Phil 108, September 4, 2012

Simple Principle of Beneficence (SPB): You are morally required to perform an action such that no other action that you could perform would produce a better outcome. Note: "better" means not better for me, or for you, but better, period: that is, better as judged from the standpoint of no one in particular. Let: I(.) be a function from outcomes to their impersonal goodness and O(.) be a function from actions to the outcomes they produce. Then the SPB says:

> You are morally required to perform an action, a, such that for all actions, x, available to you, $I(O(a)) \geq I(O(x))$.

(Possible qualification: "so long as a does not violate some other moral requirement.")

Over-demandingness Objection to the Simple Principle of Beneficence:
- There is a limit to how much beneficence can demand of agents.
- The SPB can always, in principle, exceed this limit.
- Indeed, in practice, it probably will.

Limited Principle of Beneficence (LPB): Let A(.) be a function from outcomes to their goodness for you, the agent. Then the LPB says:

> You are morally required to perform either
> (i) an action, a, such that $I(O(a)) \geq I(O(x))$ for all actions, x, available to you, or
> (ii) an action, b, such that $I(O(b)) \geq I(O(y))$ for all actions, y, both available to you and such that $A(O(y)) \geq C$, where C is a constant >0. (Leave open whether it is required, or simply predicted, that $A(O(b) \geq C$.)

The greater C, the greater the protection from the demands of beneficence that the LPB provides.

Objection: The LPB is not sensitive to the size of $I(O(a))–I(O(b))$.

Scheffler's Limited Principle of Beneficence (SLPB):

> You are morally required to perform either
> (i)　　an action, a, such that $I(O(a)) \geq I(O(x))$ for all actions, x, available to you, or
> (ii)　　an action, b, such that
> 　　a. $I(O(a))–I(O(b)) \leq C(A(O(b))–A(O(a)))$, where C is a constant >1, and
> 　　b. for no other action, y, available to you is it the case that both $A(O(y)) \geq A(O(b))$ and $I(O(y)) > I(O(b))$.

Objection: In the *Favorable Situation*, most other people comply with SLPB and the natural circumstances are good, so that $I(O(a))–I(O(b))$ is low. In the *Unfavorable Situation*, few others comply and the natural circumstances are poor, so that $I(O(a))–I(O(b))$ is high. This leads to a dilemma: Any C large enough to protect us from extreme demands in the Unfavorable Situation will be so large that (implausibly) nothing will be demanded of us in the Favorable Situation.

Murphy's insight: Imagine that the SPB applies to you and the demands on you are increasing not because the situation is getting worse, but instead because fewer and fewer people are complying with the SPB. You might complain: "Why should I have to do more because others aren't doing their share? Why should I have to do their share? Shouldn't I just have to do my fair share?" This complaint intuitively expresses the:

Compliance Condition: a principle of beneficence should not increase its demands on you just because fewer and fewer other people comply with that principle.

The Compliance Condition reflects a worry about how demands of beneficence are *distributed*. This worry makes sense only if we think of beneficence as a *shared cooperative* aim: the aim of promoting the good *together with others*. This suggests a diagnosis of the problem with the SPB: the SPB does not reflect the fact beneficence is a shared cooperative aim, since it treats the contributions of others just like natural events.

Conjecture: Perhaps the Over-demandingness Objection is really just a worry about the Compliance Condition.

The Cooperative Principle of Beneficence (CPB):
Let a^* be the action (for simplicity, we assume that there is only one) that the SPB would require you to perform and A^* be the goodness for you of the outcome that a^* would produce if, *henceforth*, everyone complied with the SPB. Then the CPB says:
> You are morally required to perform either
> (i)   an action, a, such that $I(O(a)) \geq I(O(x))$ for all actions, x, available to you, or
> (ii)   an action, b, such that $I(O(b)) \geq I(O(y))$ for all actions, y, both available to you and such that $A(O(y)) \geq A^*$. (Leave open whether it is required, or simply predicted, that $A(O(b) \geq A^*$.)

The CPB satisfies the Compliance Condition.

Question: Why "henceforth" rather than "up until now"? The latter would be, intuitively, too lenient. But what rationale is there for treating these cases differently? (Perhaps past actions, since they cannot be undone, are like natural events?)

Back to Singer's and Unger's arguments:
Notice that neither the SPB, nor the LPB, nor the SLPB explains why Shallow Pond (or Vintage Sedan) is wrong whereas Envelope is not wrong. The demands on me (we can imagine) are less in Envelope, whereas the good that I might do is greater.

Initially, it looks like the CPB explains it. In Shallow Pond, the demands on me would *not* be lower if everyone else complied henceforth; whereas in Envelope, the demand on me *would* be lower if everyone else complied henceforth.

But wait: Consider a variant—Two-Child Shallow Pond—in which there's a second child to rescue, and another person who can rescue it, but won't. CPB implies (implausibly) that it would not be wrong of you to fail to rescue this second child, after you had rescued the first.

Murphy's considered explanation:
- In Shallow Pond, there is a *special relationship* to the child or children.
- "[O]bligations that depend upon special relationships cannot be thought of in terms of a cooperative aim shared with *all* other agents."
- So CPB does not apply to Shallow Pond *at all*.

Review Questions:
1. *"Whether the LPB permits a does not vary with the difference of I(O(a)) less I(O(b))."* What does this mean in plain English? Is it an objection or a compliment? Explain with an example.
2. Why, according to Murphy, is Unger's "Pretty Demanding Dictate" objectionable?
3. Murphy concludes that we are not required to give most of our income to relief agencies. Why does the intuition that in the Two-Child Shallow Pond case you are required to save both children seem to cast doubt on this conclusion? How does Murphy respond?