

Ought I to forgo some luxury whenever I can thereby enable someone else's life to be saved?

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1. Introduction

You have been eagerly anticipating tonight's concert for the past week, but as you hurry through the park on your way there, you see a young child face down in the shallow lake. No-one else is there and you see that if you do not wade in to rescue him, he will die. Surely you ought to save him. While you will miss your concert, that is of no real significance compared to a child's life, and it would be grossly wrong not to rescue him. Now consider the following generalisation of this judgement:

The Claim:

We ought forgo some luxury whenever we can thereby enable someone else's life to be saved.

With cases such as that of the drowning child in mind, how could we disagree? How could we honestly say that it is permissible to retain some luxury rather than enabling someone's life to be saved? Indeed, this would appear to be one of the most widely agreed upon claims of morality. If we have any duty of beneficence at all—any duty to aid others—then this is a paradigm example: the costs are trivially low; a child's life is at stake.

What about the children who die from famine and disease in the developing world? Newspaper and television advertisements inform us that our donations can make a difference. For the price of a concert ticket, we can realistically expect lives to be saved—yet we go to concerts. We eat expensive meals. We wear fashionable clothes. We don't forgo these luxuries to enable Oxfam or Médecins Sans Frontières to save lives and we don't act as if there is a moral imperative to do so.

The apparent ethical similarities between the case of the drowning child and that of the starving child received widespread attention through Peter Singer's influential paper 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality'. He makes the ethical connection through the following principle:

The Principle of Sacrifice:

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.¹

Singer then qualifies this with an appropriate *ceteris paribus* clause, limiting its scope to those cases in which the act of prevention does not cause additional harms or violate other moral principles. Perhaps the act would be obligatory despite it causing some

¹ Singer (1972), p. 230.

additional harm, but the principle is neutral on such cases and they need not concern us here.

If this principle is valid, then it would appear that there is indeed an obligation to give to charity rather than indulging in luxuries such as concerts and fashionable clothes, for the death of a child is just as bad regardless of location and the frills and luxuries of our lives are surely not of any comparable importance. Thus, as Singer stresses, giving a great deal to charity seems to be not just a laudable act of generosity, but something that is morally required of each of us.

We might be tempted to dismiss the Principle of Sacrifice for just this reason: its implications are radically different to our intuitions on these matters so it simply cannot be true. However, we must be careful here, for the Principle is not intended as a description of our actual moral beliefs and actions, but rather as a normative principle regarding how we *should* act. Moreover, while the principle has an unintuitive consequence, it is itself very intuitive. Indeed, the situation is one of incompatible intuitions. One of them must yield, and with such high stakes, we must take great care in deciding which.

The phenomenology of this moral conflict seems to lend *prima facie* support to the Principle and the associated Claim. For if we were to approach a friend who was considering buying a concert ticket and ask him if he consented to the Principle, he would probably say yes. However, if we drew his attention to the plight of those in the developing world and how this fits the principle, he would likely become quite uncomfortable and uncooperative. This does not appear to be in reaction to a realisation that the Principle is actually false, but rather it seems to be a difficulty in justifying his choice and maintaining a consistency between this choice and his past and future ones. He becomes uncomfortable just because our simple argument is so powerful.

The Principle, and the Claim (which it implies), both receive some support from traditional normative theories. Utilitarianism is an obvious source of support, but they are also endorsed by Contractualism², Kantian ethics³ and traditional religious teachings, such as the New Testament. Moreover, very few theories provide explicit limits on their associated duties of beneficence. However, in this essay I shall follow Singer and Unger in focusing on appeals to our basic moral intuitions. With these, I shall try to show how this conflict between our belief in the Principle and our belief that it is not wrong to buy luxuries should be resolved. I will first examine the possible disanalogies between the two ways we can sacrifice luxuries to save lives, and show that it is very difficult to draw a line regarding our obligation of personal sacrifice. I shall then discuss a pair of direct arguments to the conclusion that the Principle must be replaced by a new, weaker version and show why they too do not succeed. Finally, I shall examine exactly what it is that the Principle and the Claim demand of us.

² See Ashford (2003) for a convincing argument from Scanlon's contractualism.

³ See Murphy (1993), p. 272.

2. Relevant differences

Perhaps there is some morally relevant difference between these cases of the drowning child and the starving child. There are two distinct ways in which such a difference could help resolve our conflicting intuitions. On the one hand, we may see that the Principle has just been inappropriately applied in the case of foreign aid. On the other hand, we may find that the moral difference points to a flaw in the principle itself, so that it must be modified in some way to reflect the newfound distinction.

Let us first look to see whether the Principle of Sacrifice has been misapplied. We cannot argue that the plight of the ill or starving children abroad is not bad, or that the cost to us of donating is morally comparable. Perhaps we could argue that the deaths abroad cannot actually be prevented via our aid. This would, however, fly in the face of available evidence. While aid is occasionally misappropriated by a corrupt government or is otherwise prevented from reaching its target, we still have a very high chance of successful intervention and the saving of lives. If one split one's donation between charities, it would be a near certainty. Surely the existence of a tiny chance of failure is not enough to prevent the use of the Principle. After all, we would be required to help the drowning child even if there was only a fifty percent chance that he would survive. Similarly, while the donation could end up being spent on general development work rather than direct life-saving, this is generally agreed to prevent even more harm in the long run, so the Principle would still apply.

Another possibility is that future harms will flow from the donation. While people will be saved from this famine, it will just allow the population to increase, causing an even greater amount of suffering and death when the next one hits. For the poorest countries this terrible possibility is a real concern and it is difficult to know exactly what to do about it. Many options are available, such as making development aid conditional on birth-control strategies or creating wealth sufficient to reduce the need to have a large number of children, but the situation is still fairly bleak.⁴ However, for our present purposes, we need not consider it any further, since there are many countries in desperate need of aid which are not suffering from this kind of population crisis and in which life for their citizens looks set to improve. Thus there are still situations (many in fact) in which we are compelled by the Principle of Sacrifice to forgo our luxuries in order to save lives abroad.

A final possibility concerns the role of governments in foreign aid. A fairly common reason for declining to donate to the poor abroad is that this is the responsibility of our governments. However, the governments are clearly failing to meet this responsibility and we need to consider the consequences of our inaction in light of this. While it could be argued that we are letting governments off the hook by donating and that they will consequently donate less, Singer points out that there is a strong *prima facie* case that on seeing increased individual aid, the government will not reduce their own aid, but will see the importance of the issue to their voters and thus increase their aid.⁵ While we cannot be sure that Singer is right in this, it seems considerably more plausible than his opponents' view, which in turn begins to look more like a convenient excuse than a realistic appraisal of fact.

⁴ See Singer (1979), pp. 174–179 for further considerations of this objection.

⁵ Singer (1972).

What of the Principle itself? Does it fail to take into account some further aspect of morality that helps us to come to our different conclusions in the two cases? One obvious possibility is that distance matters: that somehow the proximity and immediacy of the drowning child brings about the obligation of beneficence in a manner that is impossible for the starving child. On reflection, it appears that this cannot simply be a matter of physical distance. For consider a case suggested by Peter Unger, in which you are driving through a sparsely populated area and receive a call for help on your CB radio. A young man tells you that he has had a terrible accident and has been unable to contact anyone nearby. Unless you drive 10 miles out of your way and take him to a hospital, he will certainly bleed to death. If you pick him up, his bleeding may well predictably cause several hundred pounds of damage to the interior of your car, but you still ought save him. Despite the fact that he is physically distant, the obligation seems equally great.⁶

A more plausible distinction is that of *social distance*. Unlike the child in the park, the children you might help in the developing world are socially distant from you. They have different customs and a different government, different hopes and fears. Furthermore, they are not, and will never be, in a position to help you — given your joint circumstances, you are not in any kind of position to achieve mutual benefit from each others' aid.

Unger, however, has a second example which casts doubt upon the relevance of social distance. You are travelling through South America in your car and when you stop briefly by the side of the road, an injured young man explains to you that he needs urgent medical attention in a nearby hospital. Once again his bleeding will predictably do several hundred dollars of damage to your car's upholstery, but if his life is in the balance it is intuitive that you would be wrong to decline to take him. This is so despite the fact that he is from a society that is as different from yours as that of the starving child.⁷

In both of these examples, however, there was a direct connection between yourself and the person in need. Maybe it is the presence of such a connection that links these two cases to the drowning child and separates them from the starving child. The actual cases involving foreign aid are of a quite complex causal structure. There are many people who can help and they can help to varying degrees. The difference in what happens if you send aid compared to if you do not is difficult to measure. On average you may save a couple of lives, but it is hard to say whether you will on any given donation. Furthermore, it is difficult to say who it is that you will be helping. Indeed, it may be that your money allows for the provision of aid in a more efficient way than would be possible without it, but that this new possibility you have opened up means that the aid program saves these 5,000 people instead of those 4,900 people. While one hundred more people survive in this case, we can also say that those 4,900 people were prevented from being aided by your donation, complicating matters further.

However, while these real world complications make this situation *causally amorphous*,⁸ it is not clear that they create a distinction large enough to require a change to the Principle. For one thing, the fact that many of us can save a given person can be

⁶ Unger (1996), pp. 34–35.

⁷ Unger (1996), p. 35.

⁸ See Unger (1996), pp. 123–28.

incorporated into the drowning child case. Even if there were many other people in the park, none of whom made any move towards saving the child, it would still be just as wrong for you not to help.

Furthermore, some charities do have more causally direct funding than others. There are funds for individual programs or geographic areas and several charities that link your funding to one particular child. One could even imagine a charity that links each person in your country to a handful of people in the developing world (by a method involving social security numbers or the like), so that there are a few people that only you can save and your money goes directly to saving them. Such a scheme would be very inefficient, but could probably be run on some scale, perhaps linking your suburb to a certain town in Africa that would otherwise be without aid. This would give you a direct causal link, so should you then be compelled to forgo a luxury whenever you could aid such a charity? It seems that we must, yet to do so in this case and not in the more typical cases of foreign aid seems absurd, since the increased efficiencies in the standard schemes allow much more of the same type of good to be done, with no additional harm.

3. Limits on beneficence

Richard Miller takes a different approach to undermining the Principle of Sacrifice. Instead of looking for relevant differences between the cases, he instead suggests that the Principle is unrealistically demanding. He envisages an alternative under which:

It is typically wrong to fill vast closets with designer clothes in a world in which many must dress in rags, but not wrong occasionally to purchase a designer-label shirt that is especially stylish and, though not outlandishly expensive, more expensive than neat, plain alternatives.⁹

To this end, he advances the following:

The Principle of Sympathy:

One's underlying disposition to respond to neediness as such ought to be sufficiently demanding that giving which would express greater underlying concern would impose a significant risk of worsening one's life, if one fulfilled all further responsibilities; and it need not be any more demanding than this.¹⁰

The idea here is that we should show equal respect for all persons and be disposed to help those when there is no significant cost to ourselves. There are two main differences here when compared to the Principle of Sacrifice. Firstly, it provides a fixed upper limit on the total sacrifice that needs to be made. This level is set so that losing the rather enjoyable activity of mutual aesthetic appreciation that comes with buying fashionable clothes would count as worsening our lives. This is not to say that forgoing some particularly nice shirt would worsen one's life, but that missing out on a proper engagement with this activity would do so. Secondly, it is concerned more with our dispositions to help and respect others rather than the amount of help we actually give.

⁹ Miller (2004), p. 360.

¹⁰ Miller (2004), p. 359.

In stressing the importance of sympathy, Miller tries to show that his principle fulfils the demands of ordinary morality. In particular, he argues that one can abide by it and still show equal respect for all persons, which by his account is what morality intuitively demands of us. However, since it is compatible with the purchasing of expensive clothes at the expense of the lives of others, we have reason to question whether it fulfils this aim. It certainly does not live up to the demands of an impartial viewpoint (assuming such a thing is possible), for the prevention of someone's early death from starvation is clearly more important than going without fashionable clothes and the associated fun of mutual aesthetic appreciation.

However, Miller argues that we do not require equal *concern* for all, just equal *respect*. He cites Singer who, on utilitarian grounds, argues that the overall good is maximized through the possession of special concern for our loved ones. Thus, even though utilitarianism has an equal place for each person, it can still countenance such unequal concern. Miller, however, is not a utilitarian and it is difficult to see how he can give a similar story to separate respect from concern. He says that we value the children across the street just as highly as our own children, despite showing more concern for the latter. However, even if this is true in the case of these nearby children across the road I cannot see how it can be true for those starving in Africa if, as he suggests, we engage in mutual aesthetic appreciation with our own children rather than using the money to prevent others' starvation. This disparity between our level of concern and our alleged level of respect is too wide for me to find at all plausible. Instead, it seems much more likely that there is indeed an imbalance between the level of respect we find appropriate and the level we actually possess and that this explains the feeling of horror that we try to block out when the effects of our inaction are brought to our attention.

One of the most striking differences between the Principle of Sacrifice and the Principle of Sympathy is that while the former demands sacrifices in some proportion to the evils to be prevented, the latter has a fixed upper limit. In 'The Demands of Beneficence', Liam Murphy briefly considers such approaches to overcoming the extreme demands of the Principle of Sacrifice, but ultimately rejects them. He argues that if the limits are too high, it achieves nothing and if they are any lower then they are not sufficiently flexible to meet changing demands — if we really were in a situation where we could do something of amazing good for others, we really should be morally obliged to give up a great deal for it. Murphy similarly rejects principles in which we have a multiplier that increases the relative value of our own good when considering beneficent actions. If the multiplier is too low, then our overwhelming duty to the very poor remains. If it is any higher than this, then it would fail to give the correct results under high compliance — we would then have almost no duty of beneficence at all.

Taking up this issue of compliance, he points out that in the case of aid to the developing world, if all people in rich countries were to do their part, then the amount required from each of them would be quite reasonable. However, on ethical theories such as utilitarianism or on the repeated application of the Principle of Sacrifice, we are required to do much more than this, and it seems unfair to someone that their share of the burden increases when others do not do their part. Murphy thus proposes the following:

The Compliance Condition:

A principle of beneficence should not increase its demands on agents as expected compliance with the principle by other agents decreases.¹¹

This is not a principle of beneficence itself, but rather a desideratum for such a principle. In Murphy's terms, one problem with the Principle of Sacrifice and unrestricted principles of beneficence (such as in utilitarianism) is that they do not satisfy the compliance condition.

Murphy thus looks at the shift from consequentialism to collective forms of consequentialism,¹² such as rule-consequentialism, in which the rightness of an act is judged in terms of the goodness that would result if everyone did it. Thus, while people will in fact fail to comply with the rule, this is not taken into account when assessing the rightness of acts. However, this will not do in its present form, for there are potential cases where doing what is best if everyone did it is clearly the worst option in the actual case. For example, when a line of conscripted soldiers faces a powerful enemy force, the best thing for them all to do may be to stand and fight, but if all of one's comrades were actually going to run away instead, then standing and fighting would be the worst thing one could do.

Murphy thus considers a principle of beneficence in which our duties are not to do those actions that we would ideally all do, but are limited in scope by the burden that would be borne in such a case.

The Cooperative Principle of Beneficence:

Each agent is required to act optimally—to perform the action that makes the outcome best—except in situations of partial compliance with this principle. In situations of partial compliance it is permissible to act optimally, but the sacrifice each agent is required to make is limited to the level of sacrifice that would be optimal if the situation were one of full compliance; of the actions that require no more than this level of sacrifice, agents are required to perform the action that makes the outcome best.¹³

There is some intuitive pull behind such a principle, particularly because it attempts to dissolve the problem of over-demandingness not by a direct denial, but via an appeal to some form of fairness towards those who follow it. However, by considering some further situations we can see that the Cooperative Principle gives clearly incorrect answers and thus must be rejected.

What happens, for example, if the amount that I am required to sacrifice under full compliance is nothing at all? I might be rather less efficient than others and if they all did their share it might be best if I just stayed out of the way. In this case, the principle would say that I have no obligation when the others do not comply. Similarly, consider the terrible situation facing the Jews in Nazi Germany. This is a paradigm example of a duty of beneficence, where German people could and should have tried to help them. However, there were a handful of powerful people who could have resolved the situation themselves by calling an end to the persecution. Thus, on full

¹¹ Murphy (1993), p. 278.

¹² See, for example, Parfit (1987), pp. 30–31.

¹³ Murphy (1993), p. 280.

compliance the common people would have no burden to bear, so on the Cooperative Principle they actually had no duty of beneficence at all. While one could argue that the potential costs to them were too great to demand a large amount of aid, one surely could not argue that it was the existence of a group of people who could stop the persecution that removes their duty.

We cannot save the cooperative principle by simply changing it to limit our burden to the size of the average—or the largest—burden borne under total compliance. In this case, the greatest burden is just that of retracting one's own policies of persecution: a very small burden indeed. While the Cooperative Principle does have some intuitive appeal, and is a fairly natural modification of a more straightforward principle of beneficence, it is far too weak to be a plausible rival to the Principle of Sacrifice.

4. Consequentialist considerations

Suppose then, that we come to accept that the Principle of Sacrifice is valid and that we indeed ought forgo luxuries when this enables a life to be saved. What then? A fashionable suit is a luxury, so presumably if you have one you should sell it and donate that extra money. But what if you work in a high paid Wall Street or City job and your colleagues would mock your new, simple suit? What if you would be (unfairly) passed up for promotion and unable to earn a greater salary? This is quite plausible since the wearing of the right clothes and indulgence in certain luxuries (golf club memberships, expensive dinners...) often features on the informal side of career advancement, particularly in highly paid jobs. Wouldn't the abstinence from luxuries be self defeating?

Such possibilities are well known to utilitarians and the problems they raise can be adequately resolved. When we are concerned with promoting good outcomes, we must take broad sets of actions into account. For example, suppose you could work in a job that earns £40,000 per year or a job that earns £50,000 per year but would require regular games of golf with the boss and the wearing of expensive suits for a total expense of £1,000 per year.¹⁴ In this case you could clearly save many more lives and thus promote much more good with the latter job and you should take it and play the corporate luxury game. Better that this culture of luxuries were absent, but given its existence, paying the cost of the luxuries becomes the more ethical option.

Assuming no side-constraints are broken and that the only prohibition on luxuries is this consequence based one, there should be no reason why non-consequentialists who endorse the Principle of Sacrifice cannot also adopt this explanation. Thus, while it is permissible on occasion to pay for luxuries, in these cases we could not have actually saved someone's life if we had forgone them. More precisely, we could have enabled someone's life to be saved, but there would be less money to donate in total and fewer lives would be saved on the whole. While this example may seem quite unusual, there are many other ways in which the support of these principles is consistent with, and indeed perhaps necessitates, behaviour that appears to be inconsistent.

Suppose that you meet up by chance with an old friend from your childhood. She hears that you have been studying ethics and, trusting your judgment, asks for some

¹⁴ Of course we must also weigh in the good that can be done directly through one's job. Peter Singer himself is a fine example of just how much can be done.

general moral advice. Should you reply that she should always forgo luxuries whenever she can thereby enable someone's life to be saved? Probably not. For compare this option with that of advising her to donate a straight ten percent of her income to the same charities. Without very extensive discussion and guidance (which we are assuming to be impractical in this example), the chance that she would follow the former advice is practically nil. On the other hand, donating ten percent of her income is just feasible enough and commonsensical enough for her to perhaps do it. In this way, the principles that we should offer as advice can come apart from those that should be followed. Similarly, while we would hold her blameworthy for not rescuing the drowning child, we need not hold her very blameworthy for failing to save as many starving children as possible. We understand why this is a difficult commitment for her to make, demanding a considerable sacrifice and that which is even more difficult: the admission of prior massive wrong doing.

As others have trouble following demanding principles, so too do we. The inability to follow one's own plan due to a lack of self control is well known to us all. Such conflict is so well known that it is often said that, in order to successfully lose weight, we should go on a diet which we can realistically follow rather than one that *would* be better but will not end up being followed. The same could easily be the case for ethical principles and it may be best, knowing the truth of the Principle of Sacrifice, to none-the-less commit oneself to a strategy that is weaker but followable, such as that of donating a flat ten percent.

Even if we possess an effortless self restraint, it still doesn't follow that we should live a life indulging in nothing that could be called a luxury. If we did, it could easily result in considerable agonizing over exactly which small things we could justify paying for. Instead, we might adopt a policy of donating all money above a certain small amount, say £6,000, and then simply buy the best things that we could afford within this amount. For a given expenditure, this second approach is likely to be easier on our sanity. Ultimately, if we tried to completely minimise our expenditure in order to give away as much as possible, we could suffer some kind of breakdown, and be unable to go on doing good.

Let us, for the moment ask what someone who was willing to go up to this point should do and thus examine the most we could hope to do. It may be that without luxuries you can keep your life together and keep your job for about £4,000. However, it is quite plausible that by living a little more cheaply day to day and having small treats on your birthday and Christmas day, that you could actually get by on, say, £3,800. Occasional luxuries could make intervening, leaner, times more bearable.¹⁵

These consequentialist considerations thus provide a slightly fuller picture of the true demands of the claim that we ought forgo luxuries when we can thereby enable lives to be saved. It is indeed a very demanding claim, but one that is by no means self defeating and by no means incompatible with the consumption of luxuries. Acting on

¹⁵ Of course in this case and some of the others of this section, we might hesitate to call these things luxuries. The term itself appears to be context dependent, referring to some good which is markedly expensive for its level of necessity. Something that is required to stave off mental collapse is clearly a necessity. Can it also be a luxury? Can we ever *need* luxuries? Perhaps, but in any event the terminology should not concern us too much since no matter what we call these things, we cannot ultimately save lives by forgoing them.

it would involve a great sacrifice that few of us would be prepared to meet, but on the grounds above, I believe our common moral beliefs do indeed compel us to do so. Let us hope that we can.

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