

## BUT I'VE GOT MY OWN LIFE TO LIVE: PERSONAL PURSUITS AND THE DEMANDS OF MORALITY

*forthcoming in Social Theory and Practice*

Daniel Koltonski  
University of Delaware

*The dominant response to Peter Singer's defense of an extremely demanding duty of aid argues that an affluent person's duty of aid is limited by her moral entitlement to live her own life. This paper argues that this entitlement provides a basis not for limiting an affluent person's duty of aid but rather for the claim that she too is wronged by a world marked by widespread desperate need; and the wrong she suffers is a distinctive one: the activation of a duty of aid so demanding that it dominates her life, crowding out her own valuable projects and involvements.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Peter Singer's argument in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (1972) begins with certain of our secure moral convictions about the duty of rescue—as exemplified by the case of the child drowning in a shallow pond—and, in just a few steps, arrives at an extremely demanding duty of the relatively affluent person to aid those in desperate need overseas.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Singer's duty of aid is so demanding that it seems to leave no space in such a person's practical life for her own projects and involvements; she is instead morally little more than an agent of rescue. For many, this claim is unbelievable and so it must be that Singer's argument goes awry somewhere. Arguably the dominant diagnosis of how it does so focuses on this fact that Singer's duty of aid leaves no space for the relatively affluent person to live her own life, and the claim is that the duty of aid simply cannot demand this much of her, for she has a moral entitlement to live her own life that limits what such a duty can demand. Singer's argument goes

---

<sup>1</sup> For the argument, see Singer 1972: 231-236. For a similar account, see Unger 1996. Who gets counted among the 'relatively affluent'? For this discussion, we do not need anything particularly precise and so the following should suffice: people with the time and money to spend on things beyond basic needs or, as Garrett Cullity (2004: 7) puts it, "people like you and me."

awry, on this view, by failing to properly recognize the moral importance of persons having the space to live their own lives.<sup>2</sup>

This paper challenges this dominant response to Singer's argument by offering an alternate account of the moral entitlement to live one's own life, one compatible with Singer's defense of an extremely demanding duty of aid. On this alternate account, defending a duty of aid so demanding that the relatively affluent person lacks the space to live her own life, as Singer's account does, is nevertheless compatible with properly recognizing the moral importance of having the space to live one's own life. This is because it can be true that the duty of aid is as demanding as Singer's argument claims—or, as I'll put it, that the duty *thoroughly dominates* a person's possibilities for action—and yet also true that it ought not be the case that it is this demanding, for the affluent person has a moral entitlement to live her own life. On this account, then, something has indeed gone awry. But it is not Singer's argument that has gone awry—it may be sound and so the conclusion true—but rather the circumstances of our world that make it the case that the duty of aid demands so much of the affluent person.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, insofar as the various social, political, and economic institutions structuring our world are responsible for widespread and persistent desperate need, and so for the fact that the duty of aid demands so much of the relatively affluent person, we can say that she is wronged by the fact that it demands this much, for she has a moral entitlement to live her own life. And so, instead of serving as a basis for limiting the duty of aid, this moral entitlement picks out yet another individual wronged by a world containing widespread and persistent desperate need: the relatively affluent person. And the wrong she suffers is a distinctive one: the activation of a duty of aid so demanding that it thoroughly dominates her life, crowding out her own valuable projects and involvements and, in that way, turning her into morally little more than an agent of rescue.

The aim of this paper is thus *not* to mount a full-fledged defense of Singer's argument.<sup>4</sup> Its aim is a narrower one, namely to show that, if Singer's argument does go awry, it will not be because, as the dominant response claims, it is unable to properly recognize the moral importance of having the space to live one's own

---

<sup>2</sup> Examples include Cullity 2004, Hampton 1993, Herman 2007, Miller 2004 and 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Ashford (2003: 292) makes this point, specifically about contractualist and utilitarian accounts of the duty of aid: "The extreme demandingness of both contractualist and utilitarian obligations to those in need is not an objection to either view, I suggest, but an appropriate response to morally salient features of the current state of the world."

<sup>4</sup> That said, I agree with David Enoch (2011: 193) when he remarks that he "do[es] not know of any convincing argument" showing that Singer's (and Unger's) core argument is mistaken.

life. Singer's argument can affirm that persons are morally entitled to the space to live their own lives while also asserting that, given the circumstances of our world, the duty of aid nevertheless dominates them, depriving them of this space to which they are entitled.

The paper pursues this narrower aim in two parts. First, it presents and argues against what is arguably the most sophisticated version of the dominant response to Singer's argument, namely the one defended by Garrett Cullity in *The Moral Demands of Affluence* (2004). Cullity observes that an argument like Singer's implies radical changes to our commonsense conception of beneficence, and he argues that among the changes it implies—perhaps the most radical and, for him, the least plausible one—is the claim that persons' interests in living their own lives are *not* morally important. However, as I'll show, Cullity is mistaken here, for Singer's argument does not actually imply this particular change. The paper then goes on to offer a sketch of how accounts like Singer's can take seriously the moral importance of having the space to live one's own life—and, in fact, can regard it as a moral entitlement—while at the same time defending a duty of aid so demanding that it means that one doesn't have that space. In doing this second thing, the paper makes a larger point about how we might think about the apparent conflict between the moral importance of personal pursuits and the demandingness of moral duty, one that will apply to more than just duties of aid.

## 2. SINGER, CULLITY, AND THE MORAL IMPORTANCE OF LIVING YOUR OWN LIFE

Singer's argument takes what Cullity calls "an iterative approach" to the question of a person's duty of aid. According to this approach, for each person in desperate need that can easily be helped, I must contribute to the effort to help them unless the cost to me of *this* contribution is by itself large enough to justify refusal. That I may have already contributed a great deal to help others does not matter for my duty to help this further person, only whether the additional cost to me of helping this further person itself isn't too great. As Cullity (2004: 87) observes, we can understand beneficence as "concern for others' interests" but we must read this description extensionally: "In a situation where someone's life can be saved, a beneficent person's reason to help him will be that *he needs help*, and not that *this action furthers the interests of other people*." From this Cullity (2004: 87) sketches the case for the iterative approach:

What considerations can sensibly be treated as countervailing against this reason? A countervailing consideration is one that shows why, if you refuse to help, you should not be faulted for being insufficiently concerned to act on this reason. But it is hard to see how what you have done for others in the past can help show this. If a beneficent person's reason to help is *his* need, how can considerations about what you have done for others be relevant to whether your concern to act on *this* reason is sufficient for beneficence?

On the iterative approach, then, whatever cost I may be required to bear to help save another's life, beneficence requires that I bear that cost for "the thousand-and-first person" I can help save just as it requires me to do so for the first person.

The result of the iterative approach is what Cullity (2004: 78-79) calls 'the Extreme Demand':

*The Extreme Demand.* I am morally required to keep contributing my time and money to aid agencies (or to some other comparably important cause), until either:

- (a) there are no longer any lives to be saved (or comparably important goals to be achieved) by those agencies, or
- (b) contributing my share of the cost of our collectively saving one further life (or doing something comparably important) would itself be a large enough sacrifice to excuse my refusing to contribute.

In a world like ours, a world of widespread and persistent desperate need, my duty of aid will not be limited by (a)—no matter how many I help, there will be more persons in desperate need that I can help—and so I must keep contributing until I reach the limits in (b). When might I reach those limits? It is difficult to see how the incremental sacrifice of any of my personal pursuits—sacrificing, say, going to a movie, buying a book, or taking my partner out to dinner—could justify refusing to help save a life, and so, on the iterative approach, I must repeatedly make that incremental sacrifice so long as there are further lives to help save.<sup>5</sup> While there is some question as to precisely how demanding the Extreme Demand thus ends up being, Cullity (2004: 80, 85) concludes quite

---

<sup>5</sup> It is thus not enough merely to do your fair share to aid those in desperate need. So long as there remain persons in desperate need, you must continue to contribute in order to help them, even if they are in desperate need only because some other relatively affluent persons are failing to do their fair share. See Cullity 2004: 76-77.

plausibly that it “seem[s] to allow me to spend practically no time or money on my own personal fulfillment” and, as such, “it calls for the wholesale abandonment of almost all of our everyday lives.” And this does seem to be where Singer (1972: 238) himself thinks his argument leads.

*a. The moral importance of living your own life*

A common reaction to Singer’s argument—arguably the dominant one—is that something has gone awry, that it cannot be, as the Extreme Demand has it, that the relatively affluent person is morally little more than an agent of rescue. Behind this reaction, I think, is what I’ll call *the Basic Thought*:

*The Basic Thought*: It is a matter of considerable moral importance that persons have the space to live their own lives.<sup>6</sup>

By ‘space to live her own life’ I mean that the boundaries and constraints of morality—what she morally must or must not do—do not consistently narrow a person’s possibilities for action to such an extent that her own valuable projects, involvements, or relationships—generally, who and what *she* cares about—cannot, without running afoul of morality, play an independent and substantive role in her deliberations about what she is to do.<sup>7</sup>

The Basic Thought is related to what Barbara Herman (2007: 204) identifies as an “independent current in our moral understanding,” one which concerns “the relation of fit between morality and ordinary life: that whatever morality requires of us, it should not make our lives unlivable, or too severe.” That said, the Basic Thought’s underlying concern isn’t with the demandingness of morality, where demandingness is a matter of the cost or difficulty of compliance.<sup>8</sup> It is rather with whether morality allows a person space for the exercise of her freedom, where freedom is understood along the lines of John Stuart Mill’s (2003: 160) “[t]he only freedom which deserves the name is that of

---

<sup>6</sup> This formulation of the Basic Thought, which aims to capture the core idea motivating the dominant response to Singer, is not uncontroversial. For instance, you might reject the thought that the overdemandingness of impartial morality might itself be a moral problem and opt instead for the view that, while impartial morality can indeed be extremely demanding, you are rationally permitted to live your own life rather than meet those extreme demands. This is the sort of view defended, for instance, by Susan Wolf (1982). I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this.

<sup>7</sup> I am assuming here that the valuable pursuits in question are not in themselves immoral.

<sup>8</sup> For discussion of the relevance of cost and difficulty to the question of moral demandingness, see McElwee 2016.

pursuing our own good in our own way.” Granted, Mill is concerned with the threat to this pursuit posed by social and legal coercion while the Basic Thought’s focus is on the threat posed by the demands of morality. But it does seem that morality can pose a threat to freedom understood in this way, and we might call this threat *domination by duty*. A person is dominated by duty when the demands of morality overly narrow her possibilities for action, perhaps even deciding her course of action altogether and, in doing so, leave little to no room for her to “pursue her own good in her own way.” Of particular concern here is when a person is *thoroughly* dominated by duty, when she must be little more than an agent of morality for sustained stretches of time.

Confronted with Singer’s argument and its endorsement of the Extreme Demand, we might develop the Basic Thought into the claim that persons have a moral entitlement to live their own lives that *limits* domination by duty. This is essentially what Cullity’s account does: “It is reasonable for me to have a policy of contributing towards helping others that allows me to retain a defensible engagement with my own projects, relationships, and other life-enhancing goods” (Cullity 2004: 191). And this emerges most clearly when Cullity (2004: 85) considers what he calls “the nightmare scenario” in which “everywhere I went I directly encountered people needing my life-saving help, in practically unlimited numbers, and each of whom I could save at small cost.” About this scenario, Cullity (2004: 85) claims that, compared to the Extreme Demand, it is “[s]urely [...] more intuitively attractive” to hold that it would be morally permissible for me to “spen[d] my mornings saving people’s lives, perhaps, and my afternoons having a life of my own.” He thus does not deny that the duty of rescue can still be fairly demanding (I must spend my mornings saving lives, after all). But, even so, his view is that a person’s entitlement to live her own life justifies a hard limit on what her duty to aid others in desperate need can demand of her whether she encounters those others directly—as in the nightmare scenario—or not—as in our current world.

In his discussion of so-called Moderate views of the duty to aid, of which Cullity’s account is one, Brian Berkey usefully distinguishes between ‘Moderation about Principles’ and ‘Moderation about Demands.’ The former, Moderation about Principles, holds that morality does not demand that we always take everyone’s interests into account equally; rather, we may reasonably attach importance to our own valuable pursuits—projects, involvements, relationships, etc.—beyond what attaches to them from an impartial perspective (Berkey 2016: 3020, 3026). And the latter, Moderation about Demands, holds that “in circumstances like ours, morality is not significantly [or, dramatically] more

demanding [...] than *common-sense morality* takes it to be" (Berkey 2016: 3020). Berkey (2016: 3021) observes that, although Moderate views characteristically incorporate both, it is not obvious that Moderation about Principles will imply Moderation about Demands; on the contrary,

it seems not merely conceptually possible, but also quite intuitively plausible, that appealing versions of Moderation about Principles might, when applied to well off people in a world like ours, imply demands that far exceed those that proponents of Moderation about Demands are willing to accept.

As Berkey (2016, 3022-3024) notes, there is ample reason to suspect that our intuitions, about particular cases of rescue, that we are not required to make very large or very costly sacrifices are not reliable.<sup>9</sup> This presents a problem, he argues, for those Moderate accounts that, on the basis of these intuitions, build into their version of Moderation about Principles a commitment to Moderation about Demands instead of making the case for their version of Moderation about Principles independently of these intuitions (with Moderation about Demands then following from the case that's been made). Berkey (2016: 3026-3033) points to Samuel Scheffler's and Richard Miller's accounts as examples of Moderate accounts that make this kind of mistake.<sup>10</sup>

I suspect, however, that the appeal of Moderation about Demands, particularly when considering the implications not of a one-off case of rescue requiring a very large sacrifice but rather, as in Singer's argument, of an indefinitely long series of rescues requiring sacrifices that, though individually small, are cumulatively very large, rests not simply on intuitions about cases, intuitions of which we have reason to be skeptical, but also on the Basic Thought. The core worry about Singer's account is that morality's demands of the relatively affluent person over time would deprive her of space sufficient (on any reasonable understanding of 'sufficient') for living her own life, and that they would do so seems straightforwardly incompatible with the claim that it is itself morally important that she have that space. On this view, then, the Basic Thought implies Moderation about Demands: persons have moral entitlements

---

<sup>9</sup> Berkey appeals to Peter Unger's arguments in *Living High and Letting Die* (1996) and, in particular, to Unger's claim that, as Berkey (2016: 3023) puts it, "in cases in which a large number of people are in need, and their needs are not salient to us (for example, they are deeply impoverished people in a distant country), we will tend to have the intuition that we are not obligated to sacrifice in order to aid them because we will tend to be in the grip of what [Unger] calls 'futility thinking.'"

<sup>10</sup> For the accounts in question, see Scheffler 1992: Chs. 6-7; Miller 2004; and Miller 2010: Ch. 1.

to live their own lives that limit domination by duty. Additionally, the Basic Thought may serve as a bridge of sorts between Moderation about Demands and Moderation about Principles, for, if an argument denies the Basic Thought—as Singer’s, on this view, does—then that argument does not allow a person to attach sufficient importance to her own valuable pursuits to make for a plausible version of Moderation about Principles. A defensible Moderation about Principles, on this view, will thus need to incorporate a moral entitlement to live one’s life that limits domination by duty and, in doing so, it will imply Moderation about Demands. This is essentially what Cullity’s particular Moderate account does.

*b. Cullity’s argument against the Extreme Demand*

The argument Cullity offers against the Extreme Demand is, as he (2004: 128) calls it, “an argument from the presuppositions of beneficence.”<sup>11</sup> When we take ourselves to be under requirements of beneficence to help others, we accept that those others’ interests give us compelling moral reasons to help them. That we do so is important, Cullity (2004: 128) argues, because “in accepting this, we are making presuppositions from which it follows that acting out of partiality towards our own interests is not wrong.” If beneficence requires me, say, to pay the subway fare for someone on their way to audition for Julliard, then it must not be wrong of them—and would not be wrong of me—to pursue a career in music performance. But, the Extreme Demand says that, in our current world, it is wrong to act out of partiality towards one’s own interests—Extremism, not Moderation, about Demands—and so it must also reject the various everyday requirements of beneficence that we intuitively take ourselves to have. Thus, if it is in fact wrong to pursue a career in music performance, then it cannot be that I’m required by beneficence to pay that subway fare. That it rejects these everyday requirements of beneficence, Cullity argues, is a problem for the Extreme Demand.

Cullity’s argument (2004: 130) starts by observing that many goods—relationships and personal projects, for instance—are ones that “essentially involve personal partiality.”<sup>12</sup> But, in our current world, the Extreme Demand

---

<sup>11</sup> See also Cullity 2009.

<sup>12</sup> And, as Cullity (2004: 130) explains, “[t]he attitude of personal partiality I bear towards my friends and projects is a matter of taking them to justify my acting a certain way, out of proportion to the impartial value of acting that way.”



requires that I live “an altruistically focused life” by “constricting my pursuit of my own fulfillment as much as I bearably and usefully can, for the purpose of contributing to helping others” (Cullity 2004: 133). The Extreme Demand thus claims that it is wrong for me to live “a non-altruistically-focused life” (Cullity 2004: 137). With this established, the argument then appeals to the following principle:

When your interest in having (or doing) a certain thing is an interest in having (or doing) what it would be wrong of you to have (or do), that interest cannot be a good reason for morally requiring me to help you to get (or do) it. (Cullity 2004, 138)

The Extreme Demand has it that our interests in the fulfillments of a non-altruistically-focused life are interests in things it is wrong for us to have (or do). According to this principle, it is thus committed to the view that those interests cannot give rise to requirements of beneficence on the part of others to help us. But, Cullity (2004: 137) argues, it is “absurd” to deny that a person’s interests in the fulfillments of a non-altruistically-focused life can provide us with reasons to help her:

[I]t seems no less obvious that it would be wrong to refuse to make a small effort to reunite a long-parted family than that it would be wrong to refuse to make a small effort to save someone’s life. If these are moral requirements of beneficence, but there cannot be requirements of beneficence to help people get [or do] what it is wrong to have [or do], then having the fulfillments of a non-altruistically-focused life cannot be wrong. The Extreme Demand says that it *is* wrong. So the Extreme Demand should be rejected.

Or, more precisely, the Extreme Demand should be rejected unless and until we are given a justification for the radical revisions to our conception of beneficence—which interests of others do or do not matter for what beneficence requires of us in our world—that it implies. Without such a justification, “we should not take the Extreme Demand seriously” (Cullity 2004, 142).

The Extreme Demand has it that it is wrong to live a non-altruistically-focused life. Cullity (2004: 142) thinks that, as a result, it is committed to claiming not only that others’ interests in living their own lives do not give us morally compelling reasons to help them do so but also that they do not give us such reasons because those interests are not important enough to entitle those others to the moral space to do so. He thus regards the Extreme Demand as committed

to the rejection of the Basic Thought. Cullity (2004: 141-142) also holds, unsurprisingly, that this makes the Extreme Demand incompatible with a plausible version of Moderation about Principles, for, as he puts it, the Extreme Demand asks that we make “drastic” revisions not just to what beneficence actually requires of us but also to “our firm conception of what is morally important”; it claims, he says, that “many of the things that we think *are* morally important are *not*.” Since the things at issue are presumably the fulfillments of a non-altruistically-focused life, Cullity’s claim here is that, by holding that it is wrong to live a non-altruistically-focused life and thereby rejecting the Basic Thought, the Extreme Demand is committed to the view that the fulfillments of such a life are *not* morally important. And this would seem to rule out a defensible version of Moderation about Principles whereby the importance persons may attach to their personal pursuits, beyond what attaches to them from an impartial perspective, actually matters practically.

*c. Why Cullity’s argument against the Extreme Demand fails*

Cullity’s argument against the Extreme Demand fails. Consider the conditional in the earlier passage:

If these are moral requirements of beneficence, but there cannot be requirements of beneficence to help people get [or do] what it is wrong to have [or do], then having the fulfillments of a non-altruistically-focused life cannot be wrong.

The conditional’s antecedent is false because Cullity’s principle—contained in the second half of the antecedent—is mistaken. Even when your interest in having (or doing) a certain thing is an interest in having (or doing) what would *under the circumstances* be wrong for you to have (or do), that interest can nevertheless be a good reason for morally requiring me to help you get (or do) it. This is because one way to help another on account of such an interest is to change the circumstances such that it is no longer wrong for them to have (or do) the thing in question. And so, the defender of the Extreme Demand can affirm what Cullity rightly takes to be obvious—others’ interests in the fulfillments of a non-altruistically-focused life *can* give us requirements of beneficence to help

them—even while also asserting that living such a life is, under the circumstances, wrong.<sup>13</sup>

Consider Cullity's (2004: 192) example of your interest in keeping your suit clean. If your suit is about to get dirty—"You haven't noticed that it is about to slip off the coathanger you are carrying, and I could point this out without being a busybody or treating you like a child"—it seems clear that I am required by beneficence to help you in this way. But, as Cullity (2004: 192) observes, this is the case only if it is morally permissible for you to keep your suit clean:

If saving someone's life directly means dirtying your suit, then you are morally required to dirty your suit. And if I know this, I am obviously *not* required to help you avoid dirtying your suit when it means letting someone die.

The key phrase here is "when it means letting someone die." Let's assume such a case of rescue. Even though the circumstances are such that you saving another person's life requires that you dirty your suit, it may be open to me to change those circumstances so that it becomes morally permissible for you to keep your suit clean. How might I do this? Perhaps, when I come upon you about to rescue this person, it's clear that I could easily step in and save them myself. Until I've stepped in, it is wrong for you to avoid dirtying your suit—you must save them—but, when I step in, my doing so makes it the case that it is no longer wrong for you to avoid dirtying your suit. By saving this person, I obviously help them. But it seems quite natural to say that, by saving them, I help you as well, and the help I provide you by saving them is help keeping your suit clean. In this sort of case, then, your interest in keeping your suit clean can be a good reason for morally requiring me to help you by stepping in and saving the person myself, even though this interest is an interest in doing something that, until I step in, is wrong for you to do. Cullity's principle denies this and so it fails.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Of course, that it affirms this still commits the defender of the Extreme Demand to the view that many of the everyday requirements of beneficence we think obvious are not actually genuine requirements, but, as I'll argue later, the justification for this is much easier to give than the sort of justification Cullity mistakenly argues must be given.

<sup>14</sup> Someone might wonder whether this claim—that your interests can make it that I am morally required to step in and save the person myself—is compatible with the claim that, until I actually do step in, you are morally required to save that person. I think so, for reasons similar to the standard response to Liam Murphy's fair share account of the duty of aid: in cases of rescue, that some other is failing to do what they're morally required to do—they aren't rescuing the person—

This is admittedly a special case. But it is an apt one when thinking about the Extreme Demand, for its claim is that living a non-altruistically-focused life is wrong not because of anything inherent in the activities of that life—none of them, it's assumed, are in themselves wrong—but because of the circumstances in which I would live such a life. As a result, the Extreme Demand's stance here does not imply that others cannot have a reason to help me live a non-altruistically-focused life, for my interests in living such a life, along with others' similar interests, can still give them morally compelling reason to change the circumstances in which so many people are in desperate need and so require aid.<sup>15</sup> Our mistake about the requirements of beneficence, according to the Extreme Demand, thus isn't about which interests of others can or cannot give us morally compelling reasons to provide them with help; it's rather about what kinds of help, in the circumstances of our world, those interests can give us reasons to provide, the specific requirements of beneficence that they can give rise to. What others' interests in living non-altruistically-focused lives can give us morally compelling reason to do is not to help them live those lives in our world as it is—for, in this world, their doing so is wrong—but it is rather to help them by realizing a world in which it would not be wrong for them to live such lives.

As this makes clear, the Extreme Demand does imply a radical revision to our common-sense understanding of what beneficence requires of us. Cullity is certainly correct about this. And this revision requires justification, particularly because, as Cullity (2004:142) notes, the case for the Extreme Demand relies on our commonsense judgments about what beneficence requires in certain cases of rescue while at the same time it rejects “the equally obvious-seeming judgments we make about almost all of the further everyday requirements of beneficence that we recognize.” What's required, then, is an account of why the former set of judgments are more credible than the latter set. But, if my argument so far is correct—if the Extreme Demand does not deny that others' interests in the fulfillments of a non-altruistically-focused life are morally important and so can give us morally compelling reasons to help them—then what is *not* required is an account that argues, as Cullity (2004: 142) claims, “for a radically revised conception of beneficence [...] that drastically restricts the range of interests that can ground requirements of beneficence.” The problem with the latter set of judgments isn't that the interests at issue cannot ground any requirements of

---

can make it the case that you are morally required to do it instead. For Murphy's fair share account, see Murphy 1993. For the standard response, see Singer 1972: 232-234, and Cullity 2004: 75-76.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, those in desperate need also have interests in living such lives, interests that will give these others additional morally compelling reasons to do this.

beneficence at all. The problem is rather that, in our world as it is, those interests do not in fact ground many of the particular requirements of beneficence in that latter set of judgments, ones that we take to be obvious; they may instead ground other, much less obvious requirements.

What the Extreme Demand claims, then, is that we have been misunderstanding the radical implications of our world as it is, a world in which there are always persons offstage, as it were, in desperate need, each of whom we can help at small cost to ourselves. What justifies this claim of widespread misunderstanding? Largely it's that, in our everyday lives, these two facts—that these others need help and that we can help them at little cost to ourselves—are simply not made salient to us but rather kept hidden offstage. As a result, they do not enter into our moral assessments of those everyday situations where someone not in desperate need but in front of us—someone onstage, as it were—needs our help. We do not consider, for instance, whether what they need help with is, in the circumstances, actually wrong for them to have (or do) because what makes it wrong—that having (or doing) it means not helping someone in desperate need—is offstage, not part of the situation as we perceive it. Nor do we consider that the choice we face is between helping this person in front of us onstage or helping others in desperate need offstage. Our judgments about everyday requirements of beneficence—and, in particular, the fact that we take these judgments to be obvious and so absurd to deny—depend on our blindness to these facts and so to the actual moral contours of the situations at issue. Our judgments about rescue, on the other hand, do not.

Put another way, in our everyday interactions with others, we are not confronted by the fact that the situation is actually one of moral emergency—or, more precisely, one of an indefinite series of moral emergencies—rather than one of ordinary moral life.<sup>16</sup> A marker of ordinary moral life, we might say, is that persons have the moral space to pursue the fulfillments of a non-altruistically-focused life; as a result, ordinary moral life includes the everyday requirements of beneficence that we take to be obvious. That I continually misunderstand the circumstances as those of ordinary moral life is why my judgments about these

---

<sup>16</sup> As Elizabeth Ashford (2000: 430) puts the point, “the source of the extreme demandingness of morality is that the current state of the world is a constant emergency situation.” And this is true not just for a utilitarian account of the duty of aid. Martin Sticker and Marcel van Ackeren (2018: 407) point out that the notion of emergency operates similarly in Kant's ethics: “emergencies play a significant role for Kantian duties of beneficence and they outweigh many other morally significant concerns, including those pertaining to our own happiness.” They suggest that, given the realities of global poverty, a Kantian account should find a very demanding duty of aid.

everyday requirements of beneficence come to seem absurd to deny, as obvious to me as my judgments about what beneficence requires in cases of rescue. But, when I think of the circumstances as instead those of a series of moral emergencies, the radical implications of the Extreme Demand not only for what beneficence requires of us but also what it does not require of us, while still surprising and even shocking, do not strike me as absurd.

Consider again Cullity's (2004: 85) nightmare scenario "in which everywhere I went I directly encountered people needing my life-saving help, in practically unlimited numbers, and each of whom I could save at small cost." What does beneficence require of me in this world? Suppose we're in this scenario together; you've decided that, because you have your own life to live, you'll spend some of your time—your afternoons, after mornings spent saving lives—learning the violin rather than rescuing those you might encounter during that time. Would I have the same requirements of beneficence, during our afternoons at least, to help you with this personal pursuit that I would have were our world one of ordinary moral life? It is not at all clear to me that I would, and the reasons why are those that would lead one to the Extreme Demand: first, it's far from clear that learning the violin is something that, in these nightmare circumstances, you do have the moral space to do; and, second, my choice would be between helping you or saving another life, and it's far from clear that my reasons to help you could outweigh the reasons I have to save that life. When I try to imagine myself in this nightmare scenario, it does not seem absurd to deny that I will have those everyday requirements of beneficence towards you that in better, non-nightmare circumstances, would seem entirely obvious.

### 3. DOMINATION BY DUTY AS A MORAL WRONG

Nevertheless, when we are led to the conclusion that morality makes the Extreme Demand of us and, in that way, regards us as little more than agents of rescue, it is difficult to resist the thought that something has gone awry, for we have our own lives to live (and, as Cullity's argument emphasizes, everyday requirements of beneficence towards one another to fulfill). And so, we still confront the core question of whether Singer's account, because of its endorsement of the Extreme Demand, must deny the Basic Thought. It seems to me that it need not deny it, for the claim that it is wrong to live a non-altruistically-focused life is compatible with the claim that it is of considerable moral importance that persons have the space to live such a life and, indeed, that we are morally entitled to such space. In other words, it can be true both that

morality makes the Extreme Demand of us *and* that, for the reasons captured by the Basic Thought, it ought not be the case that morality makes that demand of us. There is no contradiction here.

On this account, the Basic Thought concerns not how dominating duty *can* be but rather how dominating duty *may* be. And so, when we are led to the conclusion that morality makes the Extreme Demand of us, what has gone awry may not be the argument—it may be sound and so the conclusion true—but rather those circumstances of our world that make it the case that morality does what it ought not do, which is to make this demand of us. When our world is such that morality does make the Extreme Demand of us, this fact will itself be deeply morally objectionable precisely because ordinary moral life ought to be possible for us. In this way, our conviction that we are entitled to ordinary moral life, as captured by the Basic Thought, may not give us grounds to reject the Extreme Demand; rather, it may make possible a separate and itself powerful moral indictment of our current world.

#### *a. Domination by duty*

To begin, consider (what might initially seem far afield) Michael Walzer's account of why launching a war of aggression is a moral crime. Walzer (1977: 27) claims that, in modern war, the vast majority of soldiers, even the volunteers, are *compelled* to fight. As he explains:

[T]he more a soldier fights because he is committed to a 'common cause,' the more likely we are to regard it as a crime to force him to fight. We assume that his commitment is to the safety of his country, that he fights only when it is threatened, and that he has to fight (he has been 'put to it'): it is his duty and not a free choice.

There are two relevant ideas here: there is some distinction to be made between acting out of duty and acting freely, and there can be something objectionable about a situation in which a person has a duty that, were he to recognize it as such, will decide his conduct for him.

A fully free decision to fight, Walzer (1977: 28) explains, would be "a personal choice that the soldier makes on his own and for essentially private reasons," but this kind of personal choice "effectively disappears as soon as

fighting becomes [...] a patriotic duty.”<sup>17</sup> Consider the soldier who enlists out of duty to his country. Walzer’s claim is that, upon recognizing this duty, he cannot do otherwise but enlist when his country is threatened by invasion—that is what his duty demands—and so his choice here, in an important sense, is not a free one. What Walzer is pointing to, it seems, is that the soldier’s duty to defend his country, when activated by invasion, dominates his possibilities for action, crowding out his other responsibilities, projects, relationships, and involvements. The freedom at issue here, then, is the freedom that concerns the Basic Thought and is threatened by the Extreme Demand.

What is troubling about the situation of even the volunteer soldier is that, once his duty to defend his country is activated by an unjust invasion, he loses the space to live his own life: there is nothing he can do but leave his home, his family, and his community—indeed, virtually all of his valuable projects and involvements—in order to enlist in the fight. And so, by activating this duty and thereby depriving him of the space to live his own life, an unjust invasion harms him, and, crucially, he suffers this harm prior to any actual fighting. (This harm is thus distinct from any of the obvious psychological and bodily harms a soldier is liable to suffer in war.) Indeed, we might go so far as to say that the activation of this duty by the aggressor country, because the duty now thoroughly dominates him, violates his moral entitlement to live his own life and thus wrongs him. Crucially, that he is wronged in this way doesn’t change the status of this thoroughly dominating duty to fight for his country: it remains what morality demands of him. And so, morality can dominate him in this way even though it ought not be the case that it does so. In fact, we cannot understand the harm he suffers, and how it is a wrong done to him by the aggressor country, unless the duty that dominates him remains in force.

Walzer’s discussion shows that one can wrong another by activating for them a duty that thoroughly dominates them, depriving them of the space to live their own life, space to which they are morally entitled. But it’s possible to wrong another not by activating for them a thoroughly dominating duty but rather by failing to ensure that some duty, when it’s activated for them, is not activated in such a way that it thoroughly dominates them.<sup>18</sup> Imagine, for example, finding yourself, at age 20, suddenly the sole caretaker of a cognitively and/or physically disabled sibling (or parent). How dominating is your duty of care here? Possibly

---

<sup>17</sup>As Walzer (1977: 28) points out, there will be intermediate positions between fighting as a completely free choice and fighting as wholly compelled by a sense of duty.

<sup>18</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for emphasizing the importance of this distinction.



quite dominating. But how dominating it actually is will depend on the society in which you live and, in particular, on the social services that its institutions take responsibility for providing. For instance, if you live in a society with a minimal welfare state (call it “Alabama”), your duty of care will likely be much more dominating than if you live in a European-style social democratic state (call it “Norway”). Why is this? Because the decisions that Alabama has made mean that you are much more *on your own* as your sibling’s caregiver than you would be in Norway.

In Alabama, you might find that you’re morally required to get a steady and decently-paying but mind-numbingly boring job so that you can afford the sort of care your sibling requires; perhaps this will require cutting your education short, perhaps it will require foregoing your career dreams—you were planning to be a musician—or your dream of living overseas. These sacrifices won’t be a one-off thing but a continual demand, one that will require you to radically scale back or give up entirely many of your own pursuits. In Norway, you might find that you need not cut your education short or compromise your career dreams very much, if at all—you can still be a musician, say—because your sibling qualifies for various state programs that finance and deliver a substantial portion of her care. What your duty of care requires in Norway is that you be her advocate, making sure she gets the care for which she qualifies. Of course, this may still be demanding: you may have to fight with various agencies and bureaucracies, you will need to monitor the care she gets (perhaps caregiving staff are undertrained, overworked, under-resourced, and/or underpaid, with unsurprising results). In Alabama, then, your duty to care for your sibling will likely be quite dominating, leaving you with little moral space to live your own life while, in Norway, it will leave you with substantial moral space to live your own life.

In Alabama, then, that you are on your own is a morally significant harm you suffer. But does Alabama thereby wrong you? I think it quite plausibly does. We can understand the moral entitlement to live one’s own life along the lines of Henry Shue’s (1980: 13) account of moral rights:

A moral right provides (1) the rational basis for a justified demand (2) that the actual enjoyment of a substance be (3) socially guaranteed against standard threats.

Shue (1980: 33) says, about the third component, that “[t]he social guarantees... need not provide impregnable protections against every imaginable threat, but they must provide effective defenses against predictable remediable threats.”

Domination by familial duties of care is a standard threat to our enjoyment of the space to live our own lives, and, since we are entitled to such space, we may justifiably demand that our enjoyment of it be socially guaranteed against such a threat. And so, while your duty of care can demand as much as it does in Alabama, it not only ought not be that case that it does so but you may justifiably demand that, as in Norway, it not do so. Indeed, we might say that justice requires that Alabama see to it that it doesn't demand that much, for it must concern itself here not only with your sibling and the care she needs but, because you are morally entitled to live your own life, also with you and the burdens you will bear as a caregiver. In failing at this task, Alabama—or, more precisely, the persons and institutions within Alabama responsible for this failure—wrongs you.<sup>19</sup>

*b. Domination by duties of aid*

It is by appealing to this phenomenon of domination by duty, I suggest, that an account such as Singer's, one that endorses the Extreme Demand, can accept and accommodate the Basic Thought's claim about the moral importance of persons having the space to live their own lives. On this view, the circumstances of our world activate for the relatively affluent person a duty of aid that is so demanding that it thoroughly dominates her, making it wrong for her to pursue the fulfillments of a non-altruistically-focused life; but, that she finds herself in circumstances that activates such a duty wrongs her, for she is morally entitled to the space to live her own life. But wronged by whom? By those responsible for the fact that the global institutional order not only fails to prevent such widespread desperate need but also fails, when it emerges, to respond to it effectively, for these failures together are what make the duty of aid, when activated for the relatively affluent person, thoroughly dominating.

Granted, this may seem like not much of an answer. But we do not need to perform the exceedingly difficult task of parceling out this responsibility among institutions and persons making up the global order in order to defend the claim that the relatively affluent person is wronged. To see why, consider one of the basic rights Shue (1980: 20-22) discusses, the right to security. In a society that,

---

<sup>19</sup> Of course, it still may be that, in Norway, you decide to become your sibling's full-time caregiver. What's important, I think, is that you not find yourself forced to make that decision by the circumstances being such that becoming her full-time caregiver is the *only* way for you to fulfill your duty of care.

say, fails to secure for members of a minority group their rights to security, it likely will be quite difficult to parcel out responsibility for this failure. Certainly, the justice system itself—the police and courts—will be partly responsible, but so will the governmental elites that set security policies and priorities.

Responsibility will also extend to those with influence over those governmental elites, perhaps this will be economic or social elites, perhaps it will be the wider public (or certain large segments of it). It may even be that the individual efforts at self-protection that some members of this minority group take contribute to their overall lack of security.<sup>20</sup> But even if this responsibility remains to be parceled out, the claim that those persons whose rights to security the state fails to secure are thereby wronged seems uncontroversial, for this claim requires nothing more than (a) that they could be secured and (b) that no other morally compelling interest competes with securing it such that the failure to do so, though regrettable, is justified.

In our case, then, the claims that we require are (a) that persons' basic rights to subsistence could be secured—that, as Shue (1980: 64) puts it, institutions that prevent or avoid situations “in which people are confronted by subsistence-threatening forces they cannot themselves handle” are possible—and (b) that no other morally compelling interest competes with securing those rights such that the failure to do so, though regrettable, is justified. These relatively uncontroversial claims together get us that the widespread and persistent desperate need in our world is a moral failure of the global institutional order. For Shue, of course, this means that that this institutional order wrongs those in desperate need, for their basic rights to subsistence are not secured (Shue 1980: 22-29, 55-60). But it also wrongs the relatively affluent person who, as a result of this failure, finds herself with a duty of aid so demanding that it thoroughly dominates her, for her moral entitlement to life her own life is not secured.

At this point, you might wonder whether it makes sense to cast the relatively affluent person as a fellow victim of the global institutional order. If the global institutional order “foreseeably and avoidably (re)produce[s]” such desperate need, then, as Thomas Pogge (2005: 42) argues, it would seem that “the better-off... are *harming* the worse-off” by upholding such an order. They will have demanding duties towards the worse-off, but they can hardly count themselves thus also as victims of the global order. Or, if the American empire has

---

<sup>20</sup> This is likely to be the case if this minority lives in segregated communities. And this would make the question of responsibility even more complicated, for those responsible for the segregation will bear some responsibility for the lack of security.

domineering influence over the global order, then, as Richard Miller (2010: Chs. 5-7) argues, it would seem that Americans, along with citizens of its close allies, have a special responsibility for the injustice of that global order. Here again, they will have demanding duties towards the worse-off, but those who participate in the project of maintaining and extending the American empire—as many relatively affluent citizens do, to varying degrees—can hardly count themselves thus also as victims of the global order.<sup>21</sup>

Significantly, neither Pogge's nor Miller's arguments result in duties so demanding that they thoroughly dominate the relatively affluent person. For Pogge (2005: 36), the duties that arise for the better-off are ones "to seek to reform these institutions [of the global order] and to do our fair share toward mitigating the harms they cause." For Miller (2010: 209, 182), it is "the duty to seek ways to hem in the immoral excesses of the American empire" but only insofar as "this political endeavor is not especially costly." Now, it is true that to whatever extent widespread and persistent desperate need is the result of the relatively affluent not fulfilling these various duties, they are to that extent responsible for the failure of the global order to secure persons' basic rights to subsistence. But this does not undermine the claim that, because this failure of the global order—a failure for which the relatively affluent person is herself only to a very small extent responsible—activates for her a duty of aid so demanding that it thoroughly dominates her, it thereby wrongs her.

*c. Domination by duty and ordinary moral life*

On the account I've sketched, when a person finds herself in circumstances where her moral duty thoroughly dominates her, it may be that her moral entitlement to live her own life has been violated and so that she has been wronged. But, even so, the duty nevertheless remains in force: it is what morality requires of her, even though it is morally wrong that it does so. In such a case, the fault may lie with the institutions that failed to prevent those circumstances from arising, for they are responsible for creating the circumstances in which people have the space to live their own lives. We might say, then, that persons have a claim of justice against the institutions governing their world that those institutions secure for them not only their basic rights to security and subsistence

---

<sup>21</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

but also this moral entitlement by preventing those circumstances in which their duties come to thoroughly dominate them.<sup>22</sup>

These concerns about domination by duty are particularly pressing when it comes to clear cases of moral emergencies—cases of rescue or of helping another in desperate need—for these are cases that strike us as ones where you simply must help the other, even if doing so has large costs to your pursuit of whatever projects you might have. When such moral emergencies are rare, that duty dominates your actions during one doesn't pose much of a problem for your ability to live your own life, for while a particular emergency can be quite constraining, perhaps even foreclosing the pursuit of some particular project entirely, you will still be able afterwards to go back into ordinary moral life in which morality doesn't dominate your actions. But that these sorts of moral emergencies are rare is in large part a matter of the circumstances in which you find yourself. And what's notable about such emergencies is that the strength of your duty to respond to an emergency, when you encounter one, seems independent of your history of emergency-response: as the iterative approach emphasizes, that you've already rescued other people seems irrelevant to the strength of your duty to rescue this person now. This means, then, that it is at least possible for your actions to be thoroughly dominated by duty were you to find yourself continually encountering such emergencies, with the result being that you become morally little more than an agent of rescue.

Even so, there is something morally unthinkable about a situation like Cullity's nightmare scenario where we are unable to enjoy ordinary moral life because we find ourselves in a continual procession of moral emergencies. And this, I think, is because the notion of ordinary moral life isn't merely one where emergencies happen to be statistically rare; rather, ordinary moral life is the product of institutions responsible for making it the case that such emergencies are rare. Ordinary moral life is thus a normative notion, a vision of the sort of social world morality demands that, via our institutions, we collectively achieve. This is, in the end, what the Basic Thought captures. Morality demands that ordinary moral life be achieved in our world not only because of the importance to us that we not be in desperate need, and so require rescue, but also because of the importance to us that the burdens we bear as rescuers not be too excessive,

---

<sup>22</sup> That the social-democratic welfare states of Europe have gone the furthest in fulfilling this responsibility, at least domestically, and thus count as a particular moral achievement is a prominent theme of the historian Tony Judt's *Postwar* (2005).

where excessive here is measured by whether we have the moral space to live our own lives.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Suppose that Singer's argument, with its endorsement of the Extreme Demand, is sound. In the circumstances of our world, sincere reflection on certain of your secure convictions of ordinary morality—ones concerning the duty of rescue—should lead you to conclude that you have an extremely demanding duty of aid, one that, were you to live up to it, would thoroughly dominate your life. The power of Singer's argument isn't that you will be convinced to at least try to live up to the demands of the duty of aid it finds for us. It predictably hasn't had anything like that effect, even among those who suspect the argument is sound.

On the account I've defended here, the power of Singer's argument is rather to reveal that our world is arranged in such a way that the only way that we can go about living our own lives is if we contrive to forget that the time and money we spend on our own projects and involvements could, if we only decided to use them that way, contribute to saving another person's life. For were we to think about it, a very simple argument commits us to an extremely demanding duty of aid, one that, were we to fulfill it, would keep us from living our own lives. In this way, what Singer's argument, if it is sound, shows is that the circumstances of our world are actually not those of ordinary moral life and so, just as in Cullity's nightmare scenario, you cannot be confident that you can live your own life and be a morally decent person. But ordinary moral life is an entirely reasonable thing for you to want; indeed, it is something to which you're morally entitled. This, again, is what the Basic Thought captures. As a result, if you're to live your own life in our current world, you must develop a kind of moral blindness: you must allow yourself to use the distance between you and those in desperate need to keep them out of mind—you and those near to you are onstage while they are offstage—thereby enabling you to believe that the circumstances of your world are those of ordinary moral life rather than those of an ongoing series of moral emergencies. That you are put in this sort of position is one way in which you are wronged by the institutions governing our world.

On this account, then, the Basic Thought does not provide a way to limit the duty to aid those in desperate need, as the Moderate critics of Singer's argument claim. Rather, the Basic Thought points to an additional class of persons who are

wronged by a world marked by widespread desperate need: the class of morally conscientious affluent persons. And the wrong they suffer is a distinctive one: the activation of a duty of aid so demanding that it thoroughly dominates the person's life, crowding out her own valuable projects and involvements and, in that way, turning her into morally little more than an agent of rescue.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Richard W. Miller, Michelle Kosch, Rochelle Duford, Nathaniel Jezi, and Sara Streett for their comments and criticisms, as well as to two anonymous reviewers for this journal. I also thank audiences at Lehigh University and the University of Delaware, to whom I presented earlier versions of the argument contained in this paper.

#### REFERENCES

- Ashford, Elizabeth. 2000. "Utilitarianism, Integrity, and Partiality" *Journal of Philosophy* 97.8: 421-439.
- 2003. "The Demandingness of Scanlon's Contractualism" *Ethics* 113: 273-302.
- Berkey, Brian. 2016. "The demandingness of morality: toward a reflective equilibrium" *Philosophical Studies* 173: 3015-3035
- Cullity, Garrett. 2004. *The Moral Demands of Affluence*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 2009. "Demandingness and Arguments from Presupposition" *The Problem of Moral Demandingness: New Philosophical Essays*, Timothy Chappell, ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- David Enoch. 2011. *Taking Morality Seriously*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hampton, Jean. 1993. "Selflessness and Loss of Self" *Social Philosophy and Policy* 10.1: 135-165.
- Herman, Barbara. 2007. "The Scope of Moral Requirement" *Moral Literacy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Judt, Tony. 2005. *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*. New York: Penguin.
- McElwee, Brian. 2016. "What is Demandingness?" *The Limits of Moral Obligation: Moral Demandingness and Ought Implies Can*, Marcel van Ackeren and Michael Kühler, eds. New York: Routledge.
- Mill, John Stuart. 2003. *On Liberty in The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill*, John Troyer, ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishers.

- Miller, Richard W. 2004. "Beneficence, Duty and Distance" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32: 357-383.
- 2010. *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Murphy, Liam B. 1993. "The Demands of Beneficence" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22: 267-292
- Pogge, Thomas. 2005. "Real-World Justice" *Journal of Ethics* 9.1-2: 29-53.
- Scheffler, Samuel. 1992. *Human Morality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shue, Henry. 1980. *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and US Foreign Policy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Singer, Peter. 1972. "Famine, Affluence and Morality" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1: 229-243.
- Sticker, Martin and Marcel van Ackeren. 2018. "The Demandingness of Beneficence and Kant's System of Duties" *Social Theory and Practice* 44.3: 405-436.
- Unger, Peter. 1996. *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Walzer, Michael. 1977. *Just and Unjust Wars*, 4th edition. New York: Basic Books.
- Wolf, Susan. 1982. "Moral Saints" *Journal of Philosophy* 79.8: 419-439.