

What We Owe the Global Poor: In Defense of a Moderate Principle of Sacrifice

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of
Philosophy in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Peter Singer's 1971 essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" sparked a surge in interest among philosophers in the beneficent obligations of the global rich to assist the global poor. Richard Miller, a prominent recent critic of Singer, has argued that Singer's position is too demanding and proposed the Principle of Sympathy as an alternative to Singer's Principle of Sacrifice. I argue against Miller's view and highlight problematic features of his "daughter's aesthetic sense" example and his "closeness-to-heart" criterion. After critically examining Miller's and Singer's alternative accounts, I argue for a substantially revised version of Singer's position. The Moderate Principle of Sacrifice (MPS) that I propose includes four revisions to Singer's account. These revisions allow it more plausibly to capture our beneficent obligations to assist the global poor.

Dedication

In loving memory of my brother, Michael J. Robson, Jr.

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1. Introduction

The facts of global poverty are familiar: Around forty percent of humankind lives in severe poverty, and it

is estimated that 830 million human beings are chronically undernourished, 1,100 million lack access to safe water, 2,600 million lack access to basic sanitation, 1,000 million lack adequate shelter ... 1,600 million lack electricity ... [and] 2,000 million lack access to essential drugs.¹

Moreover, each year between 1965 and 1995 “well over 10 million children died from readily preventable causes.”² Despite the staggering number and appalling conditions of the global poor, contributions remain low. OECD countries give, on average, 0.23 percent of their gross national income as Official Development Assistance, with private donations by citizens adding another 0.03 percent.³ The United States gives 0.14 percent of its GNP as aid, including 0.10 percent as government aid and 0.4 percent as private aid.⁴

The severity of poverty-related human suffering renders it unsurprising that, in recent decades, a sizeable literature has emerged on the obligations of the global rich to assist the global poor.⁵ In *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power*, Richard

¹ Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 2. See also Pogge, 268. The oldest of these data are from 1998. I have rounded the 40 percent number.

² Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4-5. I call these numerous deaths (over 300 million in total) *silent deaths*—deaths that are salient to victims’ families and friends but silent, as it were, to the many people worldwide who could have prevented them. The “silence” of such deaths makes sense given the *hiddenness of world poverty*, another term I propose. Such “hiddenness” obtains not under a general lack of awareness on the part of affluent denizens of developed countries, but due to their underappreciation, culpable or not, of the suffering involved. The severity of world poverty thus remains largely “hidden” from their view.

³ Garrett Cullity, *The Moral Demands of Affluence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 221. Cullity’s data are from 2004.

⁴ Peter Singer, *One World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 181-182. Singer’s data are from 2002.

⁵ Scores of books have been written on this topic in recent years, including not only those in the Bibliography but also many more on the topic of global distributive justice vis-à-vis poverty. Throughout this paper, by what we “owe” to the global poor, I refer to “owing” in the sense of our obligations of beneficent assistance. In addition, I refer to “the poor” and “the rich” in terms of global (not domestic) standards. More on this distinction later.

Miller identifies “two standard paths of philosophical inquiry into global justice.”⁶ One path emphasizes transnational relations as grounds for a duty of international assistance; its prominent advocates include, among others, Charles Beitz, Thomas Pogge, and Henry Shue. The other path of inquiry concerns duties of general beneficence to the global poor; its most prominent representative is Peter Singer. This second path is the topic of the present paper.⁷ I will not be offering an argument about our duties to the world’s poor under the headings of distributive, rectificatory, or regulative justice.⁸ Rather, I shall consider the presence or absence of obligations of beneficence that members of affluent countries – the vast majority of whom are well-off by world standards – have to assist impoverished residents of developing countries – the vast majority of whom are not well-off by global standards.

I shall focus on Peter Singer’s argument in his famous 1971 essay “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” and, among his critics, on Richard Miller’s engagement with Singer’s position.⁹ I treat these topics, respectively, in Chapters 2 and 3. Drawing on three of Miller’s works – his important recent text *Globalizing Justice* (2010); his article “Beneficence, Duty, and Distance” (2004); and his chapter “Moral Closeness and World Community” in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy* (2010) – I argue in Chapter 3 that Miller’s alternative to Singer’s account, though insightful, is inadequate to its task. But so, too, is Singer’s account, for reasons I discuss in Chapter 4. What we

⁶ Richard W. Miller, *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2. Miller eschews both “standard paths” and argues that “the interactions across borders ... are the real basis for a vast, unmet transnational responsibility” to assist the global poor. As I subsequently discuss, Miller treats obligations of beneficence throughout his oeuvre: in Ch. 1 of *Globalizing Justice*; in “Beneficence, Duty and Distance,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32, No. 3 (Fall 2004): 357-383; and in “Moral Closeness and World Community,” in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁷ It is unclear whether obligations beneficently to assist the global poor remain within the sphere of, or go beyond, obligations of justice to so assist. Whereas Miller implies the former, other scholars suggest the latter. Elizabeth Ashford, for example, holds that Singer’s account “grounds stringent obligations of beneficence over and beyond obligations of justice.” See Elizabeth Ashford, “Obligations of Justice and Beneficence to Aid the Severely Poor,” in *Giving Well*, eds. Illingworth, P., Pogge, T., and Wenar, L. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27.

⁸ For discussion of these kinds of justice and the relationship between justice and beneficence, see Cullity, 8-9.

⁹ Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1972): 229-243. Singer penned this essay in 1971 and published it in 1972.

need is a revised account of our beneficent obligations to the global poor. Throughout Chapter 4, I undertake to develop just such an account by giving Singer's "Principle of Sacrifice" a more moderate and, I believe, more plausible form.¹⁰

¹⁰ Throughout this paper, I call Singer's proposed beneficent obligation in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" the "Principle of Sacrifice," a fitting term which Miller uses. Also, I focus on financial beneficent giving, though other types of beneficence such as using one's time, skills, and energy to aid the poor via service work are of course important as well.

2. Beneficence, Poverty, and Singer's Account

2.1 The Nature of Beneficent Obligations

Before unpacking Singer's argument from beneficence in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," it is important to get clear on (1) precisely what beneficence is; and (2) the difficulty inherent in any attempt to grasp the nature of our beneficent obligations, if any, to the global poor. "Beneficence," says Tom Beauchamp, "refers to an action done to benefit others."¹ Although some moral theorists, such as Bernard Gert, reject the existence of moral rules under which one should act to benefit others (rather than merely to minimize evil or harm done to others), Humeans, utilitarians, and Kantians all, one way or another, recognize beneficence as a key moral category, and most moral philosophers today embrace rules of beneficence.² In this paper I rely on the fairly uncontroversial assumption that, in matters of morality, other persons' interests are justifiably action-guiding in that they give one legitimate reasons to accept moral rules according to which one ought to assist others.³ "[R]ules of beneficence," writes Beauchamp, "state positive requirements of action, need not always be followed impartially, and rarely, if ever, provide reasons for legal punishment when agents fail to abide by the rules."⁴ Beneficent obligation, moreover, ranges from strict obligation to weaker obligation and non-required action. Non-required action is supererogatory and

¹ Tom Beauchamp, "The Principle of Beneficence in Applied Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (January 2, 2008), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/principle-beneficence/> (accessed February 10, 2012), 2. Emphasis removed. Not to be conflated with beneficence, benevolence "refers to the morally valuable character trait – or virtue – of being disposed to act for the benefit of others" (Beauchamp, 2). There are many plausible definitions of beneficence in the literature. For example, in *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, Cullity holds that "beneficence, as I understand it, is a practical concern for other people's interests" (Cullity, 16; emphasis removed). Although I prefer to include the notion of *benefiting* others in any definition of beneficence, so as to ensure the definition has solid etymological grounding, proper concern for securing others' *interests* is a plausible enough alternative definition of beneficence. Moreover, Cullity's view is in keeping with my own, given his belief that the "core of beneficence ... involves helping other people, and doing so because you regard the fact that it will be good for them as a good reason for helping them" (Cullity, 16).

² In this paragraph I follow Beauchamp's analysis; see esp. 2-6.

³ See Cullity, 103, whom I paraphrase. The principles that Miller, Singer, and I defend all presuppose the legitimacy of moral rules according to which one ought to further the interests of others. I take this to be a safe and reasonable assumption.

⁴ Beauchamp, 6.

ranges from small acts of assistance, such as taking a friend out to dinner, to laudable acts of self-sacrifice, such as risking one's life to save a stranger from a burning building.⁵

In contrast to non-performance of supererogatory acts of beneficence, non-performance of obligatory acts of beneficence does have moral purchase: such non-performance is morally wrong. Garrett Cullity makes this point via an argument from analogy in *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, where he examines our ordinary language distinction between "kindness" and "unkindness." Popular opinion holds that unkindness is not merely a lack of kindness but is also, in fact, morally objectionable. As Cullity points out, we consider a person who volunteers to spend time with residents of an old persons' home "kind." But we do not consider people who choose not to do so "unkind." So Cullity is arguing, we might say, that there is no wrongmaking moral aspect to their *not* acting kindly in that sense.⁶ Unkindness therefore has an axiological dimension that the mere lack of kindness does not; the intension of "unkindness" includes wrongness, even if in a thin sense. "Unkindness is not merely conduct that is *not* kind," writes Cullity, "but conduct that is *insufficiently* kind; on this, all competent users of the word can agree."⁷

Throughout this paper I assume with Cullity that failing to provide obligatory beneficent assistance is morally wrong in much the same way that acting unkindly is morally wrong. For one's not providing obligatory beneficent assistance has a wrongmaking property (as there is in Jim's acting unkindly) that is not present in one's merely not providing supererogatory beneficent assistance (or in Jim's merely not acting kindly). In other words, just as it is not morally wrong not to act kindly, it is not morally

⁵ This spectrum of beneficence is from Beauchamp, 2-3. The examples are my own.

⁶ Michael Tooley notes that rightmaking and wrongmaking properties "determine whether an action is one that ought to be performed, or ought not to be performed, other things being equal." Michael Tooley, "The Problem of Evil," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (August 21, 2009), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/> (accessed March 15, 2012), Section 1.4.

⁷ The quotation is from Cullity, 18. Emphasis original. Throughout this paragraph, I draw on Cullity's insightful analysis.

wrong not to do works of supererogatory beneficence.⁸ And just as it *is* morally wrong to act *unkindly*, it is morally wrong not to meet obligations of beneficence.

Having laid out my conception of beneficence and its subtypes, I now turn to the nature of our beneficent obligations to the global poor, with special attention to Singer's account thereof. I begin with a note about my usage of the terms "global rich" and "global poor." By "global rich" I have in mind mainly middle- and upper-class members of affluent Western societies; by "global poor" I have in mind most residents of developing countries and, at minimum, the 40 percent of humankind that lives in severe poverty. Now, what, if anything, do the global rich owe the global poor? The answer is certainly not *obvious*. Consider the following reflection by Colin McGinn:

So what do we owe to the poor of the world? By what principle should our charitable giving be guided? I think decent rational people feel quite unsure about this question; it is not that they know very well and decline to carry out their moral duty. And this seems to me to be the real state of things in this area: morality delivers no clear-cut answer to the question of how much we should deprive ourselves for the sake of distant others.⁹

McGinn is right that it is no easy task to grasp the nature, kind, and extent of our beneficent obligations (i.e., the obligations we have *qua* global rich) to assist the global poor. He is also right that many "decent rational people" do not know how and to what extent they ought, morally, to assist the global poor. A key aim of this thesis, however, is to provide compelling answers to such questions. In this section and the sections to follow, I shall argue that Singer's Principle of Sacrifice (in *my* sense of the term, not Miller's, as I later explain) – or, at least the more moderate version of it which I shall propose – provides a good *approximation* of what morality enjoins vis-à-vis our beneficent obligations to the global poor, and certainly a closer approximation than that provided by Miller's account. To this task we now turn.

⁸ Thus, unperformed works of supererogatory beneficence fall outside the compass of moral wrongness proper.

⁹ Colin McGinn, "Our Duties to Animals and the Poor," in *Singer and His Critics*, ed. Dale Jamieson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 158.

2.2 Singer's Account of Our Beneficent Obligations to the Global Poor

In an underappreciated part of "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Peter Singer argues for the need to rethink the commonly accepted distinction between duty and charity. He argues that

the present way of drawing the distinction, which makes it an act of charity for a man living at the level of affluence which most people in the 'developed nations' enjoy to give money to save someone else from starvation, cannot be supported.¹⁰

Singer does not wish to delve deeply into the nuances of the distinction. But he does want to locate the obligations of the global rich to assist the global poor *within*, as I read him, the "strict obligation" segment of the abovementioned continuum of beneficent obligations.¹¹ Had he conceived of such obligations as merely supererogatory, Singer could not plausibly argue that "the whole way we look at moral issues – our moral conceptual scheme – needs to be altered, and with it, the way of life that has come to be taken for granted in our society."¹² Notably, Singer's view fits with Beauchamp's point that a strict obligation is a duty.¹³ In this paper, I discuss not duties but "obligations of beneficence," since Singer himself discusses "the *obligation* to assist,"¹⁴ not the duty to assist, and such obligations, he stresses, are intimately linked with moral "ought" claims, one being the conclusion of his Principle of Sacrifice.¹⁵

¹⁰ Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 235.

¹¹ Since Beauchamp characterizes Singer's position as defending "an extremely demanding and far-reaching principle of obligatory beneficence," he would presumably agree with this assessment (Beauchamp, 6).

¹² Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 230.

¹³ "The continuum of beneficent conduct and commitment," says Beauchamp, "runs *from* strict obligation" and "start[s] with duty" (Beauchamp, 2; emphasis added). Hence, the argument goes, strict obligations of beneficence are duties.

¹⁴ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 229. "The Obligation to Assist" is a subtitle in the chapter entitled "Rich and Poor" in *Practical Ethics*.

¹⁵ In "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (fn. 2), Singer writes: "'I have an obligation to' means no more, and no less, than 'I ought to.' This usage is in accordance with the definition of 'ought' given by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*: 'the general verb to express duty or obligation.'" Singer's view fits with Richard Dagger's conception of "obligation." "To have an obligation," writes Dagger, "is to be bound to do or not do something, as the etymological connection to the Latin *ligare* indicates" (Richard Dagger, "Political Obligation," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (April 30, 2010), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/political-obligation/> (accessed February 10, 2012). Yet it is not clear

Setting out to reorient our moral compass, Singer advances an argument that runs essentially as follows:¹⁶

(1) Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.

(2) 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.

(3) Such prevention *is* in our power, since we can give to effective aid organizations.

Conclusion: We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those suffering or dying from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, to the point at which further giving would cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents.¹⁷

Let us unpack Singer's argument. Premise (1) is straightforward: it is bad to suffer or die from want of food, shelter, or medical care. Premise (3) is an empirical premise that should not be controversial so long as there exist *some* effective aid organizations to which we can give in order to relieve global poverty. So (3) seems

whether Singer conceives of obligations as characteristically voluntary, as discussed both in Richard Brandt (1964), "The Concepts of Obligation and Duty," *Mind*, 73: 374–93; and in H.L.A. Hart, "Legal and Moral Obligation," in *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. A. I. Melden (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), 82–107. Above I follow Dagger, "Political Obligation;" see his analysis for further discussion (esp. section 2.1, "Obligation and Duty").

¹⁶ Singer's article has two main parts. The first, on which this paper focuses, is primarily philosophical (pp. 229–239); the second is more practical (pp. 239–243).

¹⁷ Premises (1) and (2), and most of (4), are quotations from Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 231 and 234. Emphasis added. I have also capitalized the "If" in (2). Note that Singer includes the following language after his conclusion presented above: "and maybe even to the point of marginal utility, at which by giving more one would cause oneself and one's dependents as much suffering as one would prevent" ("Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 231). I omit this language since I do not incorporate it later in the revised principle I propose, and Singer's analysis is controversial enough without it. In Chapter 4, I offer some reasons for the *prima facie* implausibility of the point expressed via this language.

plausible enough.¹⁸ Premise (2), however, is where most of the controversy lies. By not sacrificing anything of “comparable moral importance” in premise (2), Singer means not “causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent.”¹⁹ In *Singer and His Critics* (1999), Singer notes that in his 1971 essay he offered a “comparable moral importance” criterion instead of a “comparable moral suffering” criterion so that his argument would appeal not only to utilitarians but also to exponents of other ethical perspectives.²⁰ This, then, is Singer’s preferred understanding of that key phrase in premise (2). Later in the essay, however, he also offers a more moderate formulation of the phrase.²¹ His point in so doing is to show that even the moderate formulation can generate the moral intuitions he is looking for, intuitions which support the existence of a robust obligation for the global rich to assist the suffering people of East Bengal. At the time of his writing, not only were people dying there, but “[c]onstant poverty, a cyclone, and a civil war ha[d] turned at least

¹⁸ Throughout this paper I assume that affluent people today have access to effective means to assist people who are suffering or dying in developing countries. Since I focus on Singer’s argument, I have in mind aid agencies primarily; however, any effective mode of assistance will suffice for the purpose of my argument. Consequently, I need not enter into the thorny debate about the efficacy of aid-giving versus other assistance strategies.

¹⁹ Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” 231.

²⁰ Singer explains: “I didn’t want to limit the force the argument to utilitarians – that would have been preaching to the converted.” Peter Singer, “A Response,” in *Singer and His Critics*, ed. Dale Jamieson, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 302-303. He also discusses this issue in *Practical Ethics* (p. 229), where he writes:

This principle seems uncontroversial. It will obviously win the assent of consequentialists; but non-consequentialists should accept it too, because the injunction to prevent what is bad applies only when nothing comparably significant is at stake. Thus the principle cannot lead to the kinds of actions of which non-consequentialists strongly disapprove – serious violations of individual rights, injustice, broken promises, and so on.

Singer subsequently adds: “I have left the notion of moral significance unexamined in order to show that the argument does not depend on any specific values or ethical principles” (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 231).

For my part, I accept (what I call) the *metaethical compatibilism* of Singer’s argument from beneficence, namely, that the said argument is compatible in principle with utilitarian, virtue ethical, and deontological positions. My revised Principle of Sacrifice adopts a similar “minimal-exposurist” stance vis-à-vis metaethical commitments. Since it favors no particular metaethical position, it should be palatable to moral theorists of all (or nearly all) stripes, and not vulnerable (i.e., not “exposed”) to various objections that standardly issue from the alternative metaethical paradigms. This, then, is the thinking behind my metaethical agnosticism in the paper.

²¹ One can also call this the “weaker” formulation, though Singer calls it “moderate” in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” 241.

nine million people into destitute refugees.”²² Here is Singer’s moderate formulation of (2):

- (a) If it is in our power to prevent something *very* bad from happening,
- (b) without thereby sacrificing *anything* morally significant, then
- (c) we ought, morally, to do it.²³

Singer applies the more moderate principle to his famous “pond” hypothetical, attempting to generate moral intuitions according to which lessons from the hypothetical will be taken clearly to apply to our obligations to assist the distant needy. (Again, Singer deploys the moderate formulation to show that *even it* generates a robust obligation to aid the distant needy; however, he generally espouses the stronger principle, to which I accordingly propose revisions in Chapter 4.²⁴) The following example, says Singer, supports the conclusion that affluent Westerners are under a far greater obligation to aid the global poor than they presently believe. Walking past a shallow pond, you see a child drowning in it. What should you do? You should, of course, wade into the pond and rescue the child. Now clearly, says Singer, the child’s death from drowning satisfies (a). For one can indeed prevent the child from dying, and thereby prevent something “very bad” from happening. It is also clear that the cost of this action – muddying one’s clothes (and, we might add, spending some extra time) – is morally insignificant. So, the action satisfies (b). Now, given (a) and (b), (c) follows. So, Singer quite plausibly concludes, you ought to wade in and save the child.²⁵

²² Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” 229. These are the facts as reported by Singer.

²³ Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” 231. This is a direct quotation, though the letters and emphasis are added, as is the capitalization of “If.” (Also see p. 235, where Singer curiously adds “else” before “morally significant” in (b).) Singer says that he can “see no good reason for holding the moderate version of the principle rather than the strong version” (241). Yet, he wants to show that even holding the moderate version, which Singer says is a “surely undeniable principle,” would require us drastically to change our current way of life (241).

²⁴ Singer writes (emphasis mine): “I proposed the more moderate version - that we should prevent bad occurrences unless, to do so, we had to sacrifice something morally significant - *only* in order to show that, even on this surely undeniable principle, a great change in our way of life is required” (Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” 241).

²⁵ See Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” 231.

Singer's next move is to alert his readers to two striking implications of his pond hypothetical. First, acting even on the more moderate principle would alter our lives substantially. For, Singer contends, it "makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor's child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away."²⁶ Thus, Singer repudiates the view that distance bears significantly on the strength of such obligations. After all, I may have better information about how to help people near me, but globalization has greatly narrowed this information gap. Singer asserts:

Expert observers and supervisors, sent out by famine relief organizations or permanently stationed in famine-prone areas, can [now] direct our aid to a refugee in Bengal almost as effectively as we could get it to someone in our own block.²⁷

The pond hypothetical's second striking implication is that it does not matter whether I am the only one who can help or one of millions of people who can help. It may seem that my obligation to assist should be weaker if others are not doing their fair share.²⁸ But suppose, says Singer, that many people were standing around watching the child drown. Would this entail that I need not rescue the child? Singer's reasonable answer: Of course not.

Now, as Singer concedes, on this principle it could come to pass that numerous people who do not expect others to give to "charity" end up giving to aid organizations

²⁶ Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 232. This claim is far from uncontroversial. For illuminating discussion of distance vis-à-vis moral obligations to assist the global poor, see Deen K. Chatterjee (ed.), *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²⁷ Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 232. This point is more questionable than Singer lets on, at least as a general claim if not also as a claim about the East Bengal situation specifically. As noted above, the revised Principle of Sacrifice that I subsequently offer does not depend on so strong a claim about the efficacy of aid. Rather, my argument depends only on some form of assistance being efficacious enough.

²⁸ There is a large literature on fair-share views of beneficent obligations of the global rich to the global poor. See, e.g.: Liam Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and Cullity, esp. 73-77, including Cullity's defense of his position against Murphy's prominent fair-share argument. This argument holds that requirements of beneficence are agent-neutral such that they do not entail particular, subject-specific duties beneficently to assist the global poor. I believe that my reformulation of Singer's Principle of Sacrifice in Chapter 4 helps delimit the fair share of what most global-affluent persons owe in beneficent assistance to the global poor.

concurrently with the others.²⁹ The organizations might then receive more money from donations than they need. But this possibility, says Singer, only shows that the upshot of people giving more than they each reasonably *believe* ought to be given may be utility-reducing (from the amount of utility lost by the global rich exceeding the amount of utility gained of the global poor). It fails to show, however, that by doing what they *actually* ought to do, people would suffer utility losses. This is because what they ought to do is a function of what others are actually doing, not of what they *think* others are doing—if others are actually giving all at once, one would then not be under as weighty an obligation to give. “The result of everyone doing what he really ought to do,” says Singer, “cannot be worse than the result of everyone doing less than he ought to do.”³⁰

Having understood Singer’s argument from beneficence in its essentials, we now turn to Richard Miller’s important recent challenge to it.

²⁹ Later in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (p. 235), Singer offers an incisive (and, I think, decisive) critique of the notion that giving to “charity” is simply “generous” rather than obligatory.

³⁰ Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” 234.

3. Miller's Alternative Account

3.1 The Argument

Miller's account of our beneficent obligations to assist the global poor is one of the best available foils for assessing the plausibility of Singer's account. I shall first present Miller's account and, second, consider whether it offers plausible resources for a constructive reformulation of Singer's Principle of Sacrifice. Discharging the second task requires a critical assessment of Miller's alternative account, which I undertake in section 3.2.

In his 2010 chapter "Kindness and Its Limits" in *Globalizing Justice* (and in his 2004 article "Beneficence, Duty, and Distance"¹), Miller critiques Singer's "demanding imperative to give," calling it the "radical conclusion."² The radical conclusion is that "[e]veryone has a duty not to spend money on luxuries or frills, and to use the savings due to abstinence to help those in dire need."³ Miller also labels the more moderate version of premise (2)⁴ in Singer's argument—the *Principle of Sacrifice*.⁵ (In Chapter 4 I adopt Miller's useful label but apply it to Singer's whole argument, i.e., to his *three* premises and conclusion. However, in the present chapter on Miller's account, I use Miller's sense of the term.) Miller goes on to level the following criticism against Singer's account:

Singer's effort to derive the radical conclusion from rational reflection on ordinary morality and a plausible empirical claim [i.e., premise (3) concerning the effectiveness of aid organizations] misinterprets ordinary morality: it neglects the role of relationships to others, to oneself and to

¹ Miller's recent chapter overlaps substantially with his 2004 article "Beneficence, Duty and Distance."

² Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 10.

³ Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 10. Miller accurately interprets this key implication of the argument of "Famine, Affluence, and Morality."

⁴ Recall that (2) states: 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.

⁵ Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 10. Miller selects the formulation that includes the word "else." Cf. footnote 15. Subsequently I adopt Miller's reasonable label and refer to Singer's argument as the Principle of Sacrifice.

one's underlying goals in shaping the demands of equal respect for persons.⁶

Miller proposes that we adopt a less demanding version of the Principle of Sacrifice due to the skewed understanding of ordinary morality on which, he claims, Singer's principle relies. Miller offers his alternative – the *Principle of Sympathy* – not to defend a minimalist view of our obligations to give beneficently, but to better account for the true role of relationships vis-à-vis ordinary morality—a theme that runs throughout his account. Miller places special emphasis on the desideratum of building and maintaining healthy personal relationships, treating them more as ends in themselves than as the important utility-producing entities that Singer arguably takes them to be.⁷ Here is the central principle of Miller's alternative account of the obligation of the global rich beneficently to assist the needy:

*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.*⁸

The phrase “respond[ing] to neediness as such” in Miller's Principle of Sympathy corresponds to the phrase “prevent[ing] something very bad from happening” in Singer's (moderate) Principle of Sacrifice. And Miller takes the phrase “significant risk of worsening one's life” to mean, unsurprisingly, a “nontrivial chance that one's life as a whole will be worse than it would otherwise be.”⁹ Miller describes his conception of life-worsening as follows:

Additional responsiveness to others' neediness worsens someone's life if it deprives him of adequate resources to pursue, enjoyably and well, a worthwhile goal with which he intelligently identifies and from which he could not readily detach. By “a goal with which someone identifies,” I

⁶ Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 12.

⁷ Darrel Moellendorf makes this point in his review of *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power*, by Richard W. Miller, *Philosophical Review* 116, no. 2 (2007), 290.

⁸ Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 13. Emphasis added.

⁹ Both of the just mentioned clarifications are from *Globalizing Justice*, 13.

mean a basic interest that gives point and value to specific choices and plans. Such a constituent of someone's personality might be part of her description of "the sort of person I am."¹⁰

Unpacking Miller's position, we find that life-worsening occurs when, by responding to the needs of others, one must forgo certain resources requisite to pursuing a "worthwhile goal." Such a goal is not one that a person can just forget about without incurring a significant loss of some sort. Rather, abandoning such a goal causes one non-negligibly to diminish the value one derives from steering one's life in a certain direction, which direction owes to certain "choices and plans" that one makes and that affect who one is as a person. Later I examine the scope of this principle, including what it rules in and what it rules out vis-à-vis beneficent giving to the global poor.

That Miller's Principle of Sympathy is less demanding than Singer's Principle of Sacrifice can be made clear via an illustrative example of a "worthwhile goal."¹¹ Miller holds that worthwhile goals may include "the goal of presenting myself to others in a way that expresses my own aesthetic sense and engages in the fun of mutual aesthetic recognition."¹² Miller's account implies that giving to the global poor in a way that deprives one of adequate resources to pursue such a goal cannot be obligatory. Such giving would not be obligation-eviscerating on Singer's account, however, since it would arguably not be of significant *moral* importance, let alone of "comparable moral importance" to saving the lives of starving people in Bengal (or anywhere for that matter). Instead, this activity would involve aesthetic value (here Miller's emphasis on nonmoral value is on target, as I later discuss) and value from meaningful personal interaction, each of which is engendered by mutual enjoyment in recognizing the other person's fashion sense.

¹⁰ Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 14.

¹¹ Again, in this chapter I am assuming Miller's understanding of Singer's "Principle of Sacrifice." In the next chapter, I rely on my own understanding of the term.

¹² Miller, "Beneficence, Duty, and Distance," 361.

Miller also emphasizes that one's having *equal respect* for all does not require one to have *equal concern* for all. For one need not have equal concern for a girl who lives next door as for one's own daughter.¹³ Nevertheless, says Miller, a compelling Principle of Sympathy must demand equal respect if, as is appropriate, the principle is to treat all human beings as moral equals.¹⁴ In "Moral Closeness and World Community,"¹⁵ Miller avers that "a choice is wrong just in case it could not express appreciation of the equal worth of all."¹⁶ Even if it does not call for the global rich to treat the global poor with equal concern – a far stricter requirement than that of equal respect – the Principle of Sympathy will often lead its adherents to sacrifice on behalf of the global poor. Miller offers the following example. One might donate to Oxfam rather than buy an expensive shirt, because one has set a personal policy, in accordance with the Principle of Sympathy, that calls for one to purchase such items only periodically and when they are on sale.¹⁷ Yet one may legitimately buy decent stereo equipment in order to listen to one's favorite musicians, or eat in upscale restaurants in order to satiate one's particular culinary preferences.¹⁸ Miller contends that his account, though significantly less demanding than Singer's, is not only demanding enough but also grounded in an appropriate respect for persons as equals.

¹³ Miller, "Moral Closeness and World Community," 102.

¹⁴ Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 17-18. Although Miller talks in terms of "moral equality" and "equal worth" (p. 17), such talk is misleading at best. Human beings *are* each other's *basic* moral equals; however, such a claim is, I submit, perfectly compatible with the claim that they are also substantially morally unequal (e.g., Pol Pot was obviously *not* Gandhi's moral equal in anything but the most basic sense). Miller presumably means to discuss basic moral equality, not (what I call) *comprehensive moral equality*.

¹⁵ This is Miller's chapter in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy*.

¹⁶ Miller, "Moral Closeness and World Community," 101.

¹⁷ This is Miller's example, closely paraphrased, from *Globalizing Justice*, 22.

¹⁸ Miller explicitly allows these possibilities; see *Globalizing Justice*, 14-15.

3.2 Critical Assessment

Has Miller advanced a decisive alternative to Singer's position? Having laid out Singer and Miller's respective positions, I shall argue the negative. Miller understandably seeks to offer a less demanding view of our beneficent obligations to the global poor than that defended in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." But his proposed alternative is, on reflection, unconvincing, and certainly less plausible than Singer's account. It is unpersuasive for the following weighty reasons: (1) It rests on a misunderstanding of the theoretical starting point that it purportedly shares with Singer's account. (2) It overestimates the authority of ordinary moral thinking.¹⁹ (3) It includes a number of controversial examples that, on reflection, detract from the force of his Principle of Sympathy. (4) It pays inadequate attention to an entire class of problematic cases. In what follows, I treat these issues roughly in order.

Miller's analysis in "Moral Closeness and World Community" overlaps substantially with his discussions in "Beneficence, Duty, and Distance" and *Globalizing Justice*. In "Moral Closeness and World Community," Miller attempts

a vindication of ordinary moral favoritism toward closeness [that] ... grounds a case for extensive foreign aid that could be believable to the vast majority of non-philosophers, who find it unbelievable that a strong duty of impartial concern for neediness, whether near or far, determines what should be done to help needy strangers.²⁰

Miller's analysis in "Beneficence, Duty, and Distance" also bespeaks his reliance on ordinary morality. Early in the paper he provides a roadmap for his argument in relation to Singer's account and ordinary morality:

I believe that Singer's effort to derive the radical from the obvious misconstrues ordinary morality. Adequate reflection on our most secure convictions would lead most of us to embrace *a less demanding*

¹⁹ For an instructive treatment of ordinary moral reasoning in the context of moral reasoning more generally, see: Henry S. Richardson, "Moral Reasoning," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (August 4, 2007), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reasoning-moral/> (accessed March 2, 2012).

²⁰ Miller, "Moral Closeness and World Community," 101.

principle of general beneficence, which permits many purchases that Singer would prohibit while condemning callous indifference. I will begin by describing this alternative moderate principle and its implications for beneficence, defending it against some initial criticisms. Then, I will describe how ordinary secure convictions concerning special relationships and partiality lead to an interpretation of the demands of equal respect that justifies *this principle* [i.e., Miller's less demanding principle]. Finally, with these resources in hand, I will confront Singer's most powerful appeal to those who start within the circle of ordinary morality, his attempt to derive the Principle of Sacrifice from ordinary secure convictions concerning rescue, as in his famous case of an encounter with a drowning toddler.²¹

Miller argues that ordinary morality justifies, on reflection, a far less stringent obligation of beneficent assistance than Singer maintains. It is unsurprising, then, that Miller's argumentative *modus operandi* largely consists in taking ordinary morality as authoritative and using the claimed authority to justify his case against Singer's principle. In the quotation above, Miller essays to derive "resources" that will help him challenge Singer's account. One such resource is the alleged fact that "ordinary secure convictions concerning special relationships and partiality *lead to* an interpretation of the demands of equal respect that justifies this principle" ("this principle" referring to Miller's principle of general beneficence; see italicized parts of indented quotation above).²² Now Miller may be thinking that ordinary morality is constitutive of obligations to provide beneficent assistance, such that whatever ordinary morality commends vis-à-vis such obligations just *is* what is obligatory. Such a view would accord with Beauchamp's claim that strict obligations of beneficence are "grounded in the core norms of beneficence in ordinary morality."²³ By showing that Singer's claimed obligation of beneficence contravenes the dictates of ordinary morality, Miller can argue that there is, in fact, no such obligation.

²¹ Miller, "Beneficence, Duty and Distance," 358.

²² Miller, "Beneficence, Duty and Distance," 358.

²³ Beauchamp, 2.

Or so Miller might think. The problem here is that he nowhere justifies his own reliance on ordinary morality as authoritative vis-à-vis obligations to provide beneficent assistance to the poor. Given a claim that A *justifies* B, we are only justified in accepting B if we first accept the posited justificatory relationship as *valid*—in Miller’s case, that ordinary morality (“A”) is in fact “secure” or validly authoritative vis-à-vis his proposed interpretation of the principle of equal respect which, he holds, grounds our beneficent obligations to assist the poor. We must consider, then, whether ordinary morality is authoritative in the sense of plausibly justifying Miller’s principle of general beneficence. A further, also questionable point to address is this, that since Singer considers ordinary morality unreliable, Miller’s account may get far less traction against Singer’s account than he lets on. Although not always explicit, Miller’s emphasis on the presumptive authority of ordinary moral thinking (OMT) – even as regards our obligations to the world poor, about which OMT offers no consensus view – along with his desire to vindicate OMT feature prominently in his three treatments of our beneficent obligations to the global poor.²⁴ Precisely this emphasis raises doubts about Miller’s argument at the outset. I shall argue that Miller not only mischaracterizes Singer’s commitment to OMT but also rests his own case too heavily on the putative authority of OMT.

²⁴ Again, these are: “Beneficence, Duty, and Distance,” *Globalizing Justice*, and “Moral Closeness and World Community.” It is worth quoting the first paragraph in “Moral Closeness and World Community,” which sets Miller’s agenda for the rest of this chapter. Miller writes:

Ordinary moral thinking about aid to needy strangers discriminates in favor of the political closeness of compatriots and the literal closeness of people in peril who are close at hand. For example, in ordinary moral thinking, I have, as an American citizen, a much more demanding duty to support tax-financed aid to the poor of the United States than to support such aid to the foreign poor. I have a duty to save a drowning toddler I encounter at the cost of ruining my four-hundred-dollar suit, but not a duty to donate four hundred dollars to save children in a distant village from a yet more ghastly death from dysentery. ... One of my goals is to defend these biases, showing that they express a deep commitment to moral equality.

Miller, “Moral Closeness and World Community,” 101.

To begin with, Miller is right that “Singer’s most powerful appeal [is] to those who start within the circle of ordinary morality.”²⁵ Miller goes too far, however, when he suggests that “Singer’s effort to derive the radical from the obvious misconstrues ordinary morality.”²⁶ First, Singer’s project in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” is not, in fact, to build a highly demanding case for beneficent giving on the basis of our commitment to OMT as such. To get his argument off the ground, Singer need only rely on our commitment to a few ordinary moral *thoughts*. Our aptness to support premises (1), (2), and (3) from Singer’s Principle of Sacrifice is all Singer thinks he needs to convince readers to accept his conclusion. This point should not be overlooked. For it suggests that Miller’s reliance on ordinary moral *thinking* requires a significantly greater commitment to OMT from the reader than does Singer’s reliance on a few ordinary moral thoughts (or propositions) which many people find quite uncontroversial.

Consider Miller’s efforts to defend the claim that “[a]dequate reflection on our most secure convictions would lead most of us to embrace a less demanding principle of general beneficence, which permits many purchases that Singer would prohibit while condemning callous indifference.”²⁷ Even if this claim is veracious, Singer’s aim is certainly not to argue *from* (all of) our most secure convictions. It is instead to cast doubt upon (some) such convictions. Although Singer sets out “to argue for the moral position that I [Singer] take, so that anyone who *accepts certain assumptions*, to be made explicit, will ... accept my conclusion,”²⁸ his strategy is one of (1) getting others to grant a few premises and then (2) showing why those premises ineluctably lead to a striking conclusion: that many of one’s secure convictions vis-à-vis beneficent giving are entirely misguided. “The outcome of this argument is that our traditional moral categories are

²⁵ Miller, “Beneficence, Duty, and Distance,” 358.

²⁶ Miller, “Beneficence, Duty, and Distance,” 358. Although Miller begins this sentence with the phrase “I believe that,” he is clearly asserting that Singer’s analysis is misleading.

²⁷ Miller, “Beneficence, Duty, and Distance,” 358.

²⁸ Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” 231. Emphasis added.

upset,” Singer declares, due to “the revision in our moral conceptual scheme which I am proposing.”²⁹ Singer is arguing that the traditional, widely held view according to which charitable giving is supererogatory (i.e., merely a non-obligatory act of generosity) cannot be justified. If that view is one of the “secure convictions” constitutive of OMT, then clearly Singer is not endorsing OMT—on the contrary, he seeks to expose its defective contents.

That Singer suspects our ordinary morality may be radically askew finds further support in his assertion that “our society, and most other societies, do judge differently from the way I have suggested they should.”³⁰ Throughout Miller’s own argument, he seems to conflate Singer’s limited appeal to a few intuitions within ordinary morality with a general appeal to the authority of ordinary morality proper. Miller’s critique of Singer’s account purports to gain force from sharing with it certain theoretical commitments to OMT. Yet, as I make clear subsequently, Miller’s account shares no such commitments, a fact quite germane to how one weighs the force of his argument. For any case showing that those commitments commend an outcome contrary to Singer’s conclusion cannot, in that respect, do much philosophical work; indeed, Singer can just reject as implausible the notion that the ordinary moral views on which Miller’s arguments rely are finally authoritative. Singer makes precisely such a move in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”:

[T]he way people do in fact judge has nothing to do with the validity of my conclusion. My conclusion follows from the principle which I advanced earlier, and unless that principle is rejected, or the arguments shown to be unsound, I think the conclusion must stand, however strange it appears.³¹

²⁹ Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” 235-236.

³⁰ Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” 236.

³¹ Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” 236.

My first main criticism of Miller's account, then, is a methodological one. In trying to "vindicate" ordinary moral favoritism, he gives presumptive weight to ordinary moral thinking. Yet he fails adequately to account for the fact that such thinking may be unreliable, as Singer expressly suggests. Given Miller's argument, he owes the reader such an account; unhappily, he does not provide one. In short, there are two issues at play: First, Miller's account is intrinsically weak due to its reliance on OMT; second, his critique of Singer is weak insofar as it relies on a spurious "shared" commitment to OMT.

In the remainder of this section, I show why Singer's account is more plausible than Miller's in these respects. Then I argue that Miller's criteria for beneficent giving, even though plausible *prima facie*, are implausible on reflection. There I home in on the "life worsening" and "closeness-to-heart" criteria, each of which figures prominently in Miller's thought-provoking alternative to Singer's account.

There are five weighty reasons why Singer is justified in not putting much stock in ordinary moral thinking. These reasons, which are individually plausible and mutually supportive, cast doubt on Miller's attempted vindication of ordinary morality. First, ordinary moral thinking has, of course, supported numerous egregious practices historically such as slavery in the antebellum South. Second, it is by no means self-evident that, in moral matters, one should defer to the judgment of the "(wo)man on the street" (who, incidentally, supported slavery in the antebellum South). In this regard, Gandhi and Desmond Tutu's moral judgments no doubt deserve greater respect than do the moral judgments of most other people.³² Third, Western materialistic culture has greatly amplified our understanding of "need." It has concomitantly rendered us hypersensitive to losses in our material well-being (e.g., going from having twenty-five

³² This fact suggests that morality is, in important part, prospective in nature. That today's moral leaders shape tomorrow's morality militates against uncritical acceptance of any reigning morality.

shirts to having twenty shirts, or seven pairs of shoes / sandals to five pairs, makes virtually no difference in one's overall well-being, yet many people would reflexively make a big deal of this "loss.")³³ The ordinary, affluent-world view that such losses are morally significant is no doubt trivial when seen through the eyes of the two billion people (themselves also "ordinary") with incomes of less than two dollars per day. Indeed, having seven pairs of shoes is far from a genuine "need" in the robust sense of the word, notwithstanding modern advertising's deployment of its tools of psychological manipulation aimed at convincing us it is. Deeper, reason-based reflection reveals that no such need exists. (This point harmonizes both with Singer's claim that "consumer society has had a distorting effect on the goals and purposes of its members," and with the way in which rampant consumerism has arguably distorted our sense of *genuine* need.³⁴)

Fourth, our desire to meet various "needs" invented by modern society has led *ipso facto* to a state of affairs in which our ordinary morality privileges an alleged constant struggle to "make ends meet." The object of such a struggle is typically to "get by" or live a minimally decent life. Yet once one realizes that, in many cases, most of the activity requisite to making ends meet does not at all help one to meet one's *genuine* needs, the struggle appears empty. Indeed, for many of us the "struggle to make ends meet" soon appears fictive if viewed against the backdrop of our *genuine* needs as human beings. Rather than struggle to meet our basic human needs, we struggle to fulfill our middle or upper-class Western desires. What is more, we then conflate satisfying those desires with meeting those needs. A problematic consequence of this misguided struggle is that it easily crowds out any earnest effort to consider the extent of our true

³³ Complaining to others about the loss and taking the time to go out and buy replacements could plausibly diminish one's well-being or utility more than the said loss diminishes it in the first place.

³⁴ Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 241.

surplus – our money not put towards taxes or *genuine* needs – and the portion of it that we can, in fact, spare for those who *are* in genuine need. Fifth, a new sociocultural trend of beneficent giving in accordance even with Miller’s position vis-à-vis beneficent obligations to assist would dramatically increase giving in the wealthy West. But if, say, seven of every ten residents in the northern Occident began giving ten percent of their income to the poor, this new practice would itself greatly change ordinary morality vis-à-vis beneficent giving. The content of our future ordinary morality would then differ fundamentally from that of the reigning ordinary morality—to wit, it would take far greater account of the needs of the global poor. Which of these two ordinary moralities is superior? One need not even assume it is the latter to see that ordinary morality cannot reliably underpin a normative moral analysis of beneficent giving. All one needs is to be unsure of how to answer the question.

In summary, any “secure” convictions that we in the affluent West have about need, whether others’ or our own, are apt to be confused on account of certain morally problematic elements in our own culture—they are apt, that is, to be *insecure*. Add to this the fact that ordinary morality is insecure even by its own admission (assuming it is even coherent³⁵), and Miller’s position becomes less plausible still. For implicit in most ordinary moral thought is the notion that OMT itself quite often fails to provide an accurate picture of moral obligations. OMT arguably includes the view that it is a moral imperative to rethink one’s positions upon being confronted with a grave moral issue—e.g., our obligations to assist those constantly threatened by death and disease under wrenching global poverty. Consider the example of a woman in her second trimester of pregnancy who is deciding whether to get an abortion that would be her first. Confronted by this serious moral issue, such a woman will likely not just unthinkingly

³⁵ In some cases, it may not even make sense to speak of one coherent and widely interpersonally shared body of ordinary moral thought.

defer to her present views, which may be partly constitutive of her culture's ordinary morality. Rather, she will probably think long and hard about whether the views she has hitherto held about the moral permissibility of abortion are accurate after all. Ordinary morality itself calls for such a process of deep reflection by people who, like her, try to "step outside" of ordinary morality and assess its plausibility vis-à-vis the issue at hand from the "outside in." Now, since ghastly poverty is a serious moral issue, and since there is a range of views on it even within OMT, the relevant body of ordinary moral thought seems not to warrant a strong presumption of accuracy.³⁶ And yet Miller's account pivots on just such a presumption, which I have not only shown above but will also make clear via the examples below.

3.2.1 The Daughter's Aesthetic Sense Example

Miller offers the following hypothetical to support his Principle of Sympathy.

First, let us recall the principle:

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.³⁷

We now turn to Miller's example concerning his daughter's stylistic preferences. Miller writes (emphasis added):

Suppose that my daughter has identified with the humble but *worthwhile* goal ... of displaying her aesthetic sense and enjoyably interacting with others in the way she dresses. She can no more readily detach from this goal than most adults can. She has become her own person in this and other ways, although she will remain a financially dependent person for several crucial years, most of her childhood. Her life will be worse, in *ordinary moral thinking*, if I do not provide her with the means to pursue this humbler *worthwhile* goal enjoyably and well. Alternatively, by financing nothing more than neat, warm, plain clothing and donating the

³⁶ When we add to this the apparent fact that one's ordinary moral intuitions often conflict with one's basic values, as Peter Unger cleverly argues in *Living High and Letting Die*, any account that appeals to ordinary moral intuitions for force appears even more vulnerable than one might expect.

³⁷ Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 13. Emphasis added.

savings to an aid agency, I could prevent the deaths of several other children. But my choice to make it possible for my child to exercise her sense of style as she grows up expresses an appropriate valuing of our relationship, and not the horrendous view that her life is worth more than the life of a child in a village in Mali.³⁸

To be sure, Miller's view is not without some initial plausibility. He is arguing that an affluent father's relationship (affluent by world standards) with his daughter provides a sufficient ground for privileging (a) his putting money toward her aesthetic preferences and ability to develop a sense of fashion that she finds pleasing in a social setting, over (b) saving the life of a child in Mali by instead spending the money on that child. Miller holds that ordinary moral thinking supports the view that his daughter's life will be worse should the father decide not to spend his money on (a). And here he is certainly right. Nonetheless we still may ask: What, morally, ought the father to do? Let us consider how plausible Miller's view is on further reflection.

The following hypothetical addresses the value or disvalue of the ordinary moral intuition behind Miller's argument.³⁹ Consider two middle-class Western parents who are concerned to save money for their children's college educations. Meeting family needs such as these is often quite stressful. Suppose the parents wish to save enough money for their children to be able to attend private universities that cost tens of thousands of dollars annually. Now, fast forward to this scenario: Amid a stressful and involved discussion about the high priority of saving money for their children's educational futures, the parents hear a knock on their door. The knock issues from a starving person who (for the sake of argument, we may suppose) is from a developing country. After the couple reluctantly opens the door, the starving person asks the couple for some food. How shall the parents respond?

³⁸ Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 20. Corresponding passages can be found in "Beneficence, Duty, and Distance," 368-69, and "Moral Closeness and World Community," 102-103.

³⁹ I first used this "starving stranger" example in "Human Rights, Information Structures, and Intercity Partnerships: Increasing the Cost of Complacency about Human Rights" (unpublished paper).

They ought, morally, to feed the man, of course. Notice, however, that this moral intuition allows for the following point. When juxtaposed with the previous, stressful discussion about saving for their children’s college educations, the parents’ confrontation with this needy person gives them an important sense of perspective. They step back, catch their breath, and realize that the college savings previously under discussion, though important, are not as important as they had thought. The parents *reevaluate* their “worthwhile” goal of accumulating such savings and, quite possibly, reprioritize their spending. After all, they have just been confronted by a starving person suffering horribly before their very eyes – as the world’s poor do daily – and the parents have helped that person to avoid starvation and continue living. On further reflection the parents, if they are thoughtful and not atypically uncompassionate, will come to think about the plight of many other “starving strangers” in the world today. They will abstract from the starving stranger case, come to realize how financial contributions small by their standards can alleviate the suffering of other starving strangers, and, though they may still save a substantial sum for their children’s educational futures, they will quite possibly find a way to help the global poor, perhaps through diverting money from the college savings previously thought far more important.⁴⁰

Now should the arbitrary fact that a starving person happened to knock on their particular door be determinative of the extent of their obligation to provide other starving strangers with beneficent assistance? I believe that it should not. Reasoned analysis along with empathetic understanding suffices – even without one’s meeting a starving stranger – to lead one (or at least many people) to call into question Miller’s

⁴⁰ In *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, Cullity summarizes the basic, force-giving intuition of cases like that of the starving stranger:

[I]f I were confronted directly by the great need of someone whom I could help at negligible cost to myself, it would certainly be wrong not to help. So unless being confronted directly makes a difference—and why should it?—the same should be said about giving money to aid agencies. (Cullity, 10).

privileging of (a) over (b) in the example above—to wit, of the father spending money on his daughter’s aesthetic preferences rather than on dying Malians. Reading about a starving stranger and reflecting on the devastating nature of global poverty and our ability to do something to alleviate it should be enough to do that job. Many people, at least, will come to realize, as Singer observes in *Practical Ethics*, that “by not giving more than we do, people in rich countries are allowing those in poor countries to suffer from absolute poverty, with consequent malnutrition, ill health, and death.”⁴¹ Now one might understandably want to support one’s daughter by spending a good bit of money to enable her to satiate her stylistic preferences, which she may indeed *take* to be part of “who she is” as a person. (What good father wouldn’t think this way at first?) But reflection reveals a demand of morality according to which one should use at least *some* of that money to assist the global poor. Interestingly, the same act of “sacrifice” also has a positive, prudential upshot. It can enable the father to teach his daughter the importance of making ultimately minor personal sacrifices that will leave a few of the 2,000 million global poor less burdened by hunger, lack of shelter, and disease.

If the initial impulse of a father fits within ordinary morality, it would seem that further reflection reveals, for many people at least, the limited force of ordinary morality in grounding a satisfactory account of the obligations of beneficent giving. So the upshot of the above analysis is clear. Either OMT will eventually lead people to want to privilege (b) over (a) who come to have certain poverty-relevant experiences or acquire certain poverty-relevant facts, or OMT will not engender a desire in people to privilege (b) over (a), in which case it should be rejected as unreliable. Miller’s account, itself rooted in OMT, falls flat either way.

⁴¹ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 222.

3.2.2 The Closeness-to-Heart Criterion

In his analysis of the contours of one's obligations to assist the needy, Miller relies not only on a "life-worsening" criterion but on a "closeness-to-heart criterion" as well. A person "is not obliged to devote her concerns to the neediest," he asserts, "if other worthy concerns are closer to her heart."⁴² Miller offers an example concerning benefactors who support causes such as opera and ballet. He claims that such benefactors "could rightly complain of a general requirement that private aid to needy strangers always be channeled in ways that do the most to relieve the most serious needs."⁴³ Miller does allow that "efficiency in relieving the burdens of the neediest" is a "significant reason to donate to a cause."⁴⁴ But he nevertheless holds that, all things considered, "it does not seem that this consideration ... must play an important role ... in the benefactions of affluent people in per-capita rich countries, given the pressure of competing good causes which are close to their hearts."⁴⁵

Like his example concerning his daughter's aesthetic preferences, this line of argument is open to objection. Here's one important concern: In each example, Miller illegitimately (and perhaps unwittingly) applies a judgment that, though perhaps justifiable *ceteris paribus*, is not justifiable once one relaxes the *ceteris paribus* constraint. To see why considerations of efficiency in relieving the burdens of the neediest (e.g., the global poor) ought, morally, to play an important role in the benefactions of affluent people, it is useful to return to the "daughter" case. For any discussion of one's *worthwhile* goal raises a question—worthwhile in what sense?

Perhaps the daughter's goal "of displaying her aesthetic sense and enjoyably interacting with others in the way she dresses" is indeed "worthwhile" in the sense that

⁴² Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 2.

⁴³ Miller, "Moral Closeness and World Community," 118.

⁴⁴ Miller, "Moral Closeness and World Community," 119.

⁴⁵ Miller, "Moral Closeness and World Community," 119.

it gives her satisfaction.⁴⁶ But what I call *judgments of comparative beneficence* – e.g., whether to put money toward (a) the aesthetic preferences and aesthetic life of one’s child or (b) the health of dying Malians – do not rest on the “worth” of the alternatives as determined by a *ceteris paribus* judgment. Judgments of comparative beneficence instead rest (i.e., they legitimately rest) on an explicitly comparative weighing of the worth of *each* alternative. Any meaningfully decisive judgment of worth must in this sense account for the intrinsic or instrumental value of putting money towards (b). So Miller cannot justifiably conclude, as he often implicitly does, that putting money towards (a) is ethically defensible simply by showing that (a) is, by itself, “worthwhile” according to his daughter.

Now let us turn to Miller’s closeness-to-heart criterion, which is beset by precisely the same kind of problem. Contra Miller’s implied view, whether other concerns are closer to one’s heart is *not* by itself morally decisive when it comes to whether one should spend money on those particular concerns rather than on improving the welfare of the developing world’s least well-off (or some combination of the two). To take Miller’s example: It is surely true that benefactors who support cultural causes such as opera and ballet thereby do something intrinsically good. It is also certain that what they do is better morally speaking than, say, buying a large second or third home to be used rarely. But it would be odd to think that if, for example, a billionaire chose to spend millions of dollars on a research project aimed at improving the welfare of frogs, that the billionaire’s choice would be just as moral as the choice to save thousands of the global poor from debilitating disease or childhood death. Such a claim is implausible irrespective of whether frogs are cute creatures close to the billionaire’s heart.⁴⁷ To be

⁴⁶ Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 20.

⁴⁷ The reader may assume that the said frogs are not at risk of extinction.

sure, it is morally good that the billionaire is spending the money on *something* valuable. But shouldn't human lives be *closer* to this person's heart?

Pace Miller, a criterion of "worth" in the context of beneficent giving is finally not very meaningful when understood exclusively in the context of the donor's subjective preferences or individual well-being. Miller is, in fact, using current *descriptions* of subjective "worth" to support a broader *normative* case for the "worth" of a much more limited scope of obligatory beneficent assistance than that espoused by Singer. An "is-ought" move of this ilk is illicit on most plausible accounts of fact-value relationships. In any case, contra Miller's view, a more plausible account of obligations to provide beneficent assistance holds, I suggest, that spending substantial sums on frog welfare is immoral in a world characterized by abject global poverty, a claim which seems true even if spending on frog welfare is more morally justifiable than spending on various less important causes. This conclusion seems hard to rebut if, as is likely, the spender knows that the money could instead be used to provide gravely suffering humans with food or shelter essential to their survival (or, as I later discuss, to meet other similarly serious needs by curing total blindness, improving the treatment of cancer or heart disease, etc.).

I will conclude this section by asking whether Miller's account can handle two classes of difficult cases. Recall that, under the Principle of Sympathy,

[a]dditional responsiveness to others' neediness worsens someone's life if it deprives him of adequate resources to pursue, enjoyably and well, a worthwhile goal with which he intelligently identifies and from which he could not readily detach. By "a goal with which someone identifies," I mean a basic interest that gives point and value to specific choices and plans. Such a constituent of someone's personality might be part of her description of "the sort of person I am."⁴⁸

Now Miller acknowledges: "Admittedly, the demands of Sympathy are sometimes lower because someone cannot readily detach from an exorbitantly expensive

⁴⁸ Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 14.

goal.”⁴⁹ This honest admission raises two issues, however, each of which suggests that his account overlooks an entire class of problematic cases. First, there are presumably millions of people in the wealthy West who have come by mere force-of-habit to have goals the pursuit of which is very expensive by world standards. Miller’s principle has nothing to say to a wealthy gourmand who would rather eat fifty-dollar steaks each night than send that money to Oxfam to save dying children in Mali. Shouldn’t it? Second, Miller’s principle posits an inextricable link between the degree of one’s moral obligation and the degree to which one can successfully *detach* from a “worthwhile” goal. Isn’t such a link problematic? It would seem, for example, that someone who spends millions of dollars in order to have a distinctive collection of classic cars is morally obligated to assist in the cause of saving dying children, regardless of whether she finds it hard to detach from that goal.⁵⁰

This is but one of many examples that bring to light the objectionableness of Miller’s insistence that one’s attachment to value-adding goals at which one has intelligently arrived, and from which one cannot easily detach, justifies one’s lack of engagement in life-saving beneficent giving that would prevent their achievement. Take a further example. Consider a person whose goal it is to travel to fifty countries in her lifetime out of cultural interest, even if the net cost of these trips may well amount to a couple hundred thousand dollars. Singer et al. suggest that giving a fairly modest fraction of that money to the global poor would save hundreds or even thousands of lives. Given such a tradeoff, it would seem that a wrongmaking property attaches to such extensive, self-financed trip-taking, particularly if one is not already providing some degree of assistance to the global poor. This is certainly not to say that traveling

⁴⁹ Miller, “Beneficence, Duty, and Distance,” 363.

⁵⁰ One could object by noting Miller’s criterion that the goal must be one with which one is “intelligently identified” (Miller, “Beneficence, Duty, and Distance,” 360). But can’t one intelligently identify with the life-enhancing good of adding to a collection of entities if, say, the collection adds value to one’s life due both to the entities’ value and to the enjoyment one takes in so collecting?

per se is somehow morally objectionable. Rather, the point of the trip-taking, car-collection, frog welfare, and gourmand examples is this: Miller's Principle of Sympathy allows too many objectionable cases that deprioritize the well-being of the global poor (and the severely needy in general) in deference to the pursuit of goals that plausibly seem trivially important by comparison.

A final note bears emphasis. Even if one finds some of the foregoing examples less than convincing, the fact that forty percent of humankind lives in severe poverty, much of it preventable, suggests that Miller's principle does not take these lives seriously enough. The grave suffering that permeates so many societies, profoundly undermining human aspirations for a hopeful way of life, calls for *reevaluation*—reevaluation, for example, of whether to keep certain current projects close to one's heart, or detach from them even if so doing will require a struggle. Miller is not justified in taking these projects and preferences as givens; such projects and preferences do not merit our presumptive moral acceptance.⁵¹ The horrible conditions and death from which millions daily suffer under grinding world poverty give one ample reason to detach from certain "worthwhile" goals. Some such claim must be sustainable.

⁵¹ At this juncture one might have the following worry. If a key reason for living is to carry out one's personal projects, and the ability to pursue such projects is vital to one's well-being, then any view concerning beneficent obligations to the global poor that calls for reevaluation and possible abandonment of one's projects may, if acted upon, prove detrimental to one's well-being. Such a concern, though understandable, is misleading in the context of my argument. For as moral agents we very often reevaluate our commitments to certain projects, including whether and how we ought to pursue them. Hence, even taking the anti-Millerian moral stance towards beneficent giving proposed above, it is *still* true that we can, to borrow Bernard Williams's words in "Persons, Character, and Morality," be "propelled forward by the conatus of desire, project and interest." Concerns arising under Williams's or other project-focused perspectives pose a weaker challenge than one might expect *prima facie* to my contention that the global rich ought to reevaluate their commitment to certain projects. As various scholars point out (e.g., Cullity, 102-106), demanding views of beneficent giving need not be utterly impartial. And, in any case, my arguments below are not susceptible to such an objection, since the revisions I there propose to Singer's Principle of Sacrifice do not presuppose an impartialist conception of our moral obligations to assist the global poor. In short, the need to reevaluate one's existing project-related commitments on the basis of one's awareness of (1) the severe realities of global poverty and (2) one's ability to mitigate them is not, I suggest, substantially different from the need to reevaluate other personal projects in the light of other project-relevant realities. Project reevaluation may even be a beneficial, meaning-giving project *in se*.

In this footnote I draw on, but add to, Cullity's incisive analysis in *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, 102-106. See also Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-19.

4. Towards a Moderate Principle of Sacrifice

As we have seen, Miller's account of our beneficent obligations to assist the global poor offers unhappily limited resources for a constructive reformulation of Singer's Principle of Sacrifice. I believe that Singer's argument from beneficence in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," with modifications, more accurately describes our obligations to the global poor. Yet, in what follows, I shall not simply side with Singer against Miller. (In fact, I wish to vindicate Miller's reasonable worry about the overdemandingness of Singer's Principle of Sacrifice.) Rather, I shall critique Singer's view, repackaging it along the way so it becomes both less demanding and more accurate vis-à-vis our beneficent obligations. I will not aim for a perfect theory (as if such a theory were possible), but instead for a *more plausible* theory—i.e., a more plausible Principle of Sacrifice.¹ The upshot will be a "Moderate Principle of Sacrifice" that reformulates the Principle of Sacrifice more palatably than does Miller's Principle of Sympathy, whose troublesome features we have already examined. (In this chapter, I rely on my own – not Miller's – understanding of the "Principle of Sacrifice," as referring to Singer's three premises and conclusion.)

I begin by recalling Singer's Principle of Sacrifice:

- (1) Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.
- (2) 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 That is, I wish to offer an alternative account that, even though defeasible, is a clear step in the right direction.

(3) Such prevention *is* in our power, since we can give to effective aid organizations.

Conclusion: We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those suffering or dying from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, to the point at which further giving would cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents.

Unsurprisingly, Singer's account is not without its own problems. In this chapter I discuss four key problems: Its failure adequately to account for nonmoral value; its unacceptably incomplete discussion of suffering; its failure to justify one of its key framing assumptions, to wit, that we can somehow disentangle our beneficent obligations to assist the global poor from our more general beneficent obligations to assist the seriously needy; and, finally, its insufficient emphasis on our obligation to adopt a long-term perspective vis-à-vis such assistance.² I shall address these issues in order, defending my revisions to Singer's account along the way. I shall also consider and, upon reflection, dismiss the need for three additional revisions to the Moderate Principle of Sacrifice. The upshot, I believe, is a Principle of Sacrifice that not only is less demanding than Singer's view but also more plausibly captures the nature of our obligation to provide beneficent assistance to the global poor.

4.1 The Nonmoral Value Revision

Thesis: Since it can be immoral to sacrifice certain goods of high nonmoral value for the sake of beneficent giving, premise (2) requires revision.

The aesthetic revision concerns premise (2) of the Principle of Sacrifice: "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing

² In the light of these shortcomings, it might seem that Singer's account should be either supplemented or supplanted. There is a third option, however: revision and reformulation. Since I think that Singer's account is essentially on target, I shall attempt a step-by-step reformulation in order of the concerns just mentioned. My aim will be to preserve many of Singer's insights while jettisoning several of his oversights.

anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.”³ This premise is striking in its implicit rejection of a significant role for nonmoral sources of value in shaping one’s obligation to provide beneficent assistance. Consider the following cases concerning aesthetic, historical, and cultural value as they relate to the high level of beneficent giving called for by Singer. (As we will see, Miller is right at least to acknowledge the import of nonmoral value for beneficent giving.⁴)

First, *the Oxford case*. Oxford University could sell many of its buildings – the colleges, the libraries, etc. – to affluent private bidders throughout the world. It could then use a small portion of the proceeds to purchase new, highly functional (though far less aesthetically pleasing) office buildings, in which it could house students, host classes, and (after the sale) continue with academic business as usual. No doubt there would be a substantial difference between (a) the revenue from the sale of Oxford’s prestigious and aesthetically striking campus and (b) the costs of the new office buildings. Oxford could put that profit towards saving thousands of lives – quite possibly thousands *each year* – throughout the impoverished world. Moreover, Oxford’s sacrifice to that end would primarily be one of aesthetic, cultural, and historical value. It would not primarily be a sacrifice of moral importance, let alone one of “comparable moral importance” to the lives it would save. For even if one allows that securing nonmoral value can, in some cases, itself be a morally valuable act, the Oxford sacrifice would remain chiefly a sacrifice of nonmoral value.⁵ Hence it would be allowed under

³ Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” 231. I capitalized the first word.

⁴ See Miller, “Beneficence, Duty, and Distance,” 361. Miller is right to think that the need to preserve aesthetically and culturally valuable operas, plays, and the like (cf. section 3.2.2.) may, in some cases (but fewer than he claims), be a higher-priority obligation than providing beneficent assistance to the poor.

⁵ I find it plausible that a heroic sacrifice to save certain highly important artistic treasures can have rightmaking or goodmaking qualities that make it an act of moral heroism. But the value in such a sacrifice is importantly different from the value of what would have been sacrificed, namely goods of high nonmoral value.

premise (2).⁶ Are the owners of Oxford morally obligated to make such a tremendous sacrifice?

Second, *the pietà case*. The *pietà*, currently housed in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, is Michelangelo's beautiful sculpture of the Virgin Mary holding the body of her son, Jesus, across her lap. The Catholic Church could sell this masterpiece of the Western aesthetic tradition to a private donor, fetching millions, and then use the proceeds to save the lives of numerous people worldwide. Would the Vatican be justified in depriving its millions of visitors each year the opportunity to view in public this remarkable aesthetico-religious treasure, so that it can then donate the proceeds to the poor?

However one answers these difficult questions, the Oxford and *pietà* examples make clear that any plausible Principle of Sacrifice must account for nonmoral value.⁷ For it is not at all obvious that sacrificing items of high nonmoral value is morally required even when the lives of the global poor hang in the balance. Thus, I propose the following amendment to premise (2) of Singer's formulation:

(2*) If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance *or overridingly high nonmoral value*, we ought, morally, to do it.⁸

⁶ Singer arguably does not have at his disposal the reply that selling Oxford's buildings and giving the money to the global poor would be "wrong in itself" and hence contravene the Principle of Sacrifice. Proponents of a fairly strict separation between aesthetic value and moral value would reject such a claim, and those who allow for overlapping spheres of aesthetic value and moral value may very well wonder on what grounds it is clearly wrong in itself to sell an aesthetic treasure in order to save thousands of people from agonizing deaths. It is far from clear that any such sale has wrongmaking properties.

⁷ Two points bear note. First, even if the *pietà* has moral value, this value presumably derives from its (more fundamental) religious value. Second, that Singer begins "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" by addressing Britain and Australia's governmental aid indicates his openness to applying the Principle of Sacrifice to organizations (e.g., Oxford University, the Catholic Church) and not just individuals.

⁸ Singer could, of course, reply that Oxford – or Princeton, his own aesthetically pleasing university – should be sold as suggested. After all, in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" he did lament the fact that "Australia's aid...amounts to less than one-twelfth of cost of Sydney's new opera house" (Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 230). It is unclear, however, whether Singer would give his imprimatur to such a drastically anti-aesthetic measure as selling the opera house, or Oxford, or Princeton, thereby depriving the public of opportunities to enjoy these culturally important institutions. Perhaps Singer just means to imply that government aid should be a far higher percentage of the cost of the new opera house than it now is. At any

The careful reader will notice that, by taking better account of nonmoral value, the revised principle imposes a significant constraint on Singer's "comparable moral importance" criterion. On this principle, it is no longer the case that one is under obligation to forgo various highly important – but not highly *morally* important – expenditures in order to donate unspent money to the poor. This revision is appealing because it allows one, for example, to maintain a substantial amount of retirement savings in order to secure one's and one's family's financial future, a good that I take to be of both high moral value and high nonmoral value. The proposed change still entails the moral impermissibility of hoarding away huge sums of money to secure a materially lavish retirement, of building up an enormous car collection, etc., at least in a largely impoverished world such as ours today. Such a claim should be anodyne for most people and at least not unacceptably controversial for most philosophers. At the same time, the proposed change better accounts for the organic, quasi-aesthetic value that comes from maintaining meaningful relationships in one's life that importantly depend on one's financial (or other largely nonmoral) state of affairs.

4.2 The Suffering Revision

Thesis: Premise (1) and the conclusion should be revised due to problematic vagueness in the intended sense of "suffering."

Consider Singer's use of suffering in (1) and the conclusion (emphasis added):

rate, all one needs to justify the proposed revision to (2) is to accept the claim that the value of the most important aesthetic work in the world is such that it is not acceptable to sell, destroy, or otherwise substantially damage the work, nor to deprive its current owners of possession, in order to save the life of a single impoverished person in the world today. Some such claim is presumably plausible enough to ground the nonmoral value revision.

(1) *Suffering* and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.

(2) If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance or overridingly high nonmoral value, we ought, morally, to do it.

(3) Such prevention *is* in our power, since we can give to effective aid organizations.

Conclusion: We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those *suffering* or dying from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, to the point at which further giving would cause *serious suffering* for oneself and one's dependents.

The issue here is straightforward: There is no good reason to assume that we ought, morally, to render assistance to the global poor who are *merely* suffering, to the point at which we are *seriously* suffering. Consider the fact that, as Brad Hooker notes, "rule-consequentialism selects rules solely in terms of the goodness of their consequences" and "claims that these rules determine which kinds of acts are morally wrong."⁹ The rule consequentialism on which Singer's argument relies poses a problem if it requires one, morally, to subject oneself to "serious suffering" (a very bad consequence) in order that the global poor can merely not "suffer" (merely a bad consequence). Since on the resultant state of affairs some eliminable suffering would remain, that state of affairs would still not be ethically acceptable. Thus, if Singer's Principle of Sacrifice allows for such outcomes, then it is of questionable moral value even from a perspective within Singer's own ethical framework. Since, if fully

⁹ Brad Hooker, "Rule Consequentialism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (January 9, 2008), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism-rule/> (accessed March 1, 2012).

implemented, Singer's principle would lead to more suffering than is necessary, I propose that we amend the Principle of Sacrifice such that (1) and the conclusion both discuss "serious suffering." The proposed modification takes the following form:

(1*) *Serious suffering* and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.

(2) If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance or overridingly high nonmoral value, we ought, morally, to do it.

(3) Such prevention *is* in our power, since we can give to effective aid organizations.

*Conclusion**: We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those *seriously suffering* or dying from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, to the point at which further giving would cause *serious suffering* for oneself and one's dependents.

The "serious suffering" language appropriately moderates the Principle of Sacrifice by ruling out a class of cases that includes, for example, an obligation of beneficence to aid one who is suffering from a lack of medical care for a minor issue. Indeed, we would presumably not want to impute to a middle-class U.S. citizen a significant *obligation* to send financial assistance to a less well-off (but, there, middle-class) Nigerian citizen who suffers from, say, a slightly painful chipped tooth or a deviated septum that causes snoring. Such a claim would be implausibly strong, and one to which Singer would presumably not give his imprimatur.¹⁰

¹⁰ There is a valid question as to whether the seriousness of suffering should be taken as an objective measure (e.g., perhaps most currently starving people are suffering around equally seriously) or as a subjective measure (e.g., a super-motivated American high school student's rejection from Harvard might be as "serious" for her as a Nigerian's pain-causing chipped tooth is for him). Perhaps no version of the Principle of Sacrifice can easily and uncontroversially accommodate this subjective-objective value dilemma. Nonetheless, the

Of course, the proposed revision is not the only one possible. An objector might wonder why, for example, we should not choose a revision that includes a standard of “suffering” across-the-board, rather than “serious suffering” as proposed. But the justifiability of this move depends on the conceptual content of “suffering.” If “suffering” need not be “serious,” then that fact would detract from the force of Singer’s argument. For the resultant argument would call for a demanding obligation to alleviate merely mild suffering. And, anyway, by talking separately about “suffering” and “serious suffering” in his premise (1) and conclusion, respectively, Singer implicitly accepts the commonsensical notion that some suffering can be non-serious. Otherwise his use of the adjective “serious” would modify a state of affairs that is already serious, making the adjective curiously pleonastic.¹¹ On balance, some such suffering revision of the kind proposed is defensible.

4.3 The Need Revision

Thesis: A plausible Principle of Sacrifice – in particular, a plausible premise (1) and conclusion – must account for need and not just poverty, since some severely needy people who are not impoverished are nonetheless as deserving of beneficent assistance as many impecunious persons are.

Pace Singer, I suggest that it is better to discuss beneficent obligations in terms of “need” than in terms of “food, shelter, and medical care.”¹² Such a move boasts two advantages. First, the criterion of “need” does not rule out cases in which one might

proposed revision is preferable to Singer’s language since it more explicitly ensures that donors and recipients’ respective degrees of suffering will not be widely disparate.

¹¹ An alternative explanation is that the word “serious” is used for emphasis.

¹² Miller himself endorses such a view, as noted above. Below I discuss the need-centered criterion that Miller proposes in his characterization of our beneficent obligations to the global poor.

have a *greater* obligation to provide beneficent assistance to severely – but not financially – needy people than to certain members of the global poor. For example, members of an extremely politically oppressive society may be more appropriate targets for international assistance than persons who live in an impoverished nation that enjoys benevolent democratic governance. For surely the burden of having no freedom of speech at all (or freedom to travel, to worship, or to discourse publicly) can at times be greater than that issuing from certain poverty-related diseases. Thus, the character, extent, and distribution of obligations to provide beneficent assistance may well vary according to *needs* beyond the most basically material.

Moreover, if Singer's rule consequentialism calls for maximizing expected long-term utility, then in some cases it will be better to (a) meet global needs not directly related to poverty than (b) to aid the impoverished directly. Miller recognizes the importance of this fact when he presents his Principle of Sympathy in terms of one's obligation "to respond to neediness as such."¹³ Miller's formulation is superior to Singer's in that it takes need seriously as a conceptual (but also real) category; it does not privilege, without justification, obligations of beneficence to the poor, over obligations of beneficence to the needy more generally. This fact justifies Miller's deployment of a "neediness as such" criterion, since the intension of "neediness" standardly includes (in ordinary language) some notion of severity. However, to avoid any possible *prima facie* ambiguity in a "neediness" criterion, my reformulation of Singer's principle shall include the "severe" part of "severe need" explicitly. Here is the proposed revision:

(1*) Serious suffering and death from *severe* need (due to lack of food, shelter, or medical care, for example) are *very* bad.

¹³ Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 13.

(2) If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance or overridingly high nonmoral value, we ought, morally, to do it.

(3) Such prevention *is* in our power, since we can give to effective aid organizations.

*Conclusion**: We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those *in severe need* (who are seriously suffering or dying from, e.g., lack of food, shelter, or medical care), to the point at which further giving would cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents.

To summarize: The "severe need" amendment militates against any implicit or interpretive running together of "poverty" and "need." It also captures explicitly the implicitly "very bad" nature of "neediness." Finally, it accords with the spirit of Singer's driving concern in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," namely, the severely degrading and destructive effects of poverty.

Before arguing for my fourth revision to Singer's position, I wish to point out the important if often overlooked relationship between empirical data on giving and moral obligations to give beneficently. The case I am about to make will suggest that, even if beneficent donors should sometimes prioritize certain *needs* that are not related to poverty, the proposed need-centered view of beneficent giving will *not* unduly favor giving that does not help the global poor. The following discussion should assuage that understandable worry.

To begin with, the empirical data furnish one reason to prioritize giving to relieve poverty over giving, say, to cure blindness or meet other severe needs. The data suggest, in short, that giving money in order to alleviate poverty can often relieve suffering and prevent death more efficaciously than can any other kind of giving. In *Living High and Letting Die*, Peter Unger reports that "each year mere measles still kills about a million

Third World kids.”¹⁴ Compared to the costs of meeting certain grave medical needs in the affluent world, the costs of preventing or mitigating life-threatening, poverty-related conditions in the developing world are very often paltry. Unger writes:

Semiannually, an underfed child can be given a powerful dose of Vitamin A, with capsules costing less than 10 cents. For that year, this will improve the child’s immune system. So, if she hasn’t been vaccinated, during this year she’ll be better able to survive measles. What’s more, from her two capsules, she’ll get a big bonus: With her immune system improved, this year she’ll have a better chance of beating the two diseases that take far more young lives than measles claims, pneumonia and diarrhea.¹⁵

It is difficult indeed to imagine a more financially efficacious mode of preventing serious suffering and death than giving small to moderate sums to the global poor. But this is not, of course, the end of the story. For an objector might reply to Unger: “That’s fine and well, but only a small proportion of the children given vitamin A would have come down with measles without it anyway; and, in any case, *how much* ‘better’ a chance will the said child have to beat pneumonia and diarrhea, anyway?” But I believe that Unger has a plausible countercontention at his disposal. “Very true,” he might say, “but even if we multiplied these costs manyfold, a twenty-dollar bill would go further towards preventing poverty-related death and severe suffering than it would towards preventing death and severe suffering that issues from any number of other grievous sources.”¹⁶

Such a reply seems plausible given the empirical data on poverty relief. To take but two of many striking empirical examples, the antibiotics needed to save a child from pneumonia only cost about 25 cents (pneumonia takes 3,500,000 young lives annually). And a packet of oral rehydration salts that can save a child from death due to

¹⁴ Unger, 6.

¹⁵ Unger, 6.

¹⁶ A plausible reply is that natural disaster relief funds might offer an even more cost effective way to prevent death and relieve grievous suffering. Perhaps they would. But even in this case much of that death and suffering will owe directly to lack of shelter, urgently needed medical care, and so on, all of which owe in large part to impoverishment brought on by the disaster.

dehydrating diarrhea costs about 15 cents (diarrhea takes about 3 million lives annually).¹⁷ I know of no comparably cost-effective way to meet severe need. Even adding a substantial premium to account for operation costs and international delivery of life-saving aid, it makes sense to prioritize poverty-related giving. The notion that the proposed “severe need” criterion would somehow justify shifting unacceptably high amounts of beneficent assistance away from the global poor is, then, not so worrisome after all.

There is yet another reason, however, to worry that a more moderate, need-focused principle of sacrifice might allow for insufficient giving to the global poor. According to this concern, beneficent assistance should be about the donor rather than the recipient, as the moral nature of beneficent assistance is what is important, and it is the donor who is the moral actor, not the recipient. Thus, the argument goes, what matters is neither the amount nor the effectiveness of aid, but whether the donor has laudably sacrificed, with good intentions, on behalf of the global poor, irrespective of the poverty-relevant results. Given the kind of assistance on which this paper focuses, however, such an objection can be overcome. The reason is simple. Beneficent assistance to the seriously poor is not finally about the donor. It is about the needy. “The point of distributing according to need,” writes David Schmitz, “is not to prove our hearts are in the right place, *but to meet the need.*”¹⁸ Any plausible analysis of beneficent assistance should focus on the needs of the abjectly poor. It should focus minimally if at all on the moral status of the rich, who are in auspicious enough circumstances to be able to give in the first place. To be sure, that status would be a legitimate emphasis if giving of the kind under discussion were merely supererogatory. But, as Singer has forcefully argued,

¹⁷ Unger, 3, 6. The wording in the last two sentences is purposely similar to Unger’s.

¹⁸ David Schmitz, *Elements of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 166. Emphasis added.

it is not.¹⁹ This is not to say that *all* beneficent assistance should therefore go to the most severely in need.²⁰ Rather, what I am arguing is simply that giving should center on meeting severe need, and any honest reflection on the suffering of “severely needy people” will recognize that the global poor occupy a prominent place in the extension of that term.

4.4 The Long-Term Perspective Revision

Thesis: A plausible principle of sacrifice must account for the long-term welfare of the needy. We can do so by modifying premise (3) and the conclusion of Singer’s principle.

The final revision I wish to propose will allow the Principle of Sacrifice to better account for the need of beneficent donors to maintain long-term momentum vis-à-vis giving. This revision militates against the prospect of the global rich structuring their short-term giving in a way that greatly reduces their potential long-term impact on global poverty. A striking feature of Singer’s principle is that it includes minimal reference to the temporal dimension of beneficent assistance. Specifically, conspicuously absent from the following conclusion is any reference to long-term versus short-term giving:

Conclusion: We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those suffering or dying from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, to the point at which further giving would cause serious suffering for oneself and one’s dependents.

¹⁹ In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (p. 236), Singer writes:

[W]e ought to give money away, rather than [for example] spend it on clothes which we do not need to keep us warm. To do so is not charitable, or generous. Nor is it the kind of act which philosophers and theologians have called “super-erogatory”—an act which it would be good to do, but not wrong not to do. On the contrary, we ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so.

Importantly, one can delimit the scope of obligatory beneficent giving more narrowly than Singer does while, at the same, arguing without contradiction that all such giving is not about the giver, at least not primarily, but rather about meeting the need of the intended recipient(s).

²⁰ That claim is implausible. There are numerous reasons intentionally to aid less needy people, including if the aid is far more likely to help them than their needier counterparts.

It is worth stating my proposed revision now, which I include in italics as follows:

(1) Serious suffering and death from severe need (due to lack of food, shelter, and medical care, for example) are very bad.

(2) If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance or overridingly high nonmoral value, we ought, morally, to do it.

(3*) Such prevention *is* in our power, since we can give to effective aid organizations *with a view to maximally benefiting the poor over the long-term.*

*Conclusion**: We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those suffering or dying from, e.g., lack of food, shelter, and medical care, *with a view to maximizing the long-term expected benefits to the poor, to the point at which further giving would cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents.*

The purpose of this revision is to emphasize a point that Singer does make, though briefly, in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," but which does not explicitly figure in his Principle of Sacrifice. So, the "long-term perspective" revision makes an important part of Singer's account more explicit. Singer reasonably asserts that if one has "very good evidence" that one can relieve significantly more suffering in the future by not "relieving suffering that is happening now," then one should forgo short-term giving.²¹ On the conclusion above ("*Conclusion**"), affluent individuals and societies would not be

²¹ See Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 240. In this connection Singer discusses the case of population control, but any number of other examples can be used. An alternative to the controversial measure of population control that Singer discusses is the example of giving aid to a plutocratic government that will use most of it for self-enrichment. If past trends continue, one could justify delaying provision of the beneficent assistance or offering it instead to a severely needy developing country whose government can be expected to allocate the aid based on need rather than on a desire to reward its already well-off cronies.

justified in undertaking to transform their beneficent giving practices over the course of a year or two if they knew that so doing might significantly hamper their ability to give beneficently in subsequent decades. This constraint minimizes the likelihood that something like a surprising ethical awakening will engender a spike in giving in an affluent Western society that, though the sudden increase is great for the global poor over the short-term, will prove bad for both parties over the long-term—for the poor *qua* recipients and the rich *qua* donors. In this respect, the revised principle recognizes the importance for any long-term strategy of beneficent giving of maintaining the basic stability of developed-world economies and supporting the continued growth of developing-world economies. Singer recognizes this economic fact when he writes:

[L]ooking at the matter purely from the point of view of overseas aid, there must be a limit to the extent to which we should deliberately slow down our economy; for it might be the case that if we gave away, say, forty percent of our Gross National Product, we would slow down the economy so much that in absolute terms we would be giving away less than if we gave twenty-five percent of the much larger GNP that we would have if we limited our contribution to this smaller percentage.²²

Notice, however, that Singer's point concerns taking the prospect of untoward economic slow-down into account as regards *present* giving. Although the statement above understandably emphasizes present giving, its compass should be expanded to include the present and future economic impacts of giving on donor countries and their recipients.²³

My contention is that a major disruption in developed economies due to an unexpected, voluminous outflow of wealth could, in fact, do more harm than good to the

²² Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 241.

²³ Here is an example of the kind of long-term perspective that I have in mind. A group of concerned denizens of affluent country A decides to withhold from poor members of impoverished country B direct aid that would reduce suffering but would not be so crucial as to save lives in B. The As may, for instance, withhold grain-assistance from the Bs given the A's expectation that such aid would greatly curtail the B's prospects of developing productive agricultural practices which are sustainable over the long-term. The As might instead put that money towards linking the Bs, over time, into economically beneficially networks of productivity. They could, for example, foster useful business and political connections between the Bs and (say) the B's more affluent neighbors, or link the Bs into a network of affluent-world microfinance lenders.

global poor over the long-term. (It is arguably possible that Singer's principle, if followed to the tee by all globally affluent people tomorrow, would give rise to just such a disruption, his quotation above notwithstanding.) Such a disruption, whether related to Singer's principle or not, may or may not be realized in practice, but a plausible Principle of Sacrifice should account for the possibility thereof. A sudden spike in giving could dramatically alter the short-term economic productivity of affluent countries by reducing consumer spending and undermining the ability of business models to forecast economic trends. The upshot would be that many hitherto healthy businesses fail. It seems to me that such a spike in beneficent giving cannot be justifiable on a plausible principle of beneficent giving, the good intentions of donors notwithstanding.²⁴ By impeding developed-country economic production, it would impede the economic engines responsible for the substantial discretionary incomes that equip affluent Westerners to render needed assistance to the global poor.²⁵ So if a sudden increase in beneficent giving would reduce the amount of long-term beneficent assistance, decreasing the positive, poverty-reducing results of that assistance, then the said increase is not justifiable and should instead be effected more gradually.²⁶ The long-term prospective revision satisfactorily handles such unhappy possibilities.

²⁴ A related practical matter bears note. Some people who are affluent by global standards may worry that, in providing a substantial amount of aid to the global poor, they will thereby threaten their own society's long-term economic outlook. Given the long-term perspective rider, the revised principle is more appealing than Singer's in terms of its ability to assuage this worry.

²⁵ Singer often discusses the amount that one should give as a percentage of one's *net income* (see, e.g., "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 237). *Discretionary income*, however, is what should be discussed—i.e., gross income minus outlays for taxes and necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing. An impoverished United States citizen with virtually zero discretionary income is arguably not under a substantial obligation to give to the global poor, even if so doing would not require a sacrifice of "comparable moral importance" to saving the lives of the poor. This fact points to a further issue with Singer's formulation: the ten percent of income that he calls for as a number low enough to actually bring about results is still too high for many persons, in particular, poor members of the affluent-world. The discretionary income approach that I call for avoids this pitfall. For a summary of Singer's views on the amount one should give, see Beauchamp, 7-9.

²⁶ Interestingly, Singer's views may harmonize with such a position. In a postscript to "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," he asserts that "aid should be of whatever type is most effective." If by "effective" Singer means to refer to long-term effectiveness – a plausible interpretation given his comments discussed above – then this final proposed revision would accord with the spirit of his analysis. Peter Singer, Postscript to "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Utilitarian.net*, <http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1972----.htm> (accessed December 9, 2011).

4.5 Other Revisions?

So far I have proposed four revisions to Singer's Principle of Sacrifice. In the remainder of Chapter 4, I consider objections to Singer's position from two prominent critics – Colin McGinn and Michael McKinsey – before stating the final version of what I call the *Moderate Principle of Sacrifice*.

4.5.1 McGinn's Objections

Colin McGinn raises two noteworthy objections to Singer's position. He holds that, under the Principle of Sacrifice, "I could not have become a philosopher ... and neither could anyone else (including Singer), since doing so requires spending one's energies on things other than helping suffering people in distant lands."²⁷ He further observes that "[o]ne way in which I could prevent a good deal of Third World suffering would be to disallow my child to attend college, thus condemning him to a life of underachievement."²⁸ Call these objections the *philosopher objection* and the *education objection*. McGinn's concerns are certainly understandable. To what extent do they militate against the plausibility of Singer's account?

Let us first consider the philosophy objection. In *Singer and His Critics*, Singer offers a short reply to McGinn's claim that one cannot justifiably become a philosopher since so doing would overly restrict the degree to which one could provide beneficent assistance to the suffering poor worldwide. Emphasizing the "comparable moral importance" condition, Singer argues that some people might consider being able to "inquir[e] into the some of the deepest questions about the nature of our world and the direction of our lives" to be a goal of "comparable moral importance" to assisting the

²⁷ McGinn, 156.

²⁸ McGinn, 154. Miller raises a similar objection in "Beneficence, Duty, and Distance," 369-70.

world's poor.²⁹ Singer is right to suggest that engagement with the deepest questions that human beings face may indeed be a good of comparable importance to poverty relief. It seems to me, however, that protecting the social transmission of philosophical ideas is an act, not of comparable moral importance, but of comparable “net” or moral *and* nonmoral importance to relieving global poverty, especially when it comes to certain areas of philosophy which are of questionable moral import.³⁰ The protection of such ideas is important both as an intrinsically valuable good and as a means to social and political development. (To test the latter claim, try to imagine the founding of the United States without the philosophies of Locke, Jefferson, or Madison.) Also plausible is the notion that if philosophers can substantially contribute to the fight against world poverty, then, *pace* McGinn, their professional choices may also be justifiable on the moral importance criterion—so they would be justifiable not only for the intrinsic goods they engender, but also for the extrinsic benefits they secure. But to what extent can philosophers contribute to the fight against global poverty?

By virtue of her social and academic position, the philosophy professor has significant opportunities to influence poverty-relief efforts in ways that McGinn overlooks. Ideas are, of course, the currency in which the professor trades. They are circulated among the professor's students, colleagues, and readers via public and private discussions, presentations, and publications. Although McGinn claims that Singer could not have become a philosophy professor in accordance with the Principle of Sacrifice,³¹ he nowhere considers the probable fact that, as a philosophy professor, Singer has influenced *far more* people to care about global poverty than he could have by

²⁹ Singer, “A Response,” 303.

³⁰ Examples here might range from certain areas in history of philosophy to mereology.

³¹ See McGinn, 156, and the relevant quotation above.

working directly with the impoverished.³² To be sure, Singer is an exceptional case. Every philosopher who works in ethics or political philosophy, however, can make it a point to influence the extent to which dozens of people each year (her students, readers, etc.) – many of whom are influential “thought leaders” themselves – take the plight of the global poor seriously. Even philosophers (and other academics) who do not work in poverty-related areas can, if the cause is close to their heart, leverage their social status and professional position by raising awareness outside of the classroom. They can engage in informal conversations not only with young people but also with their family members and colleagues, encouraging their various interlocutors to make substantial contributions to the global poor (and setting a good example via their own beneficent giving). Even supposing that McGinn’s objection has substantial force against Singer’s view, the revised Principle of Sacrifice can withstand this objection, allowing a good number of people to become philosophers. For the revised principle recognizes that the ways in which philosophers reflect on life’s deepest questions, and how such thought-leaders can influence others to care about and fight against world poverty, are goods of comparable importance, moral and nonmoral, to the goods that a prospective philosopher could engender by focusing entirely on assisting the poor.³³

I now turn to McGinn’s education objection, to which Singer replies as follows:

If it is true that not allowing my child to attend college will condemn him to a life of underachievement, then not only will this harm him, it may also lead to less good being achieved for others. I may hope that my child

³² Of course, asking what Singer could have done in another profession is speculation bordering on the futile. But what is clear is that since the publication of “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” Singer has brought analysis of global poverty to the fore in contemporary analytic philosophy, particularly among ethicists and political philosophers.

There is admittedly no reliable way to assess the net impact of Singer’s efforts on poverty-related giving. Clearly, however, many thousands of dollars in giving ultimately owe to his efforts to raise awareness about the plight of the global poor both popularly and within practical ethics. And even if philosophers themselves have not given thousands of dollars more due to Singer’s efforts, the students whom philosophy professors influence, including those who have read “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” very likely, as a collective, have donated a quite substantial sum to relieve the plight of the global poor.

³³ I am not arguing that philosophers do, in fact, provide sufficient aid to the global poor. I am just making the case that McGinn’s objection does not *in principle* rule out one’s becoming a philosopher in keeping with the revised Principle of Sacrifice.

will live an ethical life. But as a lifetime underachiever, she may be less effective at relieving suffering than she would have been, if she had been to college.³⁴

Singer's point is twofold. Absolutely prioritizing spending on poverty relief over spending on the education of one's child can both harm the child and render the child less able to assist those who are suffering. In the light of Singer's utilitarianism, we can take him to mean that if not getting a solid education would render a child less able to assist suffering others, then the decision of parents not to pay for that solid education could jeopardize the child's ability to lead an ethical life. Singer also holds that the sacrifice of not paying for one's child to attend college and instead using that money to assist the global poor "is not one that *clearly* falls within my category of not being of comparable moral importance to the prevention of suffering and death."³⁵ Singer's reply to McGinn also references his previous reply to Lori Gruen's similar argument in "Must Utilitarians be Impartial?"³⁶ Gruen defends the view that "Singer's version of utilitarianism, unlike other versions of consequentialism, cannot coherently accommodate partial considerations."³⁷ She discusses a case in which a parent can either provide her children with certain educational opportunities or use that money to assist sick children who otherwise could not access needed medical services.³⁸

Singer's response to Gruen consists of two key moves. First, he says that parents may act ethically – even though partially – by ensuring that their children receive "the minimum amount of education needed to equip them for a decent life in the society in which we live."³⁹ Then he adds that when parents pay a good deal of money to send their children to elite private schools rather than solid public schools, that decision "goes

³⁴ Singer, "A Response," 302.

³⁵ Singer, "A Response," 302. Emphasis original.

³⁶ Lori Gruen, "Must Utilitarians Be Impartial," in *Singer and His Critics*, ed. Dale Jamieson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

³⁷ Gruen, 129.

³⁸ See Gruen, 140.

³⁹ Singer, "A Response," 300.

beyond the degree of partiality that we need or should wish to encourage in parents.”⁴⁰
Such parents, says Singer, do not adequately balance “their love towards their own children with a degree of concern for the children of others.”⁴¹

Singer is right to suggest that parents have a moral obligation to provide their children with the minimum amount of education needed to live a decent, ethical life in their society. He is also right that for them *qua* parents, this obligation is of comparable moral importance to their obligation to provide beneficent assistance to the distant needy. Yet Singer overlooks the fact that certain goods that owe to elite educations may in some cases be comparably important to certain goods that issue from poverty reduction. Indubitably, societies in which some people receive elite educations enjoy important goods as a direct result. Here I do not have in mind Millarian goods like that of satiating the stylistic preferences of one’s daughter such that she can fit in better with the crowd and perhaps develop better as a person. Rather, I have in mind growth in the arts and in industry and profound development along social, cultural, and political lines. To all of these endeavors, top-notch educations are indispensable. Such important social goods as the *pietà* and Oxford’s campus would be far rarer (or not exist) had their creators – the best architects, sculptors, and painters – lacked access to excellent educations. So the good of social welfare may in some cases, depending on context, justify financing elite educations rather than assisting the global poor.⁴²

⁴⁰ Singer, “A Response,” 303.

⁴¹ Singer, “A Response,” 300.

⁴² It also bears note that the well-educated child will often be better equipped than the decently educated child to make global poverty an important issue for people with substantial resources to fight global poverty. Well-educated children can, of course, choose to start and run poverty relief centers, a pursuit in which their critical thinking, writing, and leadership skills will often equip them to succeed. Moreover, those who do not work directly on poverty-related concerns can still donate more money to global poverty relief each year if, as is likely, they will earn substantially more money (a point overlooked by McGinn and Singer) due to their elite education. If, for example, an elite education allows one to earn \$10,000 more per year than one can earn with a standard education, and one has a 30-year career, then one can expect to give \$300,000 more to poverty by having an elite education (or, say, \$200,000 after student loans are paid off). Graduates of elite schools are also more likely than other graduates to run in distinctive social circles, such that the graduate of a distinctive school who cares deeply about alleviating global poverty can more easily raise awareness among social elites who have a good deal of financial and political. A graduate who becomes a business

To be sure, as I noted earlier parents *should* consider how the pressing needs of the global poor ought to affect their willingness to spend money on their children's educations. All I am arguing here is that, contra Singer's more restrictive view, it *can* be justifiable to finance elite educations if such educations produce important social goods. My overall analysis does not mean that education can then be prioritized absolutely over any significant amount of beneficent giving. But it does mean that McGinn's education objection is both not as forceful as he suggests and less forceful than even Singer lets on.

Before concluding my reply to McGinn's objection, I hasten to add the following qualification regarding one's potential long-term impact on poverty. Both parents and prospective philosophers who care about alleviating global poverty will at times worry that their children or they themselves, respectively, will not do as much to alleviate poverty in the future as they presently expect. In this vein, consider the idea of investing in the securities markets in the hope of increasing one's long-term financial ability to assist the global poor via donations. On account of prudent investment and patient refusal to use the invested money, one can easily give far more to the global poor years hence than one can today.⁴³ This fact raises an important question. Assuming that the value of one's investment increases as expected, will one *actually* spend the set-aside money on poverty relief rather than on sundry other things? For those who worry they will not do so, investing over a shorter time horizon or simply spending the money on

consultant can, for instance, deploy his distinctive skills to convince a CEO or CFO to dedicate some of her resources to poverty relief either personally (encouraging the leader to give out of her very high salary) or at the company level (encouraging the leader to dedicate some of her firm's resources to help the global poor, which may even yield public relations benefits). Such an outcome *can* lead (in a sufficiently moral person) to contributions significantly greater than the amount her parents would have saved by sending her to a less expensive school.

⁴³ For example, 100 dollars invested with an eight percent rate of return (which approximates or even understates the per annum return of the Dow Jones Industrial Average in recent decades) would amount to \$685 twenty-five years hence.

poverty relief today may indeed be more morally justifiable.⁴⁴ For others, investing the unspent money in the expectation of donating it years hence may be the best long-term plan.⁴⁵

Now, both the parent who is confident in her child's enduring interest in assisting the global poor, and the prospective philosopher who is confident that she will take up the cause of global poverty in her work, may well be morally justified in following a long-term plan of *investing in themselves* on account of the quite possibly equally high expected return of that investment in anti-poverty terms. That is, they – at least certain parents and prospective philosophers, in certain life situations – may be justified in using money today to finance their educations or professional development if they are confident that the said items will yield substantial positive results for the global poor. This fact further justifies the decisions of parents and prospective philosophers, respectively, to provide strong educations and pursue their professional development. Neither the important moral and nonmoral goods associated with those educations and plans, nor their long-term anti-poverty value, should be overlooked.

4.5.2 McKinsey's Objection

Having considered McGinn's objections, I now wish to consider Michael McKinsey's objection to premise (2) of Singer's Principle of Sacrifice. In "Obligations to the Starving," McKinsey argues that (2) cannot be true. "[S]uppose," he writes, "that there is a starving person whom I am in a position to help, and that I can save this

⁴⁴ Or it may at least be as morally good to spend *some* of one's poverty-relief money upon receiving it rather than investing it all in securities.

⁴⁵ Interestingly, one may be able to sign a legal document requiring one both to keep one's money in an investment account that will earn compound interest over the years, and to pull out said money at a favorable time only for donation to the severely needy. One can also include an exit clause allowing one to use said money for oneself if and only one becomes severely needy. Call this a self-binding, pro-poverty "Ulysses contract."

person without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance."⁴⁶ By (2), then,

I am obligated to help this person. But it is obvious that for any such person, there are unfortunately many thousands of other starving persons each of whom I can *also* help without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance. Thus by [2] ... I must be obliged to save each of these persons. But this is absurd, for I *cannot* save *all* of those starving persons each of whom I am in a position to save without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.⁴⁷

McKinsey goes on to conclude that (2) must be false, since "I cannot be obligated to save all those starving persons whom I can save without comparable sacrifice."⁴⁸ Does McKinsey's objection justify a reformulation of (2) in Singer's Principle of Sacrifice?

I argue the negative. McKinsey misses the point of Singer's initial clause in (2). By his phrase "*if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening,*" Singer is implying that our moral obligation to prevent something bad is conditional upon our *ability* to prevent it. So he is expressly disallowing any obligation on the part of any member of the global rich to save all presently poor, dying persons, if the member is unable to do so. The member may indeed be obligated to save more than a single starving person; however, Singer's "comparable moral importance" criterion functions as a cut-off, a crucial entailment of which is to foreclose the possibility that we are obligated to save *all* the persons whom we *can* save. Importantly, McKinsey's claim that Singer's principle requires us to save all starving persons pivots on his contention that it would be wrong for me to "grant the right to my help to one of these persons and yet deny this right to any of the others."⁴⁹

That this claim (and that contention) is false can be proven systematically. The proper *unit of analysis* here is the state of affairs of the whole set of starving strangers—

⁴⁶ Michael McKinsey, "Obligations to the Starving," *Nous* 15, No. 3 (Sep. 1981): 311. I have labeled McKinsey's premise "(2)" because it corresponds to Singer's premise (2).

⁴⁷ McKinsey, 311. Emphasis original.

⁴⁸ McKinsey, 311.

⁴⁹ McKinsey, 311.

call this “set s .” On Singer’s principle, a person p is obligated to turn s into $s-n$ where “ n ” is the number of abjectly poor persons whom p can – i.e., is *able to* – assist without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.⁵⁰ McKinsey, however, worries that one is obligated to help, not just n , but every single member of s , because one has no right to decide whom to assist and whom not to assist among those seriously in need of assistance.

My counterclaim is that one has precisely such a right, which may, for example, arise under one’s status as donor (one having the allocative right so long as s /he ensures that the aid is seriously life-improving) or simply due to conditions on the ground (a dearth of assistance entailing that some sort of allocation decision must be made, and can be made rightfully). Were there no such right, far more people than necessary would starve to death or suffer severely (or survive and not suffer, but due to illegitimate, rights-violating actions); thus, there should be a presumption in favor of the existence of such a right, however grounded. This right allows n legitimately to be less than s for p , such that, on Singer’s view, p need not be obligated to save s . Thus, McKinsey’s claim is incorrect that “by [2] ... I must be obliged to save each of these persons[,]” and we need not reformulate (2) on the basis of his objection.

Singer’s schema is stated at a high enough level of abstraction that it does not require the impossible method of implementation about which McKinsey worries. In fact, considering the schema in the light of McKinsey’s concern, one could decide practically that the best way to implement it is precisely to hold that the most efficacious way to make the bad situation referenced better, in keeping with one’s abilities, is to (1) consider the entire set s as the unit under consideration (not one member of s pitted against

⁵⁰ Since McKinsey is objecting to Singer’s account in its original formulation, in this section I use the terms “abject poverty” rather than “severe need” and “comparable moral importance” rather than “comparable moral or nonmoral importance.”

another), and (2) choose to assist some subset n of s , realizing that, whichever subset one chooses, one will mitigate the overall situation of s .⁵¹ Not to choose any subset n because all members of s need help would be to ensure a worse outcome and *a fortiori* depart from Singer's schema.

4.5.3 A Merit Revision?

Ingrid Robeyns contends that it is “outrageous to suggest that the world's most destitute people are personally responsible for the situation they are in.”⁵² It is true that the world's most destitute are not *entirely* personally responsible for their impoverished states. But any fair-minded account of obligations to provide beneficent assistance to the poor must treat the poor as real people for whom personal and moral agency are both important and, at times, may be partly responsible for their impoverished state, Robeyns's claim notwithstanding. Does this evident agential fact justify the inclusion of a *merit clause* in the revised Principle of Sacrifice?

Let's begin our investigation with an important question: Do all of the world's poor – i.e., not only today's abjectly poor but also today's moderately poor – deserve obligatory beneficent assistance? My answer, put plainly, is “of course not.” There are, after all, many cases where people act in highly immoral or other objectionable ways that bring about their severe, poverty-related need. Consider an economically well-off group that wages an unjust war with the goal of acquiring further economic resources, and, upon being defeated, suffers under languorous moderate poverty. Doesn't the way in which this group deployed its personal and moral agency preclude certain of its belligerent members from being legitimate recipients of *obligatory* beneficent assistance? True, such persons may be legitimate targets of supererogatory assistance (provided

⁵¹ N will no doubt be less than s in our world, though the two values could conceivably equalize in principle.

⁵² Ingrid Robeyns, “The Capability Approach,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (August 14, 2011), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach/> (accessed February 20, 2012).

they are willing to abstain from further acts of offensive war, etc.). But the severe need in this case is not, I suggest, obligation-generating.

How much weight should we accord in practice, then, to the fact that the merit of the poor in terms of their moral character and efforts to escape poverty has some bearing, sometimes, on whether they deserve to receive beneficent assistance? In a word: Not much at all. I shall defend this position, first, by elaborating on the particular kind of poverty which is the object of my and Singer's principles, and, second, by offering a few observations about the merit of the global rich that bear on the consideration of whether to include a merit clause in the revised Principle of Sacrifice. The motivation for my analysis is to address the popularly held view that those who provide beneficent assistance to the global poor ought to make the extent of their assistance contingent upon the apparent agential merit of the recipients (i.e., not just on the merit of the poor *qua* human beings with moral human rights, etc.).

I begin by indicating what I understand by "absolute poverty." Here I concur with Robert McNamara, former president of the World Bank, that absolute poverty is "a condition of life so characterised by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality and low life expectancy as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency."⁵³ Thus, an absolutely (or "abjectly") impoverished person is one who, for instance, is starving or has no long-term shelter whatsoever.⁵⁴ McNamara's notion of "human decency" figures prominently in my conception of obligations to provide beneficent assistance. In Singer's *Practical Ethics*, a text published after "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Singer emphasizes that his

⁵³ World Bank, *World Development Report 1978* (Washington D.C., 1978), iii. Singer cites this source in *Practical Ethics*, 219.

⁵⁴ By contrast, a moderately impoverished person may, for example, be hungry, but not severely, or may live in a shanty, but still be getting by. A person who is not at least periodically confronted by an imminent existential threat (e.g., disease, famine) or by severe suffering, is most likely not absolutely impoverished, but may indeed be moderately impoverished.

argument from beneficence focuses on obligations to alleviate absolute poverty.⁵⁵ Since my account includes an even higher threshold for impoverishment than Singer's does (e.g., it emphasizes *serious* suffering and death that are *very* bad), it thereby unquestionably addresses the global poor who are in absolute poverty such that their lifestyles are, in McNamara's words, "beneath any reasonable definition of human decency."

Now, I see no reason why merit-based considerations can undermine need-centered obligations the object of which is to meet other human beings' most rudimentary existential needs. Thus it is not clear to me why the proposed, revised Principle of Sacrifice should include a merit revision that could do just that.⁵⁶ Were the warmongers in the example above abjectly impoverished after being defeated (rather than just moderately impoverished as described), I submit that the global rich would be under a non-trivial obligation to aid them so as to prevent them from starving or dying from devastating, avoidable disease, if the said aid could not be sent to others in absolute poverty for less objectionable reasons. Nonetheless a revision that lets the existence of an obligation of the global rich to assist the abjectly poor totter upon their degree of moral or personal merit could easily counsel against such assistance. It could easily leave these immoral but *still human* actors to fend for themselves in a way that may very well be beneath their basic dignity as human beings in today's world. I readily admit that merit has some conceivable role to play in *practical* allocative decisions concerning need-based assistance. Nevertheless, the revised Principle of Sacrifice is intended primarily to

⁵⁵See Singer, *Practical Ethics*, esp. 230-231.

⁵⁶ To be clear, I can see why the practical discharge of obligations to assist the world's neediest people might depend on their merit; however, the aim of the proper practical allocation of need-based aid even here would, it seems, depend entirely on (a) the severity of the need and (b) the extent to which one can help others. If two people A and B are abjectly poor but there is only enough aid to save one person, then the proper allocative decision might depend on their relative degrees of personal and moral merit, along with factors such as whether they have children who crucially depend on their support. There would, however, remain a general obligation to assist in either case, and unmeritorious action on their part would not undermine the strength of the obligation on the part of the rich to assist them or others in similarly lamentable circumstances.

establish the *existence* of such an obligation, as is Singer's original account in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." Merit may have a role to play in setting practical guidelines concerning the implementation of such an obligation, but it has no major role to play in determining whether the fabulously rich by global standards have an obligation to assist the abjectly poor by global standards.

Even when a criterion of merit is used to determine how aid should be distributed to those in abject poverty, the emphasis should still be on *meeting need*. To begin with, there are sizeable epistemic limits to the capacity of distributors to distinguish meritorious recipients from unmeritorious recipients. It is very difficult to arrive at a reliable agential judgment, for example, as to who has meritoriously tried to pull herself up from her bootstraps while starving or near death, and who has not. Again, in such grave cases, it remains unclear why distribution should be merit-based at all rather than entirely need-based.⁵⁷ For given the inherent practical thorniness and epistemic unreliability of such considerations, one can see how merit-based allocation could quickly become paralyzing to aid distributors, an outcome not at all desired. On balance, even if merit has some role to play in practical allocation decisions concerning aid to the abjectly impoverished, that role will be a modest one at most and will not in any significant way determine whether the global rich have an obligation to aid the global poor.

There is more to the story, however. For *even if* merit-based considerations should indeed play more than just a practical role in determining the nature of our obligations to assist the global poor, a claim I have already argued against, that fact itself would *still* provide no good reason for those assisting the severely needy to refrain from

⁵⁷ The following fact further militates against merit-based aid distribution in cases of genuine abject poverty. Of two recipients who receive life-saving aid, the purportedly less personally or morally meritorious one will at times make more of her life than the other one will after receiving the much-needed assistance.

substantially assisting the contemporary global poor. In fact, the obligation of the global rich to assist the abjectly poor would arguably be just as strong on a Principle of Sacrifice with a merit clause as it would on a Principle of Sacrifice without one—and such a clause would then be uninformative at best. This claim can be justified as follows. The role of members of the affluent West in engendering and sustaining absolute poverty around the world suggests that their demerit, which if anything strengthens their beneficent obligations, more than offsets any demerit on the part of abjectly impoverished persons around the world, which demerit would if anything weaken the said obligations. In the rest of this section, I wish to argue that even a merit-based criterion for aiding the abjectly poor (a criterion which, to repeat, I reject) would leave intact a quite robust obligation of the contemporary global rich to provide beneficent assistance to the contemporary global poor.

In *World Poverty and Human Rights*, Thomas Pogge observes that “[t]he social starting positions of the worse-off and the better-off [in today’s world] have emerged from a single historical process that was pervaded by massive, grievous wrongs.”⁵⁸ Such widespread wrongs – many of which were committed by currently affluent societies – include (*inter alia*) the brutal colonization and slavery witnessed in recent centuries.

Pogge observes:

The present circumstances of the global poor are significantly shaped by a dramatic period of conquest and colonization, with severe oppression, even genocide, through which the native institutions and cultures of four continents were destroyed or severely traumatized.⁵⁹

To be sure, the wealthy West has brought a number of poverty-reducing technologies and a great total amount of aid to the global poor (in dollar terms, though not as a percentage of GNP)—and this is excellent, especially when done for laudable

⁵⁸ Pogge, 209.

⁵⁹ Pogge, 209. Although Pogge includes this passage in the context of an argument against allowing radical inequality, he nevertheless accepts the argument of the next few pages in its essentials.

moral reasons rather than just reasons of political expediency. Pogge is right, however, that the West is collectively responsible for a striking amount of poverty around the globe today. Buttressing this line of argument is Miller's emphasis in *Globalizing Justice*. After completing his treatment of Singer's account of beneficent obligations, Miller emphasizes that current developed-country practices – e.g., exploitation in the transnational economy and inequity in international trade arrangements – underwrite a significant obligation on the part of the global rich to assist the global poor.⁶⁰ In general, the present and past objectionable actions of the West would seem to offset or at least raise serious doubts about any obligation-weakening demerit on the part of the moderately poor,⁶¹ leaving securely grounded a robust affluent-world obligation to provide beneficent assistance.⁶²

An objector to this argument from historical injustices might hold that all such obligations are obligations of justice rather than beneficence. But such a claim is not convincing. Citizens of some affluent country *p*, where *p* had nothing to do with the poverty-producing enslavement and colonization of some poor country *q*, can still have obligations of beneficence to assist abjectly poor members of *q*. Members of *p* can be under beneficent obligation to help *q* out of their excess (e.g., their discretionary incomes) precisely because *q* is impoverished through minimal fault of its own. (As *p* may realize,

⁶⁰ There seem to be obligations here both to fix present unjust practices and to offer aid-based assistance to today's poor inasmuch as their state owes to past unjust practices by the aiding party or its sociocultural progenitors. Such issues take up much of Miller's discussion in *Globalizing Justice* after his treatment of beneficent obligations and Singer's Principle of Sacrifice. This discussion, however, is not very germane to the present analysis.

⁶¹ There is also the matter of what I call *resource luck*. In *Practical Ethics*, Singer implies that a country that is oil-rich merely because it was lucky enough to find underground oil within its borders may have an obligation to assist an oil-poor country that, having had no such luck, remains in poverty. (See Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 235. Singer uses real-life examples: oil-rich Bahrain and oil-poor Chad.) It is debatable whether certain presently affluent states owe assistance to certain presently impoverished states on account of what I call a *luck surplus* on the part of the former or a *luck deficit* on the part of the latter.

⁶² An impoverished community whose poverty results mostly from colonization may certainly deserve to receive beneficent assistance—even if the community is complacent in its fight against poverty. If, for example, the said complacency arises from the community's feeling disempowered due to its colonial heritage, then the community is not at all unmeritorious of beneficent assistance. Furthermore, since affluent societies that are not responsible for the colonization have an obligation to assist the formerly colonized community, the said obligation is, in part, properly one of beneficence, i.e., it does not issue from past injustice alone.

the situation could just as well have happened to it or *q*'s former oppressors.) The principle underlying this situation also clearly applies to countries that have partaken in the colonization of *q* or the enslavement of *q*'s people. Even if some country *r* now has a duty of justice on account of engaging in such unjust activities, its present members may also have a private or public obligation to help members of *q* even if they personally (and their families and subcommunities) had nothing to do with the oppression of the latter. So not all such obligations to assist are obligations of justice. This reality is even more clear given the fact that members of *r* may plausibly have obligations of beneficence to help members of some other country *s* for whose past oppression *r* is not responsible at all. If *s* is poor and *r* can help *s* without seriously jeopardizing *r*'s own basic welfare, then *r*'s ability to see that members of *s* are seriously suffering and dying and to assist them is enough, other things being equal, to generate a robust obligation of beneficence.

Other objectors might hold that the historical injustices aptly pointed out by Pogge and Miller do not constitute sufficient generative grounds for obligations of beneficence. Some might say that those atrocities were perpetrated, not by oneself, nor by one's parents, nor even by one's grandparents, but by one's forebears centuries prior, or even, in fact, by people utterly unrelated to oneself. Questions immediately arise: Whence *my* responsibility? Why must *I* repair the global damages they engendered?

My reply is as follows. Although *by domestic standards* the degree of one's actual affluence may sometimes (though surely not always) correspond to the degree to which one merits affluence, the same is rarely true cross-culturally, especially when it comes to developing countries vis-à-vis developed countries. As I will argue, this fact seems sufficient to ground an obligation of beneficence for the global rich to aid the global

poor.⁶³ Consider two people. Candace is raised in an affluent society and cultivates a morally upright character and industrious spirit, each of which enables her to make more money than Cindy, a social peer of Candace's, who, because of choices she has freely and willingly made, lacks a morally upright character and has a less industrious spirit.⁶⁴ In such a (purposely simplified) case, it seems that merit meaningfully tracks wealth, such that most people will find it morally acceptable for Candace to be more affluent than Cindy. If Cindy becomes poor due primarily to laziness and bad character, each of which she (let us assume) could readily control, her poverty is not intuitively objectionable, particularly if not severe.

But there is a salient disanalogy between this case and the following case. For the next case, let us run the same analysis as before, but this time in respect of a possible *global* correspondence between wealth and merit. Does the merit-wealth relation sketched above obtain also between (a) a hard worker of upright character in a developing country, and (b) a lazy person with a seedy character in a developed country? In other words, will (a) typically find herself in more auspicious financial circumstances than (b)? Certainly not. The disanalogy between this case and the previous case becomes clear when one realizes that many of the hardest working members of poor societies cannot earn anything near what even lazy citizens of developed countries can earn, say, by working a minimally demanding part-time job. Hence, the affluence-merit connection is very often insignificant, even vanishingly small, in developed versus developing country comparisons.

And yet – an objector might press further – the disjuncture between how closely merit tracks wealth in poor versus rich countries may *itself* owe to merit. First, the

⁶³ Assessing this line of argument requires considering the global position of today's affluent, along with any of their past immoral practices which are relevant to the amounts, kinds, and distributions of poverty that we see in the world today.

⁶⁴ This argument is, to be sure, compatible with a wide range of conceptions of metaphysical freedom.

objection might go, past generations of developed countries worked hard such that their present inhabitants merit most of their affluence. Second, past generations of developing countries have not worked hard such that their present inhabitants merit much affluence. Even if we grant these highly dubious claims about the extent to which the groups have worked diligently, such an argument is still implausible on account of the asserted “such that” (entailment) relationships. Here, the past immoral practices pointed out by Pogge and Miller are pivotal. For *even if* we were to grant certain controversial assumptions about the relative merit of past developed- and developing-world generations on account of their differing work habits, it is clear that the morally objectionable practices including but not limited to enslavement, unjust war, and colonization that stain the collective history of developed countries would rebut the claim that merit *has* tracked wealth very closely in recent history.⁶⁵ The aforementioned egregious practices are responsible for many of the dramatic differences in material well-being between developed countries and developing countries today, as much land and many riches have been gained by the sweat and blood of the enslaved, the attacked, and the colonized.

Indeed, even if the impoverished inhabitants of developing countries were significantly lazier or less moral historically than their developed country counterparts, an implausible claim to be sure, and even if the said laziness or inferior moral character were responsible for the inhabitants’ impecuniousness, a claim less plausible still, the following fact bears emphasis. Besides a minority of people who slip through the cracks, the vast majority of people in developed countries enjoy access to a social safety net that is robust by world standards but virtually non-existent in most of the abjectly poor

⁶⁵ An argument treating the merit-wealth connection throughout history proper would be fascinating; however, my analysis need only consider recent history, since it presumably is mostly responsible for the present levels, kinds, and distributions of global poverty.

world.⁶⁶ The developing world's abjectly poor "are exceedingly vulnerable to even minor changes in natural and social conditions as well as to many forms of exploitation and abuse," Pogge tells us, causing "one-third of all human deaths – 50,000 each day, including 29,000 children under age five."⁶⁷ Given the absence of such a safety net, the following point by Cullity seems particularly on target:

The life of one of the world's poorest people could be transformed by an amount of money that would mean very little to me, and I could easily give that money to an aid agency to help it to have that effect. Even if I have nothing to do with creating the poverty that afflicts much of the world's population, there remains a serious moral question what I am prepared to do in response to it. And it is hard to see how doing nothing could be right.⁶⁸

The following hypothetical reinforces Cullity's very plausible point. Imagine a case in which, through luck and hard work, a society comes to possess a large number of items that, taken together, can greatly improve the treatment of cancer (the particular nature of the items is unimportant for our purposes). The present holders of the items can donate them to hospitals and research laboratories. Or they can use them in ways that would slightly improve their own welfare but would not improve the welfare of cancer patients. Suppose further that the holders could easily ensure that the items are provided to cancer patients whose lives they would dramatically improve. If the present holders were to withhold the items from the cancer victims in order to improve their own welfare, would this act be morally censurable?

Surely the answer must be "yes." Given the facts that (1) cancer causes grievous suffering and death and (2) the items would enable great improvements in the welfare of cancer patients, such withholding certainly seems morally censurable. But now a further question demands consideration: Is there a significant moral difference between (a) the

⁶⁶ This safety net is both public (e.g., via public aid) and private (e.g., via greater access to one's family, friends, or community members who are affluent enough to offer assistance).

⁶⁷ Pogge, 2. See Pogge, 265 for details about his data, which come from the World Bank.

⁶⁸ Cullity, 10.

situation that the society in this hypothetical faces and (b) the situation that we face as middle- and upper-class Americans who possess numerous poverty-reducing items which we call dollars? A negative answer to this question not only seems appropriate but also seems strongly to suggest that it is morally censurable for members of the global rich to do nothing about global poverty. For given the facts that (1) global poverty causes grievous suffering and death and (2) our innumerable, unneeded dollars would enable great improvements in the welfare of the global poor, the conclusion from the cancer hypothetical also seems to apply to us and our society.

In this section, I have offered three main reasons for rejecting the notion that the Principle of Sacrifice should be further revised so as to account for the merit of the global poor. First, since my Principle of Sacrifice, like Singer's version, focuses on the absolutely poor of our world rather than the moderately poor, it should emphasize need rather than merit. Second, even when it comes to practical implementation, a partly merit-based scheme of aid distribution to the abjectly poor seems less justifiable than a purely need-based scheme. Third, both the sociohistorical influence that the affluent West has had in engendering and sustaining global poverty and the ghastly character of abject poverty suggest that, were a merit-based scheme of distribution justifiable, such a scheme would still support a strong obligation of the global rich to assist the global poor. At most, considerations of merit should affect how one prioritizes one's assistance to the severely needy. And even then such considerations would have a negligible impact on the strength of our obligation to assist the world's abjectly poor.

4.6 A Moderate Principle of Sacrifice

Thus, neither merit-based arguments nor McGinn's and McKinsey's objections justify further revisions to Singer's essential argument. The "long-term perspective"

revision along with the three other revisions – nonmoral value, suffering, and need – yield the following Moderate Principle of Sacrifice:

(1) Serious suffering and death from severe need (due to lack of food, shelter, and medical care, for example) are very bad.

(2) If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance or overridingly high nonmoral value, we ought, morally, to do it.

(3) Such prevention is in our power, since we can give to effective aid organizations with a view to maximally benefiting the poor over the long-term.

Conclusion: We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those suffering or dying from, e.g., lack of food, shelter, and medical care, with a view to maximizing the long-term expected benefits to the poor, to the point at which further giving would cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents.

Before concluding this paper, I want to address an important general objection to the revisionary project of this chapter. One might suppose that Singer's Principle of Sacrifice is preferable to the proposed Moderate Principle of Sacrifice because the former is simpler and so perhaps more elegant. It is true, of course, that the Moderate Principle of Sacrifice includes more complex premises and a longer conclusion than does the less moderate alternative. But the proposed formulation is not significantly less elegant than Singer's proposal, and, even if it were, the problem with such an objection-from-elegance is that it requires a plausible account of why elegance should (at least in this case) be decisively criterial for theory selection. There is no good reason, however, to assume that more complicated theories are not preferable to simpler ones if, as is often the case, less elegant (or less simplistic) theories describe the realities of complex phenomena better

than more elegant theories do. Since the nature of beneficent obligations of the global rich to assist the global poor is surely no simple matter, any principle that adequately describes the existence and character of such obligations may need to be more complicated than Singer lets on. Although the Moderate Principle of Sacrifice may be less elegant than Singer's principle, I have argued that its additional content renders it significantly more plausible.⁶⁹ And, as noted in the beginning of this chapter, all that I am after is a more plausible Principle of Sacrifice.

⁶⁹ If, as David Schmitz suggests, theories are functionally analogous to maps, then a sufficiently informative map of our beneficent obligations to assist the global poor may need to be more complicated than Singer's Principle of Sacrifice suggests. See Schmitz, 21-28.

5. Conclusion

Peter Unger offers the following pointed remark in *Living High and Letting Die*:

Here's a form of behavior that, though we're now heavily engaged in it, might well be thought terrible by our descendants and, for that reason, might be morally surpassed by them: letting distant innocents needlessly die.¹

My central aim in this paper has been to provide a plausible account of our beneficent obligations to the global poor. I have argued not merely for a certain conclusion to be embraced in theory, however, but for an obligation to be accepted in practice as well. Are we, the members of the affluent world, really justified in letting Unger's "innocents" suffer and die on our watch?

I have argued that the Principle of Sacrifice in Singer's seminal essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" is on target but in need of revision. Miller's Principle of Sympathy does not provide plausible resources for such a revision, however, due to its unjustified reliance on ordinary moral thinking and various difficulties surrounding its "daughter's aesthetic sense" example and "closeness-to-heart" criterion. Singer's Principle of Sacrifice is on more secure ground, especially with the four revisions proposed. The Moderate Principle of Sacrifice takes due account of nonmoral value, of the suffering of benefactor as well as beneficiary, of serious need rather than just poverty, and of the importance of taking a long-term approach to global poverty relief. It also can withstand objections from McGinn and McKinsey and need not be revised to better account for the role of agential merit in determining the existence and nature of our obligations beneficently to assist the global poor. The Moderate Principle of Sacrifice, then, appears complete and defensible as is, and certainly more plausible than Singer's pathbreaking original principle in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality."

¹ Unger, 19-20.

I shall end this thesis with an observation about beneficent giving in relation to the good life. The best life is one in which the person living it continually seeks to maximize the positive-sum effects of her life (and thus her agency) according to her own evolving moral vision. Thus it is said that in giving, one receives, and in doing what is right, one often finds peace. Giving beneficently to the global poor, who are surely among the most needy humans alive, harmonizes well with such a vision. The obligation of the global affluent to provide beneficent assistance to the global poor is more robust than Miller suggests, but not as severe as Singer lets on. Moreover, a sensible commitment to beneficent giving is best seen as part of that eminent and distinctively human quest to align one's life with one's ideals, among which should be the ideal of serving others. In this quest we will often fall short, but the quest nevertheless rightly commands our attention and deserves our continued efforts. Our giving should focus on meeting serious needs, but it should also not be divorced from our own desire to live the best life possible.

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