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# “Murphy’s Collective Principle of Beneficence”

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## Abstract

If beneficence requires anything of us, it requires us to perform at least some of those acts that do huge amounts of good for other people when the cost to us is very small. However, beneficence isn’t just concerned with these very valuable acts. In this paper, I will suggest that beneficence requires an agent to perform some more ‘everyday’ acts of beneficence. These acts do a small amount of good for others at a small cost to the agent. Liam Murphy’s collective principle of beneficence requires an agent to maximise the good under partial-compliance up to the level of sacrifice she would have to incur under full-compliance. Given the current state of the world, the collective principle of beneficence won’t require us to perform any acts that do a small amount of good for others at a small cost to the agent. I will argue that Murphy’s collective principle of beneficence may be inadequate because it fails to require any of these ‘everyday’ acts of beneficence.

## 1.

Beneficence might require acts of three different types: very valuable acts, moderately valuable acts and slightly valuable acts. We can show this taxonomy in the following table:

**Table 1: Taxonomy of Acts**

	Very Valuable Acts	Moderately Valuable Acts		Slightly Valuable Acts		
Cost to agent	Low	Medium	Low	Large	Medium	Low
Benefits to others	Large	Large	Medium	Large	Medium	Low

I will assume that very valuable acts are better than moderately valuable acts and moderately valuable acts are better than slightly valuable acts. In this paper, I will assume that the performance of the acts listed above does not involve harming, lying to anyone or doing anything else that might be morally prohibited.

Beneficence may require us to perform acts that are very valuable. Very valuable acts are acts that produce a large amount of good for others at very little cost to an agent. There is a lot of intuitive support behind thinking that we could be required to perform at least some very valuable acts. If I can save a child drowning in a pond at the expense of a dry cleaning bill, I ought to do so.

Beneficence may also require us to perform moderately valuable acts. Moderately valuable acts are those acts where the benefit to others produced by the act clearly outweighs the cost to us, but not to the extent that the good outweighs the cost in acts that are very valuable. There might be some intuitive support for a requirement to perform moderately valuable acts. If I can save the child in the pond at the expense of a broken arm, I may be required to do so. Furthermore, if I can save the child from a broken arm by incurring a dry cleaning bill, then I may be required to do so.

Finally, beneficence may require us to perform slightly valuable acts. Slightly valuable acts are those acts where the benefit to others only just outweighs the cost to the agent of performing the act. These acts are where the benefit to others and the cost to us are both either high, moderate or low.

There is less intuitive support for the idea that slightly valuable acts where the cost is either moderate or high could be required. Some people think I may be required to sacrifice a kidney or my retirement fund to save a child's life. This is controversial. Some people may think that I could be required to break my arm to stop the child's arm being broken. This may also be controversial. In cases where the cost to the agent and benefit to others is either high or moderate, it might be controversial to suppose that the act is required.

There is more intuitive support for requiring acts where the cost to the agent is low and the benefit to others is low. In fact, I think that there is a lot of intuitive support for thinking that some such acts are required. The sorts of acts I have in mind are acts like helping the mother carry her pushchair onto the train, giving up one's seat for the elderly person on the bus or helping the overworked secretary organise the office party. In cases such as these, it seems to me that the cost to the agent of helping is low and the benefit to those being helped is also low, nevertheless, such acts may be required. From now on I will use the term slightly valuable act to refer to those acts where the benefit to others outweighs the cost to the agent, but the cost and benefit are both low.

Of course, it is debatable whether our ordinary morality requires us to perform this type of slightly valuable act whenever we have the opportunity to. It might be that there is a good deal of latitude in which slightly valuable acts we are required to perform according to ordinary morality. That is, although we are required to perform some slightly valuable acts, a person can decide for herself when, whom and how to help. However, if someone never or hardly ever performs these slightly valuable acts she would be guilty of a failure of beneficence. Thus, even if our ordinary morality cannot condemn someone for her failure to perform a slightly valuable act on any particular occasion, it can condemn her if her pattern of behaviour involves a failure to help on many occasions.

Furthermore, there is an assumption that is in the background when we claim that ordinary morality requires these slightly valuable acts. Ordinary morality requires us to perform these slightly valuable acts *despite the suffering that currently exists in the world that can be alleviated by many of the well off*. We should be careful not to misunderstand this claim. I am not suggesting that it is intuitive to think that we are required to perform slightly valuable acts when there is something more valuable that the person could be doing instead. The claim is *not* that ordinary morality requires us to perform these slightly valuable acts even if doing so prevents us from helping those in the developing world. The point is that ordinary morality doesn't excuse you from performing these everyday acts of beneficence even if you have done many very valuable acts as well.

There may be occasions when you are excused from performing slightly valuable acts because you have performed lots of very valuable acts. Ordinary morality may judge the doctor leniently if, mentally and physically exhausted after a long shift, she refused to help the mother get her pushchair onto the train. However, it doesn't seem as though our colleague in the department is excused from helping the secretary with the office party just because she donates twenty percent of her income to Oxfam. We might think that,

given that there is no opportunity to help Oxfam at this precise moment, she ought to help with the office party.

It may be that although we have some latitude in which slightly valuable acts to perform, there are some slightly valuable acts that are not optional according to ordinary morality. It may be that I ought to help the mother carry her pushchair onto the train if it costs me little to help. In this case, I have no latitude to ignore her and help someone else at a later date. I think this might be correct, but for the purposes of this paper I need only the weaker claim that we have to perform some slightly valuable acts and we have some freedom to choose which of these acts to perform.

## 2.

Given the amount of good that can be done for those people suffering in other parts of the world at little cost to the wealthy, we might think that acts like donations to aid agencies are very valuable acts. If donations to aid agencies are very valuable acts, then the wealthy face a huge number of opportunities to perform very valuable acts. Whilst the wealthy remain wealthy, the cost of making small sacrifices for the needy will remain low.

Act-consequentialism claims that an act is right if and only if it produces at least as much good as any other act available to an agent. Many people argue that act-consequentialism is too demanding because it requires a huge sacrifice for the sake of the needy.<sup>1</sup> One way to limit the amount of sacrifice required by act-consequentialism is to claim that a person is only required to incur a certain amount of cost in performing acts of beneficence. A person is permitted not to make further sacrifices when the cost exceeds the stated amount. Whilst this approach seems plausible, it faces a difficulty in deciding how to set the maximum level of required sacrifice in a non-arbitrary way. I suggest that the best way to interpret Liam Murphy's collective principle of beneficence is as providing a non-arbitrary way of setting the maximum level of required sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>

## 3.

Murphy claims that when there is partial-compliance (i.e. when some people are not doing what they ought to do) an agent is required to perform the act that maximises well-being, except when performing that act would require her to incur a greater loss than she would have to incur, all other aspects of situation remaining the same, if there were full-compliance from that point on. Furthermore, an agent is not required to perform the act that maximises well-being under partial-compliance when there is a tie in the expected well-being produced by two or more acts. In this case, it is permissible to perform any of the tied acts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although Murphy argues that act-consequentialism is demanding because it requires us to pick up the slack caused by the non-compliance of others. See L. Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch.5.

<sup>2</sup> L. Murphy: "The Demands of Beneficence," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (1993): 267-292; *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*.

<sup>3</sup> For Murphy's full statement of the collective principle see *Ibid.*, pp.117-118.

I take the best interpretation of Murphy's principle to be an aggregate cost model.<sup>4</sup> According to this interpretation, we make a rough estimate of how much we would be required to sacrifice under full-compliance over some extended period. We are then required to perform those acts that maximise the good over the same extended period incurring a minimum sacrifice determined by what would be required under full-compliance. Murphy suggests that the relevant period for assessment ought to be the whole of a person's life.<sup>5</sup>

It is not clear how much my aggregate level of sacrifice might be under full-compliance. However, except for very unusual circumstances like some global catastrophe on an unprecedented scale, most people's full-compliance sacrifice will be significantly less than what is required by act-consequentialism.

#### 4.

One advantage of the aggregate cost model version of the collective principle is that it avoids the standard objection to the collective principle. The most common objection to Murphy's principle is that, contra Murphy, a plausible principle of beneficence should require us to pick up at least some of the slack caused by the non-compliance of others in at least some cases.<sup>6</sup> The usual example to illustrate this objection is the two rescuer/two victim case.

##### *The two rescuer/two victim case*

You are one of two potential rescuers faced with two children drowning in a shallow pond. You wade in to save one child, but the other rescuer doesn't do likewise.

It is claimed that Murphy's principle will not require you to save the second child in this case because, in doing so, you would incur a loss greater than you would under full-compliance where the second potential rescuer saves the second child. This is thought to be counter-intuitive. Given that it would cost you very little to save the other child, you ought to do so.

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<sup>4</sup> A strategy of aggregating cost for beneficence is suggested by Garrett Cullity. See G. Cullity: "Moral Character and the Iteration Problem," *Utilitas* 7 (1995): 289-299; *The Moral Demands of Affluence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> See *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*, pp.45-47, 50.

<sup>6</sup> For this objection made against Murphy, see T. Mulgan, *The Demands of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp.117-120; G. Cullity, *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, pp.74-76 and B. Streumer, "Review of Liam B. Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*," *Ratio* 17 (2004): 359. We also find similar complaints about the counter-intuitive implications of principle which requires us to do only our fair share in P. Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 233; S. Kagan, "Replies to My Critics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51 (1991): 924-925; P. Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.39; B. Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp.164-165 and E. Ashford, "The Demandingness of Scanlon's Contractualism," *Ethics* 113 (2003): 290. Richard Arneson raises a related, but slightly different objection to Murphy's view. Arneson suggests that a principle of beneficence should be sensitive to the ratio between the cost to the agent and the benefit produced. See R. Arneson, "Moral Limits on the Demands of Beneficence?" in ed. Deen K. Chatterjee, *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.36-37.

As Murphy points out, the fact that there are two potential rescuers in this case is only relevant insofar as it affects what I would have to sacrifice under full-compliance.<sup>7</sup> If I were the only rescuer then my full-compliance level of sacrifice would be larger than it would be if there were two rescuers. However, for all practical purposes this fact is irrelevant. On the aggregate cost model, we are to assess our aggregate level of sacrifice over the whole of our life under full-compliance. It is unrealistic to expect anything close to precision here. Rather, we might be lucky if we can give a rough percentage of our income that we are required to sacrifice over the course of our life. Given the imprecision of the estimate, no one could sincerely claim that they altered their estimate about the total required level of sacrifice on the basis of the two rescuer/two victim case.

What is relevant to whether the collective principle requires us to save the second child is whether cases where the agent is directly involved with the rescue generally do more good than donations to aid agencies. If it is the case that a direct rescue like the pond case does the same amount of good or less good overall than a donation to an aid agency, then such rescues won't be required by Murphy's principle.

We might see this point better if we consider a more schematic example. Suppose that there are only two sets of acts I can perform during the course of my life to incur the level of sacrifice required by the collective principle. Set A consists of 1000 equally valuable aid agencies donations and set B consists of 999 equally valuable aid agency donations and one act of direct rescue. If direct rescues and aid agency donations do the same amount of good, then the collective principle will be indifferent between whether I perform the acts in set A or set B. In other words, I will be permitted, but not required to perform set B with the direct rescue. However, if direct rescues do more good than aid agencies donations, then set B will be set of acts required by the collective principle. If the cost incurred by sets A and B are the same, then the set with the direct rescue in it will do more good than the set without.

## 5.

It might be reasonable to suppose that many direct rescues do more good than aid agency donations. If a direct rescue is very valuable, then the cost to the agent of performing that rescue will be low. In cases like saving the child in the pond, we might suppose that the cost to the agent is the cost of a dry cleaning bill and perhaps the mild inconvenience of a cold. The good done in this case is that we save a child from drowning.

Estimates about how much you would have to sacrifice to save a life in the developing world vary greatly.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, we might suppose that more good won't be done in the developing world by making a sacrifice equivalent to the cost of a direct

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<sup>7</sup> Murphy suggests this when he writes concerning the two rescuer/two victim case:

The number of potential rescuers around is relevant for determining our agent's full-compliance level of sacrifice—if there are as many rescuers as victims, then our good agent's required level of sacrifice is increased by the whole pond scenario less than it would be if there were fewer rescuers than victims. But the presence of noncomplying potential rescuers has no impact on the question of what the complier should do for his required level of sacrifice. (See *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*, p.128.)

<sup>8</sup> Garrett Cullity suggests that estimates for the cost of saving a life vary from one dollar to \$9 million! See *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, appendix 2.

rescue. Even if we accept one of the low end estimates of the cost of saving a life in the developing world, we need not accept that it is better not to perform the direct rescue. The cheaper estimates for saving a life in the developing world may, for example, be the cost of providing oral rehydration therapy to dehydrated children. Such aid is undoubtedly beneficial, but it may not be more beneficial than saving the child in the pond if the children who receive the treatment have no realistic long term hope of survival without sustained further donations.

In the face of uncertainty about helping overseas and near certainty about saving the child in the pond, many versions of consequentialism will require that the agent save the child in the pond.<sup>9</sup> The expected well-being of the child in the pond will include the probability of success.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, it seems unlikely that performing the rescue would produce any very drastic results such as threatening the rescuer's job. When we consider the case carefully, it might be reasonable to assume that performing a direct rescue is more valuable than a donation to an agency.

If this is true, then the standard objection to the collective principle will prove unsuccessful. If performing direct rescues will produce more good than donations to aid agencies, then all the sets of acts that fulfil the requirements of the collective principle (i.e. that maximise the good within the full-compliance level of sacrifice over the whole of an agent's life) will include rescuing the child in the pond. Furthermore, we can assume that they will also include a requirement to rescue the second child in cases like the two rescuer/two victim case. If I incur the cost of a dry cleaning bill when I wade in to save the first child, then, given that I am already wet and muddy, the cost of saving the second child is even smaller than the cost of saving the first child.

Of course, not all rescues are cheap and easy. Some direct rescues might be moderately valuable, i.e. they might involve either a medium cost to the agent for the sake of large benefit to others or a low cost to the agent for the sake of a medium benefit to others. If donations to aid agencies are more valuable than moderately valuable direct rescues, then no moderately valuable direct rescues will be required by the collective principle.

However, it isn't clear that we can criticise the collective principle for its failure to require moderately valuable acts. Firstly, a defender of the collective principle could deny that it is failure of the principle not to require moderately valuable acts. As mentioned above, it might be debateable how counter-intuitive it is not to require moderately valuable rescues. Secondly, a defender of the collective principle could deny that donations to aid agencies are as valuable as I have claimed. If aid agency donations were only moderately valuable, many moderately valuable direct rescues might be required by the collective principle.

## 6.

The real problem with the aggregate cost model of the collective principle is that it won't require us to perform slightly valuable acts. Given the assumption that world poverty

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<sup>9</sup> Murphy's view uses expected well-being. See *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*, pp.43-45.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Jackson argues that consequentialism will often require us to focus our attention on our nearest and dearest rather than those in the developing world because we can be more certain of the benefits of this strategy. See F. Jackson, "Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection," *Ethics* 3 (1991): 461-482.

will persist for the foreseeable future, the well-off will constantly be in a position to perform acts that are either very valuable or moderately valuable. Once we accept this, there is no space left in the collective principle for required beneficence of a slightly valuable kind. An agent will be required only to perform either very valuable or moderately valuable acts. This will result in the counter-intuitive result that Murphy's principle won't ever require an agent to help the mother carry her pushchair onto the train, give-up her seat on the bus or help the secretary with the office party. All an agent's required sacrifice will be used up helping the needy and so there will be no further requirement to help in more mundane ways.

Suppose that there are only two sets of acts I can perform during the course of my life to incur the level of sacrifice required by the collective principle. Set C consists of 1000 very valuable acts and set D consists of 999 very valuable acts and one slightly valuable act where the cost to the agent is low and the benefit to others is also low. In this case, Murphy's principle will require me to perform the very valuable acts of set C. This is because I incur the same cost by performing the acts in set D without producing as much benefit. The one slightly valuable act reduces the overall value of set D below that of set C.

An agent deciding how best to comply with the collective principle will face a situation comparable to this one. In being able to help the poor, an agent has almost unlimited opportunities to perform very valuable or moderately valuable acts. Given the opportunities to perform these acts, her full-compliance sacrifice will be exhausted in helping the least well-off. This implies that no slightly valuable acts will be required by Murphy's principle. As I mentioned at the beginning of the paper, beneficence is not just concerned with the very valuable, it is also concerned with the slightly valuable. Murphy's principle cannot adequately account for this aspect of beneficence.