

The Limits of Beneficence

On the Demandingness of an Individual's Duty to Aid the Poor

Anne Polkamp

Student number: 3164187

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Thesis Supervisors:

Dr. J.P.M. Philips

Prof. dr. P.G. Ziche

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Preface

I am grateful to Jos Philips for supervising me while writing this thesis. It could not have existed in its present form without his comments, instructive discussions and helpful literature suggestions. I would also like to thank Paul Ziche, the second supervisor of this thesis, for his supervision. His helpful remarks encouraged me to clarify my views and give more thought to some important questions.

Abstract

The central question of this thesis is to what extent affluent individuals ought to help the global poor. In hope of answering this question, I will turn to three approaches to ethics: consequentialism, Kantianism and Williams' a-theoretical approach. However, I will argue that none of these approaches can answer the question satisfactorily. Consequentialism tells us that our duty is extremely demanding, but fails to provide convincing arguments for this claim. Kantianism is unable to tell us whether to assign more weight to impartial demands or to personal demands. And while the a-theoretical approach leads to an upper limit on our duty to aid, this limit is very imprecise and it is uncertain whether we should accept Williams' arguments for it. The three approaches *do* tell us what the lower limit on our duty to aid is. If we are to live a morally decent life, we are required to give *some* aid to the poor, even if it takes a little sacrifice. While this is an important find, it leaves us with a lot of uncertainty about the demandingness of our duty to aid. The fact that there is so much uncertainty about a topic that is so significant, renders it important to ask questions about the reason why we do not have clear answers. I will argue that this reason may be found in our human nature.

Introduction

In today's world the affluent are living in luxury while millions of others are dying of the consequences of extreme poverty. For us, affluent individuals, this situation gives rise to a dilemma. On the one hand we have the intuition that extreme poverty is extremely unjust and that we should do as much as we can to prevent it. Doing anything less seems to be counterintuitively mean,¹ because doing less would include spending money on things we do not really need while others die a premature, preventable death. On the other hand we have the intuition that we are not morally obliged to make large sacrifices in order to help the poor. Doing as much as we can to alleviate poverty seems, in fact, to be counterintuitively demanding – because doing that would result in devoting most of our time and money toward helping the poor, leaving little time and money to lead our own lives. This conflict raises the question what it is exactly that morality requires of affluent individuals.

In this thesis I will therefore discuss the question to what extent affluent individuals should help distant needy strangers. In other words: how demanding is our duty to aid the global poor? The answer to this question is of great practical relevance. If we do have a strong duty to aid the poor, for example, it might well be that many of our daily actions are morally wrong, meaning that we would have to change our daily lives drastically if we were to live a morally decent life.

Before explaining how I intend to answer the question to what extent affluent individuals have a demanding duty to help the global poor, a few clarifications of this question should be made. First, I do not mean to ask which actions are morally *praiseworthy*; I mean to ask what is *minimally required* of affluent individuals if they are to live a morally acceptable life. Second, with 'demandingness' I refer to the level of sacrifice that a duty requires. An example of a demanding duty, is a duty which can only be discharged at the sacrifice of giving up a large part of one's time and money, leaving little resources to live one's own life. An example of a non-demanding duty, on the contrary, is a duty which can be discharged relatively easily. Third, with 'affluent individuals' I refer to all people who are

¹ This choice of words is Hooker's: Hooker 1999, p. 181.

able to spend money on non-necessities or luxuries²: most inhabitants of affluent countries and some inhabitants of poor countries. With ‘the global poor’ I refer to distant needy strangers whose extreme poverty undermines their ability to satisfy basic needs such as food, water, sanitation and healthcare. A fourth remark that needs to be made, is that the aim of this thesis is *not* to discover what constitutes the best way to help the poor. In order to simplify the debate somewhat, I will mainly refer to donating money to aid agencies when speaking of helping the poor, but this is not to say that giving money is the best way to alleviate poverty. The arguments in this thesis that defend a duty to aid the poor are not contingent on any specific form of aid; if another type of aid proves to be more effective than donating money, the arguments can be used to defend a duty to aid the poor in *that* way. The fifth clarification also concerns the aim of this thesis. It is important to say that I do not think it is possible to determine the demandingness of our duty to aid *in every specific case imaginable*. Rather, I aim to find out what morality requires us to do on a more general level: are we required to do as much as we can to fight poverty, are we only required to help the poor if we can do so at little sacrifice, or does morality require us to do something in between? Sixth, it is important to say that in this thesis I will only deal with the *normative* aspect of the question I posed. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the *factual* information concerning aiding the poor. Instead I will make the following assumptions: (1) by donating money to certain aid organisations one can save lives; and (2) donating money to certain aid organisations does not harm the poor.³ Seventh and last, one might wonder why I chose to focus on individual duties, since it does not seem likely that the problem of extreme poverty can be solved by individual actions only. While I think this scepticism is justified, I also think that the question what individuals ought to do is, as Cullity argues, still a question that needs to be answered.⁴ It needs to be answered because in the world that we live in today, individual actions might be able to prevent a great amount of harm, even if it is to small numbers of individuals rather than to *all* poor people. Given this possibility to prevent harm, it is important to know whether

² I realise that the definition of ‘luxuries’ is debatable. However, I also think that there are many goods of which there is widespread agreement that they *are* luxuries. Moreover, I do not think that our ability to answer the central question hinges upon the *exact* definition of ‘luxuries’.

³ These claims are not uncontroversial: many claim that donating money does harm the poor. For objections to this view see Singer 2009, pp. 35-39 and Cullity 2005, chapter 3.

⁴ Cullity 2005, p. 8.

we have a duty to do all that we can to prevent this harm, or whether our duty is less demanding.

This thesis is an account of my search for an answer to this question. In the first three chapters I will, in light of this search, examine three important approaches to ethics: consequentialism, Kantianism and Williams' a-theoretical approach. The aim of these chapters is to argue that, for different reasons, these three approaches fail to provide a satisfactory answer to the question how demanding our duty to aid is. While *consequentialism* clearly promotes an extremely demanding duty to aid the poor, it does not provide convincing arguments for its thesis, which is why it fails to prove that we indeed have such a demanding duty. And two important forms of *Kantianism* (a Kantian approach based on the Formula of Universal Law and Scanlonian contractualism), cannot tell us how demanding our duty to aid is, because they fail to tell us whether to assign more importance to impartial demands or to personal demands. Williams' *a-theoretical approach* to ethics gives us an upper limit on our duty to aid, but this upper limit is very imprecise and it is not certain that we should accept Williams' arguments for it.

After discussing what the three approaches cannot tell us, in chapter four I will examine what they *can* tell us, why they cannot tell us *more* and, lastly, how we might be able to find some more substantial answers. I will discuss these questions in three different sections. In section 4.1., I will argue that consequentialism, Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach *can* establish that we ought to give *some* aid to the poor if we are to live a morally decent life. Specifically, I will explain why the three approaches suggest that the lower limit on our duty to aid amounts to an obligation to help the poor *even if it takes a little sacrifice*. I will argue that, while it is important to know that we ought to give some aid, this outcome leaves us with uncertainty concerning the exact limits of our duty to aid. In section 4.2., I will discuss two questions that this uncertainty raises: the question why it is that three important approaches to ethics cannot give more specific answers concerning a topic this important, and the question what this uncertainty means for the moral practice. The most important aim of this section is to show that the inability of the three moral approaches to provide clear answers, can be explained by adopting the view that a duality between partiality and impartiality is inherent to human nature. In section 4.3., I will investigate where and how we might find more substantial answers concerning the demandingness of our duty to aid. The aim of this section is to explain why Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach, if they can

overcome their problems, may be able to lead the way to the justification of a moderate duty to aid – a duty that is neither counterintuitively demanding, nor counterintuitively mean.

1. On the problem of justifying demands consequentialistically

When discussing consequentialism, the most important question is probably not *whether* consequentialists think that affluent individuals have a demanding duty to aid the poor. If one thinks that one must always do what produces the best consequences, a demanding duty to aid the poor seems to be the only option. That is because a demanding duty seems to have better consequences (namely saving as many lives as possible) than an undemanding duty (which results in protecting an individual's projects and friendships). There are, of course, circumstances in which a consequentialist *could* defend an undemanding duty. He could do so, for example, if aiding the poor would be counterproductive or if it would not be *possible* to relieve poverty. However, it is unlikely that such circumstances exist in the world we live in today, and in this thesis I have assumed that it *is* possible to help the poor. When it comes to consequentialism, the more important question is therefore not whether it is demanding, but whether its demandingness is *justified*. In this chapter I will therefore evaluate three arguments that consequentialists give for the claim that we have a demanding duty to aid the poor. These arguments are: (1) the idea that we should prevent suffering if we can do so without sacrificing anything comparable (the Sacrifice Principle); (2) the analogy between failing to save someone right in front of us and failing to aid the poor; and (3) the argument that letting distant needy strangers die is morally as wrong as killing them. The reason for discussing these three specific arguments is that they seem to be the most important strategies that consequentialists use in order to prove their case.⁵ I will argue that these arguments are not convincing, which is why it is not certain that we have a demanding duty to aid the poor.

1.1. The Sacrifice Principle

The first important argument for the demanding consequentialist duty to aid the poor, is the principle that Peter Singer generalizes from the well-known case of the drowning child in the pond. This case goes as follows:

⁵ While consequentialists use these strategies to defend their position on the demandingness of our duty to aid, the arguments do not actually defend consequentialism itself: they do not necessarily defend the view that the rightness of an action depends on its consequences.

On my way to give a lecture, I pass a shallow pond and notice that a child has fallen in and is in danger of drowning. No one else is around, so it seems that it is up to me to make sure that the child doesn't drown. Pulling the child out will mean getting my clothes muddy, ruining my shoes and either cancelling my lecture or delaying it until I can find something dry to change into; but compared with the avoidable death of a child none of these things are significant.⁶

According to Singer, it is obvious that the agent in the 'Child in the Pond Case' is morally obliged to save the drowning child. He seems to think that our judgment about this case can be used to construct a general principle of beneficence.⁷ This principle, from here on referred to as 'the Sacrifice Principle', is the following: 'if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought to do it'.⁸ Combined with two assumptions about poverty and its alleviation, the Sacrifice Principle leads to the following duty toward the poor:

First premise:	If we can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, we ought to do it.
Second premise:	Extreme poverty is bad.
Third premise:	There is some extreme poverty we can prevent without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance.
Conclusion:	We ought to prevent some extreme poverty. ⁹

The demandingness of this duty depends, of course, on the meaning of 'anything of comparable moral importance'. In his article 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', Singer writes that 'without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance' refers to: 'without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good'.¹⁰ Furthermore, in *Practical Ethics* he argues that for a

⁶ Paraphrase of the 'Child in the Pond Case' as described in Singer 2011, p. 199.

⁷ Singer 2011, p. 199.

⁸ Singer 2011, p. 199.

⁹ Singer 2011, p. 200.

¹⁰ Singer 1972, p. 230.

utilitarian, things such as stylish clothes, expensive dinners and a luxury car are not of comparable significance to the prevention of extreme poverty. He also claims that non-utilitarians who accept the principle of universalizability, should accept that at least some of these things are not of comparable significance to the alleviation of extreme poverty. But according to Singer the *exact* meaning of ‘anything of moral significance’ – and therefore the exact demandingness of the duty – depends on the moral theory one accepts.¹¹ If that moral theory is consequentialism, the Sacrifice Principle is very demanding. Singer argues that the principle seems to require us to reduce ourselves to the level of marginal utility. He describes this level as ‘the level at which, by giving more, I would cause as much suffering to myself or my dependents as I would relieve by my gift’.¹² In other words, reducing oneself to this level would mean ‘that one would reduce oneself to very near the material circumstances of a Bengali refugee’.¹³ Clearly, Singer’s version of the Sacrifice Principle is very demanding.

However, there may be reasons *not* to accept the Sacrifice Principle, because Singer’s argument faces several problems. The most important problem is that Singer seems to abstract the Sacrifice Principle from the ‘Child in the Pond Case’, while this case does not necessarily lead to the Sacrifice Principle.¹⁴ Garrett Cullity describes this problem as follows. Singer’s argument has a three-stage structure: stage (1) consists of the judgment that one should save the child in the pond; stage (2) consists of the Sacrifice Principle, which is generalized from stage (1); and stage (3) consists of a judgment that is deduced from the Sacrifice Principle – the judgment that it is wrong not to give anything to aid agencies (or to do something comparable to alleviate poverty).¹⁵ The problem, says Cullity, is related to the judgments that are included in stage (1). The judgments in stage (3) cannot be included in the first stage, because that would amount to begging the question. However, if the stage (3) judgments are not included in stage (1), there are multiple ways to generalize from stage (1) to stage (2). Instead of the Sacrifice Principle, one could, for example, adopt the principle that if we can prevent something bad from happening *to someone right in front of us* without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought to do it. Unlike the Sacrifice Principle,

¹¹ Singer 2011, p. 202.

¹² Singer 1972, p. 237

¹³ Singer 1972, p. 237.

¹⁴ This point is made, among others, by Philips (see Philips 2007, p. 19) and Barry and Øverland (see Barry and Øverland 2009, p. 241).

¹⁵ Cullity 2005, p. 13.

this principle does *not* lead to the judgment that it is wrong not to give anything to aid agencies. This possibility to adopt other principles than the Sacrifice Principle, means that it is not necessarily the case that the judgement in stage (1) leads to the judgment in stage (3).¹⁶ That is why Singer's argument does not necessarily support a strong duty to aid the poor. Another reason why this is so, is that there seems to be no good reason for limiting stage (1) to the judgment that one should save the child in the pond. One could wonder why other everyday intuitions, such as the intuition that we are not obliged to make large sacrifices in order to help others, are not included in stage (1).¹⁷ If the latter intuition would be included, Singer's argument would not lead to a demanding duty to aid either. A last reason why Singer's argument does not necessarily support his conclusion, is the mistaken deduction of the third stage (the judgment that it is wrong not to give anything to aid agencies) from the second stage (the Sacrifice Principle). Even if we *are* obliged to prevent something bad from happening if we could do so without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, that does not necessarily mean that it is wrong not to give anything to aid agencies. That is because other claims than the latter could also be deduced from the Sacrifice Principle. One could, for example, deduce from this principle the claim that one ought to help sick children in one's own country (e.g. by supporting cancer research) rather than distant needy strangers. In that case, the Sacrifice Principle would still lead to a demanding duty. However, the example makes clear that the principle does not necessarily lead to a duty to aid the *global poor*.¹⁸ There are, therefore, several reasons why Singer's three-staged argument based on the Sacrifice Principle is not convincing. The argument thus fails to prove that we have a demanding duty to aid the global poor.

It is important to note that one might object to this conclusion because I have not raised fundamental objections to Singer's arguments: I have rejected certain specific arguments based on their form, rather than Singer's consequentialist approach itself. This objection raises a good point. It may be that there are other arguments, with different forms, that *can* support Singer's approach and justify the existence of a demanding duty to aid. I have not shown that these arguments cannot exist, which is why my argumentation cannot reject Singer's approach itself. However, I do not think that this objection undermines my

¹⁶ Cullity 2005, p. 14.

¹⁷ Also see Cullity 2005, p. 14.

¹⁸ Fred Feldman makes a similar point about the principles in Unger's *Living High and Letting Die* (see Feldman 1999).

argumentation. My purpose was to examine the arguments that consequentialists use to support a demanding duty to aid. Singer's Sacrifice Principle is one of the most important arguments among them and I have argued that this specific argument does not succeed. Regardless of whether other arguments for Singer's approach exist, my point remains the same: Singer's justification of a demanding duty to aid the poor based on the Sacrifice Principle, cannot succeed.

1.2. The life-saving analogy

Related to the Sacrifice Principle, and another important argument for the demanding consequentialist duty to aid the poor, is the life-saving analogy. In this analogy failing to save someone right in front of you is compared to failing to donate money to aid agencies. Singer's description of the 'Child in the Pond Case' in 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' was the first step towards creating this life-saving analogy. Since then Singer and especially Unger have worked out the analogy in greater detail. In 'The Singer Solution To World Poverty', Singer uses the following example (originally Unger's) to construct his analogy:

Bob is close to retirement. He has invested most of his savings in a valuable, uninsurable car: a Bugatti. The rising market value means he will always be able to sell it in order to live comfortably after retirement. One day Bob parks the Bugatti near the end of a railway siding and goes for a walk. As he does so, he sees that a runaway train, with no one aboard, is running down the railway track. Further down the track is a child who is very likely to be killed by the train. Bob can throw a switch that will divert the train down the siding where his Bugatti is parked. Then nobody will be killed, but his Bugatti will be destroyed. Bob decides not to throw the switch. The child is killed, but Bob keeps his financial security.¹⁹

Our intuitive reaction is that Bob's conduct is very wrong. Clearly he is obliged to make large sacrifices in order to save the child's life. Singer's argument from analogy is that by donating money to aid agencies, affluent individuals are capable of saving a life, just like Bob. If Bob is required to make a large sacrifice in order to do so, then affluent individuals should be required to do so too. Therefore, affluent individuals have a very demanding duty to aid the poor.²⁰

¹⁹ Paraphrase of Singer 1999. For the original example, see Unger 1996, pp. 136-139.

²⁰ Singer 1999.

The problem is that this conclusion depends on the comparability of the two cases, while there are many differences between Bob's failure to save the child and an affluent individual's failure to save a poor stranger. It may well be that one of these differences is morally relevant. In that case we may not have a demanding duty to aid the poor after all. Therefore Singer tries to show that various differences between the cases are of no moral relevance, after which he concludes that we seem to lack a basis for drawing a moral line between the two cases.²¹ However, Singer does not discuss *all* differences between the two cases. One difference that might be of moral importance is the fact that Bob's case is an emergency, while the possibility to save distant needy strangers reoccurs over and over again. Badhwar and Hooker both think that a difference like this might be of great importance.²² What if emergency's such as the 'Child in the Pond Case' were an everyday phenomenon, like our possibility to save distant needy strangers. Or what if we encountered a drowning person every hour? Would we really have to save everyone we encountered, thereby giving up our own lives, in order to save as many people as we could?²³ Singer does not discuss this example. Since he has not proven that all differences between the two cases are morally irrelevant, it seems that he has not proven that we have a demanding duty to aid the poor either. Moreover, one could wonder whether it is even *possible* to detect all differences and show that they are morally irrelevant. It might just be impossible to do so. In that case the life-saving analogy could never be successful in showing that we have a strong duty to aid the poor.

However, in *Living High and Letting Die*, Unger gives the immense task of detecting all differences and showing that they are irrelevant, a try. He does so in defence of a duty that seems to be even stronger than the one Singer defends. According to Unger, affluent individuals are not only morally obligated to make material sacrifices, but they are also obliged to do whatever else they can to maximize the amount of money that they can give away. They are obliged, for example, to change jobs if that would mean that they could donate more money to aid agencies. Unger argues that giving up one's job is not merely an action that is morally praiseworthy; he describes it as 'seriously wrong' not to do so.²⁴ In his defence of this demanding duty of beneficence, the life-saving analogy is of central

²¹ Singer 1999.

²² Badhwar 2006, p. 81 and Hooker 1999, p. 181.

²³ Badhwar 2006, p. 81.

²⁴ Unger 1996, p. 151.

importance. Unlike Singer, Unger tries to show that all differences between the two cases of this analogy are morally irrelevant. Unger's ambitious endeavour is a good attempt to overcome an important problem of the life-saving analogy, but, as Jos Philips has argued, it faces the problem that it is too complex to be convincing.²⁵ In *Affluent in the Face of Poverty*, Philips lists the many tasks that Unger must complete in order to reach his goal.²⁶ First, Unger has to compare the 'Child in the Pond Case' with the situation of affluent individuals who are able to help the poor, and detect all differences that might be morally relevant. Then he needs to show that these differences are, in fact, morally *irrelevant*. In order to do so, Unger has to create cases that are similar except for one factor and that are intuitively judged in the same way. In this manner, Unger has to prove that the factor in question is not morally relevant. Furthermore, Unger needs to justify the claim that our intuitions about the cases that he constructed, are reliable. And even if he succeeds in all of this, and proves that failing to save a drowning child is morally equal to failing to save a distant, needy stranger, Unger still needs to demonstrate that this means that both failures are morally wrong (which is our initial intuition about the failure to save a drowning child) rather than morally acceptable (which is our initial intuition about the failure to save a distant, needy stranger). In order to do so, Unger adopts a 'Liberationist view', according to which one's intuitive responses to many specific cases do not reflect 'morality itself', or what Unger calls 'our Values'.²⁷ Specifically, Unger thinks that our intuitive response to the failure to save a drowning child *does* reflect our Values, whereas our intuitive response to the failure to save distant, needy strangers, does *not* reflect our Values. The latter response is distorted by psychological phenomena such as 'futility thinking'. This phenomenon leads us to think that the help we can give is futile (given the total amount of help that is needed), which makes us think that we are not required to help at all. Philips notes that, even if Unger would succeed in all previous tasks, the idea that a failure to save a drowning child is similar to a failure to help a distant, needy stranger, 'still underdetermine[s] the conclusion that what Unger calls 'our Values' are indeed our values'.²⁸ He adds that '[w]e would also have to check for intuitions about cases other than the two we have considered and examine whether we could bring them into line with "our Values"', and that only after having checked multiple cases, we would be able to trust that 'our Values' are

²⁵ Philips 2007, p. 22.

²⁶ Philips 2007, pp. 21-22.

²⁷ Unger 1996, p. 11.

²⁸ Philips 2007, p. 22.

in fact our values.²⁹ Philips concludes that Unger's approach to the lifesaving analogy is problematic, among other things because of its roundabout way of arguing: Unger's approach is too complex to be convincing.³⁰ It seems, therefore, that both Singer's and Unger's defence of the lifesaving analogy are unconvincing.

1.3. Killing and letting die

A third important argument for the consequentialist, demanding duty to aid the poor, is based on the claim that killing and letting die are morally equivalent. It may be that this argument is less important to prove the consequentialist's case than the Sacrifice Principle and the lifesaving analogy. However, the claim that killing and letting die are morally equally wrong *is* defended by various philosophers,³¹ and is therefore worth discussing. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to evaluate all versions of the argument. I will focus on the argument of James Rachels only, as he is most explicit about the moral consequences of the analogy between killing and letting die for our duty to aid the poor. In 'Killing and Starving to Death', Rachels defends the 'Equivalence Thesis': the claim that our duty not to let people die of malnutrition or related health problems, is just as strong as our duty not to kill them.³² His view, he writes, 'has radical implications for conduct'.³³ To be more precise, these implications are that 'we are morally wrong to spend money on inessentials, when that money could go to feed the starving'.³⁴ This quote implies that Rachels' interpretation of our duty to aid the poor, is just as demanding as Singer's interpretation.

However, the question is whether Rachels actually succeeds in proving that letting the global poor die is just as wrong as killing them. A problem may be that his descriptions of the Equivalence Thesis are not all the same. In the beginning of his article he describes the Equivalence Thesis as mentioned above: as the claim that letting distant needy strangers die is as bad as killing them. However, later he describes this thesis as 'a claim about what does, or does not, count as a morally good reason in support of a value judgment'.³⁵ The latter claim

²⁹ Philips 2007, p. 22.

³⁰ Philips 2007, p. 22.

³¹ See for example Singer 2011; Harris 1974, Kagan 1989 and Rachels 1979.

³² Rachels 1979, p. 159.

³³ Rachels 1979, p. 168.

³⁴ Rachels 1979, p. 169.

³⁵ Rachels 1979, pp. 163-164.

means that ‘the bare fact that one act is an act of killing, while another act is an act of “merely” letting someone die, is not a morally good reason in support of the judgment that the former is worse than the latter’.³⁶ Rachels also stresses the point that he does not want to argue that *every* case of letting someone die is equally as bad as *every* case of killing. Killing a terminal patient who wanted to die, might, for example, be better than allowing an ill patient who could be saved, to die.³⁷ The difference between the two descriptions of the Equivalence Thesis, causes problems for Rachels’ aim to show that letting the distant needy die is just as bad as killing them. His article makes clear that he actually wants to defend the second version of the Equivalence Thesis. And that version, the fact that the distinction between killing and letting die is not a good basis for value judgments, is no reason for claiming that letting distant needy strangers die is as bad as killing them. As Rachels does not claim that every act of letting die is as bad as every act of killing, he needs to justify why these two specific cases (the case of letting distant needy strangers die and the case of killing them) are morally equally wrong. This justification is needed because there might be reasons why letting a distant needy strangers die is not as bad as killing them. If so, our duty not to let distant needy strangers die might not be as strong as our duty not to kill them after all.

The problem is that Rachels does not give a justification for the specific claim that letting distant needy strangers die is as bad as killing them. With regard to this specific claim, Rachels discusses only one thing – an example that is originally Trammell’s:

If someone threatened to steal \$1000 from a person if he did not take a gun and shoot a stranger between the eyes, it would be very wrong for him to kill the stranger to save \$1000. But if someone asked from that person \$1000 to save a stranger, it would seem that his obligation to grant this request would not be as great as his obligation to refuse the first demand – even if he has good reason for believing that without his \$1000 the stranger would certainly die.³⁸

With this example, Trammell wants to show that the duty not to kill is, in this case, stronger than the duty not to let someone die. Rachels’ only objection to this example appeals to its consequences:

³⁶ Rachels 1979, p. 164.

³⁷ Rachels 1979, p. 164.

³⁸ Trammell’s example quoted in Rachels 1979, pp. 169-170.

What is at stake in the situation described is the person's \$1000 and the stranger's life. But we end up with the *same* combination of lives and money, no matter which option the person chooses [...]. It makes no difference, either to the person's interests or to the stranger's interests, which option is chosen; why, then, do we have the curious intuition that there is a big difference here?³⁹

As the last question is rhetorical, Rachels' objection ends there. As a defence of the claim that letting distant needy strangers die is as bad as killing them and that we therefore have a demanding duty to aid the poor, this objection does not suffice. The objection faces the same problem as the life-saving analogy: it is difficult to prove that a strong duty to aid exists just by comparing two examples.⁴⁰ Moreover, Rachels' appeal to the consequences of the two situations is not sufficient: simply saying that the consequences of one's actions are all that matters, does not make that statement true. After all, it may be that other considerations play a role in deciding whether an action is morally right. For example, maybe it is morally permissible not to save a stranger because you are not the only one who can save him, or because the stranger's need is not immediate to you. If Rachels is to succeed in arguing that, in Trammell's example, the duty not to let die is equally strong as the duty not to kill, he needs to show that considerations like these are not morally relevant. As he fails to do so, his argument is unconvincing.

Nevertheless, I think that the final question that Rachels raises – the question why we have the intuition that there is a big difference between the cases he describes – is an important one. Rather than using it as a rhetorical question, we should try to find an *answer* to the question why we have conflicting intuitions about such cases. A good answer to this question, I think, is that our conflicting intuitions are caused by conflicting parts of our nature.

³⁹ Rachels 1979, p. 170 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁰ Just like my objection to Singer's argument, this objection is based on the *form* of argument that Rachels uses (the comparison of cases), rather than on the consequentialist approach itself. That is because it is not my intention to criticise consequentialism itself. Rather, I want to examine whether consequentialists can convincingly defend their view that we have a demanding duty to aid the poor. As said before, my aim is to prove that they cannot: their current arguments in favour of this duty, fail. There may be argument forms that *can* defend a demanding duty to aid consequentialistically, but until consequentialists have found them, they cannot prove that we have a demanding duty to aid.

On the one hand, having moral concern for others is an essential part of human nature (this is the impartial part). But on the other hand, having a great concern for one's individual life is an essential part of human nature too (this is the partial part). Nagel also describes the conflict between these two parts of our nature, and calls it the 'duality of the self'.⁴¹ The intuitions to Trammell's example can be explained by this duality of the self. In this example, the intuition that we should not shoot someone in order to save a thousand dollars, is caused by the impartial part of our nature – this part objects to killing someone. The intuition that we are not morally required to *give away* a thousand dollars in order to save someone, on the contrary, is caused by the partial part of our nature – this part objects to making large sacrifices in order to help someone else. In the same way, our conflicting intuitions about *poverty relief* can be explained by this dual nature: our intuition that we should do as much as we can in order to relieve poverty springs from the impartial part of our nature, while the intuition that we do not have to make large sacrifices in order to help others, springs from the partial part of our nature. This explanation of our intuitions shows how important a role human nature may play in the problem of deciding what we ought to do in order to aid the global poor. In chapter four, I will further reflect on this issue.

1.4. Conclusion

It seems that the most important arguments for a consequentialist, demanding duty to aid, do not succeed. The question is whether the failure of these arguments results in the conclusion that we do *not* have a demanding duty to aid the poor. On the one hand, one could argue that this conclusion is *unjustified* because there may be other arguments that can justify a demanding duty to aid the poor – arguments that we have not discussed yet. On the other hand, one could argue that it is *justifiable* to assume that we do not have a demanding duty to aid. This assumption could be justified by claiming that the consequentialists have the burden of proof on their side, since they are the ones defending the extremely counterintuitive conclusions. However, this argumentation strategy includes the assumption that – in the total absence of proof – the claim that we do *not* have a demanding duty to aid is right. This assumption might not be defensible. As Hooker argued: both the claim that we have a demanding duty of beneficence and the claim that we do not, face problems. The former claim

⁴¹ Nagel 1991, p. 44.

can seem counterintuitively demanding; the latter can seem counterintuitively mean.⁴² So in the absence of proof, we should probably not simply assume that this latter claim is right. My conclusion that the consequentialist arguments discussed above do not succeed, is therefore not to say that we do not have a demanding duty toward the poor. However, the claim gives all the more reason to explore Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach, in order to see how demanding our duty to aid the poor might be according to these approaches and whether the arguments of these approaches *do* succeed.

⁴² Hooker 1999, p. 81.

2. Kantian beneficence and its unascertainable limits

In the previous chapter I argued that the most important consequentialist arguments for a demanding duty to aid do not succeed. In this chapter I will discuss whether a Kantian account of our duty to aid might be a good alternative to a consequentialist account. In other words, I will try to answer the question whether a Kantian position *can* provide us with convincing arguments concerning the demandingness of our duty to aid. When answering this question, I will discuss two specific Kantian positions. First, I will turn to a position based on Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative (the Formula of Universal Law), because this is the fundamental basis of a Kantian theory. Second, I will discuss a Scanlonian contractualist position. The reasons for choosing this specific theory are that Scanlonian contractualism is an important account of Kantian contractualism,⁴³ and that it, unlike Rawlsian contractualism, focusses on individual duties rather than institutional ones. In fact, as Elizabeth Ashford claims, Scanlon's contractualism can be seen as the most developed version of contractualism when it comes to individual obligations.⁴⁴ With the discussion of these two Kantian positions, I hope to prove that when trying to determine the demandingness of our duty to aid, both Kantian positions face a fundamental problem. Just like consequentialism – but for different reasons – they fail to give us a convincing account of the demandingness of our duty to aid.

2.1. The Formula of Universal Law

Kant's Formula of Universal Law states that you should act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.⁴⁵ This description leaves room for questions. What does it mean for example, not to be able to will that your maxim become a universal law? Kant says something about this with respect to our duty to aid, that might be helpful. According to him, a maxim of non-beneficence cannot be willed to become a universal law. The reason why an agent cannot will a maxim of non-

⁴³ Scanlon's contractualism is not completely similar to Kantianism. I will come back to this distinction later.

⁴⁴ Ashford 2003, p. 273.

⁴⁵ Kant 2008, 4:421.

beneficence to become a universal law, is that the agent would conflict with himself if he did will this. And the reason why the agent would be self-conflicting, is that he himself may need the help of others in the future,⁴⁶ in which case the agent would surely want to receive this help. Barbara Herman describes the contradiction in will that arises: the agent ‘would be willing both that the world be such that no one could help anyone, *and* that he be helped’.⁴⁷ She explains that if you want something, in Kant’s theory it is ‘irrational to act in ways that prevent your getting what you want’ (other things equal).⁴⁸ It is clear, then, that the Formula of Universal Law says that a maxim of non-beneficence cannot be willed to become a universal law. That is why we have a duty of beneficence. However, this conclusion does not tell us how demanding this duty is. To find out, more maxims need to be tested.

In order to see whether the Formula of Universal Law supports a demanding duty to aid, let us test a maxim that prevents us from helping others when it takes great sacrifice. Following the reasoning above, it seems that this maxim of non-beneficence when it takes great sacrifice, cannot be willed to become a universal law. It may be that the agent who wills this maxim to become a universal law, at some point needs help that requires a great sacrifice from the helper. The agent would want this help, so there would be a contradiction in will if the agent would will that the maxim above (which prevents him from getting this help) become a universal law. It seems, then, that the Formula of Universal Law supports a demanding duty to aid. However, this conclusion does not seem justified when we take into account other things that the agent might want. Surely the agent wants to be able to pursue his personal projects and maintain his friendships. Given these wants, let us test the opposite maxim: the maxim that *requires* beneficence when it takes great sacrifice. If the agent willed *this* maxim to become a universal law, there would be a contradiction in will as well. That is because circumstances may arise in which the agent is required to make a great sacrifice in order to help others. That sacrifice may involve giving up his personal projects and it might jeopardize his friendships. In this case the maxim causes him to give up things that he wants to keep. This is a contradiction in will, and therefore a maxim of beneficence when it requires great sacrifice, cannot be willed to become a universal law.

It is important to clarify the way in which I have used Kant’s ‘test’ in the previous paragraph. I have argued that the aforementioned maxims cannot be willed to become a

⁴⁶ Kant 2008, 4:423.

⁴⁷ Herman 1984, pp. 579-580 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁸ Herman 1984, p. 580.

universal law, because that would result in a contradiction in will. With this argumentation, I do *not* mean to say that maxims can only be universalised when there are no kinds of conflicting motives or interests at all. That view is very implausible, because it is probable that the universalization of most maxims will result in a conflict of a certain kind. It is more plausible that one must *compare* will-determinations in Kant's test of universalization, in order to find out which maxims can be universalised. Testing the maxim of beneficence may provide an example of such a comparison. That is because both the universalization of a maxim of beneficence and the universalization of its opposite (a maxim of non-beneficence), result in a conflict of some kind. Willing that a maxim of beneficence become a universal law, results in a conflict because it means that we sometimes have to make sacrifices in order to help others, while most of us would rather not sacrifice anything. This conflict does not, however, result in the view that we do not have a duty of beneficence. That is because willing that a maxim of *non*-beneficence become a universal law, results in a more fundamental conflict. As mentioned before, the universalization of this maxim would mean that we would not be able to receive help if we would need it, while we would definitely *want* to receive help in such a case. This conflict weighs more than the conflict which arises from universalising a maxim of beneficence. This maxim is therefore one that can be universalised, which is why we have a duty of beneficence. However, a comparison of will-determinations may be easier in some cases than in others. When it comes to the maxims described above (the maxim that *prevents* us from helping others when it takes great sacrifice and the maxim that *requires* us to do so), I think it is very hard to make a comparison of will-determinations. The universalization of both maxims results in a conflict that is very fundamental. As mentioned before, in one case the conflict arises because we will not receive help when we really need it and in the other case it arises because we will be required to give up most of the substance of our lives in order to help others. These conflicts are both so fundamental, that it is not clear which conflict weighs more. It seems, therefore, that both maxims cannot be willed to become a universal law.

We thus face a problem: both the maxim that *prevents* us from helping when it takes great sacrifice, and its opposite, the maxim that *requires* us to do so, cannot be willed to become a universal law. This is exactly the problem that Thomas Nagel describes: 'It is still clearly unacceptable to fall below a modest overall level of aid to others [...]. But as we move above that level we gradually enter a region where we cannot will as a universal principle *either* that one *must* or that one *need not* help the needy at that level of sacrifice to one's

personal aims'.⁴⁹ According to Nagel, this problem arises because of what the Formula of Universal Law requires us to do. He says that it requires us

to take into account the personal standpoints of each of the parties to any situation covered by the principle under review, and their associated motives and values. We are to ask ourselves whether we can will the universalization of our maxim in light of the full range of effects and motivational demands it would entail for all the parties in whose place we imagine ourselves.⁵⁰

The fact that we have to take into account all hypothetical situations that one might be in, causes the problem. As we have seen, there is a conflict of interests: it is in the interest of the needy to be helped, but it is in the interest of the helper not to help when it takes a great sacrifice. Because of this conflict of interests, 'any maxim on which a person proposes to act would, if universalized, conflict with what he would want for himself in at least one of the hypothetical positions he might occupy under it'.⁵¹ The maxim of non-beneficence would conflict with an agent's interests if she were in need of help, but the maxim requiring her to help, would conflict with her interest to keep her money for herself if she were in the position to help.⁵²

Nagel also expresses the problem in another way: as a problem caused by the duality of the self. The duality of the self is a conflict between impartiality (which says that everyone's life is equally important) and agent-relativity (which says that everyone has his own life to lead).⁵³ As said before, I think that the duality of the self explains why it is so hard to adequately answer questions about our duty to aid. Impartiality and partiality are both so fundamental to our nature, that it is hard to solve the conflict that they cause. As Nagel notes, it helps a little that impartiality is partly internalized: the well-being of others is part of what a person wants, which makes it easier for him to sacrifice something in order to help someone else. But this internalized impartiality does not replace a person's individual aims completely, so the conflict between impartiality and a person's individual aims still exists.⁵⁴ Nagel sees no

⁴⁹ Nagel 1991, p. 50 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁰ Nagel 1991, p. 42.

⁵¹ Nagel 1991, pp. 42-43 (emphasis in original).

⁵² Nagel 1991, p. 43.

⁵³ Nagel 1991, p. 44.

⁵⁴ Nagel 1991, p. 47.

solution to this problem. In the world we live in, any principle that tries to account for impartial reasons and agent-relative reasons, ‘will be either too demanding in terms of the first or not demanding enough in terms of the second’.⁵⁵

Nagel’s conclusion suggests that it is impossible to decide what the specific limits are of the duty of beneficence. Kant himself seems to agree with this conclusion. He calls the duty of beneficence a ‘wide duty’, which means that ‘the duty has in it a latitude for doing more or less’.⁵⁶ The reason why Kant thinks beneficence a wide duty, is that it is impossible to assign specific limits to the sacrifice one ought to make in order to help others.⁵⁷ According to Kant, the Formula of Universal Law holds for maxims, but not for determinate actions. It seems, therefore, that the demandingness of our duty of beneficence cannot be determined by rational principles. Rather, the demandingness of this duty ‘depends, in large part, on what each person’s true needs are in view of his sensibilities, and it must be left to each to decide this for himself’.⁵⁸ This decision must be left to agents themselves, because ‘a maxim of promoting others’ happiness at the sacrifice of one’s own happiness, one’s true needs, would conflict with itself if it were made a universal law’.⁵⁹ Kant concludes that the duty of beneficence is therefore a ‘wide’ one. Here I will follow Nagel and Kant. The Formula of Universal Law tells us that there is *a* duty to aid, but it does not tell us much more, and it definitely cannot tell us what the specific limits are of a duty of beneficence. Therefore it is of not much help when trying to determine the demandingness of this duty.

⁵⁵ Nagel 1991, p. 49.

⁵⁶ Kant 1996, 6:393.

⁵⁷ Kant 1996, 6:393.

⁵⁸ Kant 1996, 6:393.

⁵⁹ Kant 1996, 6:393. Kant’s remark that this maxim (a maxim which requires us to promote another person’s happiness at the sacrifice of our own) cannot be willed to become a universal law, implies that we do not have a duty of beneficence when discharging this duty would decrease our happiness. This, in turn, implies that most people do not have an extremely demanding duty to aid, because such a duty would make most people less happy. It seems, then, that Kant *can* say something specific about our duty to aid: namely that, for many people, it is not very demanding. However, it is not clear what Kant means with the words ‘one’s happiness’ and ‘one’s true needs’. Moreover, elsewhere Kant claims that one should not take into account happiness when it comes to duties (Kant 2009, A 166). That is why it is not clear whether Kant really thinks that our duty to aid should be constrained by our happiness. Examining this issue in detail is, however, beyond the scope of this discussion.

2.2. Scanlonian contractualism

Perhaps Scanlon's contractualism is of more help when determining the demandingness our duty to aid. His contractualist account holds that 'an act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the regulation of behaviour that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement'.⁶⁰ This account has similarities to Kant's theory. Scanlon himself says: 'the idea that the rightness of an action is determined by whether it would be allowed by principles that no one would reasonably reject does have an obvious similarity to Kant's Categorical Imperative'.⁶¹ But there are clear differences between the two theories too. For example, Kant claims that moral duties are authoritative because they are grounded in conditions of our rational agency, whereas Scanlon claims that moral duties have importance and authority because 'other aspects of our lives and our relations with others involve this idea'.⁶²

Because Scanlon's theory revolves around the idea that an action is morally right if it is allowed by principles that no one could reasonably reject, it is important to know what 'reasonable rejection' means. Scanlon writes that 'in order to decide whether a principle could be reasonably rejected, we need to consider it from a number of standpoints'.⁶³ Beneficiaries of the principle may have reasons to insist on a demanding principle and reject less demanding principles, but the agents who will be constrained by it may have reason to reject the demanding principle and insist on a less demanding principle.⁶⁴ A principle can be reasonably rejected by a person when this person's reasons to reject it prevail over other person's reasons to reject an alternative.⁶⁵ Reasonable rejection is thus *comparative*: the reason to reject a principle must outweigh reasons to reject alternatives. Furthermore, Reasonable rejection depends on the reasons of *individuals*. The focus on reasons of an individual makes it impossible to aggregate benefits and justify actions based on the sum of a

⁶⁰ Scanlon 1998, p. 153.

⁶¹ Scanlon 1998, p. 5.

⁶² Scanlon 1998, p. 6.

⁶³ Scanlon 1998, p. 213.

⁶⁴ Scanlon 1998, p. 213.

⁶⁵ Scanlon 1998, p. 213.

value that they result in.⁶⁶ According to Scanlon, this feature is central to contractualism and it is the reason why the theory forms a good alternative to consequentialism.⁶⁷

Now we know what reasonable rejection means, the question is what constitute good *reasons* to object to a principle. Scanlon says that in many cases, reasons related to well-being are the most relevant when determining whether a principle could be reasonably rejected.⁶⁸ But he stresses that contractualism can ‘account for the significance of different moral notions, [...] without reducing all of them to a single idea’.⁶⁹ Therefore there are other moral notions, such as fairness, which can be reasons for reasonably rejecting a principle, even if that principle would not harm a person’s well-being.⁷⁰

2.2.1. *The Rescue Principle*

The question is what Scanlon’s contractualist theory means for our duty to aid the poor. Scanlon himself suggests a principle of aid that probably cannot be reasonably rejected. This principle is the Rescue Principle: ‘if you are presented with a situation in which you can prevent something very bad from happening, or alleviate someone’s dire plight, by making only a slight (or even moderate) sacrifice, then it would be wrong not to do so’.⁷¹ Scanlon notes that this principle is very similar to Singer’s Sacrifice Principle.⁷² There is, however, a difference. Scanlon makes an addition that Singer does not make: that ‘the threshold of sacrifice is understood to take account of previous contributions (so that the principle does not demand unlimited sacrifice if it is divided into small enough increments)’.⁷³ Scanlon adds that there may be other principles to aid the poor, which may be stronger in some cases and weaker in others.⁷⁴ His position concerning the content of these duties remains unclear, as does his view on the exact demandingness of his Rescue Principle. He calls the duty ‘demanding’ and says that ‘hardly any of us lives up to what it requires’, given the world that

⁶⁶ Scanlon 1998, p. 230.

⁶⁷ Scanlon 1998, p. 230.

⁶⁸ Scanlon 1998, p. 215.

⁶⁹ Scanlon 1998, p. 216.

⁷⁰ Scanlon 1998, p. 216.

⁷¹ Scanlon 1998, p. 224.

⁷² Scanlon 1998, p. 396.

⁷³ Scanlon 1998, p. 224.

⁷⁴ Scanlon 1998, p. 224.

we live in today.⁷⁵ However, given the fact that the threshold of sacrifice takes into account previous contributions, this principle is probably not as demanding as the consequentialist Sacrifice Principle.⁷⁶ It remains unclear how demanding the principle is exactly, and Scanlon claims that it is impossible for contractualism to tell us:

Contractualism, as a theory, does not tell us exactly what level of sacrifice is required by this principle [the Rescue Principle]. I would not say, for example, that we would be required to sacrifice an arm in order to save the life of a stranger. But here a judgment is required, and I do not think that any plausible theory could eliminate the need for judgments of this kind.⁷⁷

This quote suggests that it is not possible to theoretically determine the demandingness of a duty to aid – it takes ‘a judgment’ to do that. It is not clear what kind of judgment is meant by this. It is also unclear what Scanlon means when he writes that contractualism does not tell us *exactly* what level of sacrifice is required. Does he mean that the theory cannot tell us what level of sacrifice is required in specific cases? Or that contractualism cannot tell us anything more than he did before, when he said that our duty is ‘demanding’? If it is the latter, then it is clear that contractualism will not be of much more help than the Formula of Universal Law in determining the demandingness of a duty to aid. However, it may be that Scanlon’s claim in the quote above is incorrect, because others claim that it *is* possible to say more about the demandingness of a contractualist duty to aid.

⁷⁵ Scanlon 1998, p. 225.

⁷⁶ The reason for saying that Scanlon’s principle is probably not as demanding as the consequentialist Sacrifice Principle, is the following. Scanlon writes that we should make a ‘slight’ or a ‘moderate’ sacrifice, and thinks that this threshold of sacrifice should take into account previous contributions. This addition means that, according to Scanlon’s Rescue Principle, one is not obliged to make a moderate sacrifice every time that one is in a position to help others. Rather, one is allowed to stop helping after one’s total contributions have added up to a moderate sacrifice (Scanlon 1998, p. 224). This is not what consequentialists think. Singer says, for example, that one should not stop at this point. Instead, one should keep making more moderate sacrifices until one has almost become as poor as the people one is trying to save in the first place (Singer 1972). I will assume here that the level of sacrifice which Singer promotes, should be called a ‘demanding’ sacrifice, rather than a ‘moderate’ sacrifice. As Scanlon’s Rescue Principle only requires people to make a ‘moderate’ sacrifice, I think that his principle is less demanding than consequentialist principles such as Singer’s.

⁷⁷ Scanlon 1998, p. 225.

2.2.2. *A demanding interpretation of the Rescue Principle*

In her article ‘The Demandingness of Scanlon’s Contractualism’, Elizabeth Ashford claims that Scanlon’s contractualism leads to a duty to aid that is as demanding as a consequentialist duty to aid.⁷⁸ In order to prove that this claim is true, she compares the strength of person A’s objections to a demanding principle with the strength of person B’s objections to a less demanding principle.⁷⁹ One objection that person A could make to a demanding principle, is based on the severe limits it would place on the time and money that she could spend on her personal projects. This objection needs to be compared with the objection that person B could have to a less demanding principle. This person’s life could be in immediate danger, or he could be starving or living in great pain. When comparing the two objections, Ashford says that ‘the sacrifice imposed on an agent by a principle of aid to those in need will have to be extreme before it balances the cost faced by individuals in dire straits who are not helped and otherwise would have been’.⁸⁰ Since the sacrifice of person A has to be extreme before it balances the cost faced by person B, the objection of person B to less demanding principles outweighs the objection of person A to demanding principles. This comparison therefore leads us to believe that a contractualist duty to aid is as demanding as a consequentialist one.⁸¹

Another comparison that Ashford makes is the following. She says that person A could object to the demanding principle because it threatens her ability to take care of her kids well. For example, she would not be able to send them to private school if she would act according to a demanding principle.⁸² However, Ashford claims that this objection can also be outweighed by person B’s reasons against adopting a less demanding principle. If person B is in dire straits, he might not even be sure that his children will grow up to reach adulthood.⁸³ This objection to a less demanding principle outweighs person A’s reason against a demanding principle, because the reasons are of the same kind, but person B’s reasons have a ‘far greater urgency’.⁸⁴ Ashford concludes that this comparison, just like the previous one,

⁷⁸ Ashford 2003.

⁷⁹ Ashford 2003, p. 287.

⁸⁰ Ashford 2003, p. 288.

⁸¹ Ashford 2003, p. 289.

⁸² Ashford 2003, p. 289.

⁸³ Ashford 2003, p. 290.

⁸⁴ Ashford 2003, p. 290.

suggests that a contractualist duty to aid is no less demanding than consequentialist duties are. The question is whether this conclusion is justified. It is not easy to deal with conflicting reasons, and it may be that Ashford has not dealt with them correctly.

2.2.3. The impossibility of determining limits

One might argue, for example, that it is harder to decide whether losing one's life outweighs losing one's personal projects, than Ashford claims. In the first instance, this choice may seem easy, because losing one's life includes losing one's personal projects and therefore losing one's life must be worse than merely losing one's personal projects. But it may be possible that the matter is more complex than this calculation. That is because a person's personal projects and friendships, as Bernard Williams suggests, constitute a person's reason to live. Without them, a person may wish he were dead.⁸⁵ Therefore it is not clear how much a life without personal projects and friendships is worth. Maybe a life in which a person cannot set his own goals and cannot pursue his own wants and desires, is worth as much as no life at all. If Ashford is to succeed in proving that the Rescue Principle is as demanding as consequentialist principles, she needs to prove that contractualism can help us make the decision that losing one's life is worse than losing one's personal projects and friendships.

Another reason for questioning Ashford's approach to conflicting reasons, may be that her comparisons of those reasons seem to be based on one value only: well-being. While Scanlon writes that well-being is the most relevant factor in most cases, he also states that it is not the only value on which reasonable rejections of principles can be based.⁸⁶ Fairness, for example, is another value that can give rise to reasonable objection. Ashford herself also claims – in a different article, written with Tim Mulgan – that well-being is not the only important value according to contractualism.⁸⁷ Ashford and Mulgan claim that this is why the strength of objections to principles may not always be proportional to the loss of well-being that the principle causes.⁸⁸ This is another reason why we should not assume that the loss of life always is a better reason to object to a principle than the loss of one's personal projects. That assumption is a consequentialist assumption, based on well-being only, and

⁸⁵ Williams 1981b, p. 13.

⁸⁶ Scanlon 1998, p. 216.

⁸⁷ Ashford and Mulgan 2007.

⁸⁸ Ashford and Mulgan 2007.

contractualism is meant to avoid reducing all values to a single fundamental moral notion.⁸⁹ Thus it may be that Ashford's comparisons are not correct because she only takes the loss of well-being into account, while there may be other reasons to object to the principles she mentions.

In a review of Scanlon's *What We Owe To Each Other*, Nagel seems to suggest a reason other than well-being that can be used to object to a principle. He first describes the effect that a very demanding (or 'essentially unlimited') duty to aid the poor would have: it 'would simply rule out the pursuit of a wide range of individualistic values – aesthetic, hedonistic, intellectual, cultural, romantic, athletic and so forth'.⁹⁰ After describing these effects, Nagel wonders whether the abandonment of these values could be the basis for a reasonable rejection of a demanding principle. He says that it might be so:

The question for Scanlon's model would be whether it could be offered as a justification to each one of those [starving] millions, and my sense is that perhaps [...] one could say: 'I cannot be condemned as unreasonable if I reject a principle that would require me to abandon most of the substance of my life to save yours.'⁹¹

Nagel writes that if it is in fact justifiable to utter this sentence, that means that Scanlon's method 'gives a result with regard to the demand for self-sacrifice different from the result it gives with regard to principles governing the conduct of impartial third parties'.⁹² He notes that differences like this are intuitively taken for granted: we think differently, for example, about the choice of an impartial third party about who to rescue and the choice of one party to rescue himself or a loved one rather than a stranger.⁹³ Maybe these considerations should be taken into account when weighing objections to possible principles. If we would do that, we might find that an affluent person's reason to object to a demanding principle (the reason being that this principle requires him to *actively sacrifice* most of the substance of his life) is stronger than a poor person's reason to object to an *undemanding* principle (the reason being that this principle leaves him to die). In that case it would be justifiable to say that it is *not*

⁸⁹ Scanlon 1998, p. 216.

⁹⁰ Nagel 1999.

⁹¹ Nagel 1999.

⁹² Nagel 1999.

⁹³ Nagel 1999.

unreasonable to object to giving up most of the substance of your life in order to save someone else's. In any case, Nagel's analysis shows that it is possible to judge the objection of an affluent person to a demanding principle very differently than Ashford does. It is therefore unclear whether Ashford's comparisons of objections, which result in a very demanding contractualist duty, are the *right* comparisons. If her argument is to succeed, she does not only have to prove that losing one's life really weighs more than losing the projects that make one's life worth living, but she also has to prove that considerations besides well-being, such as considerations related to self-sacrifice, do not weigh more than the loss of one's life. It is hard to see how contractualism can help here. In his article 'What we owe to distant others', Leif Wenar argues that contractualism gives us no tools for understanding how to weigh the sacrifice from the rich against the benefit to the poor.⁹⁴ I think this objection to contractualism is justified. As Scanlon says, contractualism can tell us that there is a duty to aid when it takes little sacrifice, but beyond that contractualism does not tell us what to do – in those cases it takes personal judgment to make a decision. So, just like a position based on the Formula of Universal Law, contractualism does not seem to solve the conflict between impartial reasons and agent-relative reasons.

2.3. Conclusion

It seems that both the Formula of Universal Law and Scanlonian contractualism do not give us the tools to decide how demanding our duty to aid the poor is. Both convincingly argue that we ought to give *some* aid, but are not able to tell us how far this duty goes. Beyond a certain level of aid, it is not possible to will as a universal law either an undemanding duty or a demanding duty: the first cannot be willed because we may be in a situation where we need help; the second cannot be willed because we may be in a situation where we want to spend our time and money on our personal projects. The same goes for contractualism: this theory cannot convincingly show that there is a principle of beneficence that cannot be reasonably rejected. That is because contractualism does not tell us how to weigh the loss of one's personal projects against the loss of one's life. It seems, then, that contractualism does not provide a good alternative to consequentialism. For different reasons, both theories cannot give us a convincing account of the demandingness of our duty to aid the poor.

⁹⁴ Wenar 2003, p. 289.

The question remains whether the fact that contractualism cannot provide us with exact limits to our duty to aid, is a serious objection to the theory of contractualism. It may be, like Scanlon claims, that it is not possible for a plausible theory to propose specific limits to our duty to aid.⁹⁵ Therefore it may be that we should not require this of a moral theory. However, discussing this matter is beyond the scope of this paper. Moreover, this discussion may not be necessary to make my point. My point is, namely, that contractualism (like consequentialism) does not provide us with a convincing account of the demandingness of our duty to aid the poor, which suggests that it might be time to look for alternatives. In the next chapter I will therefore turn to an a-theoretical approach to morality, in order to see whether such a theory *can* provide a satisfactory account of the demandingness of our duty to aid the poor.

⁹⁵ Scanlon 1998, p. 225.

3. The imprecise limits of a-theoretical duties to aid

After criticizing consequentialism and Kantianism for failing to show us how demanding our duty toward the poor is, it is time to turn to a third philosophy. Rather than another normative *theory*, in this chapter I will discuss an a-theoretical approach to ethics that values the everyday intuitions that we have and the way we view ourselves in everyday life. Specifically, I will discuss the a-theoretical approach of Bernard Williams, as he is one of the most influential philosophers in the area of a-theoretical approaches to the demandingness of morality. I will claim that Williams' a-theoretical approach⁹⁶ provides arguments to reject extremely demanding accounts of beneficence. However, it is not clear how strong these arguments are. Moreover, even if we *do* accept them, Williams' philosophy remains vague when it comes to the *exact* limits of our duty to aid. That is why the a-theoretical approach, just like consequentialism and Kantianism, fails to tell us how demanding our duty of beneficence is.

3.1. An a-theoretical upper limit on our duty to aid

In the last chapter of his book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams criticises the morality system. He blames this 'peculiar institution'⁹⁷ for not seeing that other things than morality are important: 'Ethical life itself is important, but it can see that other things than itself are important. It contains motivations that indeed serve these other ends but at the same time be [*sic*] seen from within that life as part of what make it worth living'.⁹⁸ He also criticizes the morality system for giving too much weight to the concept of duty.⁹⁹ According to the morality system, only an obligation can beat an obligation. This view has problematic

⁹⁶ In lack of a better term, and because his scepticism about the possibility and the power of ethical theory is a central feature of his philosophy (see Williams 1981a), I will refer to Williams' approach to ethics as an 'a-theoretical approach'.

⁹⁷ Although Williams does not mention this, it may be worth noting that the term 'peculiar institution' was used as a euphemism for slavery in the Southern United States.

⁹⁸ Williams 1985, p. 184.

⁹⁹ This thesis, with a research question focusing on a duty, probably fits into the system that Williams criticizes.

consequences, says Williams: ‘if obligation is allowed to structure ethical thought, there are several natural ways in which it can come to dominate life altogether’.¹⁰⁰ Williams thinks that we should, therefore, view obligations in another way. He writes that an obligation is ‘a special kind of consideration’, but that other considerations may be important enough to outweigh an obligation on a certain occasion.¹⁰¹ Williams *does* think that ‘some kinds of ethical consideration will have high deliberative priority’.¹⁰² These ethical considerations are negative obligations and positive obligations of immediacy (obligations of immediacy are obligations to help people when their need is immediate to you, as it is, for example, when a person right in front of you needs to be rescued).¹⁰³ According to Williams, these two types of obligation often have priority because they follow from the basic interests that people have.¹⁰⁴ He emphasizes that ‘each person has a life to lead. People need help but [...] not all the time. All the time they need not to be killed, assaulted or arbitrarily interfered with’.¹⁰⁵ Because of these needs, priority is often given to negative duties and, in the case of immediacy, positive duties. However, these duties are still just one kind of consideration and do not *always* get priority over other considerations. Williams’ understanding of obligations as one kind of consideration among others, and his emphasis on the idea that they should not dominate life, seem to lead to the view that a duty to aid the poor must not be extremely demanding.

In his essay ‘Persons, character and morality’, Williams seems to defend a similar view. His argumentation for this view is based on the idea that ‘an individual person has a set

¹⁰⁰ Williams 1985, p. 182.

¹⁰¹ Williams 1985, p. 187.

¹⁰² Williams 1985, p. 185.

¹⁰³ Williams 1985, p. 185. It is, of course, important to know what ‘immediate’ means *exactly*. However, Williams is not very clear on the exact definition of the term. He merely says that obligations of immediacy arise in cases of emergency, such as a rescue case (Williams 1985, p. 186). With regard to the way we should understand obligations of immediacy, he says that ‘[a] general ethical recognition of people’s vital interests is focused into a deliberative priority by immediacy, and it is immediacy to *me* that generates *my* obligation, one I cannot ignore without blame’ (Williams 1985, p. 186, emphasis in original). The ethical consequence of understanding obligations of immediacy in this way, he says, is that we should not banish the category of immediacy because the global poor have as big a claim on us as the ones in need here (Williams 1985, p. 186). Rather, we must consider what constitutes immediacy in our modern world (Williams 1985, p. 186).

¹⁰⁴ Williams 1985, p. 186.

¹⁰⁵ Williams 1985, p. 186.

of desires, concerns or, as I shall often call them, projects, which help constitute a *character*, and on the connection between this fact and a person's 'having reason for living at all'.¹⁰⁶ In other words: Williams thinks that without one's personal projects, one does not have reason to live. He defends this view by arguing that there are categorical desires: desires that are not dependent on a person's being alive. According to Williams, these desires exist because it is possible to imagine a person who is rationally considering to commit suicide, but who decides to keep on living because of some desire.¹⁰⁷ He says that desires like this 'do not depend on the assumption of the person's existence, since they serve to prevent that assumption's being questioned, or to answer the question if it is raised'.¹⁰⁸ Because these desires serve to protect a person's existence, they 'constitute the conditions of there being [...] a future',¹⁰⁹ and without them it is 'unclear why [a person] should go on at all'.¹¹⁰ With these words, Williams shows that one's desires – or projects – give a person reason to live. Specifically, he thinks that a person may have 'a *ground* project or set of projects which are closely related to his existence and which to a significant degree give meaning to his life'¹¹¹ and which '[give] him a reason for living'.¹¹² Without a ground project a person may keep on going – driven by hope, for example – but he may feel 'that he might as well have died'.¹¹³ Williams uses this concept of a ground project to criticize the demandingness of the impartial morality of utilitarianism and Kantianism. 'There can come a point', he says, 'at which it is quite unreasonable for a man to give up, in the name of the impartial good ordering of the world of moral agents, something which is a condition of his having any interest in being around in that world at all'.¹¹⁴ According to Williams it is thus unreasonable to give up one's ground project, since it is one's reason for being alive. Williams' remarks about a person's reason to live, show us that a concern for our individual projects and friendships, is inherent to our nature. In other words: partiality is inherent to human nature.

¹⁰⁶ Williams 1981b, p. 5 (emphasis in original).

¹⁰⁷ Williams 1981b, p. 11.

¹⁰⁸ Williams 1981b, p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ Williams 1981b, p. 11.

¹¹⁰ Williams 1981b, p. 12.

¹¹¹ Williams 1981b, p. 12 (emphasis in original).

¹¹² Williams 1981b, p. 13.

¹¹³ Williams 1981b, p. 13.

¹¹⁴ Williams 1981b, p. 14.

Besides personal projects, Williams also discusses personal *relations* in ‘Persons, character and morality’. Among other things, he mentions Fried’s example of a man who could save one of two persons who are in equal danger, one of whom was his wife.¹¹⁵ Impartiality would require the man to save either one of them (or the one who had the best chance of survival), but his personal relationships would require him to save his wife. Williams uses this example to make the point that impartiality and one’s personal relationships can conflict: ‘the point is that somewhere [...] one reaches the necessity that such things as deep attachments to other persons will express themselves in the world in ways which cannot at the same time embody the impartial view, and that they also run the risk of offending against it’.¹¹⁶ Williams goes on to argue the following:

[Deep attachments to other persons run the risk of offending against the impartial view] if they exist at all; yet unless such things exist, there will not be enough substance or conviction in a man’s life to compel his allegiance to life itself. Life has to have substance if anything is to have sense, including adherence to the impartial system; but if it has substance, then it cannot grant supreme importance to the impartial system, and that system’s hold on it will be, at the limit, insecure.¹¹⁷

Here Williams argues that, like his personal projects, a person needs his personal relations in order to have reason to keep on living. Without things such as his personal relations, life will not have enough substance to keep a man allegiant to it. And if a man is not allegiant to life, adherence to the impartial system does not make sense. It is here that the problem for the impartial system arises. Without the substance that one’s personal relations provide, adherence to the system does not make sense. But *with* that substance – in other words: in a life where deep personal relations exist – the impartial system cannot be the most important. That is because if the system *would* be the most important, the existence of deep personal relationships would be undermined. The necessary condition for the impartial system to make sense – substance provided by one’s personal relations – thus renders the impartial system’s hold on life insecure. With this argumentation, Williams aims to show that we must take into account a person’s personal projects and relations when thinking about moral demands.

¹¹⁵ Williams 1981b, p. 17.

¹¹⁶ Williams 1981b, p. 18.

¹¹⁷ Williams 1981b, p. 18.

Because if we do not, life will become meaningless and the impartial system will not make sense.

It is clear, then, that Williams thinks that we have to give a certain amount of weight to our personal projects and relations when determining how demanding our duty to aid is. The question remains *how much* weight our personal projects and relations should receive according to his approach. If morality and personal relations conflict, should the latter always be preferred? Williams claims that this is ‘of course’ not the case:¹¹⁸

This [the possibility of conflict between morality and personal relations] of course does not mean that if there is some friendship with which his life is much involved, then a man must prefer any possible demand of that over other, impartial moral demands. That would be absurd, and also a pathological kind of friendship, since both parties exist in the world and it is part of the sense of their friendship that it exists in the world.¹¹⁹

According to Williams, it is thus absurd to always prefer the demands of friendship over impartial moral demands. His remarks are related to the view that impartiality is inherent to human nature. It is a fundamental part of our nature that we have an impartial, moral concern for others and it would therefore be absurd to always favour the demands of friendship over impartial demands. But as mentioned before, Williams’ views also suggest that *partiality* is inherent to human nature. It is here that a problem arises. If two conflicting considerations – partiality and impartiality – are inherent to human nature, how do we decide which consideration should weigh more? Or, to use Williams’ terms: when should we prefer the demands of friendship and when should impartial demands weigh more? In chapter four, I will argue that the duality of our nature explains why it is so hard to answer this question. Williams, in any case, does *not* answer this question, and it is hard to see how an a-theoretical approach like his *could* answer it. In everyday life both the demands of impartiality and of personal relations are important. How can an a-theoretical approach, which departs from that everyday life, decide when one outweighs the other? Because of this impossibility, it seems that Williams’ a-theoretical approach cannot show us how demanding are duty to aid is – just like consequentialism and Kantianism. However, the a-theoretical approach does tell us one thing, namely that impartial demands are not always the most important. This means that,

¹¹⁸ Williams 1981b, p. 17.

¹¹⁹ Williams 1981b, p. 17.

according to the a-theoretical approach, the moral duty to aid the global poor is not always more important than the demands of personal projects and relations. The approach therefore holds that affluent individuals are not *always* obliged to do everything they can in order to help the global poor. In other words: affluent individuals *may sometimes* prefer the demands of personal projects and friendships over the duty to help the poor.¹²⁰ Although it is imprecise, the a-theoretical approach thus defends an upper limit on our duty to aid the poor.

3.2. Should we accept Williams' arguments?

So far, I hope to have established that Williams' a-theoretical approach leads to a vague upper limit on our duty to aid the global poor. The acceptance of this upper limit is, however, dependent on the validity of Williams' arguments, which I have not discussed yet. Here I will, therefore, examine two objections to Williams' arguments. One objection comes from Cullity. He objects to Williams' arguments insofar as they are arguments against an extremely demanding principle to aid, because he claims that Williams fails to prove that we do not have such a duty.¹²¹ Cullity argues that it may be true that, as Williams claims, a life in which the impartial system is granted supreme importance, has no substance and therefore no sense. But Cullity also thinks that meeting an extremely demanding principle to aid does not deprive a life of *all* substance. He explains that this is so because a life in which an extremely demanding principle is met, does 'allow us to remain committed to personal projects and relationships: it is just that it instructs us to restrict our pursuit of these commitments as much as we bearably can'.¹²² Cullity's objection seems justified. An extremely demanding principle does not require *total* impartiality. It still gives an agent a little room for his own projects and friendships. Therefore a life in which an extremely demanding principle is met, can still have sense, which is why Williams' argument cannot rule out extremely demanding principles to aid.

¹²⁰ With these words I do not mean to say that Williams would accept as a *general moral rule* that affluent individuals may sometimes prefer the demands of personal projects and friendships over the duty to help the poor. I think that Williams does not mean to argue that sometimes preferring personal projects over impersonal demands is morally acceptable, but that it necessarily follows from the idea that life has to have substance.

¹²¹ Specifically, Cullity thinks that Williams' argument is not a good objection against the extremely demanding principle that Cullity calls 'the Extreme Demand' (Cullity 2005, p. 105).

¹²² Cullity 2005, p. 105.

Another objection to Williams is given by Owen Flanagan. He argues that Williams does not prove that ‘becoming alienated from one’s projects is always, all things considered, a bad thing’.¹²³ That is because some projects, such as Hitler’s racial purification project, are deeply immoral. Flanagan rightly argues that it would have been reasonable to try to stop Hitler’s project, even if that would have destroyed his reason for living. This example leads to the idea that ‘[a]t most it is only our innocent projects and commitments that we cannot reasonably be asked to give up’.¹²⁴ But this idea causes a problem: ‘The trouble is that what is and what is not innocent is by no means obvious. The distinction is certainly not available independent of a complex ethical conception itself’.¹²⁵ Flanagan concludes that, because of this problem, Williams’ argument does not prove that any individual is permitted to pursue the projects that are her reason for living, nor does it prove that losing one’s projects is always a bad thing.¹²⁶ Flanagan’s argumentation implies that if Williams is to succeed in arguing that a person must sometimes prefer his personal projects over impartial demands, he first needs to prove that the projects in question are innocent. This means that if we intend to use Williams’ approach in order to argue that there is a certain upper limit on our duty to aid, we first need to prove that projects which limit our ability to give aid to the poor are innocent. As Flanagan notes, it is by no means obvious what is innocent and what is not. Therefore it may not be easy to defend an upper limit on our duty to aid with Williams’ approach after all.

3.3. Conclusion

Williams argues that impartial demands cannot always be the most important, which is why affluent individuals may sometimes favour the demands of personal projects and friendships over their impartial duty to aid the poor. Williams’ a-theoretical approach thus leads to a vague upper limit on our duty of beneficence. The question is how helpful this limit can be in answering our question about the demandingness of our duty to aid. The problem is not only that the upper limit is very imprecise, but also that it is uncertain whether we should accept Williams’ arguments for it. Maybe we need to prove that projects which limit our ability to aid the poor are *innocent*, before we can defend a limit on our duty to aid. The impreciseness of the limit and the questions about its justification, lead to a conclusion that we have seen

¹²³ Flanagan 1991, p. 71.

¹²⁴ Flanagan 1991, p. 71.

¹²⁵ Flanagan 1991, p. 71.

¹²⁶ Flanagan 1991, p. 71.

before. Just like consequentialism and Kantianism – but for different reasons – Williams’ a-theoretical approach seems to be unable to tell us how demanding our duty to aid the poor is.

4. A lower limit among undetermined boundaries

The last three chapters have focussed on the things that consequentialism, Kantianism and Williams' a-theoretical approach *cannot* tell us about the demandingness of our duty to aid. In this chapter, I will focus on the things that these approaches *can* tell us about this topic, and on the question what it means that they cannot tell us *more*. In the first part of this chapter, I will argue that consequentialism, Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach *can* tell us that we ought to give *some* aid. They all must recognize a lower limit on our duty to aid, thereby eliminating some uncertainty about this duty. However, since the three approaches only succeed in defending an *unspecific* lower limit, they leave us with questions to answer. In the second part of this chapter I will address two of these questions. Finally, in the third part of this chapter, I will indicate where and how we might find some more substantial answers concerning our duty to aid.

4.1. A lower limit on our duty to aid

Consequentialism, Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach must all recognize a lower limit on our duty to aid the poor. Certainly there is a basic level of aid that an agent ought to meet if he is to lead a morally acceptable life. The question is what this lower limit on our duty to aid the poor amounts to. As we have seen, the problem of determining the limits of a duty to aid often arises when we need to weigh great sacrifices for the rich (losing one's personal projects and friendships) against great benefits for the poor (alleviation from poverty). Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach are unable to tell us whether great sacrifices outweigh great benefits or not. It is therefore impossible to place the lower limit on our duty to aid on the level of great sacrifices for the rich. A level of aid which requires *little* sacrifice of the rich, is probably the only lower limit that is not controversial. It is hard to see how this lower limit could be rejected by any of the approaches to ethics that I have discussed.

A *consequentialist* could certainly not reject a duty to aid that requires a little sacrifice of an agent. In fact, he would say that we do not only have a duty to help the poor when it takes little sacrifice, but that we also have a duty to help them when it takes great sacrifices. A *Kantian* could not reject a duty to aid that requires a little sacrifice either. Kantians who use the Formula of Universal Law cannot will that a maxim of non-beneficence when it takes a

little sacrifice, become a universal law. As Nagel says, a well-off person ‘cannot will such tight-fistedness as a universal law’.¹²⁷ A Scanlonian contractualist would also agree that we have a duty to help the poor when we can do so at little sacrifice. That is because a poor person’s reasons to reject a principle of *non*-beneficence when it takes a little sacrifice, are stronger than an affluent person’s reasons to reject a principle of *beneficence* when it takes a little sacrifice. After all, in this case the benefit for the poor person (relief from poverty) outweighs the sacrifice made by the affluent person (since it is a small sacrifice). Lastly, an *a-theoretical philosopher* like Williams could not reject a level of aid which requires little sacrifice either. Williams, who thinks that ‘[w]e should be more concerned about the sufferings of people elsewhere’,¹²⁸ would probably think it absurd to favour personal demands over impersonal demands even when one could help others at little sacrifice. That would be absurd because, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Williams emphasizes that we exist in the world.¹²⁹ Impartial moral demands are a part of that world, just like the desire to defend our actions to others. Favouring one’s own projects and friendships over helping others even when one could do so at little sacrifice, is absurd in that world. Of course, Williams would not say that it is a general moral rule that affluent individuals should make small sacrifices in order to help the poor. Rather, it is likely that he would end up with a similar conclusion given that we exist in the world and that a tendency to help others is part of who we are.

It seems, then, that all three approaches to ethics must recognize that affluent individuals have a duty to aid the global poor when they can do so at little sacrifice to themselves. Therefore it seems safe to claim that this is, in fact, the lower limit on our duty to aid the poor. But because ‘a little sacrifice’ is an imprecise notion, and because it is hard to theoretically justify an exact definition of this notion, the question remains what the practical consequences are of meeting this limit on the everyday lives of affluent individuals. The answer to this question is of importance if I am to answer the central question of this thesis (the question to what extent our duty to aid the global poor is demanding) in detail. However, as mentioned before, giving a *detailed* answer to the central question is beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore I will leave the aforementioned question for what it is, and merely say that, given the extreme circumstances of the global poor, it seems likely that the lower limit requires us to make sacrifices that many people may consider to be large rather than small.

¹²⁷ Nagel 1991, p. 49.

¹²⁸ Williams 1985, p. 186.

¹²⁹ Williams 1981b, p. 17.

And while the exact meaning of ‘a little sacrifice’ may be obscure, one thing is absolutely clear: our everyday intuition that it is not morally wrong to fail to give anything to aid agencies, is mistaken. Consequentialism, Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach show that it *is* morally wrong not to donate anything to aid agencies or help the poor in other ways. If we are to live a morally acceptable life, we ought to help the global poor even if it takes a little sacrifice.

4.2. Questions about the meaning of our lack of answers

While it is important to know that affluent individuals have a duty to help the global poor when they can do so at little sacrifice, this lower limit on our duty to aid is, of course, imprecise. Therefore it leaves us with many unanswered questions. Without expecting to provide clear answers, here I will address two of those questions, namely: (1) Why is it that three important ethical approaches do not succeed in providing clear answers to questions about a fundamental topic such as our duties toward the poor?; and (2) What is the consequence of our lack of clear answers for the moral practice?

It is of course possible that I have not found satisfactory answers because I have overlooked something in the previous chapters. It could also be that other approaches to ethics might have given us clearer answers than consequentialism, Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach – our current lack of clear answers may be a reason to turn to virtue ethics, for example. In the following, however, I will ignore these possibilities and reflect on the findings of the previous chapters only.

With regard to the first question, it is important to emphasize once again that I am not expecting ethical theories to tell us exactly what to do in every case imaginable. However, the three approaches discussed here, cannot even tell us what to do on a general level. It is clear that we ought to give *some* aid, but what we ought to do beyond that is unknown. In other words: the three approaches cannot even tell us whether we are required to give up our personal lives in order to help the poor or not. The question why these three important approaches to ethics leave us with uncertainty, is therefore justified. It may be that the answer to this question is related to the reason why I posed the central question of this thesis in the first place. The reason for asking how demanding our duty to aid the poor is, was the fact that we have conflicting intuitions about this topic: it seems counterintuitively demanding to do all that we can to help the poor, but it seems counterintuitively mean *not* to do so. These conflicting intuitions reflect our tendency toward partiality on the one hand and impartiality

on the other, and therefore point to Nagel's theory about the duality of the self. As mentioned before, Nagel defends the view that there is 'a division in each individual between two standpoints, the personal and the impersonal'.¹³⁰ The impersonal standpoint gives rise to demands of equality, while the personal standpoint results in personal wants and desires, which stand in the way of the first demands.¹³¹ According to Nagel, this conflict is *the* problem of political theory and the reason why it is hard for ethical theories to tell us what to do.¹³² Part of the solution, he suggests, is finding 'the right relation between the personal and impersonal standpoints within each individual'.¹³³ Following Nagel, I will also claim that the inability of ethical theories to provide clear answers about our duty to aid arises from a duality between equality and partiality that is inherent to each person. A few clarifications of this view are in order. *First*, it is important to say that it is, of course, not a *fact* that human nature is inherently dual. But it is not a mere assumption either: there are good reasons for viewing human nature as dual. That is because a duality between impartiality and partiality is a very good explanation for the problems that have been described in this thesis: the problem that our intuitions concerning our duty to aid conflict, and the problem that three important approaches to ethics are unable to provide clear answers about this duty. My description of the duality of the self as an explanation of our problems, brings me to the *second* clarification that is important to make. It may seem that Nagel's analysis of our problem in terms of duality (call it the 'duality-view') is merely a *re-description* of the original problem of our conflicting intuitions. I think, however, that it is rather an *explanation* of that original problem. That is because the observation that we have two conflicting intuitions about poverty relief, is not to say that our nature is inherently dual. The view that a duality between partiality and impartiality is inherent to human nature is a much more substantial remark and is therefore not merely a re-description of the problem that our intuitions about poverty relief conflict. Rather, the duality-view can explain *why* we face this problem and why it is so hard to choose between the intuitions, even after extensive reflection: the reason is that the two intuitions spring from two conflicting parts of our nature, which are both inherent to it. Lastly, it is important to emphasize that the duality-view not only *explains* our problems, but also indicates what we need to do in order to *solve* the problem. As mentioned before, the solution

¹³⁰ Nagel 1991, p. 3.

¹³¹ Nagel 1991, p. 4.

¹³² Nagel 1991, pp. 3-5.

¹³³ Nagel 1991, p. 5.

to our problem of determining to what extent our duty to aid is demanding, lies in finding the right relation between the personal and impersonal standpoint of our dual self.

From a practical point of view, the second question – the question what the consequences of our lack of clear answers means for the moral practice – is the most important. A possible answer to the question is that our lack of answers means that giving any amount of aid is acceptable, as long as the lower limit (which requires us to help the poor even if it takes a little sacrifice) is met. On the one hand, it is hard to see how we could defend any other answer. If consequentialism, Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach only succeed in defending the lower limit, on what basis could we defend a more demanding limit? On the other hand, the fact that we have not been able to *defend* a more demanding duty, does not necessarily mean that such a duty does not *exist*. It is just as uncertain that we are only required to meet the lower limit, as it is uncertain that we are required to do more. Why would this situation make it acceptable to do nothing more than the lower limit requires of us? I see no way of answering this question here. For now, the only tool that we have left for deciding what we ought to do, may be our personal judgments that do not conflict. Given the extreme circumstances that the global poor are in, I would personally say, for example, that affluent individuals are at least required to make sacrifices that many of them would consider to be *large* rather than small. While it may not be possible to theoretically defend intuitive judgments like this, in practice they might be all that a person can use in order to decide what he should do.

4.3. Possible solutions

After reflecting on what it means that we do not *have* clear answers to questions about the demandingness of our duty to aid, it is important to investigate where and how we might *find* clear answers. In this section, I will do so by discussing three questions. The first question I will discuss, is how demanding our duty to aid is according to a consequentialist, a Kantian and an a-theoretical philosopher who are able to overcome the problems described in the first three chapters of this thesis.¹³⁴ Next, I will examine which of the approaches to ethics may be

¹³⁴ Once again: it is possible that I have overlooked something and that the three approaches do not face the problems described in the first three chapters of this thesis. I will, however, not discuss this possibility in detail. Rather, I will depart from the findings of the first three chapters and assume that the three approaches have to overcome important problems if they are to convincingly defend a certain position on the demandingness of our duty to aid.

most plausible, by asking (second) which view on human nature each of the three approaches may implicitly assume, and (third) which view on human nature is most plausible. I will do so because, as said before, I think that our difficulty to choose between our conflicting intuitions, may be explained by the view that human nature is inherently dual. By examining which approach to ethics can defend the most plausible view on human nature, I hope to find out which approaches is most plausible itself, so that we know which view on the demandingness of our duty to aid we may end up with.

The first question, once again, is how demanding our duty to aid is according to a consequentialist, a Kantian and an *a-theoretical* philosopher who are able to overcome the problems that their approaches face. The view of a *consequentialist* is, as said in the first chapter, very clear: given the world that we live in today, a consequentialist thinks that we should reduce ourselves to the level of marginal utility in order to help the poor. If the consequentialist is able to overcome the problems described in the first chapter (namely if she can find convincing arguments for this view), she will therefore be able to defend a duty that is very demanding. As argued in the second chapter, a *Kantian* faces a different problem: the problem of finding the tools to choose between impartiality and agent-neutrality. A solution to this problem may take different forms. A Kantian who wants to defend a demanding duty to aid, such as Ashford's interpretation of a Scanlonian duty, can only succeed if he can show (1) why losing a life is worse than losing everything that makes a life worth living, and (2) why considerations other than well-being do not make a demanding principle reasonable to reject. If he succeeds in overcoming these problems, he would, just like the consequentialist, be able to defend a very demanding principle to aid. A Kantian who aims at defending a less demanding duty, however, must solve the problems of Kantianism in a different way. She must find reasons why agent-relativity is so important that one cannot will that a maxim of beneficence when it takes great sacrifice, become a universal law. If this Kantian would succeed, she would be able to defend a moderate duty to aid, rather than a demanding one. The *exact* level of demandingness of this moderate duty, would depend on the importance that the Kantian would assign to agent-relativity. An *a-theoretical philosopher*, lastly, would also defend moderate rather than demanding views. This philosopher faces the objections of Cullity and Flanagan, described in chapter three. If he could find a satisfactory response to these objections, he would be able to defend the upper limit that Williams' philosophy leads to. He would then need to concretize this limit if he were to say something more accurate about the demandingness of our duty to aid. If he would succeed in doing so, he might end up

with a moderate duty to aid too.¹³⁵ This moderate duty would not be a big restraint on one's projects and friendships, but it would not necessarily be very undemanding either. That is because, according to the a-theoretical philosopher, our efforts to aid the poor need to be in line with our existence in the world and the way we view ourselves. And it is probable that the way we view ourselves conflicts with a very undemanding duty, as a moral concern for others is an important part of who we are.

As stated before, the second and third question that I would discuss, are the question which view on human nature each of the three theories may implicitly endorse and the question which of these views is most plausible. Let us start, once again, with consequentialism. The demanding principle to aid that this theory defends, implies that consequentialism views human nature as highly impartial. However, the following remark by Singer, implies otherwise. He says that 'evolutionary psychologists tell us that human nature just isn't sufficiently altruistic to make it plausible that many people will sacrifice so much for strangers. On the facts of human nature, they might be right, but they would be wrong to draw a moral conclusion from those facts'.¹³⁶ This remark implies that Singer may not view human nature as highly impartial. Instead, he questions the *relevance* of human nature in the debate about our duty to aid, because he thinks that moral conclusions should not depend on human nature. This view, I think, is relatively implausible. Although I will not defend this claim here, it seems probable that an ethical theory should take into account at least the fundamental aspects of human nature. And, as I have argued, impartiality and partiality are both fundamental aspects of human nature. That is why consequentialism, which has little concern for the partial part of our nature and puts too much emphasis on the *impartial* part, probably does not endorse the most plausible account of human nature.

Kantianism seems to be a little more plausible. It seems to value both the impartial and the partial part of our nature – in fact, it values them both so much that, as we have seen, it faces the problem that it cannot choose between them. Before, I have argued that if Kantianism can overcome this problem, one version of Kantianism could defend an extremely demanding duty, while another could defend an less demanding duty. The demanding version of Kantianism – namely Ashford's account of Scanlonian contractualism – leaves little concern for the partial part of our nature. When it comes to human nature, this version of

¹³⁵ As mentioned before, an a-theoretical philosopher would probably not call this a 'duty'. For ease of discussion, I will use this term anyway.

¹³⁶ Singer 1999.

Kantianism is therefore as implausible as consequentialism. A less demanding version of Kantianism, however, may be able to recognize both parts of our nature in a more balanced way. This version of Kantianism is, therefore, the more plausible one.

Williams' a-theoretical approach, I think, also recognizes both parts of our nature. His emphasis on the importance of our personal projects and friendships, indicates that he highly values the partial part of our nature. But since Williams also thinks that it is important to recognize the way we exist in the world, and because the drive to help others is a fundamental part of our existence in the world, his approach values impartiality too.

In conclusion, then, I think that consequentialism and a demanding version of Kantianism assume a relatively implausible view on human nature. A less demanding version of Kantianism and Williams' a-theoretical approach, can recognize both parts of our nature in a more balanced way and are therefore more plausible. The way to more fundamental answers about our duty of beneficence, is therefore to further examine these two approaches and to try and overcome the problems that they currently face. If we can do so, this way may lead to a moderate duty to aid that is neither too impartial nor too partial.

4.4. Conclusion

In the first part of this chapter, I have argued that it is possible to determine a vague lower limit on our duty to aid. Consequentialism, Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach must all recognize that agents ought to meet a basic level of aid if they are to live a morally decent life. Specifically, the minimum standard of aid that one has to recognize, is a level of aid that requires an agent to help the global poor at little sacrifice to herself. This means that it is morally unacceptable *not* to give *any* aid to the poor. When it comes to helping the poor, morality is therefore more demanding than we usually think it is.

While it is important to know that this lower limit exists, the limit is imprecise and therefore leaves room for a lot of uncertainty. This uncertainty raises the questions why it is that moral theories cannot be clearer on such an important topic, and what our lack of clear answers means for the moral practice. In the second part of this chapter I have provided some first thoughts concerning the answers to these questions. Most importantly, I have claimed that the explanation for our lack of answers is the duality between partiality and impartiality, which is inherent to our nature.

Lastly, in the third part of this chapter, I have investigated where and how we might find more fundamental answers concerning our duty to aid the poor. Given the views on

human nature that they implicitly assume, I have argued that a non-demanding version of Kantianism and Williams' a-theoretical approach are the most plausible approaches to ethics that have been discussed in this thesis. Following these approaches may lead to a moderate duty to aid that recognizes both the impartial and the partial part of our nature.

Conclusion

The central question of this thesis was to what extent affluent individuals ought to help the global poor. I have attempted to answer this question by turning to three different approaches to ethics: consequentialism, Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach. Below I will shortly summarize my findings, before ending with some concluding remarks.

The first aim of this thesis was to argue that, for different reasons, the three approaches to ethics cannot tell us how demanding our duty to aid the poor is. I hope to have achieved this goal in the first three chapters. In the first chapter I argued that consequentialists, who clearly aim to prove that we have an extremely demanding duty to aid the poor, fail to provide convincing arguments for their case. Therefore we cannot be certain about the existence of an extremely demanding duty to aid. In the second chapter, I turned to two Kantian theories. I argued that both a theory based on the Formula of Universal Law and Scanlon's contractualism fail to choose between impersonal and personal demands. Therefore it is impossible to use these theories to decide how demanding our duty to aid is. In the third chapter, I argued that Williams' a-theoretical approach cannot tell us what level of sacrifice is required from us either. It leads to an upper limit on our duty to aid because it tells us that we must sometimes favour personal demands over impartial demands. However, this limit is very imprecise and it is not clear whether we should even accept Williams' arguments for it. Williams' philosophy therefore also fails to tell us anything specific about the demandingness of our beneficence.

The second aim of this thesis was to show that the three approaches to ethics *can* tell us that we ought to give *some* aid to the poor. In the first part of the fourth chapter, I hope to have shown that the three approaches must all recognize that affluent individuals are morally required to give some aid to the poor, even if it takes a little sacrifice. The everyday intuition that it is not morally wrong not to give anything to aid agencies, is therefore mistaken. I think it is important that we have established with certainty that proponents of consequentialism, Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach, must recognize the existence of this duty. However, the fact that we can only defend an undemanding duty to aid, does not necessarily mean that there is no *demanding* duty to aid. The duty described above is merely a lower limit that leaves us with a lot of uncertainty. In fact, it is striking that there is so much uncertainty

about a topic this significant. It is because of this uncertainty, that the third aim of this thesis was to argue that we need to examine what this uncertainty says about moral theory and moral practice. In the second part of chapter four, I hinted toward some answers to these questions. I suggested, based on Nagel's theory about equality and partiality, that the reason why moral theory cannot provide clear answers, may be found in our own nature. I claimed that a duality between impartiality and partiality is inherent to human beings. We must find the right balance between these two parts of our nature, before we can decide to what extent we ought to help others. When it comes to the moral practice, I suggested that we may have to rely on personal judgments that do not conflict. In the face of a lack of theoretical answers, personal judgments are all that a person has to decide what is the right thing to do.

The result of this thesis may be viewed pessimistically, as I have identified more obstacles than I have found solutions. However, I think that there is no reason for pessimism. After all, the discovery of obstacles can lead the way to progress.¹³⁷ In fact, I have described a possible way to progress in the third part of chapter four. There I argued that, given the view on human nature that they implicitly assume, a moderate version of Kantianism and Williams' a-theoretical approach are the most plausible approaches to ethics discussed in this thesis. If these approaches could overcome their obstacles, they could both lead to a moderate duty to aid. This may be the most promising way to look for substantial answers. Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach are both appealing approaches to ethics – not only because of the view on human nature that they assume, but also because Kantianism values rationality, and the a-theoretical approach values the way we view ourselves in everyday life. Moreover, following these approaches would avoid the counterintuitive demandingness of consequentialism and the demanding version of Kantianism. And if the moderate duty that Kantianism and the a-theoretical approach may defend is not too undemanding either, this duty may also be able to avoid the consequence of being counterintuitively mean. But like I said before, there are still obstacles to overcome. For example, we need to find convincing arguments for Williams' upper limit on our duty to aid. And, more importantly, we need to find a balance between impartiality and partiality. If we find this balance, the a-theoretical approach and a moderate version of Kantianism may succeed in defending a moderate duty to aid that is neither counterintuitively demanding, nor counterintuitively mean. Until then, it is important to hold

¹³⁷ This point is made by Nagel in *Equality and Partiality* (Nagel 1991, p. 3).

on to what we already know for certain: that we, affluent individuals, ought to give some aid the global poor if we are to live a morally decent life – even if doing so takes a little sacrifice.

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