

Utilitarianism and Poverty

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Biosketch

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Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of the most prominent debates about the moral significance and implications of poverty among those who accept a broadly utilitarian account of poverty's most morally important dimensions. Section 1 outlines the central features of utilitarian moral theory, and describes the basic features of a broadly utilitarian account of poverty's moral significance. Section 2 examines the various accounts of the moral obligations of the affluent to contribute to alleviating poverty that have been defended by those who accept broadly utilitarian accounts. The central issue in these discussions is how demanding the obligations of the affluent are, and in particular how much of their wealth they are obligated to sacrifice in order to aid those in poverty. Section 3 focuses on the recent debate about whether obligations to donate

more rather than less effectively – that is, in ways that produce more rather than less good – can plausibly be understood as merely conditional obligations. The central issue in these discussions is whether the broadly utilitarian requirement to do more good rather than less for those in poverty with a given set of resources can be defended independent of a commitment to potentially demanding unconditional obligations to provide aid. Section 4 briefly concludes.

Keywords

Conditional obligation; demandingness; life-saving analogy; poverty; utilitarianism

1. Introduction

Utilitarian moral theory can be understood as characterized, most fundamentally, by a commitment to four component claims. We can refer to these claims as *welfarism*, *impartiality*, *aggregation*, and *consequentialism*. (For general discussion, see Driver 2014.) Welfarism is the view that how good or bad a state of affairs is depends only on facts about the welfare of individuals. (On most currently accepted views, both the welfare of human individuals and that of non-human animals count). There is a wide range of views about what individual welfare consists in, and there is much disagreement, both among utilitarians and more generally, about which type of view ought to be accepted (Crisp 2021). Impartiality requires that the welfare of all individuals contributes equally to assessments of the goodness or badness of states of affairs. It requires, in other words, that we do not treat the welfare of some as intrinsically more important than the welfare of others. This would, according to utilitarians, amount to an unjustified bias that cannot be defended by appeal to any genuinely morally relevant consideration (Brink 1986 and 1989; for criticism see Scheffler 1992, ch. 6). Aggregation is the

view that welfare impacts on different individuals can and ought to be added together in order to arrive at overall verdicts about the goodness or badness of states of affairs. On this view, a benefit that is small in magnitude but enjoyed by a large enough number of people can contribute more to the goodness of a state of affairs than a benefit that is much larger in magnitude but enjoyed by many fewer people (Norcross 1997 and 1998; for criticism see Scanlon 1998, ch. 5). Consequentialism is the view that the rightness and wrongness of actions, as well as more general facts about which actions there is more or less reason to perform, are determined entirely by facts about their (actual or expected) consequences. (For general discussion, see Sinnott-Armstrong 2019.) On this view, there can never be more moral reason to act in a way that would result in a worse state of affairs than there is to act in a different way that would result in a better state of affairs. In combination, the four component claims of utilitarian moral theory entail that there is always most moral reason to act in the way that will maximally promote the aggregated welfare of individuals, counting the welfare of each individual as equally important.

There are several fairly clear implications of utilitarian theory for how we ought to think about the moral significance of poverty. The first is that poverty is morally troubling insofar as, and to the extent that, it involves shortfalls in aggregate welfare in comparison with available alternatives with respect to, for example, the distribution of resources. Since it is widely recognized that money and other resources, especially at high levels, tend to exhibit diminishing marginal utility, a second implication of utilitarianism is that those who possess substantial resources have strong moral reasons, and perhaps obligations, to transfer large portions of their holdings in ways that will result in the resources being used to benefit those with much less, and in particular, where possible, those living in the most severe conditions of poverty. Indeed, it implies that even those who possess only modest resources have strong moral reasons to transfer

much of what they have as well, since doing so will typically increase the welfare of those with less more than it will decrease the welfare of those making the sacrifice. In addition, utilitarian theory's commitment to impartiality implies that agents have strong reasons not to prioritize aiding those in poverty within their own communities or nations, rather than those who are worse off (and so could likely benefit more from a given amount of resources) in other, potentially far-away parts of the world.

Utilitarianism, then, has potentially radical implications regarding the obligations of individuals, and in particular well-off individuals, to contribute to alleviating poverty around the world. Precisely how radical these implications are is a matter of debate, and there are a range of views that philosophers have defended within the utilitarian tradition, broadly understood. While much of the debate has focused on the extent of individuals' obligations to sacrifice their own legally owned resources, the potentially radical implications of a broadly utilitarian approach to the ethics of poverty alleviation extend well beyond obligations to donate one's own money to effective charities. It has been argued, for example, that in addition to having strong reasons to donate money that they already possess, well-positioned individuals have similarly strong reasons, and perhaps obligations, to choose careers that will allow them to earn as much income as possible, in order to have more to donate than they otherwise would (Unger 1996, 151-2; MacAskill 2014; MacAskill 2015, ch. 9; Singer 2015, ch. 4). In addition, Peter Unger has argued that, all else equal, it is morally good, even if not morally obligatory, to steal money from the wealthy and donate it to effective charities that benefit those in poverty (1996, ch. 3). Though Unger does not appeal directly to utilitarian moral theory in making this argument, it is clear that his central commitments include claims that are at least in the neighborhood of impartiality and consequentialism. It is also easy to see why utilitarians, more so than proponents of some of the

other leading moral theories, would be inclined to accept or at least take seriously the possibility that theft from the wealthy for the purpose of using the stolen resources for poverty relief might be permissible. In the absence of unintended side-effects, such as facing prosecution and imprisonment, reducing sympathy for poverty-reduction efforts generally, or inspiring others to engage in theft for less admirable purposes, stealing from the wealthy and directing the money to effective poverty relief efforts would have the very same welfare-promoting effects as voluntary donations from the same wealthy people, while having at most slightly more welfare-reducing effects on them. (In Unger's central example the person who can be targeted for theft is a billionaire who would never even notice the loss of a million dollars; 1996, 64.)

Despite the existence of these arguments, and the fact that utilitarian theory would appear to provide at least some support for these and a broad range of other quite radical conclusions about what is permissible and perhaps required when it comes to poverty relief efforts, the bulk of the philosophical debate over the last fifty years about the moral significance of poverty within the utilitarian tradition has focused on the issue of how much of their own resources well-off people are obligated to sacrifice in order to aid those living in poverty. Broadly utilitarian approaches to poverty in contemporary philosophical debates have their roots in Peter Singer's well-known paper "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (Singer 1972). Importantly, despite the fact that Singer is a proponent of utilitarianism, and his argument in that paper is widely thought of as representative of utilitarian moral theory, the argument itself does not actually depend on the truth of utilitarianism. Instead, its key premise is a moral principle that Singer believes even non-utilitarians will tend to find difficult to reject (Singer 1993, 229). In its original, fairly weak formulation (Singer also introduces a stronger, more demanding version of the principle, which he endorses), the principle is that "if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from

happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it” (Singer 1972, 231). This principle, Singer claims, provides the best explanation for the fact, which virtually no one will deny, that it would be wrong to refuse to wade into a shallow pond and rescue a drowning child simply because doing so would ruin the clothes that one is wearing. But, importantly, the principle has significant implications far beyond nearby rescue cases – specifically, it implies that we are obligated to save lives or reduce serious suffering whenever we can do so without sacrificing anything morally significant. And this means that if we are well-off enough that giving up the amount of money that can, in effect, save the life or prevent the serious suffering of a person anywhere in the world would not constitute a morally significant sacrifice, then we are obligated to give up that amount of money. Since, Singer claims, many people living in poverty around the world die or suffer seriously as a result of fairly easily and cheaply preventable causes, his principle implies that the well-off are obligated to give substantially to efforts that effectively and efficiently provide life-saving and suffering-reducing aid to such people.

The key feature of Singer’s principle, and his argument more broadly, is that it implies that there are no morally relevant differences between cases like that in which one can rescue a child drowning in a shallow pond, and cases in which one can save the life of an impoverished person in any part of the world by, for example, donating to an effective charity. More precisely, the principle implies that—at least absent factors such as that one has a special relationship with a particular person in danger, or has made a promise to rescue them if the need ever arises—for any pair of cases in which one can save a person’s life at a particular cost to oneself, there can be no difference with regard to how strong the moral reasons to do so are in each case, or with regard to whether one is morally obligated to accept the cost. If this is correct, then the costs that

we are obligated to accept in order to contribute to preventing poverty-related suffering and death are equivalent to the costs that we would be obligated to accept to prevent an equal amount of suffering and death in cases like Singer's shallow pond example.

Singer's argument, then, hinges on what Garrett Cullity has called the "life-saving analogy" (Cullity 2004, chs. 1-2). The central implication of accepting the analogy is that, holding the amount of suffering and death that can be prevented fixed, the limits to required sacrifice in poverty-relief cases are equivalent to the limits of required sacrifice in pond-type cases. Utilitarian moral theory fairly straightforwardly implies that we must accept the life-saving analogy, though proponents of the analogy tend not to rely on strictly utilitarian premises in defending it. Nonetheless, there is good reason to treat acceptance of the analogy as the defining feature of broadly utilitarian approaches to the ethical issues raised by poverty. Like utilitarian theory more generally, the life-saving analogy implies that a number of distinctions that non-utilitarians often appeal to in order to distinguish cases are not in fact morally relevant (Kagan 1989; Unger 1996, ch. 2; Murphy 2000, 127-33; Cullity 2004, chs. 1-2). Conversely, many if not most non-utilitarians reject the analogy and hold that there is at least one morally relevant distinction between the cases. (For criticism of the analogy, see Kamm 1999a, 1999b; Appiah 2006, ch. 10; Wenar 2011; Wisor 2011; Markoč 2020; Thomson 2020.)

2. Demandingness

We can, then, at least roughly say that those who accept the life-saving analogy accept a broadly utilitarian account of our most central poverty-related obligations, even if they are not utilitarians more generally. The life-saving analogy implies that if we are obligated to make a sacrifice in a pond-type case, then we are obligated to make an equivalent sacrifice when doing so would save

the life of someone living in poverty anywhere in the world. If we accept the analogy, as utilitarian theory suggests we must, then the central question that we face is how much individuals can be obligated to sacrifice in order to save lives and reduce suffering in whatever ways they are able to do so. This is the form that the question of morality's *demandingness* takes for those who accept the analogy.

Singer famously defends an extremely demanding view. While he notes that the fairly weak formulation of his principle is sufficient to ground both the intuitively correct view that it would be wrong not to rescue the drowning child and the much less widely accepted view that well-off people have stronger obligations to donate to effective life-saving and suffering-reducing charities that aid those in poverty than it is ordinarily thought they do, he claims that we should in fact accept a much stronger version of the principle. This stronger version says that “if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it” (1972, 231). This version generates the extremely demanding implication that the well-off are obligated to give away resources up to the point at which, as Singer puts it, “by giving more, [they] would cause as much suffering to [themselves] or [their] dependents as [they] would relieve” by giving (1972, 241).

Unger (1996) defends a view that is at least nearly as demanding at greater length, and in a somewhat different way. He begins, like Singer, by noting that virtually everyone believes that in some cases we are obligated to make sacrifices in order to prevent bad things from happening to people. In one of his central examples, an agent, while driving in the country, comes upon a wounded man who is in danger of losing his leg, though not his life (1996, 24-25). The agent can drive the wounded man to the hospital and ensure that his leg is saved, but doing so would cause

over \$5,000 in damage to their prized vintage sedan. Unger notes that despite the significant cost of aiding him, nearly everyone shares the intuition that it would be seriously wrong to leave the wounded man to lose his leg. (This is true even though, as Unger presents the example, the wounded man suffered his injury while trespassing and was careless in navigating the barbed wire along his exit route.) This intuition is contrasted with the intuition, shared by most, that a well-off person is not obligated to donate so much as \$100 to effective life-saving charities, even if doing so would save over 30 lives (1996, 25).

Unger then considers whether there are any factors that differentiate these two cases that could provide us with grounds for accepting both intuitions (1996, 33-61). That is, he considers whether there are any plausible candidates for a morally relevant difference between the cases that is also consistent with our intuitions about relevant cases more generally. He argues that for any factor that we might initially think satisfies these conditions, we can construct cases in which our intuitions do not track the factor in the way required if it is to provide grounds for accepting the initial pair of intuitions. For example, we cannot claim that physical distance differentiates the cases morally, and that, in general, our intuitions support the view that we are obligated to aid those in need who are physically near us, but are not obligated to help those in need who are far away. This is because, on the one hand, most people have the intuition that it would be wrong for an agent to leave the wounded man to lose his leg even if they hear of his plight over a CB radio from many miles away (1996, 34-35); and on the other, most people have the intuition that it is not wrong for a well-off person to refuse to donate \$100 to save the lives of children in need who are quite nearby, right outside the walls of their vacation bungalow in a poor country (1996, 34).

In light of his argument for the view that there are no factors that plausibly differentiate the cases, Unger concludes that we must either hold that we are obligated to provide aid in both

types of case, or that we are not obligated to provide aid in either. In other words, he argues that we must revise either our intuition that we are obligated to drive the wounded man to the hospital, or revise the intuition that we are not obligated to donate \$100 to a life-saving charity. He offers two reasons to think that it is the latter intuition that ought to be revised. The first, much simpler reason is that revising the intuition that it would be wrong to leave the wounded man to lose his leg would, in effect, commit us to accepting the extremely implausible view that we are at least virtually never obligated to incur costs in order to aid others. If we deny that we are obligated to aid the wounded man in order to avoid accepting that well-off people are obligated to donate \$100 to a life-saving charity, then, given that there are no morally relevant differences between the cases, we would also be committed to accepting that one is not obligated to rescue the drowning child, at least if the cost of doing so would be at least \$100. And this implication is simply much more difficult to accept than is the claim that the well-off are obligated to donate \$100 to a life-saving charity.

The second reason that Unger provides for thinking that we must revise the intuition that we are not obligated to make the \$100 donation is that we have strong reasons to reject the reliability of our intuitions in cases like those involving donations to aid distant people in poverty, and strong reasons to think that our intuitions in cases like those involving the wounded man will tend to be reliable. He argues that our intuitive reactions to cases exhibit a pattern, whereby we take ourselves to be obligated to provide aid to people when their needs are *salient* to us – that is, roughly, when their plight grips us and holds our attention – whereas when people’s needs are not especially salient to us, we generally think that we are not obligated to aid them (1996, 28-33). He suggests that this provides us with a powerful error theory for widely shared intuitions that are generally unreliable. On his view, the lack of salience of the significant

needs of others is a distorting factor that causes our intuitions to fail to reflect our most important basic values—such as that there are strong moral reasons to prevent suffering and death—whereas the salience of significant needs helps our intuitions to reflect our central values: in his terms, it is a liberating factor, in that it frees us from the distorting influences of factors that prevent our intuitions from properly reflecting our values (1996, 10-13, 56-61).

In light of this error theory, Unger argues that we should accept that we have extremely demanding obligations to provide aid to those in poverty because there are cases in which virtually everyone shares the intuition that an agent is obligated to make an extremely large sacrifice in order to save the life of someone whose need is highly salient. In the case that he uses to highlight this, Bob, who is nearing retirement, has invested nearly all of his substantial wealth in an uninsurable Bugatti automobile, worth nearly \$3 million. After parking the car near the end of an unused trolley track, Bob notices that a trolley is heading down an adjacent track, where a child is trapped and will be killed if he does nothing. The only way that he can save the child, however, is to divert the trolley to the unused track, where it will destroy his Bugatti (1996, 135-36). Since nearly everyone accepts that it would be seriously wrong for Bob to let the child die in order to preserve his Bugatti, and thereby his comfortable retirement, Unger concludes that it must also be wrong for a person who has amassed \$3 million to refuse to donate nearly all of that wealth in order to aid those in poverty, especially since doing so would save many more lives than the one that Bob would save by sacrificing his Bugatti (1996, 136-39). More generally, he concludes that his argument provides compelling grounds for concluding that all well-off people are obligated to donate most of what they possess, and most of what they will come to possess in the future, in order to save the lives of people in poverty around the world who would otherwise die.

Most people, including many who accept the life-saving analogy, believe that views like Singer's and Unger's demand too much of individuals. Liam Murphy, for example, argues that while familiar demandingness objections fail to provide reasons to reject the view that well-off people are obligated to give as much as Singer and Unger claim (2000, chs. 2-3; see also Sobel 2007), there is an independent objection to their views that succeeds. This independent objection is grounded in the thought that those who are committed to complying with morality's demands have reasons to object to principles that require them to compensate for the noncompliance of others with demands that apply to them (2000, 76). On Murphy's view, the maximally demanding principle according to which we are obligated to do as much good (e.g., save as many lives, relieve as much suffering) with our resources as we can should be accepted in conditions of full compliance. If everyone is committed to contributing as much as is optimal, on the condition that all others do the same, then while those who are very well-off may have to give quite a lot, no one will have to give so much as to become even nearly as badly off as those who are initially entitled to aid.

The amount that one is required to give under the maximally demanding principle in conditions of full compliance constitutes one's "fair share," according to Murphy. The core of his objection to views like those of Singer and Unger, then, is that individuals should not be required to do more than their fair share simply because others have refused, or can be expected to refuse, to do their fair shares. He claims, then, that an acceptable principle will require individuals to do their fair share, which may involve quite significant sacrifices, but will not require them "to do other people's shares as well as [their] own" in conditions of partial compliance (2000, 76-77). If this is correct, then we should accept that an acceptable principle will not "increase its demands on agents as expected compliance with the principle by other

agents decreases,” and that “[d]emands on an agent under partial compliance should not exceed what they would be...under full compliance” (2000, 77).

Murphy thinks that this “fair share” view generates plausible results with respect to our poverty relief obligations. He acknowledges, however, that the view, in combination with acceptance of the life-saving analogy, yields implausible implications in certain pond-type cases. For example, in a case in which there are two drowning children and two potential rescuers, the fair share view implies that (all else equal) each potential rescuer is obligated to rescue one child, even at great personal cost, but cannot be obligated to take on any additional cost in order to rescue the second child when faced with circumstances in which the other rescuer has refused to do his fair share (2000, 127-33; see also Cullity 2004, 74-77; Singer 2010, 140-46).

In response, Murphy makes two central claims. First, he says that the counterintuitive force of cases of this kind can be limited by recognizing that even if it would not, strictly speaking, be wrong for an agent to refuse to take on any additional cost in order to rescue the second child, there are compelling grounds for holding that anyone who would in fact refuse to rescue the second child “would stand out for having a highly undesirable character” (2000, 132). Because of this, Murphy suggests, we can hold that our highly negative intuitive reaction to the refusal to rescue the second child is, in one sense, quite appropriate, even though it would be a mistake to claim that the agent acted wrongly. Second, he claims that the fact that the fair share view has some implications that are not just counterintuitive, but remain difficult to accept on reflection, is nonetheless not a sufficient reason to reject it, because all of the view’s plausible competitors have at least some such implications as well. The fair share view is, he claims, at least more plausible overall than the alternatives, and this standard is the only one that a view on the issues at stake can reasonably be expected to meet.

Cullity argues that although Murphy's fair share view should be rejected (2004, 74-77), there are alternative grounds for accepting limits on the demands that well-off people are subject to with regard to poverty relief. In particular, he argues that our intuitions about the range of values that can generate obligations to aid others provide us with grounds for rejecting the most demanding views about our obligations to contribute to poverty relief (2004, 134-45).

The starting point for Cullity's argument is the thought that we can clearly sometimes be obligated to help people obtain a wide range of goods, including, in particular, goods that, at least in current conditions, can only be enjoyed if one is living what he calls a "non-altruistically focused" life (2004, 133). Those living non-altruistically focused lives do not structure their lives around the overarching goal of saving lives and reducing suffering as much as possible, and so they do not live in accordance with the most demanding views of our poverty relief obligations. Nonetheless, Cullity claims, it seems clear that we can be obligated to provide aid to poor people – for example, if one can, at very little cost to himself, ensure that a talented music student who would otherwise lack the opportunity to pursue a musical career is able to do so, it would be wrong to refuse to help (2004, 136). This is true, on Cullity's view, despite the fact that the music student could save lives or reduce suffering among the global poor by, for example, selling her valuable instruments and donating the proceeds, plus the money in her tuition fund, to an effective charity. Since views like Singer's and Unger's imply that the music student is failing to live up to her obligations by not using the resources that she is devoting to the pursuit of her career to poverty relief instead, their views imply that if one were to help the music student pursue her career, he would be helping her to obtain something that it is wrong for her to have (2004, 137-41). Cullity claims that proponents of the most demanding views cannot accept the compelling intuition that we can be morally obligated to help people in their pursuit of non-

altruistically focused values, since this would be in conflict with the principle that a person's interest in having (or doing) something that it would be wrong for him to have (or do) cannot generate reasons, let alone obligations, for others to help him get (or do) it. (For example, a gangster's interest in getting his gun unjammed does not provide me with a reason to help him unjam it; 2004, 138.)

In light of this conflict, Cullity claims that we must accept that it is not wrong for people to live non-altruistically focused lives. To the extent that we think that others' interests in pursuing non-altruistically focused values can provide us with reasons and obligations to aid them in pursuing those values, we must, on his view, accept that it is not wrong for them to pursue those values. And if it is not wrong for others to pursue those values, then it is not wrong for us to pursue them either. Our commitments regarding the range of cases in which we can be obligated to help others, then, provide grounds, according to Cullity, for rejecting the most demanding views about our poverty relief obligations.

It is important to note that, while he rejects the most demanding accounts of our poverty relief obligations, Cullity's view is still fairly demanding (Singer 2010, 147-50). There are, on his view, fairly significant limits on the extent to which it is permissible to pursue non-altruistically focused values in preference to aiding those in poverty. In addition, since he accepts the life-saving analogy, he must accept limits on our obligations in pond-type cases that are similar to the limits that he accepts on our poverty relief obligations. Like Murphy, then, Cullity's view is likely to generate counterintuitively undemanding implications in at least some cases. For example, if the music student is permitted to keep her expensive instruments rather than selling them and donating the money to poverty relief, then it would appear to follow from the life-saving analogy that she is permitted to refuse to rescue a drowning child if the only

means of rescue available would destroy the instruments. (Perhaps she is carrying them and there is not enough time to put them down before jumping into the pond and still save the child.) Many will find this implication counterintuitive, but as Murphy claims, if we both accept the life-saving analogy and reject the most demanding accounts of our poverty relief obligations, then we will have to accept at least some implications of this kind.

If we think, as most proponents of the life-saving analogy do, that our intuitions in pond-type cases are more reliable than our intuitions in cases in which we can save lives or reduce suffering among those in poverty around the world, then one way of approaching the question of how demanding we should think our poverty relief obligations are is to consider our intuitive responses to pond-type cases that are crafted to be as closely analogous as possible to our circumstances with respect to those in poverty whom we are in a position to aid. Travis Timmerman (2015, 208-9) suggests that the appropriate sort of case to consider has the following structure: An agent, every day of her life, finds herself surrounded by shallow ponds in which hundreds of children are drowning. She will lose \$200 for each child that she saves, because hackers have arranged to remove that amount from her bank account every five minutes, and they can only be stopped if she takes a break from rescuing children and goes to the bank (in which case at least one child who could have been saved will instead die).

Timmerman claims that, intuitively, it would not be wrong for the agent to refuse to save as many children as she possibly can for the rest of her life (2015, 210; for criticism see Logins 2016). It would, he suggests, be permissible for her, at least on a few occasions over the many years of her life, to stop the hackers and spend some of her time and money on things that are not nearly as important, morally speaking, as a child's life – such as going to the theater. And if this is right, he claims, then our intuitions in pond-type cases, which proponents of extremely

demanding views such as Singer and Unger have appealed to in their arguments, themselves give us reason to reject the most demanding views. He suggests that reflection on this case should incline us to accept a view on which, while the well-off are obligated to contribute quite a lot to poverty relief efforts, their obligations are significantly less extensive than the most demanding views imply.

There is, then, a range of views about how demanding our poverty relief obligations are among those who accept the life-saving analogy. A broadly utilitarian approach to our central poverty-related obligations commits us to understanding the issue of the demandingness of these obligations in a way that does not treat pond-type cases as fundamentally different from poverty relief cases, but it does not by itself entail any particular view about the extent of our obligations in either type of case. It is worth noting, however, that even the least demanding of the views that have been defended by those who accept the life-saving analogy, such as Murphy's fair share view, imply that our poverty relief obligations are quite a bit more extensive than most people typically think they are. To a significant extent, then, accepting a broadly utilitarian account of our poverty-related obligations appears to push us in the direction of at least a fairly demanding view.

3. Conditional Obligations?

While those with broadly utilitarian commitments regarding the obligations of the well-off to those in poverty have focused a great deal of attention over several decades on the issue of demandingness, in recent years some have argued that a broadly utilitarian obligation to direct donations where they will do the most good can be defended without taking any particular position on how much, or even whether, one is obligated to give in the first place (Pummer 2016;

Horton 2017). On this view, we can have *conditional obligations* to do more good rather than less. (For a general discussion of conditional obligations, see Rulli 2020.) With respect to charitable donations, the thought is that even if it is permissible for an individual to refuse to donate some amount of money, if she does give, she is required to direct the money where it will do the most good. If this view is correct, it would provide grounds for proponents of effective altruism to criticize individuals who donate to their already very wealthy alma maters (Singer 2015, 10-11), for example, rather than to the most effective poverty relief efforts, without committing themselves more generally to a very demanding account of our poverty relief obligations.

The central argument for the view that we can have conditional obligations of this kind appeals to intuitions about cases in which an agent's making a sacrifice seems clearly supererogatory, and in which the sacrifice can be made in a way that will do either more or less good. For example, Theron Pummer describes a case in which an agent can sacrifice one of her arms in order to save either one person's life or one hundred different people's lives (2016, 83). He suggests that while it would plausibly be permissible for the agent to refuse to make such a significant sacrifice, if she does, she is required to save one hundred lives rather than one. And if this is right, he claims, then there is reason to think that many cases involving charitable giving have a similar structure – that is, while it may be permissible for an agent to refuse to give up some amount of money, if she does make the sacrifice, she is obligated to direct the funds where they will save the most lives or prevent the most suffering.

The view that there can be conditional obligations of this kind has, however, been challenged. Jeff McMahan, for example, has argued that it seems perverse for morality to imply that it would be wrong for an agent to do a significant amount of good despite its being

permissible to do no good whatsoever, in virtue of the fact that she is for whatever reason unwilling to do even more good at the same cost to herself (2018, 94-95).

According to a second line of criticism that I have developed (see Berkey 2020), at least most charitable giving cases are unlike Pummer's arm sacrifice case in an important respect, which undermines the analogy that he draws between the cases and suggests that even if there is a conditional obligation to do more rather than less good in the arm sacrifice case (and similar cases), there cannot be such an obligation in most charitable giving cases. The central difference, on my view, is that while in the arm sacrifice case the reason that is supposed to make it permissible to refuse to make the sacrifice does not also support the permissibility of saving fewer people rather than more, in typical charitable donation cases the most plausible reasons that we might appeal to in support of the permissibility of refusing to give at all will also support the permissibility of giving to less effective rather than more effective organizations (2020, 374-80). In the arm sacrifice case, the justification for refusing to make the sacrifice is that it would involve a very serious loss, namely the loss of one's arm. Since saving the single person rather than the group of 100 would also involve the loss of the agent's arm, the justification for refusing to make the sacrifice provides no support for the permissibility of doing less rather more good if one does make the sacrifice, and so a conditional obligation to do more rather than less good seems plausible. In contrast, in typical charitable giving cases, the most plausible justification for refusing to give is that one has a legitimate interest in using the money to pursue or promote her own most important projects and commitments (Williams 1973; Scheffler 1994). This justification, however, also provides grounds for the permissibility of much sub-optimal charitable donation, insofar as promoting the aims of organizations that do less good per dollar than others will often be among the important projects and commitments of those who make

such donations. And this suggests, I argue, that those who want to defend the view that donations to less effective organizations are often impermissible cannot rely primarily on the claim that there are conditional obligations to give effectively. Instead, they must engage the difficult issues about the demandingness of the obligations of the well-off to those in poverty, and defend the view that morality is more demanding than it is often thought to be (2020, 380-81).

4. Conclusion

The utilitarian approach to our poverty-related obligations can, like utilitarianism more generally, be criticized for failing to incorporate a concern for factors beyond individual welfare that are plausibly morally important. It nonetheless has the not insignificant virtue of focusing our attention on the ways in which we can save and improve the lives of those enduring poverty, just as we can sometimes save and improve the lives of those facing other potential causes of death and suffering to which we are generally more inclined to respond helpfully (and to believe that we are obligated to respond helpfully). More than other approaches, then, it forces us to take seriously, and face very directly, the possibility that our obligations to the poor are far more extensive than is typically acknowledged. Its contribution to the broader discussion of how we ought to respond to the poverty that continues to plague our world is, as a result, undeniably important.

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