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You Oughta Know: A Defence of Obligations to Learn

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ABSTRACT

Most of us spend a significant portion of our lives learning, practising, and performing a wide range of skills. Many of us also have a great amount of control over which skills we learn and develop. From choices as significant as career pursuits to those as minor as how we spend our weeknight leisure time, we exercise a great amount of agency over what we know and what we can do. In this paper we argue, using a framework first developed by Carbonell [2013], that in many real-world circumstances we have moral obligations to develop some skills rather than others.

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1. Introduction

Most of us spend a significant portion of our lives learning, practising, and performing a wide range of skills. These skills—as we understand them here—involve some combination of propositional knowledge and know-how.[1] What skills we are able to develop and practise is of course constrained by our physical, psychological, and social features. But even within these constraints, many of us have a great amount of control over which skills we learn and develop. From choices as significant as career pursuits to those as minor as how to spend our weeknight leisure time, we exercise a great amount of agency over what we know and what we can do. A vast number of people in the world, including in the USA, do not have much room to choose their career and might not have any leisure time at all. Bills must be paid and families fed. We are aware that choice in these matters is often a privilege or a hard-earned accomplishment that not everyone can afford. Our target group is those who can.

Philosophers have discussed whether we have moral obligations towards ourselves to develop some skills (especially those involved in developing our talents).[2]

[1] If, as intellectualists argue, knowledge-how is reducible to propositional knowledge, it will still be true that skills involve a combination of propositional knowledge under the practical and theoretical modes. Nothing in what follows depends on any theory of knowledge-how; so we set this issue aside (see, e.g., Hawley [2003], Stanley [2011], and Fantl [2017]).

[2] See, e.g., Jeske [1996], Timmerman [2006], and Schofield [2015].

But few have wondered about moral obligations towards others to develop these sorts of practical knowledge and skills.[3] Our skills and knowledge can have a great effect on whether we can assist others, prevent harm, and fight for justice. Given the fact that we have a large amount of control over the skills and knowledge that we develop, along with the effects that these skills and knowledge can have, do we have any moral obligation to choose to develop skills and knowledge that can make the world better? Or, for example, is the choice to learn CPR rather than how to juggle merely supererogatory?

In what follows, we argue that people do have a standing (and *prima facie*) duty to learn the kinds of skills and knowledge which will put them in a better position to morally benefit the world. We see our position as moderate in terms of demandingness among the current alternatives. On one side of the spectrum, Vanessa Carbonell [2013] argues that knowledge, once a person has it, might generate obligations, but she does not acknowledge that there are obligations to acquire knowledge in the first place.[4] On the opposite side of the spectrum, we have Peter Singer and the effective altruism movement, whose views either implicitly or explicitly endorse rather stringent obligations to learn or choose a career, such as the moral obligation to choose the most altruistically effective career available. In contrast, we will argue for what we call the Position to Benefit principle:

> **PB**. If an agent can (permissibly) put herself in a position from which she can create a great benefit and/or prevent great harm with little *overall cost* to herself, then she ought, *prima facie,* to do so.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section 1, we explain PB in more depth and argue that it is substantially different from similar principles in the literature. In sections 2 and 3, we develop our main argument for PB, which is a general normative principle that captures the content and strength of our obligations to learn. In section 4, we discuss and reject some potential worries about the demandingness of PB.

2. Position to Benefit Principle

The 'put herself in a position' clause of PB should be read broadly, to involve both spatiotemporal location as well as what we might call 'epistemic location'—that is, one's knowledge and skills. We believe that PB encompasses a moderate position about our obligations—including, most importantly for our purposes, our obligations to learn—between two extremes, as we discuss below. It also plausibly explains our intuitions about a variety of cases. But, first, two clarifications are in order.

PB is neutral between different first-order normative views. First, it is not a consequentialist principle, because it does not imply that it is best to choose the option that maximizes overall utility. This contrasts in certain ways with William MacAskill's [2014, 2015, 2016] consequentialist approach to career choice, and the approach of the effective altruism movement, for example. Instead, it merely

[3] Marx [1853], Unger [1996], Carbonell [2013], and MacAskill [2014, 2015, 2016] provide a few exceptions.

[4] Thanks to Vanessa Carbonell for clarifying in personal correspondence that she remains agnostic as to whether there are obligations to acquire knowledge.

implies that you are obliged to choose the option that would create a great benefit when it comes at little overall cost to yourself. Second, PB does not entail that an agent must put herself in a position to create a great benefit (or prevent a great harm) even when doing so will involve performing some otherwise impermissible action. These other actions may be impermissible on any variety of non-consequentialist grounds. Kantians may fill in PB such that no disrespect for people's humanity, no sacrifice of one's moral integrity, or violation of an agent's duties to herself can be permissibly made. PB resembles the infamous 'moderate' principle from Peter Singer [1972: 231, 2009: chs 1, 2]:

> **Singer's Principle**. 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.

We aim to capture something close to the spirit of Singer's Principle without inheriting its controversy. The key to this is that PB is a principle about our *prima facie* duties, whereas Singer's Principle is at least widely read as one about what we ought to do, all things considered. As mentioned above, when other duties conflict with PB, we remain neutral on which duty is strongest in some particular circumstance. In so far as some recommendation of PB might otherwise be too demanding, it will not be as demanding as Singer's Principle.[5] So, we do not think that PB will suffer from the same potential problems as Singer's Principle does.[6]

3. Why We Have Obligations to Learn

Our starting point with which to ground PB is the following principle [Carbonell 2013: 243]:

> **Burden of Expertise (BEX)**. One has certain moral obligations in virtue of possessing certain knowledge, skills, or experience.[7]

Carbonell illustrates and motivates BEX by way of a few cases, such as this one [ibid.]:

> **Peggy**. Peggy wrote her doctoral dissertation in anthropology on the power relations between rival tribes in Waziristan, the volatile region between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Now happily employed as a professor at a small liberal arts college and writing about other things, Peggy gets approached by officials at the State Department. They ask her to take a year-long sabbatical and come to advise them on peace-making and terrorism-prevention strategies in the area. No one in the world has exactly the same expertise Peggy has, though there are others with other kinds of relevant knowledge. Though Peggy would prefer teaching, she feels obligated to accept the offer and agrees to the one-year post.

As Carbonell points out, if Peggy is right to feel obliged to accept the offer, this is largely in virtue of the fact that she has technical expertise that few other candidates have. BEX would provide a good (partial) explanation of this obligation, if such an obligation exists.

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[5] See section 4 for more on demandingness worries.

[6] For some demandingness objections to Singer's Principle, see, e.g., McKinsey [1981: 310–12], Schmidtz [2000: 688–90], Cullity [2003: 415–16], and Timmerman [2015: 208–10].

[7] Carbonell [2013] provides a helpful framework for understanding knowledge-based obligations. We adopt part of this framework (although we reach different conclusions). BEX is the central principle of Carbonell's view.

Assuming that BEX is correct, just what is the relationship between knowledge and obligation? We believe that the underlying motivation behind Carbonell's cases is something like this: the agent who has a special skill, such as performing CPR, is in a privileged position to help. In this respect, there is nothing particularly unique about knowledge or skills.[8] Many contingent situational features about ourselves—financial means, spatiotemporal location, even body type[9]—can create distinct obligations for us. And it is explicit in BEX that our knowledge and skills can also figure in the generation of obligations unique to our situation.

Knowledge-based obligations range from being very narrow to being very wide. One's knowing CPR may just be a matter of taking a free course. On the other hand, Peggy's skills, for example, took a great amount of time, effort, and money to learn, and may even be wrapped up in her self-identity. It should be clear, then, that a principle like BEX will apply both to one-off situations like administering CPR, as well as to life-altering decisions about career choice and career change.

What is the relationship between BEX and PB? For a principle like BEX to create obligations to learn, two conditions must be met. First, we must have the relevant skills and knowledge to be able to learn. Second, there must be some previously existing moral features that ground the (alleged) new obligation(s) [ibid.: 246]. We argue that each of these conditions is often met. This implies that BEX applies widely, and so that we have many more knowledge-based obligations than we thought we had. This in turn supports PB.

Begin with the first condition. In order to have some knowledge-based obligation, according to BEX, an agent must already have the skills and knowledge in question. In order to be obliged to administer CPR, for example, an agent must know how to administer it. But if BEX is a fully general principle, it will also apply to our skills and knowledge about *gaining new skills and knowledge*. A person might not know how to do CPR, but she might have the ability to learn. If there are obligation-grounding moral features relevant to learning CPR, her knowledge that the class is being offered on this Saturday at her local community centre might trigger an obligation for her to attend in order to learn CPR.

It would be right to wonder why BEX is a fully general principle. In Carbonell's use of BEX, it is restricted to skills such as administering CPR or speaking a language. In our general use, BEX also applies to our ability to *learn* new skills. Why should BEX be extended in this way? We believe that BEX is fully general because it derives its plausibility from a very general principle—namely, that we should help when it comes at little cost to ourselves. Since knowing more puts you in a better position to help, you should learn more (come to know more) when it comes at little cost to yourself. And that is just what PB says.

If BEX is treated as general, there will be many structurally similar cases. Almost anyone reading this paper has a wealth of knowledge about how to go about developing new skills and learning new things. Furthermore, the access to

[8] There are also challenging cases where one may be morally required to *not* use their special skills. Famously, Bernard Williams [Smart and Williams 1973: 97–9] raises the case of a chemist who must decide whether to work towards creating weapons of mass destruction. We take no stand on how to approach such cases.

[9] For example, if one is the only person small enough to fit through a hole into a room to defuse a bomb, she might be obliged to do so.

the development of these skills and knowledge will at least often be otherwise financially and physically available to us.[10] From information about reducing one's carbon footprint, free phone apps to assist in learning a second language, to documentaries about conflict resolution, we have a vast range of resources with which to learn and develop all sorts of skills, and to gain all sorts of knowledge that we would not have otherwise. So, it seems clear that, for a significant amount of cases, the first condition for knowledge-based obligations will be met.

Turn now to the second condition: are there obligation-grounding moral features that can, along with our knowledge how to learn, generate moral obligations? We claim that there are. Begin with the following case:

> **Anticipated CPR**. Jill knows how to perform CPR. One Tuesday morning, she receives a letter that Ben has ingested a poison that is slow to take effect. He will suffer cardiac arrest later that evening, and, without CPR will almost certainly die. She is instructed not to contact anyone about it, not Ben, not the police, no one. Jill knows the restaurant that Ben habitually dines at on Tuesday evenings.

We believe that, in Anticipated CPR, Jill has an obligation to go to the restaurant that evening to perform CPR to save Ben's life. In other words, Jill is obliged to *put herself in the position* to perform CPR. And this obligation is due in part to her knowledge that CPR has to be performed, along with her skill to perform it.

Arguably, Anticipated CPR is not quite an instance of an obligation to learn. Rather, it is something weaker, like an obligation to be at a certain location at a certain time if doing so will save a life. But now consider a variation:

> **Anticipated CPR***. Jill doesn't know how to perform CPR, but she could easily learn within a few hours from a reliable medical website. One Tuesday morning, she receives a letter that Ben has ingested a poison that is slow to take effect. He will suffer cardiac arrest later that evening, and without CPR will almost certainly die. She is instructed not to contact anyone about it, not Ben, not the police, no one. Jill knows the restaurant that Ben habitually dines at on Tuesday evenings.

Assuming that other things are equal, intuitively Jill has an obligation to learn CPR—and we think that this intuition is on target. In other words, and as above, Jill is obliged to *put herself in the position* to perform CPR. This obligation is due in part to her knowledge that CPR will need to be performed, along with her ability to learn CPR.

If everything just said is correct, BEX (namely, that one has certain moral obligations in virtue of possessing certain knowledge, skills, or experience) has non-trivial applications for our obligations to learn. However, as it stands, we think that BEX is both too weak and too specific to capture what cases such as the two Anticipated CPR cases have in common. We think that the same basic structure underlies Jill's obligations in both cases. Her obligation is generated by the fact that she can easily put herself in the position to perform an action that prevents Ben's death. Of course, preventing a death is a stark example of something that could create an obligation for Jill, but presumably our intuitions would be much the same in any similar situation in which Jill could easily make things much better without great sacrifice to herself.

[10] Of course, there will be worries about how much—financially, physically, and psychologically—these obligations to learn could require of us. We discuss this in sections 3 and 4.

PB has a few implications in its favour. First, it can explain our intuitions in the two Anticipated CPR cases. Second, it explains the normative features that these two cases have in common. They both point to Jill's ability to put herself in the right position (broadly construed) to prevent a great harm as triggering her duty. Finally, it provides a general explanation for why BEX is true, and when, more specifically, it will kick in.[11]

In short, we have motivated PB as a plausible normative principle entailing that, at least sometimes, we have obligations not just to exercise skills tha twe already have, but to learn new skills as well.[12] Assuming that this is correct, the next question is that of how far these obligations to learn extend.

4. Short and Long-Term Obligations to Learn

So far, we have applied our principle PB to cases where the commitment from the agent is minimal—just a few hours of her time. It remains an open question as to how robust a set of obligations this principle might entail. We will now argue that PB has a relatively wide scope because people have many more obligations to learn than they might initially have thought. This is the structure of a family of cases where PB applies:

1. There are several skills that the agent can learn. Let's assume that there are only two, A and B.
2. The agent expects that A and B will increase her well-being equally (she likes them equally, she finds them equally pleasurable, etc.).
3. Learning one of them, A, would put her in a position to benefit others. Learning B would not.[13]
4. They do not require doing anything morally impermissible from her.

Consider the following instance:

> **First-Aid or Golf**. Carrie is thinking about learning one of two skills, how to provide first-aid and other basic medical skills, and how to play golf. The former would allow her to volunteer in the local clinic that is severely understaffed. Her new skill, even if amateur, would allow expert hands to be devoted to more demanding work. Learning each skill requires the same amount of time and effort. Carrie will not become a wealthy golf player who can then donate half of her massive income to charity. She will play golf with friends once in a while and have a good time.

It follows from PB that Carrie is morally obliged to learn first-aid and other basic medical skills, because this would put her in a better position to produce a greater benefit to others at little overall cost to herself and because learning either skill

[11] On the other hand, PB remains a bit vague, since we have no procedure for comparing costs to oneself with great benefits and/or harms. We don't pretend to have an answer here, but the problem is a familiar one.

[12] Could PB also create obligations to forget? Julia Driver [1989, 2001], for example, has argued in favour of some 'virtues of ignorance', such as modesty and blind charity. To take the latter case, suppose that you could only be motivated to loan money to a friend in need by failing to remember her failure to pay you back for similar loans in the past. Suppose that such a loan could greatly benefit your friend, at little cost to yourself. If you could easily forget her past failings, does PB require you to do so? This seems possible but, we suspect, rare. We set such cases aside for the rest of the paper.

[13] We focus on moral considerations that are grounded in harm and benefit. But if the reader is inclined also to accept considerations of virtue (maybe learning A is more virtuous than B) or other moral features, our view can accommodate this.

increases her well-being equally. Learning to provide first-aid comes at little overall cost to herself, even though she needs to devote a substantial amount of time to it.[14] This case illustrates that the constraint on the overall cost for the agent (it must be small) does not restrict PB to cases where the agent must invest only a few moments or hours to learn a skill. The above case suggests that our principle applies even when a significant commitment of time and energy is involved.[15] PB also applies to a wide range of cases where the agent has in her hands what we call 'disposable time'. Consider the following case:

> **TV**. John has realized that he watches bad TV religiously after work. He does not even find the TV watching relaxing or pleasant. He is just used to watching so much TV.

This is not just a situation where watching bad TV makes John better off by supplying much needed relaxation or by satisfying his pressing curiosity about the newest celebrity scandal. In principle, we have nothing against watching TV! The problem is that TV-watching does not increase John's well-being. He watches TV out of habit, instead of doing many other things that would make him happy.

Learning a new skill that would put him in a position to help others could also be a way to occupy John's time. He does not need to surrender to TV when he does not enjoy it. Learning a new skill might involve a substantial amount of time and energy, yet it would come at little cost to John because he does not spend that time doing something to increase his well-being anyway.

This is disposable time, because it is not time that contributes to one's well-being and it is not time that one spends in helping others. In a sense, one could 'do without it'. We suggest that spending disposable time to learn a skill that puts you in a position to help others comes at little cost to yourself even if the amount of time invested is substantial. Instead of watching TV, John could, for instance, learn a new language that he knows would be helpful in his community. He would invest several hours a week in doing this, but it still comes at little overall cost to him because the time invested would otherwise be disposable time.

The phenomenon of disposable time is widespread. Often, we find ourselves getting distracted from our main tasks in a variety of ways. We look away from the scary or boring task in our computer screen and into soothing cat videos and Facebook updates. We do not deny that cat videos and Facebook updates are often a source of true happiness. But often they are not, like watching TV for John. They are often sources of guilt and wasted time, even by one's own lights. Focusing even some of this time to learn a helpful skill comes at a small overall cost. Other examples of disposable time include excessive video-game-playing, and excessive TV-binge-watching. These activities are often characterized by how pleasure tends to decrease, the more that one does the activity.

[14] We take for granted the so-called dual-source view: 'the well-being of others can provide one with reasons to act in addition to those provided by one's own well-being' [Crisp 2006: 116]. It makes the minimal claim that radical egoism is not true.

[15] It might be thought that PB has implausible implications because it is only concerned with how much the agent has to sacrifice in order to learn the skill. But it might be that, while learning the skill is easy, the obligations incurred as a result of knowing the skill are substantial. It could be easy to learn CPR, but, once one knows CPR, morality might demand that an agent performs CPR on numerous occasions at great cost to her. The 'overall cost' clause is meant to limit the number of obligations that the agent has as a result of having learned the skill.

Of course, not everybody in the world has disposable time. The exhausted single mother of two small kids who watches thirty minutes of TV after working two jobs and putting the kids to bed needs those relaxing thirty minutes. It would come at a high cost to her to sacrifice that time to learn a foreign language. Her situation is very different from John's.

For an even wider scope, notice that PB also applies in cases where there is some sacrifice of the person's well-being. Consider variations of First-Aid or Golf, and *TV*. In these variations, the option that puts the agents in a position to help others leaves them worse off than the alternative does. In the original cases, the possibility of creating a great benefit works as a tie-breaker. But, in their revised counterparts, learning first-aid and learning a new language make the agents worse off when compared to the alternatives—namely, learning golf and watching TV, respectively.

PB entails that the agent is obliged to learn a skill as long as the overall cost for her is small and includes only a small sacrifice of her well-being. We acknowledge that there is a threshold such that, once it is reached, the overall cost for the agent ceases to be small and so the agent is not obliged to learn the skill anymore. We will not give a criterion to determine the threshold. That would take us too far afield. For our purposes, it is enough to point out that, despite the limitations imposed by the threshold, it is still remarkable that we have more knowledge-based obligations than we initially thought.[16]

The fact that the scope of our obligations is wider becomes especially relevant when the skills under consideration are complex, such as career choices. It follows from our principle that when two careers increase equally the well-being of a person, she morally ought to choose the one that puts her in a position to benefit others. When choosing a career, one usually focuses on its contribution to one's well-being. This could be a search for one's true passion, and we do not intend to crush people's passions. Our principle does not imply that one must choose the option that puts an agent in a position to create the *greatest* benefit to others.[17] But it does imply that career choice is not as morally neutral as we might have thought. It is not just an introspective search for what we would enjoy doing. Whenever we find ourselves deciding between two options that we prefer to a similar extent, we are morally obliged to choose the one that would create a great benefit. Sometimes we are also obliged to choose a career that would create a great benefit even if this involves a sacrifice, as long as the sacrifice is overall small.

Moreover, without abandoning one's career, one can choose to learn skills related to it that create great benefits to people. For example, as a philosopher, one can learn skills that would benefit others at little overall cost, such as pedagogical techniques that would be helpful in reaching out to disadvantaged students.

5. Demandingness Concerns

As we have mentioned, our position is rather moderate in how demanding it is. We do have moral obligations to learn skills and to choose some careers over

[16] For a discussion about the extent of the required sacrifice of the agent's well-being, see Crisp [2006: 116–19]. For an argument that sacrifices required by morality should not include radical changes in the agent's identity and moral agency, see Carbonell [2015].

[17] Compare MacAskill [2014, 2015: ch. 9, 2016].

others, but we do not have to choose the most helpful skill set or career available. Our view, unlike Singer's, does not imply that we must make great sacrifices in order to fulfil our moral obligations to learn. Bernard Williams [1985] argues that morality should not be all-encompassing, that there should be actions that are morally up to the agent. PB is compatible with this thought.

However, there are three demandingness concerns that could be leveraged against PB. According to the first two, PB is too demanding. According to the third, it is not demanding enough. The first concern, from Carbonell, is that if something like PB were true then we would have an infinite or unacceptably large number of obligations, which is absurd. After all, if PB is true, there is a wide variety of skills that we could learn in order to create great benefits. So, it may seem to follow that we are obliged to learn this wide variety of skills.

However, PB does not imply that we have as many obligations as we have potential benefit-creating skills. PB implies the more modest claim that one has some obligations to learn when it comes at a low *overall* cost to oneself. The constraint of a low overall cost will rule out many of the skills that an agent could learn. Instead, we claim that the agent has ample room for autonomy to decide what skills she learns, but that she is morally obliged to learn *some* skill or other.[18]

The second demandingness concern is that PB may generate obligations on individuals to quit a career that causes a great benefit to many people, merely because the (voluntary) cost of that career on the agent herself is high.[19] If an agent has an alternative way of creating a great benefit that involves little cost to herself, she must, according to PB, pursue that alternative. This objection is perhaps best illustrated by considering the following case:

> **Celebrity**. Cecilia wants to help to prevent the spread of malaria in Nigeria, so she travels there often to assist in distributing mosquito nets. The work is gruelling, but she takes pride in it. However, Cecilia is a celebrity, and could instead, with little sacrifice, be a powerful public relations advocate for malaria awareness. Because this PR work would take time away from her physically distributing nets, she opts against it.

Cecilia's options are whether to (a) continue distributing mosquito nets, or (b) learn PR skills to become an advocate for malaria awareness. Let's assume that both (a) and (b) would provide equally great benefits to those at risk of contracting malaria. Here, then, is the objection. It would seem odd to claim that Cecilia is obliged to quit distributing nets to do PR-work. However, doing so would provide a great benefit at little cost to herself. So, it seems that PB wrongly entails that she *is* obliged to pursue (b) and to abandon (a).

[18] We have assumed that only well-being is significant as a constraint on our moral obligations to learn. However, some have argued that difficulty in itself should be a constraint too (see, e.g., Nelkin [2016] and McElwee [2015]). Learning a language and embracing a new career, for example, are difficult enterprises even when they come at little overall cost to the person. If a principle is too demanding when it implies that we must do difficult things, PB would be too demanding. A full reply to this objection would take us too far afield, but there are reasons to think that difficulty independently of its impact on well-being is not a constraint on our obligations to learn. One of McElwee's key examples is the following. A person's only way to save a friend's life is to cut the friend's arm without anaesthetic. The very fact that it is such a difficult thing to do would make it too demanding to be morally obligatory. We believe that such cases are plausible because they are so closely related to well-being. The person who would be cutting off the arm will be immensely hurt, were she to go ahead with the action, including the possibility of failing to save the friend's life anyway. The action is difficult, precisely because the person's well-being is at stake.

[19] We owe this objection to Hille Paakkunainen.

We think that there are two plausible responses to this objection; we remain agnostic about which strategy is better. First, the proponent of PB could just bite the bullet on cases like this. To emphasize why this does not seem so bad, notice that PB only entails that Cecilia must stop distributing nets in order to begin doing PR work instead, if doing so is genuinely of little cost to herself. If, for example, she strongly prefers or identifies with on-the-ground work of net distribution, PB will not kick in, since undermining her preference would greatly decrease her well-being. PB will only override a relatively weak preference. It does not entail that agents like Cecilia must choose changes that will make them substantially unhappy or that will change their lives radically against their will.

A second strategy is more concessive, but nonetheless keeps with the spirit of PB. PB, it must be stressed, only generates *prima facie* obligations. If the normative theorist accepts a distinct normative principle that defeats the *prima facie* obligation generated in cases like Cecilia's, we are happy to grant it.[20] What is distinctive of PB is that, at least often, and in the actual circumstances in which many of us find ourselves, these obligations will not be defeated. And that is just what we argued above.

The third demandingness objection pulls in a different direction. The claim is that our principle is not demanding enough. We said that John in *TV* is morally obliged to learn something helpful instead of wasting his time doing something that he does not even enjoy. But, the objection goes, John can escape his moral obligation just by choosing an activity that increases his well-being. It could even be a rather frivolous activity. John could finally attend to the pending home improvement tasks. We embrace this consequence of our view as a feature, not a bug. Our view can be seen as implying a disjunctive moral obligation: you ought either to learn something or to help yourself during your now-disposable time. When you treat your time as disposable, you do not help yourself and you do not help others either. At the very least, morally requires of you that you benefit yourself if you are not to help others and that you help others if you are not to benefit yourself.

6. Conclusion

Many of us have a wide range of prospective choices about what skills to learn, what projects to undertake, and even (to some extent) what careers to pursue. Whether morality constrains these choices, thus obliging us to pursue some knowledge-generating projects rather than others, has been an unfortunately underexplored question. We have argued that morality does, under certain commonly met conditions, obliged us to pursue certain skills, projects, and careers, rather than others. Although this might seem surprising, we believe that the consideration of cases provides intuitive support for the claim. Finally, we considered and rejected three objections to PB. If we are right, moral considerations ought to include our deliberations about what skills to learn, what projects to undertake, and even what career to pursue.[21]

[20] Carbonell [2013: 254] argues that other competing moral obligations might be stronger and so outweigh a prospective knowledge-based obligation. This latter kind of obligation could not be decisive. This is our response to this worry.

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