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### **Rationality and the Distant Needy<sup>1</sup>**

Suppose that I find myself able to save the life of a child by making a small sacrifice – by giving away my coat, say. Am I morally obliged to do so? One well-established view in ethics says that it depends. Suppose that:

The child is just twenty feet away from me  
 I am the only person in a position to save the child  
 The child will die very soon, if I don't help  
 I can easily find out who he/she is, what he/she looks like... etc.  
 It is too late for the government to step in  
 This is the kind of situation that is unlikely to recur

Under these conditions (call them *proximity etc.*) I am morally obliged to save the child.

Now suppose, for contrast, that:

The child is a great distance from me  
 Many other people are in a position to save the child (though I know they won't)  
 The child will not die very soon, if I don't help  
 It is not too late for the government to step in (though I know it will not)  
 I cannot easily find out who he/she is, what he/she looks like... etc.  
 This is the kind of situation that is likely to recur again and again

Under these conditions (call them *distance etc.*) I am not morally obliged to save the child. Saving the child is supererogatory – morally excellent, but beyond the call of duty.

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<sup>1</sup> I owe particular thanks to Peter Singer, Bob Stalnaker, Steven Yablo, Agustin Rayo, Richard Holton, Adam Hosein, Francis Kamm, Simon Keller and anonymous reviewers at *Philosophy and Public Affairs* for insightful comments.

So morality obliges us to dive into smelly ponds so as to save nearby children from drowning, thereby destroying our coats, but it does not oblige us to give our coats to Oxfam so as to save distant children from dying from preventable diseases. Call this the *undemanding view*.

The standard way to attack this view, and thereby motivate the idea that our moral obligations are much more extensive than we ordinarily take them to be, is to argue that all the differences between pond-type cases and Oxfam-type cases (distance, the possibility of government intervention... etc.) are individually and collectively morally insignificant. So if I fail to save the child, the moral status of my failure is the same, no matter whether the child was close etc. or distant etc. Canonic arguments to this conclusion are due to Peter Singer and Peter Unger. Singer appeals to the plausibility of general moral principles that do not distinguish between pond-type cases and Oxfam-type cases – in particular:

(The Sacrifice Principle)      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.

Unger considers each of the differences in turn and argues, by appeal to our ‘deepest moral commitments’, that it is morally insignificant.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence and Morality”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229-243, and Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1981), and Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). I will spare you a review of the enormous secondary literature. Suffice to say that some people are yet to be persuaded. A common complaint against Singer is that the principles to which he appeals are no more plausible than the claims they support. A common complaint against Unger is that, while each of the differences between pond-type cases and Oxfam-type cases may be morally insignificant, a collection of insignificant differences can add up to a significant one.

But there is an entirely different kind of argument against the undemanding view, one that makes use of the fact that sometimes we do not know our relation to the people we are in a position to save. I will present such an argument here. Briefly, my goal is to show that, if you are inclined to do as little as morality requires of you according to the undemanding view (i.e. to make small sacrifices in pond-type cases, but not in Oxfam-type cases), and you are ungenerously benevolent (you prefer that the needy suffer less when this imposes no cost whatsoever upon you) then you cannot avoid having ill-ordered preferences – where your preferences are ill-ordered if they are partially reflexive (there is something that you prefer to itself) or intransitive (for some  $i, j, k$ , you prefer  $i$  to  $j$  and  $j$  to  $k$ , but not  $i$  to  $k$ ). This is bad news for the undemanding view.

## 2. A Way for Ill-Ordered Preferences to Arise

I will begin by describing, in very general, schematic terms, one way in which ill-ordered preferences may arise, and then give three examples of cases in which ill-ordered preferences arise in this way, the last of which involves attitudes towards the needy.

### *The General Conditions*

Suppose that your preferences between entities of a certain kind are sensitive to  $n$  quantifiable factors – A,B,C... Whether or not you prefer one thing to another is sensitive to how A the things are, how B they are, how C they are... in the way that my preferences between oranges are sensitive to how *sweet* they are, how *juicy* they are, how *seedless* they are...etc.

And suppose that whenever one entity dominates another with respect to the factors then you prefer it. This is to say:

(Dominance)                      Whenever one entity is more A, and more B, and more C... than another, then you prefer it.

Finally, suppose that, for some combinations of A,B,C... values, whether or not you prefer an entity with one combination to an entity with another depends upon whether the entities satisfy a further condition. To put this precisely:

(Variable Trade-Offs)              There are n-dimensionally extended regions  $Q$  and  $R$ , such that for any entities  $q$  and  $r$ , with A,B,C... values corresponding to n-tuples in  $Q$  and  $R$  respectively, if the entities satisfy a condition –  $Con$  – then you prefer  $q$  to  $r$ , but if they do not then you prefer  $r$  to  $q$ .

To put this intuitively: when you are comparing two things, and you find that considerations of how A they are, how B they are, how C they are... conflict (e.g. one of the things is more A, the other more B), then how you trade the considerations off against each other so as to arrive at an all-things-considered preference depends upon what sorts of things they are (e.g. if they are things of one sort then you place more weight on how A they are, but if they are things of another sort then you place more weight on how B they are.)

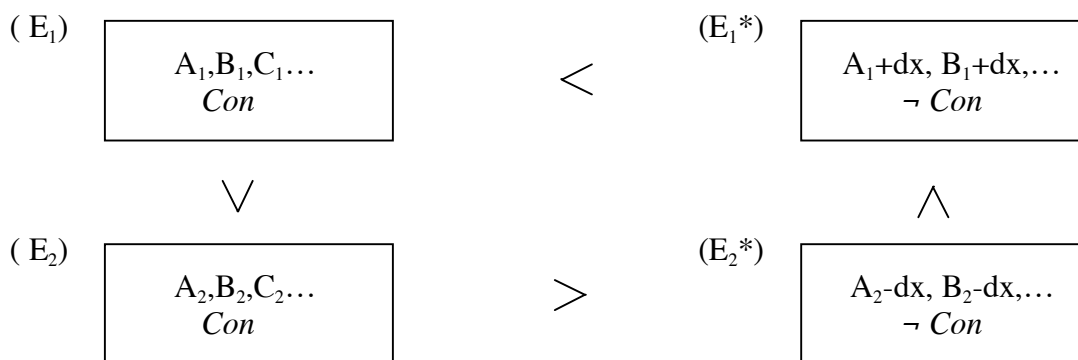
It follows that your preferences are ill-ordered. By (Variable Trade-Offs) we know there are entities  $E_1$ ,  $E_2$  and  $E_1^*$ ,  $E_2^*$  such that:

- i) Although the A, B, C... values of  $E_1$  and  $E_1^*$  are the same ( $A_1, B_1, C_1...$ ), and the A, B, C... values of  $E_2$  and  $E_2^*$  are the same ( $A_2, B_2, C_2...$ ), you prefer  $E_1$  to  $E_2$ , and  $E_2^*$  to  $E_1^*$ , because  $E_1$  and  $E_2$  satisfy condition  $Con$  while  $E_1^*$  and  $E_2^*$  do not.

and

- ii) We can add a tiny bit to the A, B, C... values of  $E_1^*$ , and subtract a tiny bit from the A, B, C... values of  $E_2^*$ , in such a way as to maintain your preference for  $E_2^*$  over  $E_1^*$ .

By (Dominance) you now prefer  $E_1^*$  to  $E_1$ , and  $E_2$  to  $E_2^*$ . So your preferences are like this (I represent a preference for  $a$  over  $b$  thus: ' $a > b$ ')



Your preferences are circular – either partially reflexive or intransitive.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of preference-pattern may not be unusual. Consider:

### *The Autophile*

Claire cares about two things in a car, *comfort* and *style*. If one car is both more comfortable and more stylish than another then she always prefers it (Dominance). But if she is comparing a more comfortable, less stylish car with a less comfortable, more

<sup>3</sup> Observations of this general kind – that by shifting the weight you place on different factors, for the purposes of making different pair-wise comparisons, you get intransitivity – have been made before. See Larry Temkin, “A Continuum Argument for Intransitivity”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25 (1996): 175-210, and Stuart Rachels, “Counterexamples to the Transitivity of Better Than”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1998): 71-83.

stylish one, then how she makes the trade-off depends upon what cars they are (Variable Trade-Offs). For example, if both cars are made by Mercedes then she places greater weight on comfort – ‘After all,’ she says, ‘comfort is what a Mercedes is *really about*.’ If both cars are made by Bentley then she places greater weight on style – ‘After all,’ she says, ‘style is what a Bentley is *really about*.’ So she prefers a Mercedes R-Class (comfort: 2, style: 1) to a Mercedes SL (comfort: 1, style: 2). But she prefers a Bentley Continental GT (comfort: 1, style: 2) to a Bentley Arnage (comfort 2: style: 1).

Claire’s preferences between cars are ill-ordered. To see this, downgrade the comfort and style of the Bentley Continental GT ever-so-slightly, and upgrade the comfort and style of the Bentley Arnage ever-so-slightly, in such a way as to preserve her preference for the former over the latter.

(Mercedes R-Class)

Comfort:	2
Style:	1

(Upgraded Bentley Arnage)

Comfort:	2.01
Style:	1.01

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∨

(Mercedes SL)

Comfort:	1
Style:	2

∧

(Downgraded Bentley Continental GT)

Comfort:	0.99
Style:	1.99

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She still prefers the R-Class to the SL, and the Continental GT to the Arnage, but she now prefers the Arnage to the R-Class (it is both more comfortable and more stylish) and the SL to the Continental GT (it is both more comfortable and more stylish). So her preferences are either intransitive or partially reflexive.

If Claire doesn't welcome this news, then she can avoid having ill-ordered preferences by rejecting either (Dominance) or (Variable Trade-Offs). So, as a way of rejecting (Dominance), she can say:

'Hold on a minute... on reflection, I think I prefer the downgraded Bentley Continental GT to the Mercedes SL, even though the Mercedes SL is both more comfortable and more stylish. This is because I have decided that style matters more than comfort in a Bentley, and the Continental GT has great style, while comfort matters more than style in a Mercedes, and the SL doesn't have much comfort.'

Or, as a way of rejecting (Variable Trade-Offs), she can say:

'Hold on a minute... on reflection, I have decided that brands don't matter. From this moment forth, I will trade-off style and comfort in the same way, no matter what the brand.'

So Claire has many options. But there's a class of cases in which, if you wish to avoid having ill-ordered preferences, your options are more limited. In these cases the entities in question are world-histories, the factors to which preferences are sensitive are the interests of particular people, and the condition to which trade-offs are sensitive is distance, and things that typically go with distance. Consider:

### *The Loving Parent*

Philip cares about his daughter. When he is comparing ways for events to go, and only her interests are at stake, there are two questions he likes to ask: 'in which history does she have the *better overall life*?' and 'in which history does she have *the better*

*future?*' Whenever these questions have the same answer (which is most of the time), he prefers that she have the better life and the better future (Dominance).

But sometimes these questions have different answers. Sometimes, when Philip doesn't know whether his daughter has just suffered terrible pain or is just about to suffer nasty, but not terrible pain, he thinks to himself: 'If she has just suffered terrible pain then she has the better future, but if she will suffer nasty pain then she has the better life.' How he trades these considerations off against each other so as to arrive at an all-things-considered preference then depends upon how he stands in relation to her (Variable Trade-Offs). If she is right beside him, holding his hand, then he prefers that her pain be in the past, that she have the better future. But if she is far away in a distant country, unable to communicate with him in any way, then he becomes more impartial. He prefers that she suffer less overall, that she have the better life.

This is an attractive attitude.<sup>4</sup> But, for just the reasons we have seen, it gives rise to ill-ordered preferences. If Philip doesn't welcome this news then he must reject either (Dominance) or (Variable Trade-Offs). But, unlike Claire, Philip can't reject (Dominance). A loving parent can't prefer that his daughter have a worse life *and* a worse future, when only her interests are at stake. So he must reject (Variable Trade-Offs). He must take the same attitude towards his daughter's past and future pains, no matter whether she is near or far.

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<sup>4</sup> I discuss this case in detail elsewhere. The thought behind the case is inspired by Parfit's discussion of other-directed time-bias in Section 69 of Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).



Philip still has two viable options. He can choose to prefer that her pain be past in both cases, or to prefer that she suffer less overall, in both cases. But sometimes, if you wish to avoid ill-ordered preferences, you have only one viable option. Consider:

*The Moderately Prosperous Person, in a World Where Resources are Scarce*

When you are comparing ways for events to go, and two things are at stake, your own interests and those of a desperately needy stranger, there are two questions you like to ask – ‘Which is better for me?’ and ‘Which is better for him?’ Whenever these questions have the same answer you prefer that you both be better off (Dominance).

But sometimes the questions have different answers. Sometimes, for example, a small sacrifice on your part will bring enormous benefits to the needy stranger. In these cases you are inclined to do as little as morality, on the undemanding view, requires of you, so in these cases how you make the trade-off depends upon your relation to the needy stranger (Variable Trade-Offs). If the needy stranger is near etc. then you prefer that you make the sacrifice, and he reap the enormous benefit. If the stranger is distant etc. then you prefer that you not make the sacrifice and he not reap the enormous benefit.

This is a very attractive attitude indeed. But, for just the reasons we have seen, it gives rise to ill-ordered preferences. To avoid having ill-ordered preferences, you must either reject (Dominance) or reject (Variable Trade-Offs). But rejecting (Dominance) is not an option – that would involve becoming a kind of ogre, becoming someone who prefers that needy strangers are significantly worse off in situations where their being better off imposes *no cost whatsoever* on you. So you must reject (Variable Trade-Offs). Your preferences must be the same, no matter whether the needy stranger is near etc. or

distant etc. But preferring that you not make the sacrifice when the stranger is near etc. is not an option – that would involve becoming another kind of ogre. So you must prefer that you make the sacrifice in both cases.

We have here the gist of an argument against the undemanding view. It will pay to present the argument in great detail. Many philosophers think about the claim that we are entitled to refrain from giving away almost everything we have to the distant needy in much the way that G.E. Moore thought about the claim that he had hands – as so stunningly obvious that any valid argument to the contrary amounts to nothing more than a reductio of the conjunction of its premises. Well and good. I will spell out the premises explicitly. If you do not wish to ride this train to its destination, it will be interesting to see where you choose to get off.

### **3. The Combined Demands of Morality and Rationality**

We begin with a couple of assumptions about rational preference. The first is a synchronic constraint on rational preference:

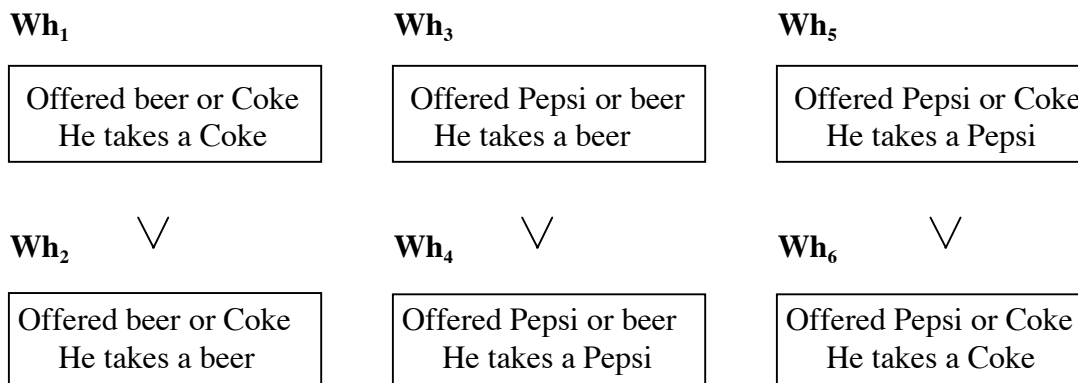
**P1** (Transitivity)      If I am rational then, at any given time, my preferences *between complete world-histories* are transitive.

I will not defend this here but, to head off misunderstanding, I will take a moment to point out what it entails. It is a weak constraint, much weaker than the one that people often have in mind when they say ‘it is irrational to have intransitive preferences.’ For example, (Transitivity) does not rule out:

### The Pepsi Challenge

I am about to offer Billy a drink. I know that if I offer him beer or Coke, then he'll take the Coke. If I offer him Pepsi or beer, then he'll take the beer. If I offer him Coke or Pepsi, then he'll take the Pepsi. These choices reflect his preferences. Yet he is rational.

One might be inclined to say that Billy has 'intransitive preferences', but all we really know about his preferences *between complete world histories* is this:



And this is consistent with his preferences between complete world-histories being transitive.

The weakness is good, because it may make perfect sense to have preferences like Billy's. Maybe Billy likes the taste of beer better than the taste of Pepsi, and the taste of Coke better than either, but when he is offered a Pepsi or Coke he thinks of himself as taking the *Pepsi Challenge*, and gets a kind of thrill out of siding with the underdog, a thrill that he values. This does not make him irrational.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Because conforming to (Transitivity) does not protect you from having seemingly cyclical preferences between entities, vulnerability to money-pumping etc., some philosophers have been concerned that it is 'empty'. If it is to rule out certain manifestly irrational patterns of desire, belief and behavior then it

The second assumption is a diachronic constraint on rational preference:

**P2 (Maintenance)** If I think that complete world histories  $x$ ,  $y$ ,  $z$  may be actual, and then come to discover that  $z$  is not actual, it is irrational to change my preference between  $x$  and  $y$  in response to this discovery.

Again, this is a weak constraint, much weaker than the constraint people often have in mind when they say ‘your views about the merits of two options should not change when you learn that a third option is unavailable.’<sup>6</sup> For example, it does not rule out:

#### Out of Beer

I offer Billy Pepsi, Coke or beer. He asks for Pepsi. Then I say “Oh... sorry, we are out of beer.” He replies “In that case I’ll have a Coke.” These choices reflect his preferences. Yet he is rational.

It may have been that, throughout the exchange, Billy’s preferences between complete world-histories were like this:

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needs to be supplemented in some way. See John Broome, *Weighing Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) section 5.4. I don’t think that the constraint is entirely empty – that’s the whole point of this paper. But I will say, in passing, that the most promising way to supplement it is to demand that the preferences between complete world-histories of a rational agent be sensitive to considerations whose significance is reflected in the agent’s other preferences. If Billy cannot explain his preference for, e.g., **Wh<sub>5</sub>** over **Wh<sub>6</sub>** by appealing to something he thinks significant (e.g. the thrill of siding with the underdog), something whose significance for him is reflected in his other preferences, then this is evidence of a kind of irrationality on his part.

<sup>6</sup> What they have in mind may be a principle variously called ‘The Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives’, in John Nash “The Bargaining Problem”, *Econometrica* 18 (1950): 155-162, ‘the Chernoff condition’, after H. Chernoff, “Rational Selection of Decision Functions” *Econometrica* 22 (1954): 423-443, and ‘Basic Contraction Consistency’, in Amartya Sen, “Internal Consistency of Choice,” *Econometrica* 61 (1993): 495-521. Formulations differ, but the basic idea is that if I prefer  $x$  to  $y$ , given alternatives  $x, y, z$ , then I should prefer  $x$  to  $y$ , given alternatives  $x, y$ . As my example illustrates, if the notion of *alternative* is construed broadly enough to encompass things that are coarser-grained than complete world-histories, this principle is very implausible indeed.

**Wh<sub>7</sub>**

Offered Pepsi, Coke or beer He takes a Pepsi
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**Wh<sub>9</sub>**

Offered Pepsi or Coke He takes a Coke
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**Wh<sub>8</sub>**

Offered Pepsi, Coke or beer He takes a Coke
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**Wh<sub>10</sub>**

Offered Pepsi or Coke He takes a Pepsi
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So he need not have violated (Maintenance). And once again, the weakness is good, because there are situations in which it can make sense to have such preferences.<sup>7</sup>

The next three premises have to do with the following scenario:

#### The Cryptic Oxfam-Worker

One winter morning, walking beside a high stone wall, I am accosted by an Oxfam worker who tells me, breathlessly, that sacrificing my coat will save the life of an innocent child – ‘little Peter’. What’s going on? It could be that the worker has been given a list of distant children, and that it is his job to generate funds to vaccinate them against Rubella. That is the most likely explanation... but the urgency of the worker’s tone gives me pause. It could be that this is a *real emergency*. There could be a child on the other side of the wall who has fallen into a canal. My coat, wrapped around his muddy body, will save him from hypothermia.

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<sup>7</sup> Amartya Sen has several examples in Sen (1993) and his “Liberty and Social Choice”, *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983): 5-28.

For the moment (call this moment  $t_0$ ), before I make further enquiries or a decision, there are two relevant unknowns: whether I will give away my coat, and whether the child who will benefit from my giving away my coat is distant etc. or nearby etc. So there are four ways world-history might go:

$W_{\text{SaveNear}}$

I sacrifice my coat  
Near etc. Peter survives hypothermia

$W_{\text{SaveDistant}}$

I sacrifice my coat  
Distant etc. Peter gets vaccinated

$W_{\text{AbandonNear}}$

I keep my coat  
Near etc. Peter dies of hypothermia

$W_{\text{AbandonDistant}}$

I keep my coat  
Distant etc. Peter dies of Rubella

What preferences will I have between these world-histories? In particular, what preferences will I have if I am *minimally decent*? (This is a term of art – let a minimally decent person be someone who in all respects conforms to the demands of morality: when morality demands that she do something then she does it, when morality demands that she have a particular desire or belief or disposition then she has it, when morality demands that she be a certain way then she is that way... etc.)

**P3** At  $t_0$ , if I am minimally decent then I prefer  $W_{\text{SaveDistant}}$  to  $W_{\text{SaveNear}}$

Why believe this? Because I am equally well off in both world-histories (I lose nothing more or less than my coat either way), and Peter is much better off in  $W_{\text{SaveDistant}}$  (it's better to avoid disease through vaccination than to recover from severe hypothermia).

Given that it makes no material difference to me which world-history comes about, why not prefer that Peter suffer less? It would be mean-spirited to fail to have that preference.

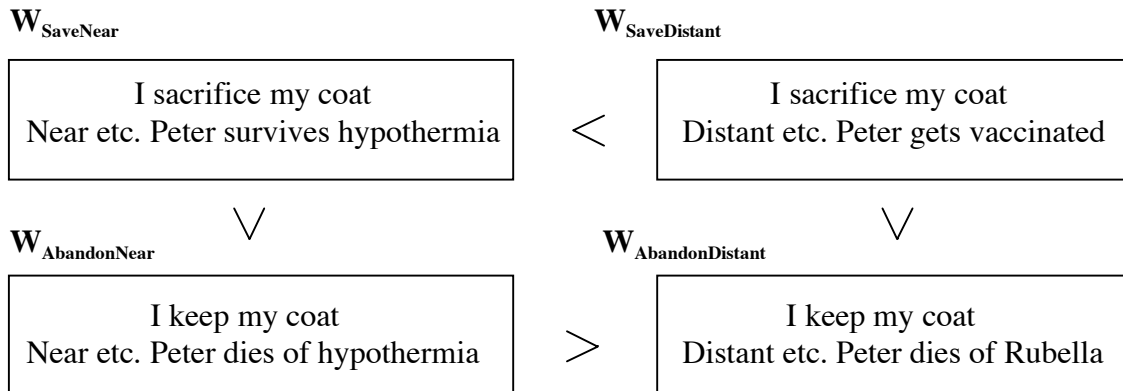
**P4** At  $t_0$ , if I am minimally decent then I prefer  $\mathbf{W}_{\text{AbandonNear}}$  to  $\mathbf{W}_{\text{AbandonDistant}}$

Why believe this? Because, once again, I am equally well off in both world-histories (I keep my coat either way), and Peter is much better off in  $\mathbf{W}_{\text{AbandonNear}}$  (death from hypothermia is, typically, much quicker and less painful than death from Rubella). Given that it makes no material difference to me which world-history comes about, why not prefer that Peter suffer less?

**P5** If I am minimally decent then, upon discovering that Peter is near etc., I will prefer  $\mathbf{W}_{\text{SaveNear}}$  to  $\mathbf{W}_{\text{AbandonNear}}$

Why believe this? Well, I just take it to be a fixed point in the debate that a minimally decent person, upon discovering that Peter is near etc., saves Peter, and saves Peter *willingly*.

It follows from **P5** and **P2** (Maintenance) that if I am minimally decent and rational then, at  $t_0$  (*before* discovering that Peter is near etc.), I prefer  $\mathbf{W}_{\text{SaveNear}}$  to  $\mathbf{W}_{\text{AbandonNear}}$ . It then follows from **P3**, **P4** and **P1** (Transitivity) that if I am minimally decent and rational then, at  $t_0$ , my preferences are like this:



In particular, I prefer  $W_{\text{SaveDistant}}$  to  $W_{\text{AbandonDistant}}$ . It follows from this and **P2**

(Maintenance) that if I am minimally decent and rational then, upon discovering that Peter is distant etc., I *still* prefer  $W_{\text{SaveDistant}}$  to  $W_{\text{AbandonDistant}}$ .

We are now perilously close to a Singer and Unger-esque conclusion. One more premise will tip the balance.

**P6 (Control)** For any world-histories  $W_X$ ,  $W_Y$ , if I have it in my power to bring about  $W_X$  or  $W_Y$  and there are no epistemic obstacles to my doing so (I know that I can do it and I know how to do it) and I have an all-things-considered preference for  $W_X$  over  $W_Y$ , and I am rational, then I will not bring about  $W_Y$ .

When rational people have control over how things go, they behave in a manner consistent with their all-things-considered preferences.

But, upon discovering that Peter is distant etc., I have it in my power to bring about  $W_{\text{SaveDistant}}$  or  $W_{\text{AbandonDistant}}$  and there are no epistemic obstacles to my doing so. So:

**C** If, upon discovering that the needy child is distant etc., I keep my coat and allow him to die of rubella, then I am either morally indecent or irrational.



This conclusion is weaker than Singer and Unger's. It allows that a minimally decent person may fail to give away his coat so as to save the distant child, if he is irrational. But if you care about being rational then you will find it no easier to live with. How to find fault with the argument?

#### 4. Objections

Perhaps you could take issue with **P3**. Am I really obliged to prefer  $W_{\text{SaveDistant}}$  to  $W_{\text{SaveNear}}$ ? You could take the view that morality demands of us only that we *act* in certain ways. It does not peer inside of our heads and demand that we have certain thoughts, beliefs, preferences or feelings.

Alternatively, as a way of taking issue with **P3**, you could observe that some preferences between complete world histories are of a kind that can guide action and some are not. A preference for  $W_{\text{SaveDistant}}$  over  $W_{\text{SaveNear}}$  is of the latter kind (call it an *inert* preference). It cannot guide any actions because nobody is ever in a position to bring about  $W_{\text{SaveDistant}}$  or  $W_{\text{SaveNear}}$  by doing one thing rather than another. You could then take the view that, while morality may demand of us that we have some preferences, it never demands of us that we have inert preferences – after all, why would morality care about inert preferences?

I find both views very implausible. Consider:

### The Missile

The BBC announces that a nuclear missile has been launched, by mistake, from a silo in Russia. It is heading towards luckless Hiroshima. But the warhead's ignition-mechanism is as old and ill-maintained as the missile's launch-mechanism. There's a fair chance that it may not go off.

Hearing this, I would prefer that the warhead not go off. Furthermore, I think this inert preference would be required of me, in a robust sense of the term. If a colleague were to say 'So it goes off... so it doesn't... I really don't care. I don't know any of those people.' My reaction would not be: 'If he were a moral saint then he wouldn't feel that way'. It would be: 'This person is *despicable*. Minimal decency requires that he have this preference, inert or not.'

Perhaps, then, it would be better to take issue with **P4**. Am I really obliged to prefer  $W_{\text{AbandonNear}}$  to  $W_{\text{AbandonDistant}}$ ? There's dominance reasoning – given that it's nothing to me, that I am no better or worse off in  $W_{\text{AbandonNear}}$  or  $W_{\text{AbandonDistant}}$ , why not prefer that Peter suffer less? Why not be benevolent, when my own interests are not at stake? But, if you are gripped by the undemanding view, you might think that such reasoning misses an important difference between the cases – in  $W_{\text{AbandonNear}}$ , by neglecting to save nearby Peter, I do something gravely wrong, but in  $W_{\text{AbandonDistant}}$ , by neglecting to save distant Peter, I merely fail to do something supererogatory. And you might think that morality allows me to prefer that I have not done grave wrong. Consider an analogous case:

### Steam-Roller or Combine-Harvester?

To celebrate the final evening of our vacation in Latvia, my friend and I appropriate some large industrial vehicles, then set off on a joy-ride through the countryside, whooping drunkenly, bumping into fragile things in the dark, having a grand old time. Next morning, at the airport, I hear that a little boy was killed in precisely these circumstances yesterday evening. Cold fear grips me for a moment, but I soon realize that there is no chance we will be caught, and think to myself: ‘Hmm... I was driving a steam-roller. If I ran over the boy then – a quick *squelch* and it was all over . But my friend was driving a combine-harvester. If he ran over the boy then – *chugga-chugga-slice-slice.*’

You might say that, in circumstances like this, morality allows me to hope that my friend ran over the boy, because then I have not done grave wrong. (I have *risked* doing grave wrong, certainly, in just the way that, in the Cryptic Oxfam Worker case, I risk doing grave wrong if I choose not to help the child before I know whether he is near etc. or distant etc. But, you might say, there’s a big difference between risking doing grave wrong and actually doing grave wrong.<sup>8</sup>)

One way to motivate this response is to say that, just as morality allows me to pay special attention to the money in my bank account and the clothes in my closet, at considerable cost to distant children, so it allows me to pay special attention to the contents of my *moral ledger*. Because there’s a black mark against my name in

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer at *Philosophy and Public Affairs* for pointing out that the objector needs to make it this very debatable assumption.

$W_{\text{AbandonNear}}$  that doesn't appear in  $W_{\text{AbandonDistant}}$ , I am entitled to prefer that  $W_{\text{AbandonDistant}}$  come about. This is just another kind of permissible selfishness.

Another way to motivate this response is to say that preferring not to have done grave wrong need not be the expression of a petty concern for one's own moral purity. It may be the expression of a nobler underlying attitude – a sense of duty, of deep respect for human life and the moral law.<sup>9</sup> And morality smiles on such attitudes.

A certain kind of philosopher may be sympathetic to this way of putting the objection. Deontologists who believe that some kinds of act (e.g. killing, stealing, lying) are impermissible even when they harm nobody and significantly benefit somebody, already believe that there are circumstances in which it is permissible (indeed, obligatory) to prefer that other people be significantly worse off, when the only cost of their being better off is that you do something bad. Such deontologists may believe, for example, that it is permissible (indeed, obligatory) for<sup>10</sup> Doctor Jane to prefer that Patient Jack suffer more and die a nastier death, rather than be killed by her, even though both of them will be better off if she kills him. And (typically) they believe that her underlying motivation need not be selfish. If she has the right kind of underlying motivation, it is inaccurate to describe her as 'wanting her hands to be clean'.

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<sup>9</sup> It may be difficult to know whether a particular preference is the fruit of the petty or noble attitude. The classic discussion of how to distinguish such attitudes is in Bernard Williams, "Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence", in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981).

<sup>10</sup> I should note that these seem to me to be the two most promising ways of motivating the response, but there are other, less promising ways. For example one could say that, in circumstances like this, morality allows me to prefer that there be fewer instances of grave wrong-doing. Whether this allows a preference for  $W_{\text{AbandonDistant}}$  over  $W_{\text{AbandonNear}}$  is under-determined by the description of the Cryptic Oxfam Worker case (it does not specify whether there will be more or less grave wrong-doing if Peter is near etc. or distant etc.) This response would imply, at best, that we are not obliged to help the distant needy when their misfortunes, if we do not help them, will not be the result of grave wrong-doing on the part of anybody close etc. to them. Thanks to Peter Singer for pointing this out.

I am not going to weigh in for or against deontology here, but I will make two observations. First, if you take either form of the response seriously, then you should still find the argument interesting, because it illustrates that there is an un-noticed connection between two classic objections to the broadly utilitarian approach to normative ethics:

*Too Demanding:* Utilitarianism tells us that we are obliged to do very good things (e.g. to make enormous sacrifices for the distant needy) in circumstances where, in truth, we are entitled to refrain from doing such things.

*No Constraints:* Utilitarianism tells that we are obliged to do very bad things (e.g. to cheat, steal, kill, break promises...etc.) in circumstances where, in truth, we are entitled (indeed, obliged) to refrain from doing such things.

The argument shows that the *Too Demanding* objection is only as good as the *No Constraints* objection. You are rejecting the view that we are obliged to help the distant needy on the grounds that it is permissible to prefer not to have done something bad, even though people will be significantly better off if you have.

Second, in the particular case we are looking at, the Cryptic Oxfam worker case, I find any view that yields that a minimally decent person may prefer the abandoned child to be distant etc. very implausible indeed. Wouldn't it be mean-spirited in the extreme, having decided not to help the child, to prefer that he be far away, and suffering more,

rather than near, and suffering less, when whether he is near or far has no material impact on me? And wouldn't it be perverse if, when asked to explain or justify my preference, I could only do so by appeal to a *moral* consideration – 'if he is near then I have done something wrong, but if he is far then I have not'? It's only because I care about morality that I want this child whose life I chose not to save to suffer a nastier death!

Perhaps, then, you could take issue with **P5**. Upon discovering that Peter is near, am I really obliged to prefer  $W_{\text{SaveNear}}$  to  $W_{\text{AbandonNear}}$ ? We may take it to be a fixed point that I must willingly save Peter but, as cases of de se ignorance illustrate, there's a difference between my wanting to do something and my wanting it to be the case that a certain person (the person I actually happen to be) does something. Perhaps you might say that I am morally obliged to want to save Peter, rather than not save him, but I am not morally obliged to want it to be the case that a certain person saves Peter rather than not.

Again, you *might* say this, but again it seems very implausible. There is no de se ignorance in the case we are considering. I know who I am. We can stipulate that. So why, given that I want to save Peter rather than not, would I not want it to be the case that a certain person (the person I actually happen to be) saves Peter rather than not?

There remain premises **P1** (Transitivity), **P2** (Maintenance) and **P6** (Control). You are free to reject one of them. But tread warily. There is something undignified about adopting a marginal view about the nature of practical rationality in an effort to avoid first-world guilt.

## 5. Wrapping Up

In sum: most of us, when we think about the needy, have a background preference that they suffer less in situations where whether they suffer more or less has absolutely no material impact upon us. Furthermore most of us are willing to dive into a pond, no matter how smelly, to save a drowning toddler. And that's lucky, because we would be *ogres* otherwise. But if you have these preferences and do not give (and give...) to Oxfam<sup>11</sup> then you are irrational. You may avoid being irrational easily enough, by becoming an ogre. You may avoid becoming an ogre easily enough, by remaining irrational. But to avoid both you must pass through the proverbial eye of a needle.

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<sup>11</sup> Assuming, of course, that Oxfam succeeds in making it the case that there is a particular child who will live if you give, and die otherwise.