effects in the real world. For example, pacifism is great if there is 100% compliance, but terrible when there is anything less than full compliance because you are unable to protect yourself and others from the attacks of those who do not comply with the moral code of pacifism. With the *Two in a Pond Case*, it is great if both bystanders do their fair share and all two children are saved, but when there is only partial compliance, it results in the easily preventable death of a child.

The best interpretation of the partial compliance objection, according to Hooker, goes like this: you might sometimes be required by these rules to do something that, because others are not complying, would produce *very much worse* consequences when view impartially<sup>39</sup>. If so, it seems that we must abandon such notion if we are to truly maintain a consequentialist moral theory. It is true that if everyone does donate a small percentage of their income we could eliminate extreme poverty altogether, but the matter of fact is, very few affluent people regularly give such proportion of their income to charity. And the fact that others do not comply results in undeniably very much worse consequences: millions of people suffer and die prematurely. Therefore, it seems that rule consequentialism must be abandoned if we are to maintain a consequentialist theory.

Hooker attempts to rescue rule consequentialism from this charge by bringing in a strong requirement that one prevent great harm<sup>40</sup>, but it is doubtful that rule consequentialism can truly allow for such a constraint. However, the suggestion that we adopt rules that encourage certain dispositions would naturally provide the constraint because it would be in the nature of such disposed people to prevent great harm. The problem is, due to partial compliance, these dispositions would result in very demanding

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<sup>39</sup> Hooker, B. 1990. Rule-Consequentialism. *Mind* 99(393), p.74.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 76.

obligations, especially with regards to poverty alleviation. If what I am required to do depends on the level of compliance, although this overcomes the partial compliance objection, it seems to revert back to classic act consequentialism, and prove to be overly demanding.

It seems rule consequentialism is stuck between a rock and a hard place. If it says that what the rules require does not change depending on the level of compliance, we are faced with the partial compliance objection, that it is absurd for a consequentialist theory to produce very much worse consequences when applied in real life. If rule consequentialism says that what the rules require of us *does* change depending on the level of compliance with reference to dispositions or any additional constraints, we are back to the act consequentialist position of always doing to the optimal good, because of the lack of compliance of others.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

In this section, we looked at moderate versions of consequentialism which attempt to lessen the demands of beneficence by incorporating an agent-centred prerogative or referring to a more collective view of our duties. I have examined whether these are successful in providing answers that match our intuitions regarding emergency cases and famine relief, and concluded that because they do not show that there is a morally relevant difference between Envelope-type cases and Vintage Sedan-type cases, they fail to justify offering aid in one situation and not in another. We need to show that there really is a morally relevant difference between these two types of cases in order to avoid the extremely demanding conclusion that whenever we dismiss an opportunity to donate to charity, we commit a heinous crime equivalent to letting a child drown in a pond. An appeal to general rules to care for those who are near fails because of the ideal world objection. We need for there to be a morally relevant difference between

these two cases to explain why it is worse to fail to save a drowning child than it is to fail to donate to charity.

## 4

### My Solution to the Puzzle

The previous chapters demonstrate the difficulty in justifying for our different reactions in cases like *The Envelope* and *The Vintage Sedan*. We found that Boonin's initially promising solution to Unger's puzzle, that the morally relevant difference between famine relief and emergency situations is the unique directedness of aid, is unsuccessful. Applying more moderate accounts of consequentialism also fail to provide a morally relevant difference and so they are not able to provide justification for offering aid in one situation and not in another.

This chapter will offer my own solution to Unger's puzzle. I suggest that differences such as physical and temporal proximity, experiential impact, and the unique directedness of aid are all morally relevant factors, not because they are relevant in themselves, but because of their correlation with our ability to empathise and have compassion for the suffering of others. I argue that placing the role of empathy at the core of our duties to the poor not only solves Unger's puzzle about our different intuitions but it is also able to provide new solutions to problems associated with the demandingness of beneficence.

#### 4.1 Correlation with empathy as morally relevant

Going back to Boonin, if it is the unique directedness of aid that is morally relevant, our intuitions between *Uniquely Directed Envelope* and *Vintage Sedan* should be the same. Both cases are examples of aid that is uniquely directed, where only you can save the life of one person at the cost of \$100. Considering that these two cases are identical from both an impersonal and

personal perspective, we would expect that we have the same intuitions regarding both cases. However, our intuitions say otherwise; we still feel that stronger obligation to provide aid in *Vintage Sedan* over *Uniquely Directed Envelope*. This is demonstrated by the fact that when we are faced with the decision to save only one person, our intuitions say that we ought to save the injured bird-watcher over the child in *Uniquely Directed Envelope*. So, it seems that this difference in our moral intuitions cannot be explained by mere the unique directedness of aid. The difference in our intuitions regarding *Vintage Sedan* and *Uniquely Directed Envelope* show that we need something other than the unique directedness of aid to explain this difference.

Singer and Unger reject many of the different factors between cases like *The Envelope* and *The Vintage Sedan* as morally irrelevant, and I agree that factors like physical proximity and experiential impact are not morally relevant in themselves. However, these factors are closely connected with our ability to empathise with the suffering of others, which I believe is morally relevant. In this section, I will examine three factors which are closely related with empathy: physical proximity, temporal proximity and experiential impact.

#### *4.1.1 Physical proximity and experiential impact*

A clear difference between *Uniquely Directed Envelope* and *Vintage Sedan* is one of physical proximity and experiential impact. Both Singer and Unger reject physical proximity outright as a morally relevant difference, that sheer distance simply cannot be morally relevant to our obligations to aid. As we looked at previously, Singer states that although the fact someone in need is nearby may make it more likely that we *shall* assist him, this doesn't show that we *ought* to help him any more than a distant stranger. Unger refers to the cases of *The Bungalow Compound* and *The CB Radios* to show that physical proximity and experiential impact make no difference to our moral

obligations, even if it may make a difference to the psychological impact on the potential benefactor.

Although I agree that mere physical distance and experiential impact are not sufficient factors to excuse us of moral obligations to give aid to people in distant countries, I do not think that they are completely morally neutral differences. By physical proximity, I do not simply mean geographical location. Neither do I mean Kamm's redefinition of what it means to be close, in her paper "Does Distance Matter Morally to the Duty to Rescue?"<sup>41</sup>. Kamm argues that being close means that we are near the threat to the victim or the means to saving the victim. So, even if you are far away from the victim, if you have long arms to reach them, you are still obligated to help as you are near to the means to save them. Or, even if you are far away from the victim, if you can save them by pressing a button next to you, you are obligated to save them. However, in both *Vintage Sedan* and *Uniquely Directed Envelope*, the means to saving the victim are close, and we can further alter the cases so that the means to save the victim is closer in *Uniquely Directed Envelope*. We can alter the case so that in *Vintage Sedan*, in order to save the injured bird-watcher you would have to drive them to the nearest hospital which is hundreds of miles away, while saving the life of a child in *Uniquely Directed Envelope* will only require a quick bank transfer.

Nor do I mean what Violetta Ighneski claims in "Distance, Determinacy and the Duty to Aid: A Reply to Kamm."<sup>42</sup> She argues that being near it is not about the distance, but the determinacy of the situation. "If being "near" just means being able to do something determinate that will save someone from a perilous situation, why not just say that it is the determinacy of the situation

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<sup>41</sup> Kamm, F. M. 2000. Does Distance Matter Morally to the Duty of Rescue? *Law and Philosophy*. 19(6), pp.655-681.

<sup>42</sup> Ighneski, V. 2001. Distance, Determinacy and the Duty to Aid: A Reply to Kamm. *Law and Philosophy*. 20(6), pp.605-616.

that affects the structure of our obligations to aid and not nearness.”<sup>43</sup> In uniquely directed cases of aid, the situation is determinate. But again, this does not solve the puzzle as to why given the choice between *Vintage Sedan* and *Uniquely Directed Envelope* we feel morally obligated to save bird-watcher, as in both cases the situation is determinate.

By physical proximity, I neither mean geographical location or being near to the means of saving the victim or the determinacy of the situation, but being physical close enough to perceive the need of the victim. The very act of perceiving the need makes it worse for me to ignore that need. In the same way, experiential impact is also a morally relevant factor because of its connection to empathy. Something about perceiving the suffering of a fellow human being in front of me triggers our ability to empathise, to truly be pained by the other’s pain. The reason why physical proximity and experiential impact are morally relevant, then, is not because the spatial distance and the experience are important in themselves, but because of their correlation with empathy. Failing to help a drowning child in a pond is worse than failing to help a distant unperceived sufferer, even if both cases involve uniquely directed aid, because there is something about the vividness and immediacy of the situation that engages with human empathy and compassion.

If we take physical proximity as being physically close enough to perceive the suffering of others rather than spatial distance, this explains why we feel that it would not be morally wrong to ignore the envelope in *The Bungalow Compound*. Although, spatially, you are only a few feet away from the children who you can save, they are not physically close enough for them to enter into your experience. If the *The Bungalow Compound* case was adjusted so that you received a direct plea from the children face to face, I think our moral intuitions would differ. Having seen their plight first hand, it

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 614.

would be morally condemnable to ignore their need, especially when you could alleviate their suffering at such little cost to yourself.

On the other hand, the reason why we feel strongly that we ought to help the injured bird-watcher in *The CB Radios* is because even though he is not close enough for us to directly perceive his suffering, the fact that we can hear him over the radio is enough of an experiential impact to trigger our ability to empathise with him. Even if the sounds are just electronics, we can hear the pain in voice and it is easy to imagine being in his situation. Even if he sends a message in Morse code, it is a personal encounter and a conversation with someone in need which increases the experiential impact it has on the agent. Again, it is easy to put ourselves in his situation and respond empathetically to his sufferings. Admittedly, it is not as vivid as it would be in the original *The Vintage Sedan* case where we see the injured bird-watcher in front of our eyes, but it is still a lot closer to home than *The Envelope*, where the potential recipient of aid is undetermined and distant.

This is further supported by the fact that if, as Unger claims, physical proximity and experiential impact have no moral relevance, there should be no difference between *The Vintage Sedan* and *The CB Radios*. This means that when faced with the option of saving either an injured bird-watcher in front of you or an injured bird-watcher ten miles away, it makes no difference which person you choose to help. You would be morally permitted to save either person. But there seems to be something wrong if someone ignores the pleas of someone in front of them and drives away in order to save another who is ten miles away, from whom you've received a message over the radio. We would expect that a moral and compassionate person would help the injured bird-watcher in front of them over the one who is ten miles away, because the perceived suffering of the injured bird-watcher in front of you makes it impossible to drive away.

This solves Unger's puzzle because not only does it explain why our intuitions differ between *The Vintage Sedan* and *The Envelope*, but it also



justifies that moral intuition. It is worse for the moral agent to drive past an injured birdwatcher than it is for them to fail to send a \$100 check, because the very fact that you see the injured birdwatcher first-hand makes it morally worse for you to ignore their suffering. Similarly, it is morally worse if you to drive past an injured birdwatcher than it is for them to fail to send a \$100 check in the case of *Uniquely Directed Envelope*, even though both are cases of uniquely directed aid, as while one involves a personal encounter, the other does not. This would also explain and justify why it might be worse to drive past a birdwatcher who will almost certainly die, or ignore a drowning child who will most certainly be saved even if I don't, than it is to fail to send a \$100 check in *Uniquely Directed Envelope*, even though it is actually much worse from an impersonal and personal perspective. There is something ruthless and callous about walking away from someone suffering in front of you, and a compassionate and caring person would be unable to do so. Thus, physical proximity and experiential impact are morally relevant factors in that they usually correlate with our ability to empathise with the victim, and although this alone doesn't determine our moral obligations to the needy, it does make it worse to fail to provide aid in situations in which we perceive the suffering for ourselves.

#### 4.1.2 Temporal proximity

Another interesting thing to note is empathy's correlation not only with spatial distance, but also with temporal distance. Although this is not directly applicable to Unger's puzzle regarding our different intuitions between *The Vintage Sedan* and *The Envelope*, our ability to empathise is also linked to temporal proximity. Many people have a bias towards the near future as opposed to the distant future. We prefer pleasurable experiences to be in our near future and painful experiences to be in our distant future<sup>44</sup>. In other words, I care more about my present and near future than I do about my distant future. This time bias is transferable to other people; when we

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<sup>44</sup> Greene, P and Sullivan, M. 2015. Against Time Bias. *Ethics*, 125, pp.947-970.

empathise with other people, we also care about their present situation and their near future, more than we do about their distant future. This means that we are more concerned with alleviating their present suffering than their future suffering. There is a greater vividness and immediacy with the present suffering of people that triggers our empathy, than learning of some misfortune that will come upon someone some years in the future. So, our ability to empathise with the suffering of others is also correlated with temporal proximity.

From an impartial perspective, other people's present situation will matter just as much as my present situation, and other people's future will matter just as much as my future, and so if I am completely agent-neutral I will care equally about my present and other people's present, and I will regard my future and other people's future with equal weight. Agent-neutrality is, of course, rejected for various reasons, and most people would accept that it is permissible for me to give greater weight to my own present and own future than the present and future of others. But given that I am near-biased, I care less about my future, especially my distant future, and as mentioned before, this bias is translated onto people whom I empathise with; I care more about other people's present suffering than their future suffering. This means that a decent dose of empathy will imply that I care about other people's present as much as my distant future, and so I should sacrifice my distant future happiness in order to relieve someone's current suffering.

This seems relevant for ethical giving because usually when talking about beneficence it is not about my present situation contending with other people's present situation. The common example used to argue that moral obligations to give aid is overly demanding is of an agent who is going to watch a movie but each time, having to give that money to charity instead: I decide to watch a movie, but realising that I could do more good by spending the money on famine relief, I give the money to a charity instead. The next day, I try to watch the movie again but I am faced with the same outcome; I must give my money to famine relief. However, unless we believe that we

have very strong moral obligations to alleviate poverty that forbids us from watching movies like Singer's principle of beneficence, the agent can and is likely to donate to charity *and* also go watch the movie. The choice to give to charity doesn't usually create immediate suffering and loss for the agent. The decision to donate, however, will mean that I will have less to spend later, and a lifestyle of charity when added up over the years will mean that my future well-being is sacrificed. For instance, it may mean that I will have to cut back on my spending next month because I have less to spend. The monthly donations added up over my lifetime may mean that I put less into my savings account, so I will enjoy a less cushy retirement. The decision to give to charity, then, seems related to the temporal proximity of other people's suffering, and how much weight we give to our own future selves. Given that we discount the value of our distant future, when care enough about the present suffering of others, there will be a point at which I will care more about the present suffering of others than my distant future. Therefore, it makes sense for us to sacrifice our future well-being in order to relieve the current suffering of others. This questions the morality of saving up to secure our future when there are currently millions of people starving across the globe.

This is not directly relevant to solving Unger's puzzle as temporal proximity as both *The Envelope* and *The Vintage Sedan* take place in the present time. The suffering of both the injured bird-watcher and the children in poverty are happening in real time. However, if you do not give the injured bird-watcher a ride, he will most certainly soon lose his leg, whereas in *The Envelope*, it will take at least a couple of weeks for your donation of \$100 to be translated into life-saving aid. If your aid is going to save someone's life, it will be the case that the person who will be saved by your aid is not currently on the brink of death. Although this may be morally irrelevant on its own, the seemingly more urgent situation of *The Vintage Sedan* makes the need of the victim more salient and vivid for the agent. This coupled with the fact that he is in extreme pain in front of your very eyes explains why we feel we have strong obligations to offer aid to the injured bird-watcher, for it

would be extremely unsympathetic and callous to walk away. We would expect anyone with a decent amount of empathy to respond to his need, and we would morally condemn someone who does not.

I have attempted to show in this section that there are factors that do make a difference, morally, to our moral obligations to offer assistance. I have just looked at physical and temporal distance and experiential impact, but other factors such as the unique directedness of aid, how we acquire information of the victim and so on, can all make a difference to the strength of moral obligations to aid. Again, these factors are not morally relevant in themselves, but due to their correlation with our ability to empathise with the suffering of others. In cases like *The Vintage Sedan*, it is likely to be a multitude of different factors which explain why our moral intuitions differ from cases like *The Envelope*. These factors may be themselves morally irrelevant, but when put together, the effect we would expect it to have on the moral agent is such that we would regard it morally reprehensible for someone not to offer aid in such a situation.

#### 4.1.3 *An alternative approach to beneficence*

But, isn't this making a naturalistic fallacy? Just because we do feel empathy towards the suffering of people in front of us, and less empathy towards distant people, it doesn't make it *right* that this is our emotional response, or prove that what morality requires of us must align with our emotional responses in the first place. It seems that Singer and Unger would argue this. It is a failure of our imagination that we don't feel empathetic towards those in distant countries. We should and ought to feel the same amount of empathy towards all who are suffering regardless of where they are, but we don't. And regardless of this, we ought not to discriminate. This is a failure of ours, and we are committing an is-ought fallacy when we claim that just because we *do* feel more empathy in emergency cases, we have stronger moral obligations to help in these cases.

But this response misses its mark if beneficence *is* essentially about what kind of person we ought to *be*, rather than what we ought to *do*. When we take this alternative attitude towards beneficence, the role of empathy is paramount as it is closely linked with the character of the agent. True, a truly virtuous person would feel empathy towards all humankind, and be affected personally by the suffering of distant strangers. But we cannot deny that this is harder to do, and this is due to the nature of empathy.

According to psychologists, there are two types of empathy: cognitive and emotional empathy<sup>45</sup>. Emotional empathy, also called affective empathy, is the response we have when we encounter the suffering of others first-hand, when we see another in peril in front of us. When we do so, it is easy for us to empathise with them. It is an automatic drive to respond appropriately to another's emotions, and it happens automatically and often subconsciously. There is no active thought process or effort on behalf of the agent, as it is something that happens to us rather than something that is done by us. Their suffering is vivid, and a person who would walk away in this situation, we would condemn because we would agree that anyone with any decent amount of empathetic response would offer aid in these situations.

Cognitive empathy, on the other hand, is different. It involves a higher level of cognitive ability and it is a largely conscious drive to recognise accurately and understand another's emotional state. This kind of empathy is sometimes called "perspective taking". It is a more conscious, deliberate, and abstract process, and a skill that everyone can learn. There are various factors present in cases like *The Envelope* which make it much harder to empathise with the suffering of others. It is harder to put yourself in another's shoes when you have never seen them before, or have seen their suffering first hand. It is harder to take the perspective of the potential beneficiary when the aid you provide will not uniquely directed at a particular individual

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<sup>45</sup> The Psychology of Emotional and Cognitive Empathy, Lesley University, accessed 30 June, <https://lesley.edu/article/the-psychology-of-emotional-and-cognitive-empathy>

or individuals. It is harder to empathise because poverty does not have a face. Singer and Unger may be right; it is a failure of imagination, but it is precisely because it is difficult to empathise with distant, undetermined strangers that some leniency is granted when we fail to help than if we fail to wade a child out of a pond.

In some ways, my response regarding our actions, or rather lack of action, in Envelope is similar to Railton and Parfit's response – that this is a case of “blameless wrongdoing”. The ideally moral person would not fail to empathise with distant strangers and they would be personally affected by their suffering. When we fail to do so, we are doing wrong in that we are failing to live up to the golden standard of morality. However, the difference is that while Railton and Parfit's version of consequentialism doesn't require the agent to do anything more and they remain in a perpetual state of wrongdoing, my alternative approach says more. While it is true that the agent may be excused while still doing wrong, they cannot remain in this position indefinitely.

If we think of beneficence as essentially about what kind of person we ought to be, and that it is inevitably connected to the agent's character, the demands of morality would not allow us to remain lacking in empathy towards distant strangers. This approach to ethics demands there be moral development in the life of the agent. And due to the focus on the character of the agent, and the key role that empathy plays in our duties of beneficence, this alternative approach can offer a way to overcome the demandingness of beneficence in a way that is different from the consequentialist responses I examined, while also accepting that our obligations are truly demanding. The next section will look a recent paper that offers a similar solution to this and highlight the ways in which my view differs to this approach.

#### **4.2 Reconciling strong duties of beneficence with a life worth living**

One of the main objections to Singer and Unger's conclusion regarding our duties to alleviate poverty is that it places unreasonable demands on the affluent, otherwise known as the Demandingness Objection. There is more to the Demandingness Objection than it simply being an attempt to excuse ourselves from strong moral duties; it points to the fact that personal projects and relationships are an essential part of a life that is worth living and moral theories which require a single-minded pursuit of the overall good results in alienation. The motivation for finding a preservationist solution to Unger's puzzle is, for many, to lessen the demands of beneficence, and thus, overcome this objection. So far, we have argued that Boonin's solution and moderate versions of consequentialism fail both to provide a preservationist solution and to lessen the demands of beneficence. With my alternative approach to beneficence, I attempt to uphold strong obligations to alleviate poverty while also allowing room for the agent to undergo a process of moral development. Before outlining my own views on how this alternative approach to beneficence overcomes the Demandingness Objection, I will examine a comparable approach proposed by Tom Dougherty.

#### 4.2.1 *Dougherty's argument*

In "Altruism and Ambition in the Dynamic Moral Life"<sup>46</sup>, Tom Dougherty attempts to provide an account of beneficence that reconciles two seemingly contradictory statements. Consider Amy, an ambitious altruist who is setting aside a generous portion of her income towards charitable giving. She is doing well when it comes to altruism, but given that the world is ridden with poverty, she feels morally *required* to try to do better. She accepts the following statement:

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<sup>46</sup> Dougherty, T. 2016. Altruism and Ambition in the Dynamic Moral Life. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. 95(4), pp.716-129.

*Ambition.* Beneficence requires an impressive altruist like Amy not to be content with how much she is giving, but to ambitiously increase how much she gives.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, many of us are inclined to say that Amy is doing well, and so we feel pulled towards another thesis:

*Moderation.* Beneficence is not so demanding that an impressive altruist like Amy is failing to sacrifice enough of her resources to help people in need.<sup>48</sup>

Both views are attractive, and both explain the phenomenology of Amy's experience. A morally decent person like Amy can experience herself as compelled to sacrifice more, without thereby needing to feel guilty for how much she has been sacrificing. However, the two views are in tension. If we accept a moderate view of beneficence, Amy is already doing enough and is not required to aim to give more. If we accept *Ambition* and she that she *is* required to give more, then how could it not be that she is failing to meet beneficence's demands?

Dougherty aims to reconcile this tension between *Ambition* and *Moderation*. In defending a *dynamic* view of beneficence, where we think of beneficence as having a temporal profile, we can distinguish between what someone must do *now* and what someone must do in the *future*. Rather than determining what we ought to do *at a time*, we should consider what we ought to do *over time*. Although people's urgent needs give us powerful moral reasons for alleviating them, beneficence should not be overly demanding, leaving the agent with insufficient room for other worthwhile interests. Therefore, we are required to develop morally over time, and to increase our sacrifices as we do so, while still leading a good life. This view of beneficence captures the idea of an ambitious altruist while also leaving room for moderation. The impressive altruist is sacrificing enough now, but is also required to increase how much she sacrifices over time.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 716.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 717.



What beneficence requires of individuals, then, depends on the agent's stage in moral development, and they are also required to keep on developing morally at a moderate pace. This seems to overcome the Demandingness Objection as although beneficence may be demanding, it is not overly demanding for the agent in question as she has developed the moral capacity to give a lot without it being too much of a sacrifice for her. Dougherty gives the analogy of learning the high jump to demonstrate this point: the bar is set low for the novice athlete, but she should aim to improve over time and to raise the bar higher<sup>49</sup>. In the same way, beneficence's demands will vary across times and persons, and for each individual we would expect that the demands would gradually increase over time. Altruism becomes possible through moral development. In order to make altruism easier, we should look to form appropriate habits and develop our capacities for will-power, as well as shaping our interests towards not only less expensive forms but also forms that benefit others.

By introducing the concept of moral development, Dougherty's view entails that the demands of beneficence will vary across persons and times. What is required of Amy now will be less than what will be required of her 30 years down the line when she has increased her moral capacity to give. Also, what is required of Amy will be more than someone who is less morally developed than her. The developmental view makes it necessary for the agent to continue to develop morally. If someone is fully responsible for failing to develop morally, then they will still be required to sacrifice as much as what would be required of them if they had done so in a counterfactual scenario. As well as beneficence being dynamic, Dougherty also claims that beneficence must have a static requirement to prevent people with stunted moral potential from being let off the hook. He suggests a bare minimum requirement, a 'minimally decent' person standard<sup>50</sup>. This bare minimum lacks a temporal profile and is insensitive to someone's stage in her moral

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 723.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 726.

development. Going back to the high jump analogy, the bar needs to be set a certain height in order for it to count as engaging in the sport.

#### 4.2.2 Critique of Dougherty's argument

At first glance, Dougherty's attempt to reconcile *Ambition* and *Moderation* seems to significantly lessen the demands of beneficence by arguing what we are required to do changes over time. It allows for the agent to gradually make changes in her life so that the sacrifice she is required to make is not overwhelmingly huge. However, this developmental account faces problems when we introduce moral principles like Singer's principle, or when we iterate Unger's puzzle regarding cases like *The Envelope* and *The Vintage Sedan*. Under Peter Singer's Weak Principle, for instance, "if it is in our power to prevent something *very* bad from happening, without sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally to do so"<sup>51</sup>. This seems to be an undisputable principle that we would expect any minimally decent person to follow, regardless of their stage in moral development. To use Singer's analogy, surely the bar should not be set so low as to say it is morally permissible to walk past a drowning child in a pond because I am wearing expensive shoes. Singer's Weak Principle is not demanding in itself, for it seems that any minimally decent person would not hesitate to prevent something extremely bad if it is at very little cost to themselves.

The problem, however, is that the demands of the world are inexhaustible from the individual's perspective. The occasional giving up of something insignificant to prevent something bad is not difficult, but because there is almost a limitless amount of suffering the individual can prevent by sacrificing morally insignificant luxuries, it requires a dramatic change in the way we live our lives which is demanding. The same point can be made with reference to Unger's puzzle. If it follows that a minimally decent person would stop to help the injured bird-watcher, then, unless we can show that

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<sup>51</sup> Singer, p. 231.

there is indeed a morally relevant difference between Vintage Sedan and Envelope, it must be that a morally decent person should also donate to charity at every opportunity that comes their way. Again, this is very demanding because these opportunities are endless. I have argued above that a multitude of different factors such as physical proximity and experiential impact are morally relevant differences because of their correlation with empathy. This is not to say that we have no obligations toward distant strangers, but it does make it much worse to ignore the suffering of needy people in front of us. If the basic static requirement is what a minimally decent person would do, from our current commonly held intuitions regarding our duties to aid others, this would be to offer assistance in emergency situations like *Pond* and *The Vintage Sedan*. The requirement to donate to charity would be incremental, depending on the moral development of the agent.

However, reducing what we are morally required to do just because someone finds it difficult to adjust seems unjustifiable. Making room for moral development in this way may be a practical requirement but it is not a moral requirement. There need to be legitimate concerns with the agent's own life, experiences and agency in order to justify failing to meet the needs of desperate people, but there are very few people who give up to anywhere close to this point. If we take it that Dougherty is right about the need for a baseline static requirement of beneficence, and if we take it that counter-reasons to justify not giving must be sufficiently strong, this minimum requirement must be a lot higher than our common-sense intuitions. It may be that even Altruist is failing to meet the minimum moral requirement, meaning we would have to reject *Moderation* – that beneficence is not so demanding that an impressive altruist is failing to sacrifice enough of her resources to help people in need. We only regard her as an impressive altruist because of our already held beliefs that beneficence is supererogatory rather than obligatory.

In this case, Dougherty's attempts to reconcile *Ambition* and *Moderation* may not be necessary as *Moderation* is just false. If Altruist believes that she should be doing more and feels morally required to do better than she is doing now, she does not really believe that she is sacrificing enough. Dougherty wants to reconcile two contradictory views, but it seems that these views are not held by the same person. It is the people who see Altruist give much who conclude that she is doing well and that she is not failing to sacrifice enough of her resources to help people in need. Dougherty claims that a morally decent person like Altruist can experience herself as compelled to sacrifice more, without thereby needing to feel guilty for how much she has been sacrificing. But is Altruist's compulsion to sacrifice more due to the fact that she feels *required* to sacrifice more or because she feels it is *good* to sacrifice more? If she is currently feeling that she *ought* to sacrifice more, then *Moderation* is not true. If she is currently feeling that it is *good* to sacrifice more, but not morally required to sacrifice more, then *Ambition* is wrong. Even with Dougherty's requirement to develop over time, although she may be required to sacrifice more in the future, she is not required to right now, and so at the least she should be content with how much she is giving at the present moment. But this doesn't seem to be in line with how altruistic people usually feel. They often feel that they are *not* doing enough right now, although the people around them think and assure them that they are. It is other people who impose the *Moderation* view on the agent while the agent herself claims *Ambition*. From the perspective of the person who is doing worse than Altruist, what Altruist is doing seems to go over and beyond what is morally required. However, Altruist herself would reject *Moderation*. Not that she necessarily feels constantly guilty about how much she is sacrificing but that she is not content with how much she is giving *now*; she does not believe that she is giving enough.

These two attitudes seem to come from two completely different views on beneficence. The Altruist who feels compelled to sacrifice more is operating under a different paradigm of beneficence than those who hold the

*Moderation* view. The Altruist accepts a demanding view of beneficence, which is why she is not satisfied with how much she is giving at the moment. Those who maintain *Moderation* reject such view on the grounds of demandingness. But as said before, we have powerful reasons for alleviating people's urgent needs, and unless our sacrifice seriously compromises the way we live our lives, we are morally required to do so. This gives us reason to reject *Moderation* in favour of *Ambition*, and hold that although someone may be giving much to alleviate poverty by the current standards that we hold, she ought not be satisfied with how much she is giving because what morality demands of us is much higher than our currently held moral intuitions about beneficence.

Does this leave any room for moral development? Should we morally condemn every person who doesn't live up to such high standards? Is everyone required to give until the point where it would seriously affect our agency and our life commitments? This is where I believe my alternative view of beneficence may give room for some leniency. By arguing that there is indeed a morally relevant difference between emergency cases and famine relief on the grounds of empathy, we can say that although the demands of beneficence are high, there is still a moral distinction between walking away from a drowning child and ignoring a letter from UNICEF. Although we do have strong obligations to alleviate poverty, it is worse to ignore the plight of people in face-to-face emergency situations than it is to fail to donate to charity. This is because, as said above, it is much harder to empathise with the suffering of distant strangers. So, the person who fails to respond in *Envelope*-type cases are less condemnable than those who fail to aid the injured bird-watcher. While accepting that the agent is morally required to give up things that are morally irrelevant in order to alleviate suffering, depending on their moral development, they may not be completely blameworthy when they fail to respond to the needs of others in *The Envelope*-like cases. And this is because of certain factors which make it difficult for the agent to empathise with their suffering.

However, this does not and should not let us off the hook with regards to alleviating poverty. The demands of beneficence are still extremely high as we have powerful reasons to alleviate the suffering of others. Still, as long as we are on the path to keep increasing the amount we give in order to satisfy the demands of beneficence, we can perhaps allow for some moral leniency and say that we are morally permitted to reach this over time. This is not to say that what is required of us changes over time as Dougherty claims; the demands of beneficence remain the same for all, and there is an acknowledgement that until we reach that standard we are in some sense, failing morally. Instead of the high jump analogy, an archer analogy may be more appropriate: we can think of it as shooting an arrow at a target. We are required to hit bulls-eye, but some leniency is given to those who, although they are not managing to hit bulls-eye immediately, are aiming at it and eventually they will be able to hit it with ease. What is right does not change, then, depending on the agent's stage of moral development. Until she hits the bulls-eye, there is an acknowledgement that she is not doing 100% what is right and *is* failing morally, but a certain amount of time is permitted for her to get there if that is what she is truly aiming at. In order to at least aim at the bulls-eye requires a radical change in the way we think about beneficence. It requires a shift in our paradigm, from thinking of beneficence as something that is not meant to be too demanding to something that *is* very demanding but also obligatory. It requires an acknowledgement that we do have strong moral obligations to alleviate poverty and that we are in some sense failing morally when we fall short of its demands. The Altruist who is already giving a lot but also feels compelled to give more, then, has already undergone this major shift in the way she thinks about beneficence, unlike those who claim *Moderation*.

With Dougherty's account of beneficence, because what is immediately required of the agent is not demanding to begin with, we are merely required to make room for beneficence in our lives by gradually developing more 'frugal interests' so that we can give more to charity. Under this alternative account, a greater change is required than incorporating beneficence into

the agent's life while still making ample room for the agent's own interests. It requires a completely different conception of what our interests should be in the first place. Rather, projects or interests that are not significant to your flourishing as a person should be given up altogether, and our interests should be directed at poverty relief instead. Again, this is something that happens over time, but we would expect that someone with a drastically changed view of beneficence would eventually phase out unimportant, frivolous interests because of the high demands of beneficence. For example, say I have an interest in collecting expensive antique furniture merely as a hobby. Dougherty may say that I should gradually develop a taste for less expensive furniture so I can give more to the needy. The alternative account, on the other hand, would require that I give up this hobby altogether, given the severity of the needs of others, and instead direct my interests toward the project of poverty relief. I think that this makes more sense in regards to what really happens in the life of Altruist. It is not that she simply learns to be satisfied with less over time so that giving a lot becomes less difficult. Beneficence is not something that she incorporates into her life, but something she identifies with, something that becomes an essential part of who she is. In light of extreme global poverty, meeting the needs of the poor *becomes* her main interest so that over time it doesn't become a sacrifice at all.

### **4.3 Overcoming the demandingness objection**

Many reject Singer and Unger's conclusion regarding our duties of beneficence for being overly demanding because it requires impartiality, and it also results in the loss of the agent's integrity. The same goes for the act consequentialist approach, as I mentioned briefly in the section on Railton and Parfit. In this final section, I will look at how this alternative approach to beneficence is able to deal with two versions of the demandingness objection: the appeal to partiality and the integrity of the agent.

#### 4.3.1 *The demandingness objection: partiality*

Singer and Unger's conclusion and the act consequentialist approach are overly demanding because it requires us to judge the rightness or wrongness of an action from an impartial perspective, where everyone's well-being has exactly the same moral weight. This means that we ought to be completely impartial in the way we treat people, and this poses a problem because our relationships require partiality. Partiality is a precondition for relationships in that they require that we put the interests of our loved ones above the interests of distant strangers.

I believe the alternative approach to beneficence outlined in this chapter is able to provide a solution to this problem. We said before that dispositions like empathy and compassion are multi-track; I cannot only care about the people that are close by me because caring for the needs of others starts with a basic level of compassion for humankind. A truly caring person will not only care for those around her, but will care about the suffering of distant strangers also, though to a lesser extent. Similarly, I cannot care about the suffering of distant strangers without understanding the importance of these relationships. A person who impartially calculates and chooses donate to charity in order to save two lives rather than save her own child is not someone who we would commend as being caring and compassionate. So, this focus on an empathetic and compassionate response to the suffering of others in our duties of beneficence naturally places a constraint on both the extent of my partiality and impartiality.

In a similar vein, Timothy Chappell argues that we need a balance between 'impartial benevolence' and 'partial love'<sup>52</sup>. Impartial benevolence must make room for partial love because to understand impartial benevolence properly, we need a proper understanding of the well-being that impartial

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<sup>52</sup> Chappell, T. 2009. Impartial Benevolence and Partial Love. In: Chappell, T. ed. *The Problem of Moral Demandingness*. Hampshire, Eng.: Palgrave Macmillan, p.83.



benevolence aims at; and we cannot understand well-being without understanding the central place in it of partial love<sup>53</sup>. Both impartial benevolence and partial love have the right to act as a limit and constraint on the other<sup>54</sup>. In other words, it is reasonable for impartial benevolence to demand that partial love should not ignore the suffering of strangers, but also reasonable for partial love to require that impartial benevolence does not marginalise the special relationships we have in our lives.

#### 4.3.2 *The demandingness objection: integrity*

Another reason why Singer and Unger's conclusion is so demanding is that it would undermine the integrity of the agent's life, and result in alienation. If I live by such standards of morality, I will have to give up all my hobbies and projects, gradually becoming more and more miserable and alienated. A meaningful life is a life of personal engagement of projects of worth, and since no agent who follows consequentialism would be able to identify with her own projects, no such agent could live a meaningful life<sup>55</sup>.

As said beforehand, I think that beneficence is not about what we ought to do now, or even what we ought to do over time, but it is essentially about what kind of person we ought to be. When our view of beneficence is grounded in an empathetic response to the suffering of others, this offers a solution to the Integrity Objection. To avoid alienation, it must be the case that I truly care about those who I am helping, whether it is in emergency situations or providing famine relief, and so the motivations and intentions of the agent are extremely important. If I truly care about the suffering of distant strangers, it will not be so difficult for me to give up non-essential goods to provide them with aid in comparison to someone who is indifferent.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 84.

<sup>55</sup> Mulgan, T. 2001, *The Demands of Consequentialism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.15.

Empathy and compassion towards others is something that needs to be cultivated, and involves a process of moral development. As John Cottingham claims, ethical understanding is never something static, abstract and simply intellectual, but it is something that develops over time, arising from tangible experiences, and involves 'seismic shifts' in our whole way of feeling as well as thinking about the world<sup>56</sup>. In our critique of Dougherty's argument, I claimed that the Altruist is operating under a difference conception of the demands of beneficence, unlike the people who claim *Moderation*. It is likely that something happened in her life that caused her to undergo a dramatic change in the way she views the world. This highlights the importance of moral education and the need to constantly be challenged by new experiences to expand our moral capacity. For instance, seeing the nature of poverty at first hand is a way in which an agent's mind-set can be shifted from a closed, self-centred perspective into one that expands her circle of care to include distant strangers. These changes in ethical perspective will result in a radical revision of what counts as unreasonably demanding.

In this way, as the agent goes through a process of moral development, she is able to give more and more to charity without it becoming over demanding. Her integrity is not lost because she is not required to give up her life projects; instead, beneficence becomes one of her central life projects and has a special place in her heart as poverty alleviation is now what she finds to be meaningful in her life. Concern and compassion for the poor is a part of who she is, and she strives to become a more compassionate and empathetic person. It may be that Singer's principle is what is morally required of us, but this alternative approach argues that this cannot happen overnight. We should not immediately give up all our hobbies and life projects if it means that we become miserable and alienated in the process. Instead, we are encouraged to take steps in accordance to the

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<sup>56</sup> Cottingham, J. 2009. Demandingness, Moral Development and Moral Philosophy. In: Chappell, T. ed. *The Problem of Moral Demandingness*. Hampshire, Eng.: Palgrave Macmillan, p.96.

stage of ethical development we are at, incorporating beneficence into our lives until it becomes a core part of who we are.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

In summary, as a solution to Unger's puzzle, I suggest that differences such as physical and temporal proximity and experiential impact are morally relevant factors, not because they are relevant in themselves, but because of their correlation with our ability to empathise and have compassion for the suffering of others. Many objections to strong obligations to alleviate poverty such as the loss of the agent's integrity and conflicts between the demands of partiality and beneficence stem from neglecting the role of empathy and compassion in our duties to the needy. This chapter fleshed out what this alternative approach would imply for our moral obligations to alleviate poverty. Placing the role of empathy at the centre of our duties to the poor not only solves Unger's puzzle about our different intuitions but it also is able to provide new solutions to problems associated with the demandingness of beneficence.

## Conclusion

Singer and Unger present a puzzle about the demands of beneficence. Regarding our moral duties to help needy people, we have very different intuitions about emergency cases and famine relief. Both Singer and Unger's claim that there is an absence of any identifiable difference between emergency cases and cases of famine relief that could reasonably ground our conflicting moral judgements, Singer using the analogy of a child drowning in a pond, and Unger making a side-by-side comparison between *The Vintage Sedan* and *The Envelope*. This thesis has been an attempt to face up to the surprisingly difficult challenge of identifying a morally relevant difference between cases like *The Vintage Sedan* and *The Envelope*.

After stating Singer and Unger's arguments and their reasons for rejecting various different factor being morally relevant, I turned to a potentially promising solution given by Boonin, which is unexplored in the literature. I argued that Boonin's solution, that it the unique directedness of aid which creates an obligation to offer aid, is unsuccessful for the following reasons: First, his solution is vulnerable to the Demandingness objection because charities could change the method in which they distribute aid. They could easily make the aid uniquely directed and therefore create extremely demanding moral obligations for the agent to provide aid. Second, if we accept Boonin's argument, what I am required to do depends on contingent facts that are morally irrelevant, such as the way charities operate or the pool size from which my recipient of aid will be chosen from. Finally, I showed that we can revise cases to demonstrate that even when aid is not uniquely directed, we are still required to give aid. This suggests that there is something other than the unique directedness of aid that grounds stronger moral obligations to assist in emergency cases in comparison to cases like *Envelope*.

In Chapter Three, I examined several moderate versions of consequentialism to see if they are able to provide a solution to Unger's puzzle. Scheffler's agent-centred prerogative, and his claim that the psychological costs in killing your uncle is much greater than failing to donate to charity, was applied to Unger's puzzle. We could argue that the psychological costs of driving away from the injured bird-watcher is much greater than ignoring an envelope from UNICEF. However, I argued that not only is it wrong to refer to psychological generalisations that do not apply to all agents, it is highly unintuitive to say that the only reason why murder or leaving someone to die is wrong is simply because it is too costly. Railton and Parfit's versions of consequentialism were examined next, and then collective and rule consequentialism. These versions can be applied to Unger's puzzle in the following way: we ought to have dispositions (or to follow rules that encourage dispositions) to care for only those who are close us, explaining why we feel we ought to help the injured bird-watcher but it is permissible to fail to donate \$100 to UNICEF. This fails because of two main reasons: first, it is not possible to have dispositions to *only* care about those who are near to you because caring for others is grounded in a general compassion for humankind. Second, these versions of consequentialism are vulnerable to the partial compliance objection. Although it is true that if everyone were to just care for those close to them, this would create the best overall state of affairs, in reality, it is not the case that everyone complies. And considering that this lack of compliance results in very much worse consequences, we must abandon these moderate versions and revert back to classic act consequentialism if we are to maintain a consequentialist theory.

Finally, I offered my own solution to Unger's puzzle, arguing that the potential preservationist solutions which Unger initially rejects as being morally irrelevant, do make a difference in determining the strengths of our moral obligations to assist. I suggested that differences such as physical distance, temporal proximity, experiential impact and so on are morally relevant factors, not because they are relevant in themselves, but because

of their correlation with our ability to empathise and have compassion for the suffering of others. This explains why our intuitions differ between *The Envelope* and *The Vintage Sedan*, and also justifies our intuitions if we think of beneficence as essentially about what kind of person we ought to be. I offered an alternative approach to beneficence, one that places empathy at the heart of our duties to the needy, to explain why it is morally worse to ignore someone suffering in front of your eyes than it is to ignore a written plea from a charitable organisation. Not only does this solve Unger's puzzle about our different intuitions but it also is able to provide new solutions to overcome the Demandingness Objection. This alternative approach provides a natural constraint for the conflict between partiality and impartiality, and allows the agent to incorporate beneficence into their lives over time so that they are not alienated from their projects.

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