Deontic Reasons and Distant Need

Sarah Clark Miller
University of Memphis

A shocking number of people worldwide currently suffer from malnutrition, disease, violence, and poverty. Their difficult lives evidence the intractability and pervasiveness of global need.[1] In this paper I draw on recent developments in metaethical and normative theory to reframe one aspect of the conversation regarding whether moral agents are required to respond to the needs of distant strangers. In contrast with recent treatments of the issue of global poverty, as found in the work of Peter Singer (1972 and 2002), who employs a broadly consequentialist framework focusing on suffering, and Thomas Pogge (2002), who inventively reframes the issue in terms of a negative duty not to harm, I explore this issue through an alternative approach: a social view of deontic moral reasons that features the idea of relational normativity. I address whether moral agents must respond to needy others by considering how the needs of distant strangers make implicit claims on those able to help them.[2] Ultimately, I demonstrate why indifference in the face of global need is morally unacceptable, hence supporting the idea of an obligation that requires response to others' basic needs.[3]

Practical Reasons

What obligations might moral agents have to help the distant needy? Awareness of the problem of global need outlined above impels moral agents toward the question of what kind of moral response, if any, is required. Proximity to extreme need tends to make the answer to such questions clear. When we come face-to-face with dire human need, as we imagine we do in Peter Singer's (1972) hypothetical Pond case, that we are required to rescue the one in need seems immediately and directly obvious. To refuse to save the child by wading into shallow water for fear of ruining your pants would be callous, to say the least. Proximate cases of need that involve response of moderate cost to moral agents carry with them an intuitive sense that they should be met. Whether the seemingly limitless needs of non-proximate others entail such a requirement of response, however, is a more hotly debated matter. The moral significance of claims of distant need is thus murkier.

A fruitful alternative philosophical tactic to employ when determining

the answer to such questions begins by consulting practical reason, here understood as "the general human capacity for resolving, through reflection, the question of what one is to do" (Wallace 2003). In turning to practical reason, through a process of deliberation, agents generate, compare and weigh various reasons for action. Practical reason serves this important function in a number of domains. For example, you may engage practical reason when deciding what to do on a late Friday afternoon after a stimulating, yet somewhat taxing week during which you poured much effort into a paper, say, for the *Southwest Philosophy Review*. Speaking purely hypothetically, one possible course of action would be to find the most divine vodka martini (straight up with a twist) that your home city has to offer and sip it serenely. Another possible course of action would be to edit the galley proofs that have been sitting on the corner of your desk all week, sadly neglected. Other relevant factors might include your knowledge of the upcoming busy week in which finding time to proofread the galleys will be a challenge, as well as the knowledge that you have yet to find a decent vodka martini in your mid-sized metropolis. Taking everything into account, you probably have conclusive reason to choose the galley proofs over the martini. It is practical reason that led you to this conclusion.

But note something interesting about this example. The conclusion you reach, although certainly recommending a particular action, does not bind you to perform this action in any strongly moral sense (even if your editor disagrees). If you were to decide to martini hunt Friday afternoon, and galley proof first thing Saturday morning, in doing so, you would not violate any moral precepts. Under consideration in this example are reasons exhibiting what R. Jay Wallace calls "an aspirational character, insofar as they count in favor of the actions they recommend in a way that leaves the deliberating agent with some discretion to ignore or discount their claims" (Wallace 2008, 3-4). Thus, in this case, it is up to your discretion to discount the claim of the galley proofs in favor of the claim of the martini.

We have just seen how practical reason guides action concerning non-moral matters. But practical reason can play a significant role in moral deliberation, too. The reasons for action given by morality—and by deontic morality in particular—differ significantly from reasons given in favor of non-moral actions. In contrast to the aspirational structure of reasons relating to non-moral action (as found in the galley proofs case) reasons for deontic actions do not present themselves as *recommended*, but rather as *required*. They provide us with conclusive reasons to act. In Singer's Pond case, the fact that the child is drowning does not merely recommend the action of saving him or her, it requires it. To understand the action as

merely recommended is to misunderstand something about how practical reasons work in the context of deontic morality. In this scenario, the moral agent involved is left with little to no discretion to ignore or discount the claims of reason, or in other words, the claim the child's desperate need makes on her.[4] In short, she has an obligation to save the child.

The Case of Self-Interested Samantha

Thus far I have explained some of the basic features and functioning of practical reason with an eye toward answering the question, "What is one to do about global need?" Against this background, I now turn to a particular example to demonstrate and offer an alternative explanation of what I take to be a rather common error moral agents make about individual responsibility, non-necessary or luxury goods and global need. Analysis of this example will provide several significant insights regarding the role of deontic moral reasons in our present global age.

Meet Self-Interested Samantha. Samantha is a reasons-amoralist,[5] which means that while she both understands and recognizes moral reasons, they do not necessarily motivate her, which is to say, they do not determine her choice of action (Greenspan 2007, 173-74).[6] On the topic of responding to the plight of needy, distant strangers, Sam deliberates as follows: She recognizes that there are desperately needy people in the world. Moreover, she even recognizes that their well-being, or in this case the lack thereof, may provide her with some moral reasons. But she does not act on these reasons. Why not? Because she also holds a seemingly stronger or more important reason that justifies advancing her self-interest instead of aiding substantially needy others. So, if Sam holds in her hands a $100 bill and has to decide between two courses of action—between (1) giving the money to Oxfam or (2) using it to buy a new tech gadget that would further streamline her life, thus giving her, to her mind, an edge of efficiency at the office—Sam would choose action (2). How does Sam reach the conclusion to select action (2)? She acknowledges that others are starving elsewhere in the world. She also acknowledges that their good or well-being provides her with moral reasons, but she understands that which is in her self-interest, in this case, to gain additional technologically enhanced efficiency at the office, to be more significant.

There are some important features of Sam's case to note. Sam is a rational agent, so we can't simply attribute her deliberation to some form of persistent irrationality. She is not just making an unprincipled exception of herself. Rather, she has adopted a principle of action that recommends that she discount moral reasons pertaining to others, in order to put

herself and her interests first. Thus, her decision not to act in accordance with some moral reasons, namely, the moral reasons others' basic needs provide her with, does not represent a moment of lapsing into irrationality. Rather, she rationally, albeit perhaps selfishly, discounts moral reasons pertaining to needy others and instead acts in accordance with reasons recommending that she advance her own interests over those of others.

Sam's thinking represents one common pattern of deliberation that affluent individuals might follow when deciding for or against actions that could aid needy others. Rather than understanding such actions as irrational, to my mind there is a more fruitful, more interesting explanation of the error of Sam's ways. To describe her error simply in terms of irrationality is to get wrong what she gets wrong and therefore to miss an opportunity to learn something important about moral reasons and obligations.

I submit that Sam's problem is that she is mistaken about the nature of deontic reasons and the role they play in moral deliberation. What Sam fails to appreciate is that moral reasons are inherently social and, indeed, that an individual's deliberation takes place in an interpersonal context. As Wallace has recently maintained, deontic moral reasons "are constitutively implicated in complexes of relational. . .normativity" (2008, 18).[7]

Relational normativity involves "a series of characteristic assumptions about the normative relations you stand in to the other person. That person has a right not to be harmed or made to suffer, which goes together with a claim *against* you not to treat him in these ways. Your obligation in this matter has a similarly relational aspect; it is an obligation…not to disregard his well-being, and its violation would not merely be something that is impersonally wrong or incorrect, but an act that *wrongs* the person who is made to suffer" (Wallace 2007, 28). Sam is mistaken in not realizing that the moral reasons she acknowledges as pertaining the needy others' well-being or good correspond with claims against her that she act on these reasons. She incorrectly understands moral reasons arising from others' basic needs as freestanding moral considerations, which is to say that she fails to acknowledge others' corresponding claims that emerge in a structure of relational normativity. In addition, Sam does not properly acknowledge the ways that others are vulnerable to the harm that results from her inaction. Thus the practical expression of such moral wrong is significant: with certain cases of need, the potential for harm resulting from inaction is no less than the loss of life.

Thus the social view of moral reasons, understood through a model of relational normativity, clarifies the conception of deontic reasons in several ways. The giving and receiving of moral reasons happens in an interpersonal context, an awareness of which reveals the model of individual delibera-

tion to be inadequate. Indeed, this is the problem with how philosophers have often treated cases like Sam's: although this is the form that such considerations tend to take in moral philosophy (an individual moral agent presented with a hypothetical situation about which she deliberates alone), the structure and presuppositions of such a case render those who are in need less visible. By understanding moral deliberation as a process of claim making and reason receiving, those in need come to be acknowledged and properly represented in the deliberative process. In common parlance, we often speak of fundamental needs as if they issue a call, namely, a call to be met. The view of moral reasons as social renders this sense of need intelligible in moral theory. In addition, it opens the door to practices of moral accountability, dismissing the assumption that one must provide justification primarily to the one contemplating a moral action to explain why he should engage in that action. Within a moral accountability model, rather than justification only involving those in Sam's moral community attempting to explain to her why she should engage in certain actions, she is also called upon to account for and to legitimate her inaction in the face of dire need to others. It is in light of an understanding of normativity as relational and moral reasons as social that she ultimately discovers that she has a lack of discretion to discount others' moral reasons in her deliberations. No longer is it possible for her to automatically trump the moral reasons of the desperately needy with her own self-interested reasons of less consequence.[8]

Stephen Darwall's recent work on the second-person standpoint provides a related way to analyze Sam's mistaken moral outlook. In broad strokes, one can say that Darwall aims to elucidate the significance of reciprocal recognition for moral theory and in so doing develops a compelling account of moral obligation as second-personal. For Darwall, the second-person standpoint is "the perspective you and I take up when we make and acknowledge claims on one another's conduct and will" (2006, 3). Understood through Darwall's moral framework, Sam does not properly acknowledge her own and others' second-personal standing and in so doing disregards claims that distant strangers in need can make on her actions. The claims that needy others make should function for Sam as second-personal reasons for acting. Darwall explains, "A command is a form of address that purports to give a person a distinctive kind of (*normative*) *reason* for acting, one I call a *second-personal reason*. What makes a reason second-personal is that it is grounded in (*de jure*) authority relations that an addresser takes to hold between him and his addressee. Unlike practical reasons of other sorts, therefore, second-personal reasons must be able to be addressed within these relations. And…second-personal reasons are distinctive also

in the kind of claim they make on the will" (Ibid., 3-4). On this account, distant needy strangers, in light of their second-person competency, have the authority to make claims on Sam's will and actions. The second-person practical reasons that arise in this context are grounded in the authority relation that holds between Sam and distant strangers through which they issue claims, make demands and have expectations of one another.

In other words, Sam and distant strangers in need are involved in a moral community consisting of relations of mutual recognition and respect, as well as the mutual accountability of equals. Ultimately, for Darwall, such relations can be characterized in terms of the dignity of persons, which Darwall understands as "the second-personal authority of an equal….[R]espect for this dignity is an acknowledgement of this authority that is also second-personal" (2006, 121). Thus, one final way of articulating the gist of Sam's moral misperception is to say that she does not realize her position as a member of a wider moral community governed by relations of mutual recognition. On this account, to discount the claim others make as needy individuals is to discount their very standing as members of the moral community. It is to disrespect them and deny their dignity. It is to fail to extend to them moral recognition respect, to fail to "take seriously and weigh appropriately the fact that they are persons in deliberating about what to do" (Darwall 1977, 38).

Scope and Moral Relationships in the Context of Globalization

One might question whether Darwall's second-person standpoint can be employed in the service of an analysis of global moral relations in which a more traditional conception of addresser and addressee is not necessarily applicable. Articulating this set of worries in terms of Sam's case, one might ask: What is the scope of Sam's obligation? Who is included in her moral community? Which relationships are morally significant, even in a minimal sense? Before concluding, I would like to address the impact of globalization on the relational normativity formulation by discussing what the interpersonal context of moral reasons means in a global era. Thus, I will consider the impact of globalization on both the extent of interpersonal connection and the scope of moral community.

It is quite obvious that globalization has greatly altered everything from our economic practices to our patterns of material and cultural consumption to even our aesthetic sensibilities. We can travel farther faster and buy more from a distance. Our reach of learning goes further, as does the influence of the ideologies in which we are invested. Such changes

resulting from globalization are well documented. But I want to focus on an element globalization affects that has received much less attention: how globalization alters our common sense moral thought and moral intuitions, especially with regard to moral responsibility. Samuel Scheffler helpfully characterizes a traditional common sense view of moral responsibility, still somewhat widely believed, in which "human social relations. . .[consist] primarily in small-scale interactions, with clearly demarcated lines of causation, among independent individual agents" (2001, 39). In addition, such a view draws on a phenomenology of agency through which we experience ourselves as agents with very circumscribed causal powers. A result of holding these views is that we believe that our moral impact and the results of our actions only travel so far. In addition, we tend to believe we are beholden to a moral community of a limited size and that our individual responsibility, in conjunction, is of a rather narrow scope.

Given the general increase of cultural and interpersonal exchange resulting from globalization, I want to suggest that these common sense moral views and moral intuitions are incorrect. In the current global context, the possibility that our action or inaction will affect those located at quite a distance from us increases significantly. More specifically, that our action or lack thereof will bring about harm for others across the world is a likely outcome. Moreover, we often have the means to gain knowledge of people on whom our actions may have an impact. They are no longer located in distant, mysterious lands about which we only hear fantastic stories. The increase of impact when taken in conjunction with the increase of knowledge of others establishes a basic relationship between us and distant individuals.[9] The nature of this relationship, as one that involves access to knowledge of others' interests as well as to knowledge of our impact on their well-being, creates and sustains an interpersonal context in which moral claims may be made and moral reasons may be received, which is to say that it becomes the territory of relational normativity. The notion that there exists a global moral community is no longer a fanciful one. Instead, it is rapidly becoming our reality. This is why Self-Interested Samantha is mistaken in her moral deliberations. And this is why indifference in the face of global need—for those who are positioned such that they can meet others' needs without extensive sacrifice on their part—is morally impermissible.

Works Cited

Brookings Institute, Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement. (2007). *Addressing internal displacement in peace processes, peace agreements and peace-building*. Retrieved March 4, 2009, from http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2007/09peaceprocesses.aspx.

Darwall, S. (1977). Two kinds of respect. *Ethics 88* (1), 36-49.

———. (2006). *The second-person standpoint: Morality, respect and accountability*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Greenspan, P. (2007). Practical reasons and moral "ought". In R. Schafer-Landau (Ed.), *Oxford studies in metaethics, vol. II* (pp. 172-194). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Neill, O. (1985). Rights, obligations, and needs. *Logos 6*, 29-47.

———. (2005). The dark side of human rights. *International Affairs 81* (2), 427-439.

Pogge, T. (2002). *World poverty and human rights*. Maldon, Mass.: Polity Press.

Reader, S. (2003). Distance, relationship and moral obligation. *Monist 86* (3), 367-381.

Scheffler, S. (2001). *Boundaries and allegiances: Problems of justice and responsibility in liberal thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Singer, P. (1972). Famine, affluence and morality. *Philosophy and Public Affairs 1* (1), 229-243.

———. (2002). *One world: The ethics of globalization*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

United Nations Children's Fund. (2007). *State of the world's children 2008*. Retrieved March 4, 2009 from http://www.unicef.org/sowc08/report/report.php.

Wallace, R. J. (2003). Practical Reason. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy.* Retrieved March 4, 2009 from http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/practical-reason/.

———. (2007). Reasons, relations, and commands: Reflections on Darwall. *Ethics 118*, 24-36.

———. (2008). The deontic structure of morality. Unpublished manuscript.

Williams, B. (1972). *Morality: An introduction to ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. (1981). *Moral luck: Philosophical papers 1973-1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

World Hunger Education Service. (2009). *World hunger facts 2009*. Retrieved on March 4, 2009 from http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/world%20hunger%20facts%202002.htm.

Notes

[1] Frequently-cited statistics indicate the vast scope of this problem. At present 850 million people in the world are undernourished and 987 million persons live below the international poverty line, subsisting on only one dollar a day (according to the World Bank) (World Hunger Education Service 2009). Approximately 26,000 children under the age of five die every day from largely preventable causes including unsafe water, treatable disease, and hunger, accounting for the death of 9.7 million children a year (United Nations Children's Fund, 2007). The total number of people worldwide who have been internally displaced because of violence in their countries stands at approximately 25 million. Brookings Institute (Brookings Institute 2007).

[2] As my argument today falls within the realm of ethics as opposed to politics, it aims to discern the responsibility of individual moral agents rather than governmental institutions, for example. This is not meant to indicate, however, that I necessarily take the individual moral agent to be the sole or even primary locus of global responsibility. But as one possible locus, determining the extent of global responsibility for individual moral agents is a worthwhile task.

[3] In some sense, then, this paper follows Onora O'Neill's emphasis on developing a discourse of obligation so that human rights might come to be more than mere "manifesto" rights (1985 and 2005).

[4] On the predominant view of practical reason currently in play in many philosophical circles, reasons function as reasons in favor of some action, which is to say, reasons play a positive role in guiding action. Thus, when serving as reasons establishing actions we ought to do, that is, that we are obligated to perform, on this

view, they must be strong *pro tanto* reasons for action. As such they are nevertheless susceptible to defeat via opposing or weightier reasons. Patricia Greenspan defines *pro tanto* reasons as "reasons counting in favor of or against some act as far as they go, but capable of being defeated by opposing reasons" (2007, 172). In addition, *pro tanto* reasons can be "weighed against competitors" (Ibid., 188). Generally speaking, Greenspan's critical view of practical reason seems better suited to capture the structure of reason giving associated with obligation (Ibid.). On Greenspan's view the essential characteristic of a practical reason is its relation to criticism. The function of a practical reason is either (1) to offer criticism (note that this could be potential criticism and need not always be actual criticism posed to the moral agent) or (2) to respond to a criticism by noting valuable features of the act under consideration (Ibid., 173). Greenspan observes that the change in emphasis from reasons in favor of some action on the positive view to the reasons against—what we might call "cons" or negative reasons—is characteristic of the critical view of deontic morality (Ibid., 174).

[5] Cf. Williams 1972.

[6] Sam represents a reasons externalist view, as opposed to a reasons internalist view—as set forth by Bernard Williams—in which one can only make sense of the notion of practical reason by understanding it as motivating. (See Williams 1981)

[7] See also Wallace 2007.

[8] It is important to note that other types of claims might trump claims of need, such as claims involving special obligations to family members or goods vital to a moral agent's pursuit of the good life.

[9] See Reader 2003.