

Rethinking the Ethics of Giving: The Normative and Motivational Inadequacy of Resource Management Approaches to Beneficence

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A certain degree of sensitivity to the needs of strangers beyond one's "kith and kin" is widely viewed as the mark of a decent character, while indifference to the basic needs of strangers is generally perceived as the mark of a parochial, self-centered, and morally stunted personality. Indeed, many philosophers have suggested that there is a universal duty to care for strangers in need. However, there is little agreement on the precise content and scope of such a duty. In this essay, rather than settling the exact content of our duties toward strangers in need, I aim to shed some light on the sorts of factors that are relevant to the determination of our duties of beneficence—what we might call the "moral ontology" of beneficence. In this regard, I contend that a large swathe of standard philosophical treatments of this question offer a very selective and misleading picture. Put simply, standard approaches tend to treat the demands of beneficence fundamentally as a matter of resource management, summed up in an imperative to transfer individual and collective resources to needy individuals and groups, with maximum efficiency, without reducing one's own welfare below a minimum threshold. I offer a critique of this "resource distribution" or economic approach to beneficence and propose in its place a more wholistic approach that views beneficent choices not simply as choices about how to manage resources, but choices about *what sort of life to lead and what sort of person to be*. I contend that the wholistic approach, insofar as it is more sensitive to the unique contours of an agent's life and aspirations, can do a better job than standard "resource management" approaches at providing meaningful and demanding guidance, as well as motivation, for the interpretation and enactment of the duty to care for strangers in need.

I begin with some general remarks on the purpose and scope of the argument. Second, by way of preliminary orientation, I highlight the main distinguishing features of the economic or resource management approach, of which I am critical, and the wholistic approach which I favor. Third, I argue that the economic approach, as exemplified by recent theories of beneficence elaborated by Liam Murphy and Peter Singer, oversimplifies the problem of beneficence by relying almost exclusively on broadly economic criteria (i.e., criteria focused on resource distribution and welfare enhancement) to guide agents concerning the content of their duties of beneficence. This sort of approach yields criteria of

beneficence that are at best extremely incomplete as a description of the factors that inform our duties of beneficence; at worst, based on a type of economic rationality so narrow that it arbitrarily suppresses or sidelines projects and goals that do not efficiently enhance the welfare of potential beneficiaries. Fourth, I sketch in broad brushstrokes an alternative, wholistic account of our duties toward strangers that gives an important role to noneconomic or nondistributive dimensions of practical reason, such as agents' practical identity, projects, and lifeplans, as crucial mediators between general principles of beneficence and the actions that honour them. This account aims to expand and enrich the wholistic criteria of beneficence suggested by previous authors, most notably Robert Noggle and Richard Miller. I conclude by anticipating a possible objection against the wholistic approach, connected to the apparent vagueness and variability of the actions it prescribes.

1. Purpose and Scope of the Argument

The principal contribution of this article is (i) to identify, more clearly than previous authors have done, the defining features as well as problematic consequences of the economic or "resource management" approach to beneficence; and (ii) to offer a preliminary characterization and defense of a rival approach—the "wholistic" approach, thus exposing a crucial and widely neglected theoretical dividing line in debates over beneficence. I would like to preface the argument with five clarifications about its purpose and scope. First, for the purposes of this essay, I will assume that all more or less able-minded human beings have a natural duty of justice (i.e., a duty not derived from any particular institutional ties) to work with each other with a view to extending a web of support to all persons, so that eventually all of us (all of us human beings, whichever part of the globe we happen to inhabit) are afforded meaningful opportunities to meet our own basic needs, or to have our needs attended to in case we are incapable of meeting them through our own efforts.¹ The argument of this article is thus an argument that occurs within the family of theories that accept the notion that human beings share responsibility, in some important sense, for extending opportunities for flourishing to one and all, at least to the extent that it lies within their power to do so.² The main contribution of this article is to offer a more plausible and feasible interpretation of our mutual responsibilities, not a foundational defense of them.

Second, in this article I shall analyze the problem of beneficence primarily as it confronts an ordinary agent, not as it confronts the constitution framer, social theorist, or institutional designer. The social theorist adopts a structural perspective, attempting to identify appropriate rules and institutions (whether legal, economic, social, or moral) for coordinating the behavior and interactions of individual members of groups as well as the behavior and interactions of groups, in such a way that individuals and groups together, as far as their resources permit, manage to extend opportunities for flourishing to all human beings,

or else, where the target population is conceived more narrowly, to all members of the relevant population. The ordinary agent, by contrast, adopts a personal perspective: he must endeavor to improve the lot of some of his fellow human beings, in the short and long term, in a very specific set of circumstances over which he has limited control. The ordinary agent, when he adopts this personal perspective, is less concerned with the question, “which normative system best honors our collective duties of beneficence?” than with the question, “how can I best honor my duty to care for the people around me, in the short and long term, given the institutional and social context within which I act?” A theory of beneficence that seeks to speak to the ordinary agent will attempt to formulate guiding principles that can orient his or her choices so that he or she contributes his/her fair share toward the development and maintenance of a comprehensive global web of support for human flourishing.

Third, in this article I restrict myself to a treatment of our *duties* of beneficence, not the virtues of beneficence in general, which may include dispositions that extend far beyond the “call of duty.” The reason for constraining my argument in this way is that, while it would arguably be a good thing if everyone consistently poured out their lives in the service of humanity, this level of self-giving cannot realistically be required or expected from everyone. Thus, we need to identify a baseline of beneficence that we can view as a universal obligation, a baseline rewarded by social approval, and, in cases of conspicuous deviance, sanctioned by social disapproval.³ The language of “duty” identifies this sort of baseline: it picks out action types that may encounter some emotional resistance, or are at risk of being displaced by competing goals such as the agent’s own economic position, yet are considered of critical importance for a decent and responsible human life, and/or contribute in essential ways to a decent and responsible society. By describing certain actions or action types as “duties,” we put agents on notice that they ought to feel guilty or seriously morally deficient if they fail to undertake the actions in question.⁴

Fourth, it is worth underlining that the claims advanced below concern the sorts of considerations that shape the content and scope of our duties of beneficence, not just the way people *come to know or be motivated* by their duties of beneficence, independently constituted. For example, I do not follow a utilitarian line by arguing that family bonds are a convenient cognitive “short-cut” for individual agents to pick out a reliable way to serve the greater good of the greater number. Nor do I argue that personal projects and relationships are relevant to our duties of beneficence simply because they have the power to motivate costly undertakings. Clearly, the fact that the wholistic approach makes the duties of beneficence discernible and meaningful to ordinary agents is a point in its favor. But the validity of the wholistic approach depends on its claims about the normative basis for our duties of beneficence, not the cognitive or psychological efficiency of wholistic principles of action.

Finally, the argument for the wholistic approach is essentially a phenomenological argument, in the sense that it appeals to the structure of ordinary

human experience. However, it is not merely a “value-free” social psychological argument, an analysis of experience that somehow stands “above” any view of what is genuinely good for human beings. Rather, it is an argument about how the basic parameters of a meaningful and worthwhile human life, and the shape of our social responsibilities, are disclosed through ordinary experience. The claim is that on the one hand we ought to accommodate certain goods disclosed through ordinary experience to be inseparable from a meaningful and worthwhile human life, such as life projects, friendship, family bonds, and personal commitments, within any plausible account of duties of beneficence, and on the other hand that we can do so without violating other important moral principles.

2. Two Approaches to Duties of Beneficence

In this section, I restrict myself to depicting the main contrasting features of the economic and wholistic approaches. My argument for the superiority of the wholistic approach will come later. The economic approach, which seems to dominate most philosophical discussions of beneficence, at least in the Anglo-American world,⁵ is exemplified most paradigmatically in the works of authors such as John Rawls, Peter Singer, Thomas Pogge, and Liam Murphy.⁶ Economic theories of beneficence view beneficent activity primarily as the transfer of resources (time, energy, and money) from benefactor to recipient(s), and beneficent choices as choices about how many of one’s resources to transfer, and to whom. Duties of beneficence, on this view, are determined by (a) an impartial moral criterion concerning how much and to whom any given agent owes assistance; and (b) a largely technical calculation concerning which transfer of resources and to which person or group best satisfies the moral criterion in question. While beneficent activity may be costly and require a high level of moral motivation on the part of an agent, the reasoning through which one discerns one’s duties of beneficence is predominantly technical or economic in character, that is, focused on achieving an efficient distribution of one’s available resources (time, energy, and money) to those in need, all the while maintaining some suitable minimum threshold of welfare.

Another way to characterize economic or “resource management” approaches to beneficence is to say that they attempt to resolve the problem of beneficence by answering particular sorts of questions: how much should each of us be giving of his time, energy, resources toward those in need? Who counts as a needy person or a person deserving of our assistance? How is the amount I owe to others modulated by my current or prospective economic position? How is the amount I owe those in need affected by the failure of my peers to do their part in the collective enterprise of distributing resources from the well-off to the needy? How are my personal duties of beneficence affected by the existence of institutions such as the State, which already engage in activities of beneficence on my behalf and with my tax contributions? How should we define the minimum threshold of welfare that agents of beneficence are entitled to maintain

when they engage in beneficent activity, whether individually, as families, as associations, or as nations? Broadly speaking, these sorts of questions are economic in character, in the sense that they are focused on the external movement of pre-existing resources between persons and groups, and view agents primarily as movers or distributors of objective resources (time, energy, talent, and money).

Before explaining what is missing in the economic approach, let me say a few words about the rival approach that I favor, at least enough to bring out more clearly the distinctiveness of the economic approach and the fact that it is not the “only game in town.” The main alternative I discuss in this article is what I call the “wholistic” approach to duties of beneficence. This approach has not as yet been fully spelt out or extensively theorized in the context of debates over beneficence. Inspired by the general revival of virtue ethics spearheaded by MacIntyre and others,⁷ and notions of “practical identity” and the integrated self discussed by philosophers such as Harry Frankfurt, Christine Korsgaard, and Bernard Williams,⁸ the wholistic approach emphasizes the centrality of moral character, interpersonal relationships, and sense of self to beneficent activity. While it does not deny that beneficence has an important economic dimension, it insists that the content of each person’s duties of beneficence is a profoundly complex and personal matter, which can only be made fully intelligible and operational when viewed as (i) an expression of a particular sort of character and personality; (ii) as part of a meaningful and worthwhile way of life; (iii) as shaped by a unique web of relationships; and (iv) typically as a choice about how to implement an imperfect or open-ended duty of beneficence, involving a type of practical wisdom that transcends economic or technical calculations. As we shall see later, several authors, two of whom (Robert Noggle and Richard Miller) I discuss in some detail in this article, have already gestured toward this sort of approach to our duties of beneficence.

3. A Critique of the Economic Approach

One possible explanation for the wide appeal of economic or resource management approaches to beneficence is the fact that they appear to offer clear, tangible criteria that can directly guide the behavior of all or virtually all agents, without presupposing any special degree of insight or wisdom beyond that of an average decent person.⁹ Furthermore, as economic criteria of beneficence can in principle be grasped and applied by all intelligent and thoughtful persons, they can also be socially enforced through the public approval and disapproval of compliant and deviant behavior. But the allegedly universal reach of economic criteria of beneficence turns out to involve an oversimplification of the duties of beneficence. The latter cannot be determined exclusively by technical or economic forms of reasoning; on the contrary, the duties of beneficence are shaped by factors that transcend economic or distributive criteria, such as the life projects, ethical vision, and sense of self of potential benefactors. Thus, the primary

selling-point of the economic approach—its capacity to provide tangible public criteria to guide the behavior of all agents—is based on a gross overestimation of the power of economic or technical reasoning to independently determine the content of one’s duties.

Singer, Murphy, and other adherents of the economic paradigm assume that the demands of beneficence can in principle be met by simply adhering to universal maxims or formulas provided by the theorist, requiring little deliberation beyond technical and/or utilitarian calculations and observations (e.g., how needy are potential beneficiaries? how effective are potential courses of action likely to be in alleviating needs?). By overlooking or significantly downplaying the relevance of the agent’s unique life projects, sense of self, and special relationships to his beneficent choices, the economic approach must content itself either with general one-sided maxims of beneficence with little bearing on the circumstances of choice confronted by real agents, or else with more specific interpretations of our duties toward the needy that arbitrarily disregard the concrete circumstances of the agent on the ground, insofar as they are informed by one-sided maxims of beneficence.¹⁰ Rather than laboring the argument in the abstract, I will illustrate its force by applying it to two recent accounts of beneficence that exemplify the economic approach I have described, namely those of Peter Singer and Liam Murphy.¹¹ It is worth emphasizing that my goal is not merely to highlight the general implausibility of these authors’ positions, but specifically to show how their accounts overlook critical components of the problem of beneficence.

One of the most prominent and controversial voices in the debate about our positive duties toward strangers is undoubtedly that of Peter Singer. In an influential article published some forty years ago, Singer argued that once one conceded that a passerby was duty-bound to save a drowning child in a nearby pond, even at the cost of getting his clothes muddy, one was compelled to admit that anyone of more or less affluent means (i.e., practically any citizen of a developed country) has a duty to donate his nonessential income to a charity devoted to tackling humanitarian causes such as famine relief.¹² In both cases, a pressing human need, the protection of one or more human beings from imminent and avoidable death, is at stake, while the cost to the agent is the sacrifice of a nonessential good, or what Singer calls something “morally insignificant,”¹³ whether it is fashionable clothes or disposable income for leisurely pursuits. Singer’s approach to beneficence is probably captured most succinctly in the principle that “if it is in your power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so.”¹⁴ From Singer’s perspective, we do not have the moral right to discount the value of other persons in our deliberations, when compared with the value of our own lives and those of our “kith and kin”: all human lives deserve to be weighed equally in our deliberations, notwithstanding some concessions we might make to the parochial inclinations of human nature.¹⁵ If we apply this radically egalitarian argument to our behavior consistently, many of us will find ourselves duty-bound to unburden

ourselves of a large chunk of our worldly possessions, as we can always truthfully say that the loss of such-and-such a material good or comfort is “morally insignificant” compared with the severe suffering and deprivation they could alleviate in the lives of strangers.

Singer’s formulation of our duties toward strangers has already attracted considerable criticism.¹⁶ Rather than rehearsing each of these criticisms here, I will just focus on what I take to be one salient, and in my view decisive problem with Singer’s approach, namely, the arbitrarily restrictive shackles it places upon the choices and life plans of benefactors. On Singer’s view, we are all bound to reduce bads in the world to the extent that it lies within our power without inflicting some comparable evil upon ourselves, and to make that the measure of all our actions. But why not promote good, even when that does not directly reduce a comparable quantity of bads, or does not even help diminish severe evils in the world? While it might make some sense in many situations to privilege disaster relief over the construction of concert halls, particularly if the victims of the disaster are closely connected to the benefactor, I do not believe such a rigid trade-off between good-promotion and evil-avoidance is a reasonable metric by which to systematically measure the goodness of all of our actions. It is perfectly reasonable and good for me to contribute to the upkeep of a concert hall in my city, and help advance the education of inner city children, even if I do not give to humanitarian causes that alleviate objectively worse human situations, many of which I may be poorly positioned to address, and others of which I may legitimately choose not to address, while I busy myself with other beneficent tasks. To sum up, Singer assumes an implausibly rigid scale of values, and this rigid scheme of values dramatically reduces the scope of permissible action for potential benefactors.¹⁷

Singer would likely respond that by giving people a moral license to weigh their own well-being and that of their kith and kin more heavily than the well-being of strangers, we are demonstrating that we do not actually value the lives of all human beings equally. And that seems problematic on its face. But this charge trades on an important equivocation: there is an important difference between recognizing the equal objective worth of all human lives and feeling oneself bound to *promote the well-being of all equally*. Recognizing the equal worth of all human lives should prevent me from inflicting arbitrary harms on other people, for example, seizing their property, or verbally abusing them in public, or implementing public policies that clearly and avoidably impose an unequal financial burden on them. However, just because I recognize the equal objective worth of all human beings, it does not necessarily follow that I will feel a personal obligation to remedy bad things in their lives.

For example, I may give money to a local school in my city that I could have given to an NGO that fights humanitarian disasters. The students in that school were almost certainly not as desperately needy as the victims of humanitarian crises. But if I am a resident of this city, with children of my own of school-going age, my membership in this community and my special

understanding of the educational needs of children similar to my own give me special reasons to support the cause of education in general, and more specifically to support the education of children in my city, reasons which may outweigh potential responsibilities to tackle disasters in other countries or in neighboring cities. This modulation of responsibility, partly through special relationships and partly through choices I make about which commitments to take on, cannot be plausibly equated with a *disvaluing* of the objective worth of some lives, or invidious discrimination in favor of some over others. That is because even if I recognize that all human lives have equal intrinsic worth, my positive responsibilities and reasons for action are not shaped exclusively by that equality of worth, but by a range of other factors, including my relationships, circumstances and vocation, my professional situation, capacities, prior commitments, and so on.¹⁸

So far I have suggested that one possible consequence of economic formulations of the duty of beneficence is that they may illicitly restrict agents' scope for beneficent action by prescribing artificially narrow normative parameters for all. Another related danger of the economic approach is that it may prescribe one-sided maxims that are only applicable in special contexts, rendering the duty of marginal relevance to most real-world choices. Liam Murphy's theory of beneficence is a case in point. According to Murphy, "[e]veryone is required to perform one of the actions that, of those available to her, is optimal in respect of expected aggregate weighted well-being, except in situations of partial compliance with this principle. In situations of partial compliance, a person's maximum level of required sacrifice is that which will reduce her level of expected well-being to the level it would be, all other aspects of her situation remaining the same, if there were to be full compliance from that point on."¹⁹ Murphy argues that a universal duty to optimize weighted aggregate welfare under situations of partial compliance would be unfair. For example, if we assume that affluent nations can best promote "weighted aggregate welfare" by contributing X dollars to the developing world per year, then any particular affluent citizen is obligated to contribute the share of X he would have had to pay in a world in which all other citizens paid their full share, and not a cent more. Murphy argues that discounting the cost of beneficence in this way is necessary to ensure that people are not unfairly burdened because of the irresponsibility of others. In his own words, "Why should I have to do more just because others won't do what they ought to do? [...] Surely I should only have to do my own fair share."²⁰

Murphy's approach can only serve as a practical guide to action in certain contexts of choice in which economic variables are of salient importance or in which technical, say distributive, calculations play a decisive role, because it is premised on an implausibly quantitative conception of the demands of beneficence. He seems to assume that one can calculate the "amount" of beneficence people owe to others, based on the amount they

would owe under a scenario of full compliance. This sort of model may work in a situation where there is a quantifiable collective duty (e.g., a monetary debt) to be discharged, but in fact, the object of beneficence, the promotion of others' welfare, is an extraordinarily complex and multifaceted thing, not something one could "divvy" up like money, or measure on a scale of utils. Therefore, urging people to make quantitative calculations about how much beneficence they would be required to incur in a hypothetical world in which everyone is fully compliant is not especially helpful for guiding agents as they discern their *actual* duties of beneficence in a world of partial compliance in which a large chunk of beneficence is nonquantifiable.

There are other grounds upon which one might criticize Murphy's formula of beneficence.²¹ But for present purposes, suffice it to say that the limited applicability of Murphy's theory in the context of real-life beneficent activity is yet another pitfall of the economic project, which zones in on a narrow range of criteria, broadly economic in character (in Murphy's case, the notion of a "fair share" contribution to an economic distribution), and quietly disregards noneconomic variables that are often of decisive importance in determining what counts as appropriate intervention in the lives of others for this or that particular agent, such as the agent's and beneficiary's special relationships, personal projects, commitments, and sense of purpose in life.

To sum up, Singer and Murphy both aim to describe a set of relatively fine-grained duties to be instantiated by all or most agents, focused on achieving certain forms of welfare redistribution from the well-off to the needy, and both give little positive weight to noneconomic factors such as an agent's life plans, projects, special relationships, and sense of purpose in life. In this sense, they both count as instances of the economic approach to beneficence as I understand it. The nub of my argument is that any theory of beneficence that proceeds in this way misfires from the start, as our duties of beneficence are generally not derivable from a predominantly economic model. Any attempt to guide our duties of beneficence based on such a model is likely to yield action-guiding principles that are quite disconnected from the choices confronting real-world benefactors, principles that are either (i) extremely one-sided and consequently of limited applicability, especially in situations of choice in which a range of noneconomic variables come into play, or (ii) technically applicable, but morally arbitrary insofar as their specific prescriptions involve an unwarranted restriction of an agent's sphere of permissible action. Murphy's theory falls prey to the first type of distortion, while Singer's falls prey to the second.

4. Toward a Wholistic Account of our Duties toward Strangers

In light of the foregoing arguments, it seems to me that there is much to be gained if we give up on the project of formulating our duties of beneficence in predominantly economic terms, and opt instead for conceptualizing the burden of beneficence as an imperfect or open-ended duty to assist the needy in a way

that is guided by a range of factors, both economic and noneconomic. The hypothesis I wish to explore below is that by describing in a more inclusive or nonreductive fashion the process through which we discern our duties of beneficence, rather than relying predominantly on economic or distributive criteria, we stand a much better chance of offering modest but effective guidance to agents in their efforts to live up to the duty to care for needy strangers, without artificially constricting the agent's range of choices or disregarding relevant variations in personal circumstances, life plans, commitments, and so on. The resulting account would articulate course-grained rather than fine-grained (imperfect rather than perfect) duties of beneficence, but it would not stop there: it would also orient the deliberative process by articulating a set of prudential guidelines for translating coarse-grained, imperfect duties into specific, tangible undertakings.

I am not the first to criticize economic approaches to beneficence and to attribute a more decisive role to noneconomic reasoning in settling the content of our duties toward strangers. At least two recent authors have made comments suggestive of a more wholistic approach to this question. Robert Noggle's approach "does not offer a specific formula for beneficence, but rather it requires an agent to devise her own plan for living in such a way that beneficence is one of her central life projects."²² Noggle's account, like mine, suggests that the duty of beneficence is best construed as an open-ended duty to give fundamental practical importance to our responsibility to care for others. Richard Miller nicely complements Noggle's account by emphasizing that the "basic concern" with others' neediness (or what Noggle described as a "central life project") should ideally be expressive of an "underlying disposition to respond to others' neediness."²³ Reflecting once more the open-endedness of the duty of beneficence and the crucial role of the benefactor's practical wisdom in enacting the duty, Miller asserts that "[u]nderlying dispositions, expressing basic concerns, need not, by themselves, entail any very definite association of specific conduct with specific circumstances. In their bearing on conduct our basic concerns are usually course-grained. Still, . . . basic concerns rationalize and are manifested in more specific determinations to act in certain ways."²⁴ The finer details of Miller's and Noggle's accounts of beneficence do not concern me here. Instead, I would just like to highlight the fact that together, both accounts suggest that adherence to our duties of beneficence involves (i) the interpretation of an imperfect or open-ended duty;²⁵ (ii) an underlying disposition to respond to others' needs; and (iii) beneficence as a central life project or fundamental concern that touches the meaning of one's life.

What I propose to do here is to articulate and flesh out some central elements of the wholistic approach to beneficence, already intimated by Miller and Noggle, at least enough to show that it appears to be a worthy rival for standard economic approaches. What distinguishes my account from Miller's and Noggle's is that I am more intentional about thematizing and making explicit the various factors that ought to inform an agent's deliberations as he closes the

“gap” between the open-ended duty of beneficence and specific undertakings that honor that duty.²⁶ A wholistic account of this sort is composed of two basic elements: first, the formulation of an imperfect or open-ended duty of beneficence, intended to apply to all persons; and second, a set of orienting principles to guide agents as they set about enacting the duty of beneficence in their everyday lives. As I mentioned at the outset, I offer no defense of the notion that there is a duty of beneficence toward strangers, because the intention of this article is not to defend the duty of beneficence, but to show that, for those of us who accept it, the wholistic approach offers an interpretive lens that is more normatively compelling and more consistent with our moral experience than its economic counterpart.

4.1. The Duty of Beneficence toward Strangers

It should be clear by now that on my account, our positive duties toward strangers cannot be deduced mathematically from some formula. Rather, they must be interpreted and applied using practical wisdom (*phronesis*) or sound judgment. Furthermore, as the possession of practical wisdom presupposes a certain level of training and experience in judging complex practical matters, on my account the success of agents at interpreting and applying their duties toward strangers will vary significantly depending on the moral and intellectual maturity which they bring to the task. For example, a fourteen-year-old adolescent with limited life experience may be more vulnerable to certain errors of judgment than a thirty-year-old adult with a rich life experience of service to the community. Thus, these guiding principles are in no way intended to function as a substitute for life experience and moral training. Rather, they are intended to provide a plausible orienting framework for agents who are already morally mature enough to make sound judgments about their duties toward strangers. Keeping this in mind, here is my suggested two-part formulation of the duty of beneficence:

- i. Every more or less able-minded person has the duty to make a substantial, well-informed, and thoughtful contribution to the development and preservation of a world in which all people, in the short and long term, are afforded a realistic opportunity to meet their basic physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs, including the need for shelter, nutrition, physical and mental health, education, reciprocal acceptance within a safe and welcoming community, and the ability to worship freely.
- ii. Every more or less able-minded person also has the duty to make the needs of others a central and ongoing concern of his, and to cultivate a disposition to respond generously to the needs of others.

Duty (ii) could be thought of as a duty of “self-care” or a duty to “tend to one’s own soul,” while duty (i) expresses the outward task of beneficence that is

incumbent upon each agent to perform. Duty (ii), to cultivate a beneficent disposition, may be partially realized through intelligent reflection on the needs of others and on one's own capacity to benefit them, motivating an inner commitment to beneficent projects. But it is primarily realized by observing duty (i) in one's intentions and actions on a regular basis.²⁷ Duty (i) should be interpreted and applied prudentially, with the assistance of six auxiliary principles: (i) proportionality of contribution to capacities and position of benefactor; (ii) the imperative to draw the circle of care generously; (iii) the normative salience of special relationships of value; (iv) the need for beneficent collective action; (v) the duty to respect the agency of the beneficiary; and (vi) the need to integrate beneficent activity into a coherent and meaningful life.²⁸

- i. *Proportionality of Contribution to Capacities and Position of Benefactor:* Not everyone inhabits the same role or social position, either in local or global communities. So what counts as a "substantial contribution" to an inclusive web of support should be understood as proportionate to the capacities and position of the benefactor, and may vary greatly across different agents. For example, while it may require dramatic large-scale interventions from statesmen and CEOs of multinational corporations, most people will not be in a position to make contributions on this sort of scale. Ordinary people can, however, exercise caring habits at a local level, and thus jointly sustain a supportive community, even if few of them, taking individually, are directly altering the social system on a large scale.
- ii. *The Imperative to Draw the Circle of Care Generously:* Acts of beneficence should not be restricted exclusively to those toward whom we already have a prior, well-defined institutional or relational responsibility; on the contrary, they should include efforts to expand our existing institutional and relational sphere of responsibility, to reach out to some strangers in need (people in need with whom one has weak or no prior tangible relational and/or institutional ties). If people only respond to obligations that are already institutionally embedded or well-defined, they are holding back society's capacity to expand the web of support to those who are currently on the fringes of social networks or whose existing support structures are dysfunctional.
- iii. *The Normative Salience of Special Relationships of Value:* In expanding the circle of care and contributing to a fully inclusive web of support, each of us has the right and duty to generally treat the reasonable demands of family, friends, and close associates as normatively salient, at least where these relationships are valuable and morally acceptable, not abusive or oppressive in nature. Some philosophers, such as Peter Singer, believe that this general priority of special relationships is an arbitrary psychological preference that cannot be justified in terms of impartial moral principles. However, many important values in life are premised on

the specialness of particular relationships and the priority of their demands upon agents. For example, parents do not care for their child based only on a general duty to love mankind or to love all children: they love their child precisely as *their* child, and are consequently more attentive to the needs of their own children than the needs of other children. Similarly, spouses do not care for each other and give each other gifts as an instantiation of some general obligation to maintain healthy families and relationships: they value and prioritize each other uniquely, and dedicate a disproportionate amount of their time and resources to each other, precisely because they love *each other* in a way that they do not love others.

Of course, much more could be said in defense of the normative salience of special relationships.²⁹ For now, I can only state the argument very succinctly: first, it is observed that the claims of special relationships, far from being an anomaly of the moral life, are germane to fundamental and pervasive human goods such as family bonds, friendship, and social solidarity. These sorts of goods would effectively lose their distinctive value and meaning in a life in which impartiality was an overriding rule of conduct. Given the centrality of relational goods to the shape of a meaningful and worthwhile human life, it is reasonable for people to pursue and protect relational goods even if we also expect them to make some room for the claims of strangers in need. Conversely, it seems unreasonable to expect people to either forsake relational goods or to cultivate and promote the well-being of kith and kin in exactly the same way as they cultivate and promote the well-being of persons with whom they have less immediate social relations. For to disregard the special claims relational goods make upon us would disfigure and impoverish our lives beyond recognition, and the disfigurement of human life cannot be the goal of morality.

Auxiliary principles (ii) and (iii) must be interpreted in conjunction with each other. Together, they are intended to help frame the sort of caring attitude that is both loyal to local relationships and responsive to the needs of strangers. Each of these attitudes—that of loyalty and openness respectively—coexist in a delicate tension which should not be collapsed. Principle (ii), the imperative to draw the circle of care generously, is intended to act as a check on our tendency to take the “path of least resistance” and only care for our immediate associates, excluding from our circle of care people on the social “fringes” who may not be already well integrated into a network of support. Principle (iii), the general priority of special relationships, is intended to act as a check on the temptation (faced by philanthropists and political activists among others) to allow the needs of strangers to overwhelm their own need to participate in special friendships and associations, as well as the legitimate demands of their close associates, in particular family, friends, and colleagues, to be generally given more attention and care than strangers. There is no way to eliminate the tension between the imperative to expand the circle of care and the priority of special relationships: it must be managed to the best of

one's ability and respected, otherwise important human values are harmed and community life is driven into either some form of narrow-minded parochialism (e.g., the absolute prioritization of national interests over non-national interests) or some form of contrived and inhuman cosmopolitanism, stripped of flesh-and-blood attachments, incapable of responding to the deep human need for friendship, loyalty, and belonging.

- iv. *The Need for Beneficent Collective Action*: One's contribution toward a fully inclusive global web of support should not be restricted to uncoordinated individual acts of beneficence. Each of us should take advantage of opportunities, based on our capacities, resources, and social position, to participate in, promote, protect, improve, and where appropriate, create, institutions that facilitate collective or coordinated forms of beneficence, given that certain forms of collective action are likely to be much more effective than uncoordinated individual efforts at extending support to people in need. For example, institutions can pool the knowledge, ideas, and skills of many individuals to solve practical problems or deliver aid to people in need; and large groups of people can, through collaborative beneficence, distribute the costs of supporting people who have experienced a family tragedy or natural disaster, in a way that merely a few individuals cannot. Much more could be said about institutional and collective forms of beneficence. However, as the primary focus of this article is on individual choice and action, this rough picture should suffice for present purposes.
- v. *The Duty to Respect the Agency of the Beneficiary*: All acts of beneficence should be aimed at enabling rather than disabling the beneficiary's capacity for agency, including the beneficiary's sense of responsibility for his own future. Obviously, there are cases where extreme or total dependency is unavoidable, and no question of independence arises. In that case, respect for agency may be replaced with due respect for the dignity or worth of the person being assisted, whether an infant, a patient in a coma, or someone with minimal cognitive functions. However, there are many cases where dependency falls somewhere on a continuum between total dependency and total independence. In those cases, benefactors should be attentive to the risks of creating or reinforcing unnecessary or harmful forms of dependency. A well-known example is the case of government welfare programs, which may incentivize citizens to accept chronic dependence on state assistance rather than seeking employment. While some such risk may be unavoidable, the level of risk involved should be taken into consideration in determining the most appropriate form of assistance. And where the risks of excessive dependency are accepted, appropriate steps should be taken to mitigate them.
- vi. *The Need to Integrate Beneficent Activity into a Coherent and Meaningful Life*: There is an overall sense of meaning and purpose to a life, which is

not reducible to judgments about how an agent can grow in virtue or perform good actions. While there are certain duties of beneficence whose recognition may not require extensive reflection on one's sense of meaning and purpose in life—for example, the duty to pay one's taxes—there are broad or imperfect duties of beneficence—for example, the duty to support just institutions, or to expand the web of support for those in need—which can rightly be interpreted in light of one's sense of the meaning and purpose of one's life. For example, if someone has a brother or sister with Down's syndrome, she might decide to campaign for better public facilities and support for Down's syndrome children and their parents. This might seem to her the most fitting cause to get involved in, because she has seen up close the joys and struggles of a Down's syndrome child and his family, and she feels that this intense personal experience opens her heart to the needs of Down's syndrome children in a special way. Along similar lines, Martin Luther King could have taken up many causes if he had wished, but the meaning of his life was closely bound up with his special solidarity with racial justice, a cause he felt impelled to defend even at great personal risk.

Of course, one's sense of meaning and purpose in life will also include projects and relationships that do not obviously implicate the needs of strangers, for example, one's love for great art, or one's love for one's family. But these too may enrich a life, and there is no duty to systematically sacrifice "non-altruistic" interests in order to advance the well-being of strangers.³⁰ One's duties of beneficence must be conscientiously integrated into one's broader way of life alongside other projects, rather than "swamping" or systematically trumping all other life projects. Nonetheless, whichever projects we undertake or tend to must be compatible with part (ii) of the general duty of beneficence, the duty to "make the needs of others a central and ongoing concern . . . , and to cultivate a disposition to respond generously to the needs of others."

The relevance of one's overall sense of meaning to one's duties of beneficence fits our ordinary moral experience remarkably well: people do in fact frequently bring a sense of personal mission or calling to their view of what they owe society, beyond the clear-cut duties that can be derived from impartial principles of promise-keeping or institutional loyalty. This has distinct psychological and cognitive advantages: first, it helps agents narrow down their options, by picking out a subset of forms of beneficence that resonate with their sense of meaning and purpose in life;³¹ and second, it can help agents to undertake and follow through on their commitments toward beneficiaries, insofar as such commitments are now somehow wrapped up in the meaning and purpose of their lives. Furthermore, this attention to considerations of meaning and purpose seems reasonable and legitimate, because we are meaning-seeking creatures, and making sense of one's life as a whole is integral to living a life one can reflectively endorse. Though reflective endorsement is not the only dimension of

a worthwhile human life, it is hard to imagine a worthwhile human life bereft of it.³²

5. The Vagueness Objection

Let me conclude by considering an objection that a critic might bring against my account, related to the apparent vagueness of its practical implications. The objection might go something like this:

“It is not clear that your account is any more informative or action-guiding than its rivals. You have claimed that it is. Yet in discussing the process through which the duty of beneficence is interpreted and implemented, you have not proposed a list of tangible duties that apply to all. Instead, you have offered a remarkably vague and open-ended formulation of our duties toward strangers: ‘*make a substantial, well-informed, and thoughtful contribution to the development and preservation of a world in which all people, in the short and long term, are afforded a realistic opportunity to meet their basic physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs. . .*’ Surely, rather than offering agents meaningful guidance, you are simply telling them to look into their heart and decide for themselves?”

The first thing to say about this objection is that it should not be the goal of a theory of beneficence to be maximally action-guiding, *at any cost*. Achieving specificity at the cost of specifying the wrong sorts of actions, for example, is hardly a desirable feature of a theory of beneficence. If my critique of Singer’s approach is right, then his theory achieves a high degree of specificity at the cost of treating as duties undertakings that are merely good and permissible things to do in general. Telling people they must contribute a large amount of their money to relief efforts in developing countries is very specific, but it also imposes a particular program of beneficence upon agents that is not sensitive to legitimate variations in personality, circumstances, commitments, and so on. Clearly, then, I do not claim to achieve greater specificity than all existing theories of beneficence. Rather, I claim to offer a higher degree of the *right sort* of specificity—specificity that respects the contours of people’s lives, and allows a proper role for common sense and personal discernment concerning one’s duties toward the needy.

Second, the objection overlooks the fact that the two-part duty of beneficence I presented above is not supposed to operate in a vacuum, but in light of the six auxiliary principles I have outlined, designed to capture crucial elements of the deliberative process that mediates between imperfect high-level duties and specific undertakings that honor them. Needless to say, these principles do not behave like mathematical algorithms—otherwise we could do away with the need for practical wisdom—but that does not mean they are of no practical use, or that they are simply uninformative. They give agents a series of considerations that are relevant to their deliberations about how to fulfil their duties of beneficence.³³

Third, it is important to keep in mind that the present account, to make its points as efficiently as possible, focuses primarily on the perspective of the individual agent, leaving the question of institutionalization virtually untouched. Nonetheless, as I recognized at the outset, a complete theory of beneficence requires a full treatment of the institutional or organizational dimensions of the problem. In particular, our collective duty to care for the needy requires some formal coordination of beneficent activity. While moral rules and customs may provide some of the necessary coordination, they leave too much scope for individual discretion to serve as a comprehensive coordinating mechanism. Consequently, they must be supplemented by institutions capable of coordinating, distributing, and supervising beneficent activity, whether charities, NGOs, governments, or churches. In recognition of the need for coordinating institutions, one of the auxiliary principles of beneficence I have proposed above is that each of us should take advantage of opportunities, based on our capacities, resources, and social position, to participate in, promote, protect, improve, and where appropriate even create, institutions that facilitate collective or coordinated forms of beneficence. But the task of spelling out the most effective strategies for coordinating beneficent action falls beyond the remit of the present argument.

I claimed in the introduction that my approach to duties of beneficence was more successful than standard economic approaches at providing meaningful and demanding guidance, as well as motivation, for the interpretation and enactment of the positive duty to care for strangers in need. I would like to conclude by reiterating the basis for this claim: standard economic or resource distribution accounts, whether Singer's radical humanitarianism or Murphy's "fair share" distributive principles, propose more or less one-dimensional, economic formulations of the duty of beneficence, but have very little to say about the complex process through which agents interpret and assimilate the demands of beneficence within the unique contours of their lives. Thus, agents are confronted with principles excessively removed from the circumstances relevant to their real-world choices, resulting in maxims of action that are either simply unworkable across a wide range of situations (Murphy's quantitative conception of beneficence), or violative of agents' legitimate freedom of choice (Singer's overriding duty to reduce bads in the world).

My account, by contrast, not only provides a high-level formulation of the duty of beneficence, but identifies a range of auxiliary principles to assist agents in applying it to the special circumstances of their lives, such as the importance of valuable special relationships, the need to expand one's circle of care, and the practical orientation provided by one's sense of meaning and purpose in life. These principles are not algorithmic; rather, they must be applied prudentially, drawing on the good sense, knowledge, and character of the agent. Nonetheless, they at least provide a broad orienting framework to guide the complex deliberations of agents, which is more than can be said of rival accounts. In addition,

insofar as these principles can mediate between generic duties of beneficence and the “warp and woof” of an agent’s commitments, aspirations, and life plans, they promise to ground duties of beneficence more firmly in the agent’s practical identity or sense of self, lending significant motivational force to the general duty to care for strangers in need. Although the account of beneficence offered here is preliminary and by no means exhaustive, I hope it has successfully exemplified the fruitfulness and promise of the wholistic approach.

This article is the latest incarnation of a work in progress spanning several years. I would like to thank the internal and external reviewers of the Journal of Social Philosophy for their very helpful comments and suggestions and an anonymous reviewer at a journal this article was not accepted by for helping me to see that my argument was really about the narrowness of the economic paradigm rather than some other issue like vagueness. In addition, thanks to those who have responded to presentations of previous versions of this article, in particular those attending a World Youth Alliance conference at Yale University (September 2009), an Association for Political Theory conference in Portland, Oregon (October 2010), the Ethics and Politics Forum at Villanova University (March 2011), an American Political Science Association conference in Chicago (August 2013), and the Ethics and Society Forum at the Institute for Culture and Society, University of Navarra (October 2013).

Notes

- ¹ Here I am following David Miller [David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)] in assuming that we humans have a collective responsibility to ensure that each member of the human community has the opportunity to satisfy his basic needs. For present purposes, I shall assume, at a minimum, that basic needs include adequate nutrition, shelter, physical and mental health, acceptance within a safe and welcoming community, and the ability to worship freely.
- ² It is important to point out that a collective responsibility of global reach may be distributed *unevenly* across different members of the collective. For example, the responsibility of national governments toward their own citizens is arguably more onerous than their responsibility toward citizens of other nations. Works that either assume or argue for a collective responsibility to extend opportunities for flourishing to all include Robert E. Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985); Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save* (New York: Random House, 2009); Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*; and Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- ³ Of course, establishing deviance from the duty of beneficence is not always a straightforward matter. In many cases, nobody except the agent’s close associates, or even the agent himself, may be in a position to judge whether or not he has honored his duties of beneficence.
- ⁴ Much more could be said about the nature of a duty and the contrast between dutiful and supererogatory acts. For a detailed analysis of the concepts of duty and supererogation, though one that is in my view insufficiently attentive to the social psychological dimension of these concepts, see Gregory Mellema, *Supererogation, Obligation, and Offence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

- ⁵ It is probably no accident that a conspicuous counter-example comes from the continental tradition, namely Emmanuel Levinas's conception of beneficence as a response to "the other" (not just any other person, but *this particular* other person). See Emmanuel Levinas and Philippe Nemo, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985). Insofar as Levinas recognizes that giving is an interpersonal act implicating to some degree the *whole person* of the giver and the receiver, and the relationship between them, his approach could be described as "wholistic."
- ⁶ I discuss Singer and Murphy in some detail in section 3. Singer and Murphy have been quite influential in setting the terms of the debate: often, people who engage their arguments do so on economic terms, that is, with the goal of clarifying and correcting economic formulas of beneficence rather than questioning the entire economic approach. Rawls does not have any worked-out theory of individual beneficence comparable to those developed by Singer and Murphy. However, he at least holds this much: that fair political institutions that improve the position of the least well-off members of society as well as protecting everyone's basic rights fix the content of our positive duties toward others in a well-ordered society. Although Rawls stipulates that beneficent acts are acts "which we are at liberty to do or not to do" [John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 438], in this essay I am interested in the scope of our obligation to benefit others in a broad sense, so Rawls's positive duty to support the material welfare of others through our taxes counts as a duty of beneficence for the purposes of this analysis. For Rawls's full account of our mutual duties under a just political order, see *A Theory of Justice*.
- ⁷ Works associated with this revival include G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981); Philippa Foot, *Virtue and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977; repr., 2001); and Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
- ⁸ See Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Harry Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); and Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).
- ⁹ Obviously, most theories of beneficence recognize that agents may fail to act on knowledge of their duties through laziness, selfishness, weakness of will, and so on. However, theorists of beneficence still seem generally quite confident that theoretical principles can inform a wide spectrum of differently situated agents of the action-types they are bound to perform, to a relatively high degree of specificity, without presupposing special moral training or insight on their part.
- ¹⁰ It is important to note that I am not suggesting that Singer and other adherents of the economic paradigm are *completely blind* to the relevance of personal circumstances and noneconomic factors to the deliberations of agents concerning how they should give. Rather, I am suggesting that *when compared with the wholistic approach* I am recommending, their approach gives much less weight to the special circumstances of the agent.
- ¹¹ Other representatives of the economic approach (even if that is not how they themselves would characterize their positions) are Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* and Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- ¹² Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972). For a more recent, enlarged discussion, see Singer, *The Life You Can Save*. Admittedly, *The Life You Can Save* offers a more extended defense of Singer's position, and introduces some subtle and sophisticated reflections about how we can best minimize suffering in the real world. However, Singer does not "recant" any element of his original article. On the contrary, he offers a more extended and wide-ranging defense of his original position.
- ¹³ Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 231.
- ¹⁴ *The Life You Can Save*, 15. Compare this with the 1972 formula, "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" (231, emphasis added). On the 1972 formulation, something "morally significant" could apparently be traded off against the prevention of something "very bad." That leaves a good bit of wiggle room for the benefactor to avoid undertaking costly sacrifices—he would just need to find a "morally significant" reason to withhold the sacrifice. Whereas the later formulation, "without thereby sacrificing anything *nearly* as important," sets the bar higher: to be excused from averting an evil, one would have to show that one is acting for the sake of something of *comparable or near-equivalent* importance to the evil one might otherwise avert. But my argument below applies to both the moderate and demanding versions of the principle.

- ¹⁵ The equal value of all human life is fundamental to Singer's position and explains why, while accepting a certain degree of "parochialism" as a necessary motor for human beneficence, he generally believes that parochial attachments are given far more weight than they deserve. This equality of value or worth is brought out explicitly in Singer's assertion that "[t]he Golden Rule requires us to accept that the desires of others ought to count as if they were our own. If the desires of the parents of [a] dying child were our own, we would have no doubt that their suffering and the death of their child are about as bad as anything can be. So if we think ethically, then those desires must count as if they were our own, and we cannot deny that the suffering and death are bad" (*The Life You Can Save*, 16–17).
- ¹⁶ See in particular Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), chap. 10, "Kindness to Strangers," esp. 160–174; and Leif Wenar, "Poverty Is No Pond: Challenges for the Affluent," in *Giving Well: The Ethics of Philanthropy*, ed. Patricia Illingworth, Thomas Pogge, and Leif Wenar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- ¹⁷ Here, I am drawing on Appiah's critique of Singer's position. Appiah objects to the Singers of this world that they "think it is so important to avoid the bad things in other lives that we should be willing to accept for ourselves, our families and friends, lives that are barely worth living" (Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, 165). From Appiah's perspective, which I am inclined to share, good things in life cannot be simply traded off against natural disasters and famines as if there were only one scale of right action: many different goods are legitimately pursued simultaneously and cannot be systematically traded off along one dimension of value.
- ¹⁸ This is not the place for a full defense of the relevance of nonutilitarian factors (e.g., relationships) to our duties of beneficence. But I will briefly state one argument for this antiutilitarian position in section 4 below. Cf. also note 16 for works where the utilitarian approach to beneficence has been criticized in greater detail.
- ¹⁹ Liam B. Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87. By "weighted aggregate welfare," Murphy means that we ought not simply aim to maximize *total* welfare, but rather to ensure that as many people as possible reach a minimal threshold of well-being. For example, rescuing twenty people from starvation would presumably be weighted more heavily in the utility calculus than enabling twenty people to enjoy fine wine.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.
- ²¹ Besides its inattention to noneconomic factors relevant to our duties of beneficence, Murphy's account has some unacceptable moral consequences because it suggests that the duty to rescue someone in dire need may be heavily discounted in case others are not doing their "fair share." For criticisms of Murphy along these lines, cf. Robert Noggle, "Give Till It Hurts? Beneficence, Imperfect Duties, and a Moderate Response to the Aid Question," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 40, no. 1 (2009): 3; Richard Arneson, "Moral Limits on the Demands of Beneficence," in *The Ethics of Assistance*, ed. Deen Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37; and Singer, *The Life You Can Save*, 140–146.
- ²² Noggle, "Give Till It Hurts?," 12.
- ²³ Richard W. Miller, "Beneficence, Duty and Distance," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (2004): 359.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 360.

- ²⁵ Miller does go further than Noggle in formulating a universal principle of beneficence, and setting a threshold of required sacrifice, in his “principle of sympathy” (“Beneficence, Duty and Distance,” 359). I believe that Miller’s formula, like any other of its kind, is fraught with the danger of understating the requirements of beneficence for some agents. But space does not permit me to develop this point further here. Suffice it to say that I consider Noggle’s position to more fully embody the spirit of the wholistic account than Miller’s.
- ²⁶ Nonetheless, I am indebted to Noggle and Miller for certain elements of the account, such as the idea that benevolence should be one of the agent’s central concerns in life, and that it should be expressive of an underlying disposition, not just a spur-of-the-moment decision.
- ²⁷ After all, a moral commitment that is never actually exercised, while it may be a good intention, is by definition not a *disposition*, as dispositions cannot arise without repeated action.
- ²⁸ This framework is intended to illustrate the *general thrust* of the wholistic approach, not to offer an exhaustive list of factors informing the duty of beneficence.
- ²⁹ For a sympathetic yet critical exploration of the relational character of human life and its tension with impartial obligations, see Samuel Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. chap. 2, “Individual Responsibility in a Global Age.”
- ³⁰ Bernard Williams has famously criticized utilitarianism precisely for requiring agents to systematically prioritize the utility calculus rather than their own “ground level” projects, that is, the life goals they care intensely about (Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism”).
- ³¹ Robert Adams argues quite persuasively that the idea of vocation, or a sense of *calling* in life (which may nor may not be religious in character) probably plays an essential role in selecting a manageable range of options from among the countless options that confront us in choosing how to live and act. Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 292.
- ³² This does not mean that everyone has to be constantly second-guessing their choices, or that they have to conform to Kant’s ideal of an autonomous agent. But they must at least be capable of making some judgment, however inchoate, that their life is on the right course. Otherwise they are uncritically conforming themselves to their own emotional impulses or to the pressures of their environment, and forsaking the sort of reflective agency that distinguishes humans from other animals.
- ³³ Cf. Aristotle’s point about the difference in levels of precision we can reasonably expect from ethics and mathematics in *Nicomachean Ethics*, I chap. 3, 1094b.