

What We Owe the Global Poor: In Defense of a Moderate Principle of Sacrifice

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ABSTRACT: Peter Singer's 1971 essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" sparked a surge in interest among philosophers in the obligations of the global rich beneficently to assist the global poor. Richard Miller argues that Singer's account is too demanding and proposes his Principle of Sympathy as an alternative to it. I first argue against Miller's view and, in particular, his insistence that the value of pursuing worthwhile goals that are close to one's heart significantly weakens one's obligation to assist the least well-off. Secondly, I critique Singer's account and argue for a substantially revised version thereof. The Moderate Principle of Sacrifice (MPS) that I defend includes four revisions to Singer's account. These revisions allow it adequately to account for nonmoral value; the suffering of donor as well as recipient; serious need rather than just poverty; and the need for a long-term approach to global poverty relief.

KEYWORDS: global poverty, obligations of beneficence, ethics of assistance

1. INTRODUCTION

In *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power*, Richard Miller identifies "two standard paths of philosophical inquiry into global justice."¹ One path emphasizes transnational relations as grounds for a duty of international assistance; its prominent advocates include, among others, Charles Beitz, Thomas Pogge, and Henry Shue. The other path concerns duties of general beneficence to the global poor; its most prominent representative is Peter Singer. The second path of inquiry is the subject of this paper.² I will not be offering an argument about our duties to the world's poor under the headings of distributive, rectificatory, or regulative justice.³ Rather, I shall consider the obligations of beneficence that residents of affluent countries—the vast majority of whom are well-off by world standards—have to assist impoverished denizens of developing countries.⁴

I will examine Peter Singer's famous argument from beneficence in his 1971 essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," as well as Richard Miller's alternative

account as discussed in three of his works.⁵ Addressing Miller's substantially similar arguments in "Beneficence, Duty, and Distance" (2004), *Globalizing Justice* (2010), and "Moral Closeness and World Community" (2010), I argue in Section 2 that Miller's alternative account, though insightful, fails adequately to capture the nature of our beneficent obligations as members of the global rich to assist the global poor. But so, too, does Singer's account, for reasons discussed in Section 3. Although Singer's Principle of Sacrifice is more plausible than Miller's Principle of Sympathy, in its current form it cannot withstand several key objections. What we need is an account of our obligation to assist that takes due account of nonmoral value; the suffering of benefactor as well as beneficiary; serious need rather than just poverty; and the need for a long-term approach to global poverty relief. I offer just such an account in Section 3, which I call the Moderate Principle of Sacrifice.⁶

2. SINGER'S ACCOUNT AND MILLER'S ALTERNATIVE

2.1 The Arguments

Miller's account of our obligation of beneficent assistance to the global poor is one of the best available foils for assessing the plausibility of Singer's account. In Section 2.1, I summarize Singer's account and then present Miller's alternative; in Section 2.2, I offer a critical assessment of Miller's account and argue that it is implausible as an alternative to Singer's argument from beneficence. Miller's principle is too weak and unjustifiably goes to the opposite extreme of Singer's view.

In "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Singer sets out to reorient our moral compass by challenging how we conceive of our obligations of beneficence to assist the global poor. The argument he advances runs essentially as follows:⁷

- (1) Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.
- (2) If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.
- (3) Such prevention *is* in our power, since we can give to effective aid organizations.

Conclusion: We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those suffering or dying from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, to the point at which further giving would cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents.⁸

Unpacking Singer's argument, we find that premise (1) is straightforwardly acceptable: it is bad to suffer or die for want of food, shelter, or medical care. Premise (3) is an empirical premise that should not be controversial, as there clearly exist *some* effective aid organizations to which we can give in order to relieve global poverty. Premise (2) is where most of the controversy lies. By not "sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance,"⁹ Singer means not "causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent."¹⁰ This is Singer's preferred understanding of that key phrase in (2).¹¹

In his 2010 chapter “Kindness and Its Limits” in *Globalizing Justice* (and also in his 2004 article “Beneficence, Duty, and Distance”), Miller critiques Singer’s ‘demanding imperative to give,’ calling it a ‘radical conclusion.’¹² Singer’s radical conclusion is that “[e]veryone has a duty not to spend money on luxuries or frills, and to use the savings due to abstinence to help those in dire need.”¹³ Miller goes on to level a striking criticism against Singer’s account:

Singer’s effort to derive the radical conclusion from rational reflection on ordinary morality and a plausible empirical claim [premise (3)] misinterprets ordinary morality: it neglects the role of relationships to others, to oneself and to one’s underlying goals in shaping the demands of equal respect for persons.¹⁴

Miller proposes that we adopt a less demanding version of Singer’s account due to the skewed understanding of ordinary morality on which he claims it relies. Miller’s *Principle of Sympathy* is an alternative to Singer’s account that, he believes, better accounts for the true role of personal goals and relationships as understood within ordinary morality. The Principle of Sympathy holds that:

[o]ne’s underlying disposition to respond to neediness as such ought to be sufficiently demanding that giving which would express greater underlying concern would impose a significant risk of worsening one’s life, if one fulfilled all further responsibilities; and it need not be any more demanding than this.¹⁵

Miller takes the phrase “significant risk of worsening one’s life” to mean, unsurprisingly, a “nontrivial chance that one’s life as a whole will be worse than it would otherwise be.”¹⁶ Life-worsening occurs when responding to the needs of others forces one to forgo certain resources requisite to pursuing one’s *worthwhile goal*. Such a goal is not one that a person can just forget about without incurring a significant personal loss. Rather, abandoning a worthwhile goal causes one to endure a loss of value from not being able to make certain ‘choices and plans’ that not only give direction to one’s life but also shape who one is as a person.¹⁷

That Miller’s Principle of Sympathy is less demanding than Singer’s account can be seen from an illustrative example of a ‘worthwhile goal.’ Rather than giving to the global poor, one may legitimately buy decent stereo equipment in order to pursue the goal of listening to one’s favorite musicians, or eat in upscale restaurants for the purpose of satiating one’s particular culinary preferences.¹⁸ Another example of a worthwhile goal is “the goal of presenting myself to others in a way that expresses my own aesthetic sense and engages in the fun of mutual aesthetic recognition.”¹⁹ Miller holds that if assisting the global poor deprives one of adequate resources to pursue such goals, it cannot be obligatory. On Singer’s account, however, such giving would not be obligation-eviscerating in that it would arguably not be of significant moral importance, let alone comparable moral importance, to saving the lives of starving people across the globe today.

Finally, throughout his account Miller emphasizes the desiderata of building and maintaining healthy personal relationships. He focuses not on the utility-producing value of relationships, as Singer does, but on treating relationships as ends in themselves.²⁰ Crucially, Miller emphasizes that the moral imperative to have *equal respect* for all does not also require one to have *equal concern* for all. For example, one need not have equal concern for a girl who lives next door as for

one's own daughter.²¹ But even if the Principle of Sympathy does not oblige the global rich to treat the global poor with equal concern—a far stricter requirement than that of equal respect—it will often lead its adherents to sacrifice on behalf of the global poor. For example, one may justifiably donate to Oxfam rather than buy an expensive shirt because one has set a personal policy, under the Principle of Sympathy, to purchase such items only periodically and when they are on sale.²² Miller contends that his account, though no doubt less demanding than Singer's, is demanding enough and grounded in a proper respect for persons as equals.

2.2 Critical Assessment

Miller aims to offer an account of our obligations to assist the global poor that is less demanding than Singer's. In this section, however, I will home in on a key issue with Miller's argument that renders it unconvincing in itself and less plausible than Singer's: *viz.*, its inadequate defense of the primacy of worthwhile goals that are close to one's heart.

Miller offers the following example to support his argument for a much more moderate obligation to assist than that offered in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (emphasis added):

Suppose that my daughter has identified with the humble but *worthwhile* goal . . . of displaying her aesthetic sense and enjoyably interacting with others in the way she dresses. She can no more readily detach from this goal than most adults can. She has become her own person in this and other ways, although she will remain a financially dependent person for several crucial years, most of her childhood. Her life will be worse, in ordinary moral thinking, if I do not provide her with the means to pursue this humbler *worthwhile* goal enjoyably and well. Alternatively, by financing nothing more than neat, warm, plain clothing and donating the savings to an aid agency, I could prevent the deaths of several other children. But my choice to make it possible for my child to exercise her sense of style as she grows up expresses an appropriate valuing of our relationship, and not the horrendous view that her life is worth more than the life of a child in a village in Mali.²³

Miller's view is not without some initial plausibility. He holds that an affluent father's relationship with his daughter sufficiently justifies his putting money toward (a) her aesthetic preferences and ability to develop, while growing up, a sense of fashion that she finds pleasing in a social setting, instead of (b) saving the life of a child in Mali. Miller is certainly right that ordinary moral thinking supports the view that his daughter's life will be worse if the father decides not to spend his money on (a). Yet we still may ask: What, morally, ought the father to do when faced with a choice between (a) and (b)? Given that valid moralities require people to put aside their own and their loved ones' interests in order to serve the legitimate interests of others, it is far from clear that the father is justified in upholding his daughter's aesthetic preferences—many of which seem to bear a tenuous relation to her actual wellbeing—by effectively neglecting the vital interests of the poor.

Miller relies not only on a life-worsening criterion to delimit our obligations to assist but on a *closeness-to-heart criterion* as well. A person "is not obliged to devote her concerns to the neediest," he says, "if other worthy concerns are closer

to her heart."²⁴ Miller argues that benefactors who support causes such as opera and ballet "could rightly complain of a general requirement that private aid to needy strangers always be channeled in ways that do the most to relieve the most serious needs."²⁵ Although Miller allows that "efficiency in relieving the burdens of the neediest" is a "significant reason to donate to a cause,"²⁶ he nevertheless holds that, all things considered, "it does not seem that this consideration . . . must play an important role . . . in the benefactions of affluent people in per-capita rich countries, given the pressure of competing good causes which are close to their hearts."²⁷ This is Miller's closeness-to-heart criterion, against which I will argue.

Efficiency in relieving the burdens of the neediest (i.e., the severely needy) ought, morally, to play a *quite important* role in the benefactions of affluent people, even if other good causes are closer to their hearts. Conclusions about to whom or to which causes one should give—e.g., whether one should put money toward (a) the aesthetic preferences of one's child or (b) the health of dying Malians—are not sustainable simply on the basis of deliberations about the worth of any alternative considered in isolation. Instead the value of pursuing each alternative must be explicitly weighed against the value of pursuing the other alternatives. In the above example, any justifiable judgment of worth must also account for the intrinsic or instrumental value of putting money towards (b).

Miller often implies that putting money towards (a) is ethically defensible simply because it would serve an interest closer to the father's heart than that served by putting his money towards (b). Such a view is mistaken, however, since the fact that certain concerns are close to one's heart cannot legitimately determine whether one should put money towards those concerns or towards other concerns such as the good of improving the welfare of the poorest people worldwide. For example, it is true that benefactors who support cultural causes such as opera and ballet thereby do something intrinsically good. But to take a different case, it would be odd to think that a billionaire who chooses to spend millions of dollars on a research project aimed at improving the welfare of unendangered frogs acts as morally as a billionaire who chooses to save thousands of impoverished people from debilitating disease or death. For an ethics according to which human beings have special moral value must hold that, even if frogs are cute creatures close to one's heart, human lives should be *closer* to one's heart—and, by extension, the first billionaire acts immorally by not meeting a greater obligation to his or her fellow human beings. (The criterion of justification for this conclusion would be something like the ethical obligation to preserve beings of much higher value over beings of much lower value, where "value" can be cashed out in various ways.) Now if the frog benefactor has good intentions but acts immorally nevertheless, then it would seem that persons who donate exclusively to the arts or other cultural causes despite knowing that their donations could instead save the lives of innocent human beings would also be acting immorally—even if donating to the arts is not immoral in itself but only in the context of more morally urgent demands (and, of course, better than hoarding one's money for greedy, selfish reasons).

One further issue bears note. The author relies on current descriptions of subjective ‘worth’ in order to advance a broader normative case for the ‘worth’ or value of a pattern of beneficent giving that is far narrower than that espoused by Singer. An ‘is-ought’ move of this ilk may be illicit and, at any rate, is not anodyne among philosophers.

I shall conclude this section by asking whether Miller’s account can handle two classes of difficult cases. “Admittedly,” writes Miller, “the demands of Sympathy are sometimes lower because someone cannot readily detach from an exorbitantly expensive goal.”²⁸ This frank admission raises two issues. First, presumably millions of people in the wealthy West have come by mere force-of-habit to have goals that, by world standards, are very expensive to pursue. And yet Miller’s principle has nothing to say to a wealthy gourmand who would rather eat a fifty-dollar steak each night than send that money to Oxfam to save dying children in Mali. Second, Miller’s principle posits an inextricable link between the nature of one’s moral obligation and the degree to which one can successfully *detach* from a ‘worthwhile’ goal. But it would seem that someone who spends millions of dollars to pursue the goal of assembling a distinctive classic car collection is morally obligated to desist partly or wholly from that pursuit and instead assist in the cause of saving dying children, regardless of whether the collector finds it difficult to do so.²⁹

The car-collection, gourmand, and frog welfare examples point unequivocally to the following conclusion: Miller’s Principle of Sympathy deprioritizes without justification the well-being of the global poor in deference to the pursuit of goals that appear trivial by comparison. I suggest that the grievous conditions and death from which millions suffer each year under world poverty give one ample reason to detach from certain ‘worthwhile’ goals, *even if* such goals are close to their heart. Detaching oneself from such goals may even be a morally virtuous act.

3. TOWARDS A MODERATE PRINCIPLE OF SACRIFICE

Singer’s account of our obligation to assist—which I will call the Principle of Sacrifice—is not, however, without problems of its own, and I suggest that it goes to the other extreme of Miller’s account, such that a more moderate position is called for. In what follows I will not simply side with Singer against Miller; rather, I also wish to vindicate Miller’s reasonable worry about the overdemandingness of Singer’s Principle of Sacrifice.

Singer’s account is beset by four issues: (1) Its failure adequately to account for nonmoral value; (2) its incomplete discussion of suffering; (3) its failure to justify a key framing assumption, to wit, that we can somehow disentangle our obligations to assist the global poor from our (more general) obligations beneficently to assist the seriously needy; and (4) its insufficient emphasis on our obligation to adopt a long-term perspective *vis-à-vis* such assistance.³⁰ In addressing these problems, I shall defend several substantial revisions to Singer’s Principle of Sacrifice, the upshot of which is my own Moderate Principle of Sacrifice.³¹

3.1 The Nonmoral Value Revision

The nonmoral value revision concerns premise (2) of the Principle of Sacrifice: “If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.”³² This premise is striking in its implicit rejection of a significant role for sources of nonmoral value in shaping one’s obligation to provide beneficent assistance. I take ‘nonmoral value’ to include value in the arts, architecture, poetry, and the like (e.g., a painting’s beauty gives it aesthetic value, even if its social message gives it moral value as well), and the proposed revision concerns such value. Consider the following hypothetical, which emphasizes—as Miller does—the import of nonmoral value for beneficent giving.³³

The Oxford Case. Oxford University could sell many of its buildings—the colleges, the libraries, etc.—to affluent private bidders throughout the world. It could then use a small portion of the proceeds to purchase new, highly functional (though far less aesthetically pleasing) office buildings in which it could house students, host classes, and continue with academic business as usual. No doubt the revenue from the sale of Oxford’s aesthetically remarkable campus would far exceed the costs of the new office buildings. Oxford could then put that money towards saving thousands of lives—quite possibly thousands *each year*—throughout the impoverished world. Moreover, Oxford’s sacrifice to that end would primarily be one of aesthetic, cultural, and historical value, and no doubt a sacrifice of tremendous nonmoral value (e.g., the nonmoral value of the campus’s aesthetic beauty). If indeed this sacrifice would not be of ‘comparable moral importance’ to the lives it would save, then it would be allowed under premise (2).³⁴ Yet I wish to suggest that the owners of Oxford are not morally obligated to make this tremendous sacrifice.

Whatever one thinks about the truth value of that claim, the Oxford case demonstrates that any plausible Principle of Sacrifice must account for nonmoral value. For it is not at all obvious that sacrificing every item of substantial nonmoral value is morally required even when the lives of the global poor hang in the balance. (Could it perhaps even be *immoral* to sell great art to a private owner and then donate the proceeds to save human lives if the owner would then deprive the public of its beauty?) Accordingly I propose the following amendment to premise (2):

(2*) If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance *or overridingly high nonmoral value*, we ought, morally, to do it.³⁵

By taking better account of nonmoral value, the revised principle imposes a significant constraint on Singer’s ‘comparable moral importance’ criterion. For it is no longer the case that one is under an obligation to forgo various highly important—but not highly *morally* important—expenditures in order to donate unspent money to the poor. One can, for example, amass substantial retirement savings to secure the financial future of one’s family—such savings being both morally and nonmorally valuable inasmuch as they enable one to enjoy both moral goods (e.g., money for activities that improve one’s family relationships) and nonmoral

goods (e.g., money that enables one to see artwork at a local museum). Yet the proposed reformulation does still recognize that hoarding huge sums of money to secure a materially lavish rather than merely comfortable retirement is morally impermissible in a largely impoverished world like our own (as is building up an expansive car collection, etc.).³⁶

3.2 The Suffering Revision

The suffering revision concerns Singer's discussion of suffering in both (1) and the conclusion. Singer writes (emphasis added):

(1) *Suffering* and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.

...

Conclusion: We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those *suffering* or dying from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, to the point at which further giving would cause *serious suffering* for oneself and one's dependents.

The (italicized) linguistic incongruity is more important than it appears on first glance. For there is no good reason to assume that we ought, morally, to render assistance to the global poor who are *merely* suffering, to the point at which we are *seriously* suffering. Indeed the act consequentialism on which Singer's argument relies poses a problem if it requires one to subject oneself to 'serious suffering' (a very bad consequence) in order that the global poor can merely not 'suffer' (merely a bad consequence). The requirement would then allow for a state of affairs in which some eliminable suffering could persist. Since Singer's principle, if implemented, would lead to more suffering than is necessary, let us amend the Principle of Sacrifice such that (1) and the conclusion both discuss 'serious suffering.' Here is the proposed modification:

(1*) *Serious suffering* and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.

...

Conclusion:* We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those *seriously suffering* or dying from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, to the point at which further giving would cause *serious suffering* for oneself and one's dependents.

The 'serious suffering' language appropriately moderates the Principle of Sacrifice by ruling out a class of cases that includes, inter alia, an obligation of beneficence to aid one who is suffering from a lack of medical care for a minor issue. For we do not want to say that a middle-class U.S. citizen has a significant *obligation* (for example) to financially assist a Nigerian citizen who is well-off by Nigerian standards because the latter is worse off than the former due to a slightly painful chipped tooth or a deviated septum that causes snoring. Singer would presumably not give his imprimatur to this kind of implausibly strong claim.

3.3 The Need Revision

Pace Singer, I also suggest it is better to discuss obligations of beneficence in terms of 'need' rather than 'food, shelter, and medical care.' This move boasts two advantages. First and most obviously, the criterion of 'need' allows for cases

where one is morally obligated to assist a severely needy person who is not also poor by global standards. Consider the fact that members of an extremely politically oppressive society may be more appropriate targets of international assistance than persons who live in an impoverished nation that nevertheless enjoys benevolent democratic governance. For example, one can suffer more by losing certain vital capabilities (e.g., speech, travel, worship, dissent) under political oppression than from certain poverty-related diseases. Accordingly the character, extent, and distribution of obligations to assist seem to vary according to *needs* (with the development of certain capabilities falling under the broad rubric of “need”) including—but not limited to—basic material needs such as food, shelter, clothing, personal security, and medical care. It may even be ethically indefensible to financially assist the moderately poor if the money could instead be used more effectively to alleviate the suffering of people beset by smothering political oppression.

So if Singer calls for maximizing expected long-term utility, then in some cases it will be better (a) to meet global needs not directly related to poverty than (b) to aid the impoverished directly. Miller recognizes as much when he couches his Principle of Sympathy in terms of one’s obligation “to respond to neediness as such.”³⁷ Miller’s formulation is in that regard superior to Singer’s because it takes need seriously as a morally important category and does not privilege, without justification, obligations of beneficence to the poor over obligations of beneficence to the needy more generally. Furthermore, Miller’s deployment of a ‘neediness as such’ criterion is justifiable since the intension of ‘neediness’ standardly includes (in ordinary language) some notion of severity. However, my reformulation of Singer’s principle shall include the ‘severe’ part of ‘severe need’ explicitly, so as to avoid possible ambiguity concerning the intension of ‘neediness.’ Here is the proposed revision:

(1*) Serious suffering and death from *severe* need (due to lack of food, shelter, or medical care, for example) are *very* bad.

...

*Conclusion**: We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those *in severe need* (who are seriously suffering or dying from, e.g., lack of food, shelter, or medical care), to the point at which further giving would cause serious suffering for oneself and one’s dependents.

3.4 The Long-Term Perspective Revision

The final revision I propose allows the Principle of Sacrifice to better account for the need of beneficent donors to maintain long-term momentum vis-à-vis giving. The revision militates against the prospect of the global rich structuring their short-term giving in a way that greatly reduces their potential long-term impact on global poverty. Strikingly, Singer’s Principle of Sacrifice includes minimal explicit consideration of the temporal dimension of beneficent assistance. Conspicuously absent from his conclusion is any reference to long-term versus short-term giving:

Conclusion: We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those suffering or dying from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, to the point at which further giving would cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents.

My proposed revision takes the following form:

...

(3*) Such prevention *is* in our power, since we can give to effective aid organizations *with a view to maximally benefiting the poor over the long-term.*

Conclusion:* We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those in severe need (who are seriously suffering or dying from, e.g., lack of food, shelter, or medical care), *with a view to maximizing the long-term expected benefits to the poor, to the point at which further giving would cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents.*

This revision emphasizes and makes explicit a point that Singer mentions briefly in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." Singer rightly holds that one should forgo short-term giving if one has "very good evidence" that one can relieve significantly more suffering in the future by not "relieving suffering that is happening now."³⁸ On the conclusion above (*Conclusion**), affluent individuals and societies cannot justifiably give far more to the global poor over the short-term if they know that so doing will reduce their long-term capacity to give by a far greater amount. This constraint minimizes the likelihood that, say, a sudden ethical awakening will cause in society a spike in aid-giving that, though quite beneficial to the poor now, will be detrimental in the future both to the poor qua recipients and the rich qua donors. A significant disruption in developed economies due to a voluminous outflow of wealth and a major reduction in consumer spending could easily do more harm than good to the global poor over the long-term. It could undermine not only the assistance-capacity of developed economies but also the long-term growth of developing economies. (Interestingly, if all globally affluent individuals were to follow Singer's Principle of Sacrifice to the tee tomorrow, the result would arguably be just such a disruption.³⁹) The point of the long-term perspective revision is to prevent such unhappy possibilities.

3.5 A Moderate Principle of Sacrifice

The long-term perspective revision along with the three other revisions—non-moral value, suffering, and need—collectively constitute a substantial corrective to Singer's account. The upshot is a more plausible, less demanding account of our obligations to assist the global poor whose demands are different from Singer's in both kind and degree. Here is the Moderate Principle of Sacrifice that I propose as a more justifiable alternative to Singer's account:

- (1) Serious suffering and death from severe need (due to lack of food, shelter, and medical care, for example) are very bad.
- (2) If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance or overriding high nonmoral value, we ought, morally, to do it.

- (3) Such prevention is in our power, since we can give to effective aid organizations with a view to maximally benefiting the poor over the long-term.

Conclusion: We ought, morally, to provide assistance to those in severe need (who are seriously suffering or dying from, e.g., lack of food, shelter, or medical care), with a view to maximizing the long-term expected benefits to the poor, to the point at which further giving would cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents.

4. CONCLUSION

I've argued that Singer's account of our obligations beneficently to assist the global poor is roughly on target but in need of revision. Miller's Principle of Sympathy is not a plausible alternative, however, due to its treatment of worthwhile goals that are close to one's heart as decisive constraints on one's obligations to assist. Singer's account is on more secure ground given the proposed revisions, since the Moderate Principle of Sacrifice takes due account of nonmoral value; the suffering of benefactor as well as beneficiary; serious need rather than just poverty; and the need for a long-term approach to global poverty relief. Peter Unger makes the following striking claim in *Living High and Letting Die*:

Here's a form of behavior that, though we're now heavily engaged in it, might well be thought terrible by our descendants and, for that reason, might be morally surpassed by them: letting distant innocents needlessly die.⁴⁰

Although the Moderate Principle of Sacrifice is less demanding than Singer's account, it too upholds the view that members of the affluent world should avoid letting distant innocents needlessly die. To abide by it is to refuse to let the global poor suffer and die on our watch.

Endnotes

1. Richard W. Miller, *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2. Miller eschews both 'standard paths' and argues that "the interactions across borders . . . are the real basis for a vast, unmet transnational responsibility" to assist the global poor. As I subsequently discuss, Miller treats obligations of beneficence throughout his oeuvre: in chap. 1 of *Globalizing Justice*; in "Beneficence, Duty and Distance," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32.3 (Fall 2004): 357–83; and in "Moral Closeness and World Community," in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101–22.

2. For an alternative account see Elizabeth Ashford, "Obligations of Justice and Beneficence to Aid the Severely Poor," in *Giving Well*, ed. P. Illingworth, T. Pogge, and L. Wenar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26–45. Ashford argues that Singer's account "grounds stringent obligations of beneficence *over and beyond* obligations of justice" (Ashford, "Obligations of Justice and Beneficence," 27; emphasis added).

3. For discussion of these kinds of justice and the relationship between justice and beneficence, see Garrett Cullity, *The Moral Demands of Affluence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8–9.

4. At times I use "Western countries" to mean "affluent countries" and "us" to refer to "residents of Western countries" or "the global rich." My analysis focuses on Westerners

but applies more generally to the obligations of the global rich—including affluent members of impoverished or moderately well-off countries—to assist the global poor.

5. Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1.1 (Spring 1972): 229–43. Singer penned this essay in 1971 and published it in 1972.

6. In Section 3 I adopt Miller's elegant term 'Principle of Sacrifice' to refer, not (as Miller does) to Singer's moderate version of premise (2) in his schematized argument, but rather to Singer's whole schematized argument from Section 2 (i.e., his three premises and conclusion).

7. Singer's article has two main parts. The first, on which this paper focuses, is primarily philosophical (Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 229–39); the second is more practical (ibid., 239–43).

8. Premises (1) and (2) and most of the conclusion are quotations from Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 231, 234. Emphasis added. I have also capitalized the 'I' in (2). Note that Singer includes the following language after his conclusion presented above: "and maybe even to the point of marginal utility, at which by giving more one would cause oneself and one's dependents as much suffering as one would prevent" (ibid., 231). I omit this language since I do not incorporate it later in the revised principle I propose, and Singer's analysis is controversial enough without it.

9. In *Singer and His Critics* (1999), Singer notes that his 1971 essay proposed a 'comparable moral importance' criterion rather than a 'comparable moral suffering' criterion so that his argument would appeal not just to utilitarians but also to exponents of other ethical perspectives. Singer explains: "I didn't want to limit the force the argument to utilitarians—that would have been preaching to the converted." Peter Singer, "A Response," in *Singer and His Critics*, ed. Dale Jamieson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 269–335; see esp. 302–3. He also discusses this issue in *Practical Ethics*, where he notes: "I have left the notion of moral significance unexamined in order to show that the argument does not depend on any specific values or ethical principles" (Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* 2nd ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 231). Singer's account plausibly accords with diverse contractualist, deontological, natural law, utilitarian, and virtue ethics positions.

10. Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 231.

11. I omit reference to Singer's famous pond hypothetical, as it is not essential to assessing Miller's account.

12. Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 10. Miller's 2010 chapter overlaps substantially with his 2004 article "Beneficence, Duty and Distance."

13. Ibid. Miller accurately interprets this key implication of the argument of "Famine, Affluence, and Morality."

14. Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 12.

15. Ibid., 13. Emphasis added.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 14.

18. Miller explicitly allows these possibilities; see ibid., 14–5.

19. Miller, "Beneficence, Duty and Distance," 361.

20. Darrel Moellendorf makes this point in his incisive review of *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power*, by Richard W. Miller, *Philosophical Review* 116.2 (2007): 290.

21. Miller, "Moral Closeness and World Community," 102.

22. This is Miller's example, closely paraphrased, from Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 22.

23. *Ibid.*, 20. Corresponding passages can be found in Miller, "Beneficence, Duty and Distance," 368–9, and Miller, "Moral Closeness and World Community," 102–3.

24. Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 2.

25. Miller, "Moral Closeness and World Community," 118.

26. *Ibid.*, 119.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Miller, "Beneficence, Duty and Distance," 363.

29. An objector might claim that the goal on Miller's criterion must be one with which one is "intelligently identified" (*ibid.*, 360). But can't one intelligently identify with the life-enhancing good of adding to a collection of entities if, say, the collection adds value to one's life due both to the entities' value and to the enjoyment one takes in collecting?

30. Given these shortcomings, it might seem that Singer's account should be either supplemented or supplanted. But there is a third option: reformulation. My aim in what follows is to preserve many of Singer's insights while jettisoning several of his oversights.

31. At this juncture it is worth considering an important objection to Singer's view. The objection holds that ordinary morality prioritizes the need to prevent one-off emergencies in one's immediate vicinity over the need to prevent a pattern of behavior that causes suffering far away. As a result, Singer's view appears implausible. This claim rests on a faulty comparison, however. At issue is the question whether we in well-off countries are morally obligated to shift resources (time, money, talent) to far away places in order to prevent terrible suffering there *if* the sacrifice can reasonably be expected to cause significantly less suffering here. Singer is not arguing that we should deprioritize the prevention of local suffering if credible data suggest that we could prevent a similar or greater amount of suffering by donating to local causes than we could by donating to the distant needy.

32. Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 231.

33. See Miller, "Beneficence, Duty and Distance," 361. Miller is right to think that preserving aesthetically and culturally valuable operas, plays, and the like may, in some cases (though far fewer than he thinks), be a higher-priority obligation than the obligation beneficently to assist impecunious persons or societies.

34. Even if one allows that securing nonmoral value can, in some cases, itself be a morally valuable act, the Oxford sacrifice would remain chiefly a sacrifice of nonmoral value.

35. All one needs to demonstrate the need for this revision is to accept the claim that the value of the most important aesthetic work in the world is such that it is not acceptable to sell or substantially damage the work, or deprive the current owners of possession, in order to save the life of one impoverished person in the world today.

36. One's huge sum of money is not of overridingly high nonmoral value. Though it is of significant nonmoral value, that value pales in comparison with the value of helping the world's least well-off.

37. Miller, *Globalizing Justice*, 13.

38. Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 240.

39. In fairness to Singer, such a disruption might occur if all globally affluent people *thought* they were acting upon his Principle of Sacrifice. Epistemic constraints may cause the people erroneously to act upon his principle by giving in a way that causes serious suffering, their good intentions notwithstanding.

40. Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 19–20.