The Costs and Requirements of Morality

A critical discussion on moral principles, cost claims, and the demandingness of morality

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1. Introduction

This essay tries to answer the question; what sacrifices, in terms of costs, should I be prepared to make in order to make the world better? Another way to put it is which moral principle (or what kind of moral principle), in this vast array of suggestions that is available to us, that is reasonable to embrace. Since one part of the main question utilizes the expression “make the world better”, the second section briefly touch upon the subject on how we can improve the status of our world. In this section I stipulate that one way to make the world better is to focus on the worst form of suffering and also the kind of suffering which we can relieve and prevent in the most cost effective way. It is due to these two reasons that it seems most appropriate to focus our efforts towards extreme poverty since we who are (at least) well off are able to make a large difference with very small measures.¹

The third section presents different moral principles put forth by philosophers Peter Singer, Peter Unger, Jamie Mayerfeld, Elizabeth Cripps, and Brad Hooker. These principles are various ways to answer my main question. Most principles state that we are obligated to act morally unless the cost to ourselves of acting accordingly will be too great. It is this conditional, and the cost claims that are used in these principles, that I will focus on. Some questions arise in this section; what should be regarded as a cost? Is it possible to index these different cost claims? And what are the things we should be prepared to sacrifice? This will be discussed in section four.

The fifth section will utilize the results from the fourth section and revisit some of the suggestions from the third section. At this stage we will hopefully have a better picture of what these principles imply and therefore it will become easier to determine which of these suggestions that is reasonable to embrace. Voices have been raised against so called “unreasonably demanding” principles, and in this section I evaluate whether and to what extent one central objection hold water. I argue that this criticism seems to rest on an intuition that lacks a rationale. Furthermore, I also claim these objections stem from a misconception of what stronger principles will actually require of us when applied.

¹ I borrow the definition of those who are well off (or rich) from Singer (2010, p. 143) who states that if we define those who have an income above the average income of Portugal (the lowest-income nation of the rich nations) then there are 855 million well off (or rich) people in the world.
2. One way to make the world better

2.1. Preliminary remarks

Before I do any of the above I would like to explicate some remarks about the scope of this essay.

(1) Limited framework: The following discussion will take place within a broadly conceived consequentialist theoretical setting. It will also specifically target principles of beneficence within the consequentialist line. Other moral theories, for example deontological considerations and virtue ethics views, are therefore left out. Thus, all further mentions of ‘morality’ and ‘moral principles’ should be understood as references to consequentialist notions only. One reason for this restricted framework is that it would be impossible to try to fit in all aspects of normative ethics in the limited space of this essay.

(2) The preferred end(s): The philosophers discussed in this essay all focus on suffering in one form or another but the preferred ends of their moral principles differ. Singer and Unger argue that our preferred end should be to prevent the suffering and premature deaths of the world’s poor. Mayerfeld states that we are obligated to relieve suffering in its worst forms. Cripps, who is taken out of her context in this essay, formulates principles which aim at mitigating and preventing the suffering that will come with climate change. Hooker states that it is not necessary that the preferred end of a moral principle should be to make the world better, rather, the aim should be that the principle is accepted from an impartial view. I will, for reasons stated in 2.2., follow Mayerfeld (and Singer and Unger to some extent) and discuss morality’s demands in relation to preventing the suffering and premature deaths that are the consequences of extreme poverty.²

(3) The interests of non-human animals: The essay will only focus on the suffering of human beings. This is since a discussion on what moral obligations we might

² I am aware that there are other kinds of severe suffering than the kind that arises from a life lived in extreme poverty. As Fred Feldman (1999, p. 196) points out, there are a lot of things that can be done about racial injustices, genital mutilation, ethnic cleansing, slavery, and homelessness as well – just to name a few calamities. However, I want to stress that the arguments put forth here does not necessarily apply exclusively to poverty.
have towards non-human animals would extend this essay to an unbearable length. I firmly believe that we do have certain duties towards non-human animals, however, that will be the topic of another discussion.3

2.2. One way to make the world better
If suffering makes the world worse it seems appropriate that one of our moral tasks will be to alleviate and prevent suffering from occurring if we want to make the world better.4 5 The formula seems easy, but what needs to be answered is if there are kinds of suffering which we should be more (or less) concerned about.

First, if we take diminishing marginal utility into account, it is possible for us in the richer part of the world to decrease the amount of extreme suffering with very small measures. For example, people who live under the international poverty line of $1.90 a day can easily be aided by donating to organizations such as Oxfam. But more is needed of us if we are to achieve the same effect for those who live a life that can be considered to be above and beyond those who lack their basic necessities.

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3 I bring this to light since Alison Hills (2010) argues that utilitarianism is even more demanding than we usually consider it to be due to the fact that non-human animals also falls within the scope of a utilitarian principle.
4 I will not discuss the suggestion that one way to make the world better is by making the already happy people happier. It is certainly possible to make the world better in that way, but as long as severe suffering is occurring I cannot see how our best means to make the world better would be to focus on the already happy. This idea is discussed further in Brülde (2009, p. 102). However, I want to add that none of the principles discussed in this essay include a requirement to promote a good; rather, what is proposed is that we are required to prevent what is bad (which in the context of this discussion is suffering). This way we are solely required to prevent suffering. Thus, making the world better by increasing the happiness for those who are already well off can be considered as optional.
5 It can of course be argued that there are things other than suffering that makes the world worse such as injustices and inequalities.
Second, it is uncomplicated for us to contribute to the fight against poverty. The vast variety of competent charity organizations which aids and supports those who live under extreme conditions is overwhelming to say the least. All that is needed of us better off citizens is basically that we contribute with a little part of our income.

These two remarks brings us close to a position that states that in order to make the world better we should first and foremost identify the groups and persons that suffer the most. But we should also identify which groups and persons we are able to help in the most cost effective way, in other words, how we can reduce the largest amount of suffering to a relatively low cost. These two conditions normally apply to poor groups in selected regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central Asia, and the Caribbean. Nevertheless, it is not always the case that it is most cost effective to help those who suffer the most, and, according to this model, it will occasionally be better to help those who already have their basic needs met if their increase in happiness comes at a very low cost. I have conflicting intuitions over this last remark but I will not delve deeper into that discussion this time.

There are several ways to relieve extreme suffering, although, an individual’s contribution to this nexus of efforts usually consists in supporting charity organizations in various ways. Nevertheless, extreme suffering can be relieved by; promoting and supporting economic development in poor countries so that the deprived will have their most basic needs met, by supplying aid and medicine for regions with substandard or non-existent healthcare systems, by fighting against undemocratic regimes which suppresses its citizens, by making sure that human

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6 It is a widely embraced idea that happiness starts to stagnate as our income and wealth hits a certain point, see Layard, Mayraz, Nickell (2008), Garhammer (2002), and as Ronald Inglehart (2000 p. 219) writes: "Moving from a starvation level to a reasonably comfortable existence makes a big difference. But beyond a certain threshold, the subjective payoff from economic development ceases‖. Even though this seems trivially true it has also been contested just how great and tangible the effect of diminishing marginal utility actually is, see Easterlin (2005).


8 For example, according to The World Bank (2012), Congo-Kinshasa had a poverty headcount ratio ($1.90 a day) at 77.18% in 2012, Sierra Leone at 52.3% and Niger 50.3% in 2011, and Madagascar had a sky high poverty headcount ratio at 81.8% in 2010. Meanwhile, Haiti struggled at 53.91% in 2012 and in 2003 Uzbekistan had poverty ratio at 66.79%.
rights are recognized, respected, and upheld, and the list goes on with efforts to improve education, working conditions, compensation and adaption for climate catastrophes, etc.⁹ In light of this I believe that we now have a sufficient understanding of how we can make the world better.

3. Different obligations for making the world better

In this section I will present moral principles which roughly answer my main question. These moral obligations take the form of stronger as well as weaker moral principles. Peter Singer, Jamie Mayerfeld, and Peter Unger belong to the former group while Elizabeth Cripps and Brad Hooker present principles of the weaker kind. I will start off with the stronger principles.

3.1. Strong principles

One position that is normally considered as too demanding in its original form is act consequentialism. This view states that an act is morally right if and only if that act maximizes the good (where happiness or well-being usually figures as the good). The core idea of the act consequentialist principle is that we are always obligated to maximize the good even though it could require extreme sacrifices on our part. In other words, the principle is unconditional in the sense that it lacks the form of ‘We ought to do X unless Y’ and the standard criticism opposes the idea that there is no limit to moral requirements. Thus, to make consequentialism more attractive and less implausible one needs to formulate a principle which includes such a conditional. This is what has been done with the accounts that I’ll present here.

3.1.1. Peter Singer

Just like many moral philosophers before him, Singer claims that the key aspect to morality is that suffering is bad.¹⁰ In ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’ it is the suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care that is bad.¹¹ The basic reasoning is that suffering is bad and we ought to prevent bad things from

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⁹ Brülde (2009, p. 204).
¹⁰ This may come across as trivial to the reader, but, it is not the claim that suffering is bad that is interesting. It is the difference in what ways suffering is bad, that is, the axiology of badness that may differ from one theory to another and how bad it is compared to other evils.
¹¹ Singer (1972, p. 231).
occurring. It is from this assumption that Singer presents two versions of his moral principle – a strong principle and a moderate principle.

**The Strong Principle:** If it is in our power to prevent bad things from happening, unless in doing so we would be sacrificing something of comparable moral significance, we ought, morally, to do it.\(^\text{12}\)

**The Moderate Principle:** If it is in our power to prevent bad things from happening, unless in doing so we would be sacrificing something morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it.\(^\text{13}\)

Both cost claims, that is, ‘comparable moral significance’ and ‘morally significant’, are evaluated from what is called an ‘impersonal view’. It does not matter if the agent finds being forced to sell off his stamp collection for charity to be an outrageous tragedy – on the impersonal view his suffering cannot be said to be comparable to the suffering of those who are in danger of dying from starvation.\(^\text{14}\)

Singer also presents two supplementary claims – these principles take no account of proximity or distance to the suffering and they do not make a difference between cases where the agent is the only one who’s able to help and where she is just one out of millions of able agents. Both of these aspects do not in any way relieve the agent of his requirement to prevent badness and suffering. The strong principle also justifies a third claim; we ought to give until we reach the level at which, by giving more, we would cause as much suffering to ourselves and our dependents as we would relieve by our gift (Singer calls this the level of marginal utility).

The two versions of the principle are basically identical except in one aspect; where the strong version states that we should prevent suffering unless we are sacrificing something of *comparable* moral significance, the moderate version only states that you’re obliged to relieve suffering unless you’re sacrificing something of moral significance. Why does this difference matter?

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\(^\text{12}\) Singer (1972, p. 231) defines ‘comparable moral significance’ in terms of causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good that is comparable to the bad we want to prevent. This principle does only require of the agent to prevent suffering and not to also promote things that are morally good.

\(^\text{13}\) Singer (1972, p. 241).

\(^\text{14}\) This seems reasonable given that the stamp collecting man is not some kind of suffering monster who experiences much more pain than other people when being forced to give up his personal belongings.
'Comparable moral significance' is an equivalent sacrifice – we are obligated to act accordingly up to the point where the moral worth of our loss is comparable to what the person in need would lose if she remains unassisted. If someone’s life is in danger and you are able to prevent her from dying, you ought to do so unless that would cost you your own life. However, a morally significant cost has a lower threshold, as Singer puts it:

On the more moderate principle, it may not follow that we ought to reduce ourselves to the level of marginal utility, for one might hold that to reduce oneself and one’s family to this level is to cause something significantly bad to happen.\textsuperscript{15}

It is important to read this in a charitable way – under the moderate principle the agent may be relieved of his duty some steps just prior to the level of marginal utility but I doubt that it is up to the acting agent to judge whether she sacrifices something of moral significance or not. In other words, I find it an open question whether the stamp collecting man would actually be exempt from selling off his stamp collection under the moderate principle. Singer embraces the stronger principle, that is, we are required to relieve suffering unless it requires us sacrificing something of comparable moral significance. I will nevertheless evaluate both principles in the subsequent sections.

3.1.2. Jamie Mayerfeld

There are three theoretical features to Mayerfeld’s notion of suffering. First, just like Singer, Mayerfeld analyses suffering from an impersonal view. Second, the total view which he embraces states that suffering is not only bad for the person who suffers, it is also bad since it “makes the world that much worse”.\textsuperscript{16} Lastly, Mayerfeld argues that there’s a cumulative badness of suffering that is determined by factors such as the intensity and duration of the suffering but also the number of people who suffer. Consequently, the world becomes better by reducing the cumulative badness of suffering.

According to Mayerfeld, the inherent badness in suffering justifies a moral requirement to prevent and relieve it; suffering ought not to occur and therefore we

\textsuperscript{15} Singer (1972, p. 241).
\textsuperscript{16} Mayerfeld (1999, p. 111).
do right by preventing its occurrence and relieving where it already occurs. Although he does not explicitly formulate a principle of his own in *Suffering and Moral Responsibility*, there are certain features that become apparent as his discussion progresses that seem sufficient for us to articulate the duty to relieve suffering in the form of a moral principle.

First, Mayerfeld states that the duty to relieve suffering is a prima facie duty – it holds true in the absence of other moral considerations. However, he seems convinced that there are very few instances where the duty should be constrained or limited. This is since the duty to relieve suffering is consequentialist in its core – what is important is that we reduce the maximum amount of cumulative suffering. It is difficult to make out whether deontological constraints should be relevant for the duty to relieve suffering. On the one hand, attempts to prevent suffering might be “forbidden on the grounds that it requires the use of impermissible means” even if the outcome would be better overall. On the other hand, it is not deontological constraints but a promotion of deontological inhibitions that is preferable for Mayerfeld, which is justified on consequentialist ground via a two-level conception of morality. In other words, violence is not prohibited because violence is wrong in itself, but behavior that shy away from violence should be promoted since that will give us better consequences. This view is strengthened by the claim that the duty to relieve suffering requires us to “do whatever will minimize the cumulative badness of suffering”. I take this as the position that deontological constraints are only relevant if they lead to a better outcome overall.

The only time we are relieved of our duty is when the cost of preventing suffering becomes worse from an impersonal perspective than the suffering prevented. In other words, if there would be more suffering, from an impersonal

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17 Mayerfeld (1999, p. 113).
18 Mayerfeld (1999, p. 118) also argues that the duty to relieve suffering does not necessarily entail pure consequentialism since there might be other moral considerations that we should be concerned about. But, if the duty to relieve suffering is a large part of morality then he is convinced that morality is overwhelmingly consequentialist in its nature.
21 Mayerfeld (1999, p. 120).
view, by my attempt to prevent other suffering, then I am relieved of my duty to relieve suffering. This seems identical to Singer’s reasoning about being relieved from reducing oneself to the level of marginal utility. With this in mind I do believe that the duty to relieve suffering can be formulated as follows:

*The Duty to Relieve Suffering:* We are morally required to act in such a way that relieves the maximum amount of cumulative suffering unless in doing so we produce a worse outcome, in terms of suffering, than if we would have not acted in such a way.

Now, the duty to relieve suffering might come off as stronger than what it actually is. For example, the duty does not necessarily require an attitude of complete impartiality of the acting agent since people are generally in a better position to understand and respond to their own needs and the needs of their loved ones than the needs of strangers or people unknown to them. Similar proposals can be applied to how you spend your time, your money, and how you should prioritize your personal projects. I will elaborate on these matters in sections 4 and 5.

3.1.3. Peter Unger

As opposed to Singer and Mayerfeld, Unger does not start out with a moral duty or principle and tests its viability through different thought experiments. Instead, Unger switches the order of things and presents us with two different thought experiments to get our intuitions flowing. The first case is called *The Vintage Sedan* in which a Mercedes driver can save a stranger from losing his leg by driving him to the hospital. However, by driving the stranger to the hospital, the upholstery of the car will be soaked in blood and restoring it will cost over $5000. Because of self-interest, the driver chooses not to help the stranger, and as a consequence, the stranger loses his leg the next day.

Most respondents to this case reply that the driver’s behavior was morally wrong. Nevertheless, the reactions to his second example, *The Envelope*, are what

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23 Mayerfeld (1999, p. 208), this is also proposed by Brülde (2009, p. 180).

24 Unger (1996, p. 26). In a footnote Unger (1996, p. 34) explains that the respondents to his cases are students, colleagues, and friends of his. Thus, the survey is, as Unger describes it, unsystematic, as opposed to a proper psychological experiment. Unger initially intended to conduct a proper survey by asking graduate students at the psychological institution of his university to take on the project. But no graduate students took on the project, and, in Unger’s own words: “Having limited energy, I’ve left the matter there”.
cause the enigma. In this example, you are able to save thirty children from premature death by sending a check for $100 to UNICEF. But, because of some arbitrary reason, you choose not to send the check and as a consequence thirty more children die prematurely than if you would have sent the check. Surprisingly, most respond that your behavior in *The Envelope* was not as bad as the Mercedes driver’s. In fact, most respond that it wasn’t even mildly wrong.²⁵ The initial moral intuitions seem to be susceptible to factors which we might question as to why they are morally relevant (such as physical and social proximity) which gives us an inconsistent result. The Mercedes driver is blameworthy for not aiding the stranger while you get off the hook by allowing thirty children to die prematurely. The key claim in *Living High and Letting Die* is that our intuitions seem to imply that it is good if we lessen the suffering in the world but it is also all right if we don’t. Unger argues that it is seriously wrong not to do anything to lessen serious suffering – regardless of whether it is your dear neighbour or a starving child in a developing country. In fact, the intuition that leaves no blame for people who abstain from lessening serious suffering “strongly conflicts with the truth about morality”.²⁶

Despite his somewhat unorthodox methodology, Unger’s discussion does result in a collection of different moral principles. I have picked out one of them:

*Being Appropriately Modest about Lessening Early Death:* Other things being even nearly equal, if your behaving in a certain way will result in the number of people who *very prematurely lose their lives* being less than the number who will do so if you don’t so behave and if even so you’ll still be at least *very modestly* well off, then it’s seriously wrong for you not to so behave.²⁷

Note that it is not up to the agent herself to determine when she is ‘very modestly well off’ since this is evaluated from an impersonal perspective. If I can save two children from dying by sacrificing a leg and all of my savings, according to this model, very modestly well off since, as Unger expresses it, I will *ceteris paribus* be “a

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²⁶ Unger (1996, p. 8).
great deal better off than very many other people”.\textsuperscript{28} Also, and I want to emphasize that this is a comparative notion from a global perspective, so as long as you are better off than “impoverished Third Worlders who, as they didn’t get enough Vitamin A when very young, as children became completely and permanently blind” you are at least very modestly off, as Unger expresses it.\textsuperscript{29} I am somewhat suspicious to this part of Unger’s approach since the fixed rate of being ‘very modestly well off’ seems solely based on an individual’s level of well-being compared to others. That is, I have a difficult time categorizing someone who has lost all of his money and a leg as being very modestly well off (even if it is obvious that this person is better off than many other people). Taken to its extreme, suppose you live in a deprived and gruesome world where 98% of the world’s population live on less than $1 a day, whereas you belong to the 1% who live on $3 a day. The last 1% consists of the group of people who lives on $5 a day. In this case you are certainly better off than very many other people, but it does not seem reasonable to categorize you as being very modestly well off based on that single fact. The evaluation can easily be improved by adding further requirements for when we should consider someone as being worse or better off, such as whether or not her most basic needs are fulfilled or to what degree she is free to pursue her interests. My cost analysis in section 4 will draw on this latter notion.

3.1.4. Final remarks on strong principles

I believe that all the principles presented so far (except for Singer’s moderate principle) can be regarded as equal in terms of demandingness. This is largely due to the state of our world and the vast amount of people who we are able to help (section 4.2. will have a more elaborate discussion on this matter). Thus, to use Singer’s terms, it is always in our power to prevent bad things from happening without us sacrificing something of comparable significance. And, interpreted harshly, it seems theoretically possible that Singer’s strong principle might push us to Unger’s comparative notion of being at least very modestly well off. Could it be that Unger

\textsuperscript{28} Unger (1996, p. 145) discusses this in relation to a version of his thought experiment \textit{Bob’s Bugatti} in which a man named Bob have to sacrifice all of his savings (which is invested in a beautiful but uninsured Bugatti) and his leg in order to save two children from a premature death.

\textsuperscript{29} Unger (1996, p. 145).
and Singer sets their threshold in reference to where they believe a further sacrifice would cause more suffering than it would prevent? I believe so, and with that said, there is a connection to Mayerfeld’s duty to relieve suffering as well.\textsuperscript{30} Let us move on to weak principles.

3.2. \textit{Weak principles}

There are other ways as opposed to the ones above to approach our main question; one can formulate principles which will have the best consequences provided everyone complied with them, which is the starting position of rule consequentialism. A similar thought is that of ‘fair share’-theorists who argue that the costs of our moral principles should be formulated in reference to the number of duty bearers.\textsuperscript{31} Alternatively, one can divide people by groups in terms of capability, ability, and responsibility and assign them collective as well as individual duties depending on which group(s) they may belong to. The latter is what Cripps does in \textit{Climate Change & the Moral Agent}.

3.2.1. \textit{Elizabeth Cripps}

In order to make a viable scheme that will enable us to counteract climate change in the most efficient manner, Cripps divides people into three distinct collectives. The Young, whose fundamental interests are threatened by the consequences of climate change; the Able can contribute to climate change mitigation at a less than significant cost to themselves; and the Polluters who, as the name depicts, have a very strong obligation to lessen their emissions and compensate for their past emissions.\textsuperscript{32} I want to avoid going into detail about Cripps’ full account so what I will do is to take the duty Cripps assigns to the Young out of context, that way we have a weak principle that fits into the scheme of this essay. Putting the deeper justification of the duty and the specific issues of climate change aside, an individual who belongs to the Young is bound to the following principle:

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{30} Remember that Singer argues that we ought to sacrifice to a level at which by imposing further costs we would cause more suffering than we would prevent. And Unger (1996, p. 145) writes that we should comply with the principle mentioned above up to the point “where going further will be unproductive, overall, in lessening serious losses”.
\item\textsuperscript{31} Murphy (1993) and (2003).
\item\textsuperscript{32} I want to point out that an individual might very well belong to more than one collective.
\end{itemize}
Weak Principle of Beneficence: An individual (moral agent) has a moral duty to prevent the serious suffering (deprivation of fundamental interest) of some other human being or human beings (moral subject(s)) if she can do so at a minimal cost to herself.\textsuperscript{33}

The actions that are required from the Young are actions that will prevent them from being deprived of their fundamental interests in the future, and therefore, since this duty should work to their advantage, the costs they should be prepared to impose on themselves should only be minimal.\textsuperscript{34} I shall point out that Cripps does first and foremost talk of duties in terms of indirect duties and promotional duties, that is, duties to organize and work for institutional and collective changes (since that is a more effective way to reach the preferred end). For example, I might arrive at a lake where twenty people are drowning, but, there are also enough able swimmers present that, if we were to organize a collective effort, we would be able to save everyone who are drowning to a minimal cost to ourselves. However, the rescue can be life threatening for everyone involved if it is not done collectively. If I attempt to persuade the other able swimmers to cooperate with me and come up with a viable scheme that will safely rescue every drowning person in the lake then I have fulfilled my promotional duty under the weak principle. If my attempts are rendered unsuccessful and I become exhausted and worn out from trying, despite my best efforts to make the others cooperate, then nothing more is required of me by said principle (even if a continued effort would eventually persuade the group).\textsuperscript{35}

According to Cripps, the only time an agent should be prepared to sacrifice something of a significant or comparable cost is when she is negatively connected to the harm. Suppose that the people drowning in the lake were pushed in by the people now standing on the shore. Then any unsuccessful attempt to coordinate a rescue would not constitute a reason for not jumping into the lake and save the drowning people, even if an uncoordinated rescue would involve a serious risk. Thus, Cripps is willing to embrace a stronger principle for some agents, but unlike Singer and other of his likes, she does not take it as her point of departure.

\textsuperscript{33} Cripps (2013, p. 13) also formulates this principle (and a ‘moderate’ principle of beneficence) in terms of collectives instead of individuals. The idea is that we can derive promotional individual duties from the collective duties of beneficence, but that notion falls outside of the scope of this essay.

\textsuperscript{34} In other words, something that should work to your advantage cannot be too costly for you.

\textsuperscript{35} Cripps (2013, p. 156).
3.2.2. Rule consequentialism & Brad Hooker

The rightness criterion of rule consequentialism tells us that an act is right if it conforms to the rule which by complying with it leads to the best consequences. Also, rule consequentialism argues that the best consequences are only brought about if the decision procedure of the agent is guided by certain rules such as “Don’t lie” or “Don’t steal”.

This theory struggles with two issues in its initial form. This is due to the idea that we should follow the rules (and formulate the rules) that would get us the best consequences given the fact that everyone complied with them. On the one hand this seems to demand too much of us in certain situations. As Göran Duus Otterström has pointed out, it seems unreasonable that I am under the obligation to defend my country single handed during an invasion, even though every citizen can be said to have an obligation under ideal circumstances to fight for king and country.\(^{36}\)

On the other hand, the demands of rule consequentialism are simply too weak in other contexts. Suppose that we would be able to eradicate poverty if everyone complied with the rule “Donate 2% of your annual income to charity”. Most of us who are well off are able to donate much more than 2% without sacrificing something important but even if we are capable of donating more than that we would not be blameworthy if we stopped at 2%. Cripps summarizes the problem with rule consequentialism and fair share theories rather brilliant by saying that “to set the limit according to what the individual would have to do if others had acted as they ought, but did not, is to render her moral duties too detached from the situation she is actually in”.\(^{37}\)

The interesting question for rule consequentialists, then, is what is required of us in a world of free-riders and partial compliance. There are more sophisticated versions of rule consequentialism that seems to be able to handle the compliance problem, such as Brad Hooker’s internalization account.\(^{38}\) Hooker argues that we should not formulate rules that will lead to the best consequences given the assumption that everyone complies with them. Instead, we should formulate rules

\(^{36}\) Brülde & Duus Otterström (2015, p. 278).

\(^{37}\) Cripps (2013, p. 159).

\(^{38}\) Hooker (2000).
which, if *internalized or accepted* by all, would give us the best expected consequences. By accepting a rule and making it our own, that is, to feel motivated to act accordingly and feel guilt when we fail to do so, is to internalize a rule.

In order to get around the compliance problem Hooker suggests that we should follow the optimific rules unless when our following them would result in a great harm (e.g. due to non-compliance). This seems promising, although, it does not fit with another key aspect of Hooker’s theory, namely, that the internalization and maintenance costs of every rule should be accounted for in the cost analysis. That is, the costs of sustaining peoples’ commitment to it and getting new generations to learn the set of rules that will get us the best expected consequences. If we are obligated to donate 2% of our income and it comes to my attention that Bob does not comply with this rule then I should pick up his tab. But, if I also find out that Barbara does not comply with the rule, I should fill in for her share as well, and so on. Taking internalization costs into account and given our “natural human selfishness”, Hooker states that this kind of morality can only be internalized at a great cost. Thus, a less demanding morality would probably have better consequences than the one proposed above. With that said, Hooker does propose a limit on moral behavior by stating that:

*The Aggregate Significant Cost:* Over time agents should help those in greater need, especially the worst off, even if the personal sacrifices involved in helping them add up to a *significant cost* to the agents. The cost to the agents is to be assessed aggregately, not iteratively. (my emphasis)

The notion of aggregative costs implies that we should count the impact our sacrifices have on our life overall. Thus, I should not evaluate whether my sacrifice adds up to a significant cost every particular occasion since many small costs can turn out to be extreme seen as a whole. This threshold is reached when someone “regularly gives a little wealth or time to good charities, or sometimes gives a great deal of time or wealth to them”. Nevertheless, this obligation does not require us to

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39 Alternatively convince Bob to do what is required of him by means of blame or persuasion.
40 Hooker (1990, p. 77).
41 Hooker (2000, p. 166).
sacrifice any personal projects or personal relationships except in extreme situations e.g. where the agent’s self-sacrifice would save the world.

This concludes my presentation of the moral principles that will be discussed through the remainder of this essay. How do we make sense of all these suggestions? What the next section will discuss are the different cost claims that figure in each of the principles presented – from Singer’s ‘comparable cost’ to Cripps’ ‘minimal cost’.

4. The scale of demandingness

4.1. What should be regarded as a cost?

First of all, what is a cost to the agent? There are various metrics that could go into this notion. I choose to distinguish between three different metrics – what I call ‘descriptive costs’, our fundamental interests, and our lesser interests.

A descriptive cost is measured objectively and it is something that I give up – e.g. the amount of money I donate or the amount of time I spend working with charities.\(^4\) Thus, it only takes the strictly descriptive notion of a cost into account and not how it affects the agent’s interests or well-being. Now, there are several kinds of descriptive costs. I can devote my time and energy to charitable causes by direct actions, such as working at the local soup kitchen or (if I have the skills needed) volunteer on location for organizations such as Doctors Without Borders. There are also indirect actions when it comes to time and energy, I could strive for structural and institutional changes by putting pressure on elected politicians or taking part in demonstrations. Another descriptive cost metric is my wealth, which I can either donate to charitable causes or spend on eco-friendly and fair trade products. In more extreme situations I might be required to sacrifice my physical health in some way, for example, someone who works as a doctor during an epidemic is at the risk of getting infected. Devoting a majority of these metrics to our moral duties will probably take its toll on two others – our relationships and personal projects. If all of my time, energy, and wealth are spent on charitable causes then it will be difficult for me to establish any meaningful relationships or pursue my projects. All these things I

\(^{43}\) Descriptive costs can affect us in negative ways as well (depending on its size, scope, or severity) but I also want to emphasize that it is not a necessary feature of that metric (e.g. a billionaire who donates $10 to charity).
have mentioned are essential for my well-being in some way or another. So, is well-being the compound metric we should use in our cost analysis? I will start with a minimal approach and see where we move on from there.

I would like to suggest that severe costs affect, to borrow Cripps' notion, our fundamental interests. The list includes having the capability or a meaningful opportunity to enjoy continued life, bodily health, bodily integrity, affiliation (relationships with others), and practical reason (being able to develop and pursue a life plan). This list is objective in the sense that, as Cripps puts it, the things listed are prerequisites to living a “fully flourishing human life”. Mayerfeld captures a similar, although more basic, list of significant minimums with what he calls ‘vital interests’. My idea is that the less a moral action interferes or violates with the agent’s fundamental interest, the less costly it is.

With that said, when attempting to expand the cost analysis to include more subjective notions – such as our lesser interests, preferences, and desires, we can find ourselves in some perplexing situations. For example, Bob is a very charitable man and seems to only get happier the more time he volunteers in the soup kitchens while he also gladly devotes his financial resources to those in need. Bob is neither poor nor rich, but he could have been the latter were he to abstain from charitable actions. The opposite of Bob is Scrooge, he is an extremely selfish man who desires and prefers to spend his earnings in growing businesses and thus make his fortune even greater. If Bob and Scrooge were asked to donate $1000 each to the local homeless shelter we can assume that their well-being would be affected differently. The charitable character of Bob would be pleased to be able to help even though giving away that sum of money would lead to a cancellation of the family’s vacation. Scrooge, who is more than financially stable, is so deeply attached to his wealth that any dollar that is not spent the way he prefers makes him bizarrely anguished and relentlessly frustrated.

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44 As the keen reader might have noticed, Cripps’ list of fundamental interests is to some extent influenced by Amartya Sen’s capability approach.
45 Cripps (2013, p. 7).
If the costs to the lesser interests of Bob and Scrooge differ then it seems as if some of the moral principles presented here would require different things from them. But it is intuitively ill-fitting that just because Scrooge experiences the charitable act as a tremendous sacrifice, he might be relieved of his duty to donate under some principles. Our protesting intuition seems to be about fairness, it just is not fair that people who have a good moral character should be required to do more than people who lack it. The problem of Scrooge arises when we account for his desires and lesser interests in the cost analysis. If the desires of the acting agent are stripped from the cost analysis then Scrooge will not be relieved of his duty since the donation of $1000 will not violate or threaten his fundamental interests. This however is not a feasible solution in my mind. Although Scrooge’s desires are wicked and distorted I do believe that a viable definition of costs should take lesser interests and desires into account, excluding them seems to lack a rationale.

On the other hand, why should we assume that morality has to be fair? The primary aim is to make the world better by preventing suffering, and if this is done in unfair ways, then so be it. As long as this unfairness does not cause more suffering than it prevents (as in the case with Bob and Scrooge) then I do not see why it should matter.\(^47\) Surely, it would certainly be better if suffering was prevented via a fair structure, nonetheless, I also tend to think that it is not a necessary feature in morality. But, I am not entirely satisfied with this view either.

If we evaluate Scrooge’s well-being from an impersonal view on suffering (as Singer and his likes do), it is highly unlikely that even if we take his extreme frustration into account then it will outweigh the suffering he prevents with the donation (assuming that the donated sum is utilized optimally). This way we recognize peoples’ lesser interests and, although it is not probable that these desires will trump the suffering of the poor, there are what I find to be justified exemptions (more on that in section 4.3.).

\(^{47}\) Or, as Singer (2010, p. 146) has moderately expressed it: “[W]e learn that sometimes we have to accept unfairness. We don’t have to like it, and we can certainly rail against the person not doing his share; but in most circumstances, we’ll do what has to be done if the costs of not doing so are high enough. Those who refuse as a matter of principle to do more than their fair share make a fetish of fairness”.
On a further note, acting morally does not automatically deprive us of anything objectively or subjectively valuable. In fact, donating to charity seems to have a positive effect on our well-being.\textsuperscript{48} The same goes for doing voluntary work:

A survey of 30,000 American households found that those who gave to charity were 43 percent more likely to say that they were “very happy” about their lives than those who did not give, and the figure was very similar for those who did voluntary work for charities as compared with those who did not.\textsuperscript{49}

In short, we feel good by doing good. This leaves me uncertain whether we actually can categorize such behavior as a cost or a sacrifice on our behalf since we in fact gain from doing what we ought to do. However, this is probably only true to a certain extent – I am quite confident that we who are well off can donate 5\% of our annual income and still be regarded as benefitting (and not sacrificing) from said action. Let’s for the sake of the argument assume that when we donate 10\% of our annual income we start to feel a negative effect to our well-being. We may have to make some adjustment to our spending, have a weekly food budget, stop going to restaurants, settle for the clothes we have instead of the new fashionable trends, and so on. Even if it will be quite an adjustment at the beginning, we will soon settle in to our new standards, at least if we are to take the notion of hedonic adaption at face value.\textsuperscript{50} That is, even if this change in our lives affects our well-being negatively at first we eventually return to our previous level of well-being within time. So, this temporary reduction in well-being should only be regarded as a lesser cost provided that we ‘bounce back’ to our former level of well-being soon enough.

Thus, there are three essential kinds of costs that go into the definition of a cost. First, we have descriptive costs, the amount of something that I sacrifice. Second, we have our fundamental interests. Lastly, we have our subjective well-being, the interests, desires, and preferences that are not regarded as fundamental, e.g. Scrooge’s wish to spend his money exclusively on himself. What, then, should be regarded as a cost? Here is a suggestion:

\textsuperscript{48} Brülde (2009, p. 139) and Singer (2010, p. 169).
\textsuperscript{49} Singer (2010, p. 171) cites a study from the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey.
\textsuperscript{50} Brülde (2009, p. 135) also points out that we adapt quicker to improvements than losses in our lives and that we find it very difficult to adapt to living with a chronic disease such as MS.
Cost analysis: Something should be regarded as a cost to the agent if and only if (a) it is a descriptive cost that has a negative impact on her fundamental interests but not on her lesser interests, or, (b) it is a descriptive cost that has a negative impact on her lesser interests but not on her fundamental interests, or, (c) it is a descriptive cost that has a negative impact on her lesser and her fundamental interests.

Thus, the cost analysis proposed includes three cases. The case of (a), although unusual, is a descriptive cost that affects the agent's fundamental (but not her lesser) interests. Think of a person who is entirely liberated from his desires and lesser interests e.g. a Buddhist monk who is required to forgo his life plan to stay at the temple in order to work with charity organizations full-time in the city. The case of (b) is essentially the case of Scrooge; he experiences a sacrifice (since it interferes with his lesser interests) when he is required to donate $1000. This could be considered as a lesser cost; nonetheless, it should be regarded as a cost. Lastly we have case (c), which captures someone who (as opposed to the Buddhist monk) has lesser interests and is required to act in such a way that will affect both her lesser and her fundamental interests (e.g. donate all of her wealth to charity). What this analysis excludes are descriptive costs that do not impact the agent in any way, such as a billionaire that donates $1000 without her noticing it. But it also excludes cases where we gain from doing good since that does not have a negative impact on our fundamental interests or our lesser interests. With this interpretation of what a cost is I would like to move on to talk about why the application of the moral principles presented here can give rise to very demanding requirements.

4.2. A permanent emergency situation?

Conceptually, the demandingness of moral principles is constant. However, the actual requirements from different moral principles will vary depending on the situation which the principles are applied to. For example, in a world where only a few people suffer mildly we will only be required by Singer’s strong principle to make sacrifices comparable to the mild suffering we can prevent. With that said, almost all principles presented here have the potential of being very demanding provided that the suffering is extreme. Thus, when applying the principles from
section 3, how does the state of our world affect the actual requirements bestowed upon us?

Even though extreme poverty has been reduced significantly over the course of twenty years, 897 million people are still living on less than $1.90 a day. That is a global poverty headcount ratio at 12.7%.\textsuperscript{51} This great amount of people who live under these horrid conditions should definitely be labelled as a disaster or an emergency situation.\textsuperscript{52} Extreme poverty is rarely an isolated issue and most poor countries are ruled under unjust regimes, burdened by wars, or constantly struggle against a hot climate. It is not likely that we will overthrow regimes or end civil wars by just donating money to UNICEF or Oxfam, but these efforts are not futile in any way and we have every reason to do so while at the same time we work for structural changes.

Suppose that you are able to save someone from extreme poverty at a minimal cost to yourself by donating to charity. Now there is one less person who does not live in extreme poverty, but the emergency situation still stands. Hooker writes:

Often you can save some of these lives by contributing to the best charities. But there is an overwhelming number of lives to be saved. Thus, an unlimited requirement to prevent disaster seems to entail that you should keep making contributions—at least to the point where you yourself are impoverished.\textsuperscript{53}

By donating $13 to Oxfam you are able to provide clean water for ten persons, but there are obviously ten more people that can get clean water for another $13. And this goes on as long we are in this state of emergency. It is not just the application of strong principles that are affected by the state of our world, even the demandingness of weak principles become very persistent since $13 is just an unnoticeable cost for most of us. But, as mentioned above, it is just not on one occasion that I am given the opportunity to donate $13 – the opportunity is constantly present. So, how should we count our costs? That is what the next section will discuss.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Ferreira et al. (2015). In 1990 the global poverty headcount ratio was at 37.1%, thus, the drop to 12.7% is substantial to say the least but the number is still very high.
\item \textsuperscript{52} It should be added that these are just the people who live on less than $1.90 a day. Thus, there are still millions of other people who are slightly better off but who does not have their basic needs fulfilled.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Hooker (2000, p. 165).
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4.3. Aggregative costs, moral investment, and moral vacation

As previously mentioned, Hooker is explicit that sacrifices and costs from moral behavior should be counted aggregately and not iteratively.

Small sacrifices, repeated indefinitely, can add up to a huge sacrifice. If on every occasion on which you can help the needy you have to ignore whatever sacrifices you made in the past and to sacrifice a little more of what you have left, then, if there are enough such occasions, you will end up with only a very little yourself.54 (my emphasis)

Cripps is on a similar path when she writes that “the morally relevant impact in determining the limits of our duties must surely be the impact that fulfilling them would have on the duty-bearer’s life overall”.55 The difference between the two ways of counting aggregately and iteratively can be illustrated with two conceptual figures:

![Figure 2. In the left figure the agent is allowed to account for previous sacrifices when assessing her current situation at t1. This makes the sacrifice at t1 greater than if she would have counted her cost iteratively. If the agent in the figure to the right would have counted aggregately she would have had a greater total than the agent in the left figure, but, seen as she is counting iteratively, the cost analysis of her sacrifice is isolated to t1.](image)

The backward looking aggregative cost seems quite impractical. I do not find it likely that the agent, at t1, should recall what she did in the past in order to evaluate her

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54 Hooker (2000, p. 167).
55 Cripps (2013, p. 54).
situation properly. Why should it matter that she donated $500 to Oxfam three years ago if she is able to do so again at t1? The more intuitive question to ask is; given the resources that I have now, what sacrifices am I able to endure at this moment that does not compromise my life now and in the foreseeable future? My point is that rather than having a backward looking aggregative cost we ought to count aggregative costs in a forward looking manner. So, it is not aggregative in the sense Hooker proposes but it is not entirely iterative either since it takes the ability to make future sacrifices into account as well. This leads into what I will call ‘moral investments’.

A moral investment is when the agent invests in her own life in one way or another in order to be able to make a greater contribution towards relieving suffering in the future than she would be able to do were she not to invest in herself. Let me give you an example.

Simon loves his job and has a successful career in the hedge fund market which gets him an annual income of $100,000. Now, there are two versions of Simon we might consider – Instantly Deprived Simon and Long Term Simon. At the end of December, when Instantly Deprived Simon have just received his last pay check for the year, he sells everything he owns, withdraws all his savings, and donates everything to charity. Let’s assume that the total sum of all of his wealth at this moment is $100,000. Instantly Deprived Simon also quits his job in order for him to be able to volunteer at the local homeless shelter full-time. He knows that what he is doing is for the greater good, but he is also very depressed since he was very fond of his previous employment and he is almost certain that he would have been able to generate a lot of more wealth throughout the years if he would have stayed. His regret renders him unproductive with his new occupation. As opposed to Instantly Deprived Simon, Long Term Simon stays at the hedge fund market for twenty years, generating a net wealth of $1,500,000. Throughout his working years, Long Term Simon donates 40% of what he has left of his annual earnings and in the long run he has donated $600,000 to charity. Being overall happy with his life, Long Term Simon

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56 My rough estimate is that Long Term Simon has living costs for $500,000 (including taxes) throughout the twenty years.
decides to volunteer for the local homeless shelter during the weekends and his days off.

Thus, by investing in ourselves and developing our talents we are in most cases able to relieve more suffering during a long period of our lives than we would have were we to devote ourselves to relieving suffering right off the bat. I find this to be a defensible stance but I also understand that there is an element of uncertainty in play. Even if Long Term Simon stays in the hedge fund business he might become terminally ill after one year, he may get fired from his job, or there is the risk that he will not earn as much as he projected he would.57

There is another form of exemption for the agent to act in her own interest, what we can call a ‘moral vacation’. The idea is that we are allowed to take breaks from acting morally from time to time since otherwise we become exhausted or worn out. Even Mayerfeld, who embraces a strong principle, suggests this idea:

While it is true that we should use all of our free time to minimize the cumulative badness of suffering, we may find that we use our time most effectively when we take occasional breaks for inexpensive relaxation and recreation.58

I do want to stress that it does not mean that we take yearly vacations to the Bahamas just for the fun of it.59 A moral vacation should be an inexpensive break that we do not necessarily want, but a break that we need in order to keep going.

To summarize, in this section I suggested that we should take present and future impact into account and evaluate whether the sacrifices we make now will prevent us from contributing to a larger extent in the future, and if that is the case then we should make a moral investment. I also wanted to argue that we are sometimes justified in taking a break from acting morally in the form of moral vacations. Both of these suggestions can be justified through a consequentialist framework since it requires me to take all consequences into account when acting. Thus, if I am able to generate better consequences (in this case relieve more suffering)

57 To be clear, these uncertainties should be accounted for with Instantly Deprived Simon as well.
59 As Shelly Kagan (1998, p. 159) have pointed out: “It does not seem especially likely that [a moral vacation] will come close to justifying the tremendous amounts of time that most of us squander, or the tremendous expenditures on luxuries that we typically bestow upon ourselves”. 
by moral investments and moral vacations, then consequentialism tells me to do so.
What I now want to discuss is how the different cost claims used in the moral
principles from section 3 stand in relation to each other.

4.4. The scale of demandingness
I will now index the cost claims in terms of demandingness, where I find the
reasoning around the principles to support their position on the scale.

![The Scale of Demand]  

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Figure 3. ‘S’ stands for Singer, ‘H’ for Hooker, and ‘C’ for Cripps. I left out ‘fair share’ theories
since I found that position to be unconvincing. The reader will notice that neither Unger nor
Mayerfeld is present on the scale. This is since (as I argued in section 3.1.4.) their moral
principles seem to be equal (in terms of demandingness) to Singer’s strong principle.

There are three things that need to be sorted out; how a minimal cost differs from a
trivial cost, why I do not find Hooker’s ‘significant cost’ to be as demanding as
Singer’s ‘morally significant cost’, and why Singer’s ‘comparable cost’ is put highest
on the scale.

First, even though a minimal cost sounds fairly weak, it is a threshold that does
not get reached simply by signing an Internet petition and sharing it on Facebook.60
Rather, a cost is minimal, according to Cripps, as long as it does not undermine our
fundamental interests.61 When does an action undermine my fundamental interests?
For example, if you ask me to go out and get your medicine at the pharmacy that is

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60 Cripps (2013, p. 156).
61 Cripps (2013, p. 56).
f ours miles away (even though I have no personal interest in going out for a run today) I should do so, since it does not seem as if that would undermine one of my fundamental interests. However, if you asked me to do so every Monday for the rest of my life we would be getting closer since that might get in the way of me pursuing some kind of life plan. What then is a trivial cost? Well, that will be a cost that is not even close to threatening one of my fundamental interests, but it may affect or undermine one of my lesser interests. For example, dropping $5 in the Salvation Army bucket when passing by might impinge on my plan to buy that hamburger I’ve been longing for all day, and that could be considered as trivial, but it does not suffice for a minimal cost.

Secondly, both Hooker and Singer utilize the term ‘significant cost’ and one might think that this should render them equal on the scale of demandingness. Let me explain why I do not find this to be the case. A viable model for a balanced moral life, according to Hooker, is someone who regularly does a little good or occasionally does great things for the disadvantaged. Hooker also claims that someone who sacrifices her personal projects or deep personal relationships impinges a significant cost on her life.

Singer draws the line for a significant cost (or morally significant cost to be exact) in a very different manner. One obvious reason for this is that Hooker and Singer have different views on the metrics we should use for a cost and how we should count them. Singer does not seem to count costs aggregately (at least not in

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62 Cripps (2013, p. 55) runs a similar argument that leans toward an objectivist position when she writes that: “[…] those drivers obsessed with maximizing their speed between London and Glasgow could, if they drive at all, focus instead on the challenge of doing so in the most fuel-efficient manner (or, still better, attempt to hone their speed skills on a bicycle instead, and improve on another central human functioning at the same time)”.

63 I have left out Cripps’ definition of a ‘less than significant cost’. This is since Cripps’ definition of a significant cost is very similar to Hooker’s definition. However, I find Cripps’ distinction between a ‘less than significant cost’ and a ‘minimal cost’ to be unsatisfying. Someone who is a member of the Able have a duty to prevent suffering as long as she can do this at less than significant cost to herself. A significant cost is a deprivation of one of my fundamental interests (even if it is only temporary). So, a less than significant cost is something that threatens one of my fundamental interests but it does not deprive me of one. But, this comes strikingly close to what can be considered a minimal cost and I find it difficult in how we ought to separate the two. Thus, I shall leave this matter unresolved.

64 Brülde (2015, p. 208) points out one flaw with this reasoning: what if my loved one lives on the other side of the globe, would I not be entitled to spend great deals of money (that could have done great things for the needy) on plane tickets and long distant phone calls?
the backward looking manner) – what matters is what I can do now for those who need my help at the moment. Remember also that Singer argues that we might not be obligated to reduce ourselves to the level of marginal utility under the moderate principle since that can be considered to be of a morally significant cost. I find this reasoning to be very different from someone who “regularly does a little good” and that is why Hooker’s ‘significant cost’ is put below Singer’s ‘morally significant cost’ on the scale of demandingness.

Lastly, why is Singer’s ‘comparable cost’ at the top? If it is of a comparative notion could it not be at the bottom or in the middle as well? Depending on situation the agent is in, the comparable cost will vary. If you drop your wallet in shark-infested water and I am the only one around who is an able swimmer it does not seem that the preferred end (the happiness you get by the retrieval of your wallet) is of a comparable significance to me risking my life by jumping in and getting it. I might be obligated to try my luck with the fishing rod, but not much more. Singer, however, talks in terms of saving lives (or avoiding very bad things), and if we were to weigh my sacrifice comparably to saving a life there is not much that is sacred. It seems that I should be prepared to forgo almost anything except my own life in order to save a life, which means that this principle has the potential of being the most demanding on the scale of demandingness. And, since the state of our world can be labelled as a state of emergency this makes Singer’s strong principle very demanding. However, as I mentioned earlier, if the state of our world were different in the sense that just some people suffered only mildly or if we were only able to help those who suffer very little, the comparable principle would only require us to make mild or small sacrifices (since the suffering that is in our power to prevent would only be mild or minimal). In what follows I will demonstrate how a scale of descriptive costs might correspond to the scale of demandingness.

4.5. The scale of descriptive costs

I would like to briefly exhibit a possible interpretation of how descriptive costs can correspond to the scale of demandingness. The point is to give a somewhat plausible interpretation of the cost terms evaluated in the last section and apply them to the different metrics of descriptive costs, that is, our wealth, time, and physical health.
Figure 4. These are what I find to be the essential descriptive costs. I have left out personal relations and our personal projects since, it is not something that we normally sacrifice by itself, rather, it gets collateral damage from sacrificing too much of our time and wealth.

There is a lot to say about this figure, but I will limit myself to two matters – how I justified the intervals on the wealth scale and why the top of both ‘Wealth’ and ‘Time’ are blocked out.

First, let’s take a look at the wealth scale. A trivial cost is equal to dropping $5 in the Salvation Army Bucket when passing by. I draw this idea from Robert Noggle, who labels such acts as “yuppie ethics”.65 I want to emphasize that wealth does not necessarily have to be our money, it could also be things we own, such as the

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65 Noggle (2009, p. 1) sees yuppie ethics as the position that sees moral obligations of beneficence as very weak and minimal, therefore they can easily be discharged only by imposing a trivial cost on one’s behalf.
sacrifice of our uninsured car in order to save the life of a child (this is one of Unger’s famous examples, Bob’s Bugatti). Next up is a minimal cost, and as Cripps argues in the passage quoted above, we can give easily donate more than 3% to 4% of our resources before we sacrifice anything fundamental. Let us round up and say that 5% seems to be a good fit for that threshold. Moving on to a significant cost, Hooker leaves a little more space for interpretation since he states that we are obligated to donate at least 1% to 10% of our annual income to charities. Since everything up to 5% is already covered by a minimal cost, I will put the limit of a significant cost at 10%. This leaves us with a morally significant cost, which, according to Singer, should push us to the point where we are almost as deprived as those we are attempting to aid. With a very rough and intuitive estimate on how much we can donate before we come close to the level of those who are suffering severely (and interfere severely with our fundamental interests), I say that donating 50-75% of our annual income sets the lower threshold for a morally significant cost. And, if we interpret Singer more harshly and claim that a morally significant cost can imply that we reduce ourselves to the level of marginal utility then the upper threshold for a morally significant cost will be reached when we donate everything that we own.

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66 Unger (1996, p. 136). Bob is a 70-year-old engineer who has amassed a wealth of $3 million throughout his career. Instead of putting all of his money in a retirement fund, Bob buys the thing he has always wanted, a Bugatti automobile for the full $3 million. He expects that the value of the car will increase by 20% for the time he is ready to retire. But, since he has put all of his money into buying the Bugatti, he is unable to insure his newly acquired automobile. One day Bob arrives at a trolley track. He parks his Bugatti on one of the tracks and watches as the trolley comes in another from a far distance. Bob also observes that at this other track there is a young child trapped who will not be able to get out in time before the train gets to him. Bob, who stands close to the switch, can either let the child get hit by the train or pull the switch and wreck his expensive Bugatti (and with that, sacrifice his entire retirement fund).

67 I should point out that when Singer (2010, p. 164) puts forth a ‘realistic’ suggestion in The Life You Can Save he puts the minimal threshold at 5% of our annual income. The 5% tax starts with people who earn at least $105,000 annually. People who have an income lower than that is not obligated to donate to the same extent. I believe that there are many people who are able to donate at least 5% of their income who have an annual income lower than $105,000. But, as opposed to ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’, Singer does not seem to address the middle class in this later monograph; rather, it seems as if it is a plea to the upper middle class and the wealthier people beyond that level.

68 Hooker (2000, p. 163) states that a rule that requires us to donate at least 1% to 10% of our annual income will at least have a high expected value (since he is unsure of whether it will give us the best consequences in the end).

69 I start with 50% based on this passage by Thomas L. Carson (1991, p. 118): “It seems clear that in order to bring about the best consequences with our money we would need to give away more than one half of our annual net income. Giving away half of our income to CARE would save the lives of a substantial number of people … after having given away half of our net income we would still have a much higher standard of living than most people”.
Now, why are the top levels of ‘Wealth’ and ‘Time’ blocked out? It is based on the premise that if the agent gives up all of her time and wealth in order to save someone from extreme suffering or save someone’s life, the cost she imposes on herself will not be comparable to the life she saves. I want to test this claim with an example.

*Dr. Jones:* Jones is a prominent doctor who has had the pleasure of a successful and vibrant career. Apart from loving spending time with his family, Dr. Jones also enjoys collecting and driving old sports cars. If Dr. Jones were to sell everything he owns he would be able to finance a project in the affected region where a hazardous epidemic has just started to spread. Furthermore, if he were to abandon his family and move to work at his newly founded crisis camp he would be able to mitigate the suffering of those infected to an even greater extent. Thus, if Dr. Jones abandons his family, exposes himself to a great harm, sells everything he owns, and spends every waking moment trying to fight the epidemic he will, with all probability, be able to save hundreds of people from dying prematurely than if he were to abstain from doing all these things. In fact, the only thing that Dr. Jones does not sacrifice is his life in the literal sense.

Is Dr. Jones’ sacrifice comparable to the lives he saves? On the one hand, even if we say that Dr. Jones sacrifices his own life by getting rid of all the things he values in his life, he saves *hundreds* of lives by doing so. On the other hand, if the notion of a comparable cost should be strictly comparable, should it not be the case that we measure Dr. Jones’ sacrifices with just *one* other life he can potentially save? Or, is it comparable at all if the sacrifice is not of the same currency as the preferred end? One view is that the accumulative total of Dr. Jones giving up all his wealth, time, relationships and personal projects is equal to giving up his life in the literal sense. Thus, if Dr. Jones only gave up his wealth but stayed home with his family he might not have made a comparable sacrifice but one at the level of a morally significant cost. Nevertheless, that is not the case here, and since he sacrifices everything except his own life in the literal sense, he might still be said to sacrifice his own life. I believe that the viable path to take here is to count these sacrifices accumulatively, that is, Dr.

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70 I should point out that Unger (1996, p. 154) does not compare on this 1:1 ratio, rather he puts the life of the acting agent on par with *all* the lives you can save in a certain situation.
Jones actually sacrifices his own life by giving up all the things he owns and loves. I will have to leave the remaining questions left to be answered for another occasion. However, it may be wise to refrain from this account since there seems to be more questions than answers involved in using a comparative notion as a measure for sacrifices.

Lastly, I want to point out that there is a consensus that the actual distribution of costs should increase in proportion to individual income and wealth. Thus, for those who have a lot, even if they are obligated under the Cripps’ weak principle, should probably donate more than just 5% of their annual income.

In this section I have given a rough sketch on how the correspondence might look like between cost claims used in moral principles and descriptive costs. I also briefly touched the issue on how a comparable cost might be difficult to assess since there are often different metrics between what we sacrifice and what we want to achieve. In the subsequent and last section I will discuss a common objection to strong principles and how we really should understand the demands of strong principles.

5. Objecting to strong principles

5.1. The argument from demandingness and its justifications

I want to clarify that the following paragraphs will only discuss one central counterargument towards strong principles and evaluate its legitimacy. Thus, I will not provide the reader with any direct positive arguments for strong principles so even if my criticism proves viable towards this argument there is still a lot more to be said in this matter.

Alternatives to strong principles usually suggest that the agent should be allowed to give her own interests special weight, or treats “my” or “mine” as magical pronouns. However, all of these proposals rest on the assumption that morality is too demanding. I believe that it is this assumption that needs to be addressed before we move on with formulating sophisticated moderate and agent-centered views.

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72 E.g. Samuel Scheffler’s (1994, p. 14) is one of the more well-known agent-centered accounts and is briefly described in this passage: “Agents would no longer be required always to produce the best
discuss what I call ‘the motivation argument’. It says that we are naturally biased towards ourselves and our loved ones and if morality should guide our action it cannot require us to forgo our personal interests and personal relations since that will only make people “throw up their hands in despair”. Thus, the demands of morality will have to be on a satisfying level for our intuitions if it ought to motivate us.

On the one hand there is the point of view which states that, as Samuel Scheffler describes it: “morality demands what it demands, and if people find it hard to live up to those demands, that just show that people are not, in general, morally very good”. On the other hand, maybe we should not view morality as fully separated from human nature, that is, morality cannot just demand what it demands – it needs further variables. Even Singer acknowledges this latter claim:

>Moral rules have to be attuned to our evolved human nature, with all its quirky relics of our tribal past ... if we fail to take into account [our] biases ... then we make it difficult to persuade us to give anything like the same weight to the interests of distant people we cannot identify as we give to the interests of other people we can see or name, then the moral rules we advocate will do little good, because few people will follow them.

It is a compelling point, moral principles are supposed to be action guiding but if they do not ‘attach’ to our motivations then the guiding light function vanishes, regardless of how justified they are. But, there are difficulties in determining at what overall outcome; each agent would have the prerogative to devote energy and attention to his projects and commitments out of proportion to their weight in the impersonal calculus. Such a prerogative would be a genuinely agent-centred prerogative, for it would have the function of denying that what an agent is permitted to do in every situation is limited strictly to what would have the best overall outcome, impersonally judged”.

74 I am aware that there are many other arguments for a less demanding morality but due to lack of space and time I can only focus on the ones mentioned. Other noteworthy examples are Williams (1973) who argues that being required to give up our personal projects is damaging to our integrity. Hanna (1998) criticizes Unger for not admitting that moral behavior is better evaluated by degrees of goodness (what she calls different types of ‘Samaritans’). And, Lichtenberg (2010) argues that morality should not be entirely divorced from the practical realm of human nature and human capacities.
75 Scheffler (1986, p. 531).
level this motivational concern should be set. It seems unreasonable to respect all motivations and biases, since that could render morality tolerant to inconsistent and selfish views (recall the responses to Unger’s *The Envelope* and *The Vintage Sedan*). And, to be crude, a slacker morality that only requires of us to do what we want to do is a pretty useless morality. Furthermore, even if we would be able to find the ideal measurement to what degree our motivation and biases should influence our moral principles the project comes off as flawed in itself. Why should morality not be that demanding if its requirements are legitimate? For pragmatic reasons? As Robert E. Goodin has expressed it: “Morality’s being ‘action-guiding’ means that we should be fitting our conduct to morality’s demands – not morality’s demands to our conduct”.78

One might object that I certainly have not proven that the requirements of strong principles are legitimate. It is however a tricky question to determine where the burden of proof lies. The strong principles presented here assume an impersonal view and it can be argued that they have the initial upper hand since this view rests on the assumption that all lives count equally. In that case objections from demandingness will have to justify why we should deviate from that assumption. But it could also be the case that both sides share an equal burden of proof. That is, it might not be sufficient for the impartialist in this case to refer to the assumption that all lives matters equally, more is needed. This latter reasoning is viable if there is a difference between the reasons for which we find a point of view to be justified and the reasons for why we should embrace one perspective over another when acting morally. In other words, I do not find it controversial to say that the impersonal view is justified via the assumption that all lives matters equally, but it can be contended whether this is a sufficient reason for us to embrace that view unconditionally.

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77 The arguments put forth here also concerns Hooker’s notion of internalization costs. Hooker (2015) writes: “Rule-consequentialist assessment of codes needs to avoid giving weight directly or indirectly to moral ideas that have their source in other moral theories but not in rule-consequentialism itself. Suppose people in a given society were brought up to believe that women should be subservient to men. Should rule-consequentialist evaluation of proposed non-sexist code have to count the costs of getting people to give up the sexist rules they have already internalised so as to accept the new non-sexist ones? Since the sexist rules are unjustifiable, that they were accepted should not be allowed to infect rule-consequentialist assessment”.78 Goodin (2009, p. 11).
One way to do so is by referring to what Cripps calls (with inspiration from Nagel)\textsuperscript{79} the three perspectives, that is, the personal, the interpersonal, and the impersonal.\textsuperscript{80} The personal gives me reasons to act in my own interests. The interpersonal gives me reasons to act in the interests of the people I have ties with. Lastly, the impersonal, I as a moral agent have a reason to prevent other peoples’ suffering (regardless of their affiliation with me). Cripps suggests that there is something “not fully human about anybody who doesn’t experience the central pull of each of the three standpoints”\textsuperscript{81} and I agree. The concept of the three perspectives works as an explanation as to why people view strong principles as too demanding. Strong principles seem to require us to act from the impersonal perspective so as to neglect and sometimes even abandon our other two perspectives. In other words, strong principles seem to deprive us of the chance of being fully human and that is why they should be deemed as ‘the ethics of fantasy’.\textsuperscript{82}

Nevertheless, I also agree with Cripps’ claim that these three perspectives will with all probability always be irreconcilable and she does not provide any arguments for what perspective that should trump the other in these situations. And, to be frank, that is the relevant question. If we find ourselves with irreconcilable perspectives in nearly every moral situation, should the impersonal view be given priority? I believe so, and in the next section I will provide arguments for why it may not be as controversial as one might think.

To conclude, giving a rationale for the motivation argument proves tough. What seems to be available is an explanation of why we deem some moral principles as too demanding, but, this explanation does not seem sufficient to justify a restriction on morality. In other words, strong principles might require us to neglect our personal and interpersonal perspective from time to time and that is when we experience them as too demanding. But, if we take Cripps’ words literally, there is something not fully human about anybody who doesn’t experience the central pull of each perspective. That is just to say that someone who does not experience guilt or

\textsuperscript{79} Nagel (1991).
\textsuperscript{80} Cripps (2013, p. 171) uses the term ‘impersonally moral’ but since I have utilized ‘impersonal’ throughout the essay I will do so in this case as well for the sake of convenience and consistency.
\textsuperscript{81} Cripps (2013, p. 190).
\textsuperscript{82} Scarre (1998).
remorse when she has to cancel the family’s vacation just so she can donate to a disaster relief programme does not appear to be fully human – but it says nothing about whether or not she actually should donate the money she would otherwise spend on the family’s vacation. With that said, it seems that proponents for stronger principles still need to provide further reasons for why the impersonal perspective should trump the other perspectives. But, as for right now, they may worry less about the motivation argument.

5.2 What is there really to object to?

It is obvious that those who are deprived and that we are obligated to assist do not benefit by the mere fact that we who are well-off deprive ourselves of everything we value. Compared to a method were we deprive ourselves to the level of those we are trying to assist (in order to elevate their well-being), a better alternative would be to prevent and relieve suffering in a way that will still leave us at a level where we can considered to be happy (wherever that line is drawn). The sceptic will argue that the latter might not be possible – I demur.

Those who doubt might quote Unger when he states that “for a well-to-do adult … it’s badly wrong not to provide vital aid even if it costs many thousands of dollars of lessen by just one the number of distant children who’ll die young rather than live long”83 or Mayerfeld when he writes that “I waver on the question whether the duty to relieve suffering permits a small degree of self-interested bias, or none at all. But I tend to the view that it permits none at all”.84 Does this imply that a strong principle requires of us to become moral saints? I will provide some arguments for why I think otherwise.

Let us go back to Long Term Simon. One might suggest that he could have easily done more, for example, he could have donated 75% of his wealth. This is probably true, but my point is that we will not prevent the most suffering by sacrificing everything we own and all of our time in the drastic manner of Instantly Deprived Simon. If a smaller contribution now enables me to make a larger

contribution in the long run then I believe that is the right way to go (instead of the “all at once”-contribution).

Think of the agent who is in pursuit of the good as frantically running around, pushing himself in every direction, until he drops from exhaustion … Most likely such a person would not actually be making his greatest possible contribution to the good … In contrast, an individual who shapes and carries out a life plan with an eye to promoting the good is likely to make a greater contribution in the long run.85

In the context of this discussion we substitute “contribution to the good” with “relieving suffering”. Mayerfeld, whose principle is very close to pure consequentialism, is also sympathetic to these assumptions of what the consequences would be by implementing strong principles. Our wealth, he argues, should not necessarily be dedicated to the first opportunity that pops up, rather, we should take our time to carefully investigate which charity organizations that are most effective and what kind of suffering that is most effectively prevented.86 Furthermore, I also believe that the concept of a moral vacation is justified under a strong principle such as Mayerfeld’s since if the occasional break from moral behavior leads to a greater contribution in the end (which I assume it does) it can certainly be defended from a standpoint that we should relieve the maximum amount of suffering.

Similar arguments have been put forth by Geoffrey Scarre who claims that it is highly unlikely that the best do-gooders are unlikely to be the pure do-gooders. For example, in order to become an altruistic moral saint an agent would have to forgo all her personal projects and relationships and “without strong affections, one would lead a bleak and joyless life and find it hard to preserve a sense of the value of other lives”.87 This seems to imply that, from an impersonal view, the agent should not neglect her personal and interpersonal perspective in order to relieve suffering. Scarre’s reasoning also relates to Unger’s claim on how much money we should be prepared to give away to charity. Most of us have dependents which will be affected by the choices we make and if you ignore this fact you are acting in the manner of

“Mrs Jellyby in *Bleak House*, who busied herself with charities while her family went to ruin, you are actually making the world a worse and not a better place”. 88

With that said, will a strong principle require me to forgo all the things I value in my life in order to relieve suffering? Sometimes, when the gain is greater than the losses imposed on myself, the answer is yes. That is, if the *only* solution to relieving a specific amount of suffering is that I sacrifice everything that I value then I should do so. However, both Unger and Mayerfeld hold that circumstances that would require actual self-sacrifice would have to be exceptional. 89

Furthermore, instead of depriving ourselves to the point where we are just as bad off as the ones we are attempting to assist it is certainly better in the long run if we work for structural and collective change so that more people start to act towards eradicating poverty. To be frank, one self-sacrifice does very little in the big context, but a collective act with many individual contributions will help us reach our goal and limit the sacrifices we are required to make in order to relieve and prevent severe suffering. Would this render the requirements of morality less demanding? If a collective framework is in place, then, yes. However, bringing about a collective structure may still require very much of the individual and there is an element of uncertainty whether such efforts are worth their potential payoff in the long run, especially when we contrast it to individual contributions. For example, when I donate $10 to the Against Malaria Foundation I can be certain that my individual contribution will do good. 90 But, if I start to campaign for collective actions that are aimed towards eradicating poverty by joining committees, taking part in political rallies, and try to persuade politicians and those around me to do the same, the risk is that my efforts will be futile. Even if I devote all my time, energy, and resources towards this cause there is a risk that, in the end, no change has come along. But, there is also the chance that my efforts (combined with others) do result in a collective effort that has a much larger impact than I would have ever been able to

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89 Unger (1996, p. 155) writes that “were we to live in a world far more dangerously unpredictable than this actual world, then, to live a morally decent life, a fair number of us would have to suffer losses far, far greater than any we need actually suffer” and Mayerfeld (1999, p. 218) states that a world which would require such excessive sacrifices would not be a world in which there was any reason to go on living in.
90 Especially since Against Malaria Foundation is the top-ranked charity by GiveWell as of right now.
orchestrate on my own. Thus, whether or not I should focus on bringing about collective action as opposed to acting on my own is a question of expected utility. A collective change has a great payoff but it comes with a low probability, individual contributions usually have a lesser payoff but there is a very high probability that these actions do good. It all boils down to empirical considerations. If the political structure I am part of does not seem to have any interest in bringing about the change I am after and the legislative process is ridiculously slow and inert then it might be better if I focus on donating to charity and volunteer to the extent I am able to. If the political climate were different and many lawmakers seemed willing to embrace policies that would relieve the suffering of the poor then it is possible that I should focus my efforts toward bringing that about.

To summarize, in this section I tried to respond to the critics who claim that strong principles would require of us all to become moral saints. I presented what I found to be viable reasons for believing otherwise. With that said, strong principles will still require of us to do much more than we are currently doing to prevent and relieve the suffering of the poor. This could mean that we should donate thousands of dollars just to save the life of one child, but it is more likely to mean that we should, during our lifetime (remember the aggregative cost), donate thousands of dollars so that we will relieve the suffering and prevent the premature deaths of as many as possible who are doomed to a life in extreme poverty. Also, to reiterate from 4.1., I believe that there is a lot we can do (that we do not do now) towards relieving suffering before we actually start to impose an actual cost on ourselves since we gain from beneficiary behavior to a certain extent. In the last section of this essay I will get back to the main question and provide reasons for why a certain strong principle should be embraced.

5.3. What is a reasonable principle to embrace?

In the preceding sections I argued that it is difficult to justify a limit on morality based on the idea that it is too demanding. However, strong principles also have a limit (such as Singer’s ‘comparable cost’), but as I discussed in 3.1.4., this limit seems
justified on the assumption that going any further would cause more suffering than it actually prevents.\textsuperscript{91}

Even if that assumption is correct, Singer’s comparable metric is still questionable due to the fact it is difficult to spell out what a comparable sacrifice is when the preferred ends and the means to that end are of different currencies (e.g. Dr. Jones). Also, as I argued earlier, Unger’s comparative notion from a global view of when we are very modestly well off does not seem to give us much guidance. Even so, Unger’s principle is consequentialist in the sense that it claims that “if your behaving in a certain way will result in the number of people who very prematurely lose their lives being less than the number who will do so if you don’t so behave … then it’s seriously wrong for you not so behave”.\textsuperscript{92} Will the spirit of this principle allow for moral investments and moral vacations? I am uncertain, but there is, in my mind, a better alternative.

I started out by saying that our preferred end for this discussion should be to relieve the suffering that is caused by a life lived in extreme poverty. I then argued that the most viable way to approach this end is not by requiring of the agent to become a moral saint, rather, she should be allowed moral investments and moral vacations. In other words, to paraphrase Kagan, we should carry out a life plan with an eye to relieving and preventing suffering. Consequently we should embrace a principle that justifies moral investments and moral vacations. Let’s revisit my take on Mayerfeld’s duty to relieve suffering:

\textit{The Duty to Relieve Suffering:} We are morally required to act in such a way that relieves the maximum amount of cumulative suffering unless in doing so we produce a worse outcome, in terms of suffering, than if we would have not acted in such a way.

It becomes a matter of interpretation whether or not this principle allows for the exemptions listed above. Instantly Deprived Simon relieves a lot of the present suffering by his actions, however, the actions of Long Term Simon relieves more suffering in the long run than Instantly Deprived Simon (at the expense of the suffering that is occurring now). I remain uncertain whether or not this should be

\textsuperscript{91} However, if this limit is not justified on consequentialist grounds then these principles will be vulnerable to the same objection as the weaker ones.

\textsuperscript{92} Unger (1996, p. 144).
regarded as permissible. However, the duty to relieve suffering (and all the other principles mentioned in this essay) is not concerned about when the suffering is occurring, only the amount that we are able to relieve and prevent. This seems to give support to Long Term Simon’s actions. I find this to be a reasonable principle to embrace, not just for the fact that it justifies the actions of Long Term Simon but also because it is potentially very demanding – a feature that I find attractive in a moral principle. Sometimes a reasonable principle should require us to forgo our physical health, our relations, and our projects when the sacrifice of these things would do more good than harm in the long run. We would not be surprised if people would refrain from imposing these excessive sacrifices on themselves, but, to borrow Goodin’s words, I do not find Harry Stamper’s self-sacrifice in the movie Armageddon to be ‘disproportionate’ to what is gained.93 With that said, it will be highly unlikely that we found ourselves in such situations.

This puts me quite close to Hooker’s notion of a viable moral life, that is, the life where we regularly give a little wealth or time to good charities, or sometimes give a great deal of time or wealth to them. However, my reasons for this position differ from Hooker’s. Remember that Hooker believes that we should only be prepared to impose significant costs on ourselves and we should count the total of this cost aggregately in a backward looking manner. I suggest that we do not have to put a limit to moral behavior if we count or costs aggregately in a forward looking manner. This way I believe we relieve the maximum amount of suffering by investing in ourselves, take occasional breaks from acting morally, and always keep an eye towards relieving suffering.

6. Concluding Remarks

This essay has attempted to clarify what is required of us under an obligation to prevent and relieve suffering. I started out by providing an exposé of the proposals that have been put forth by prominent philosophers such as Singer, Mayerfeld, Cripps, and Hooker. This was followed up by an attempt to elucidate what should be

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regarded as a cost, how we should count these costs, and how different cost claims stand in relation to each other. I suggested that a cost is something that I give up in a descriptive manner (e.g. donating $100 to charity) combined with a negative impact on my fundamental interests, my lesser interests, or both. I also proposed that we should count costs aggregately in a forward looking manner. I found this to be a viable method since it concerns how much suffering I will be able to relieve in the long run. This gave strength to two related notions – moral investments and moral vacations. Taking these concepts into account and arguing that some of the objections from demandingness lack a rationale, I concluded that stronger principles and morality will probably not require us to make as excessive sacrifices as we previously thought.
List of References


