Principles of beneficence require us to promote the good. If we believe that a plausible moral conception will contain some such principle, we must address the issue of the demands it imposes on agents. Some writers have defended extremely demanding principles, while others have argued that only principles with limited demands are acceptable. In this paper I suggest that we look at the demands of beneficence in a different way: our concern should not just be with the extent of the demands faced by individual agents. Instead, we should consider how the demands imposed on an agent by a principle of beneficence are affected by the level of compliance with the principle by others. Act-consequentialism, for example, in effect requires each complying agent to shoulder her share of the demands of beneficence plus as many of the shares of noncomplying agents as would be optimal. I suggest that we focus on this feature of consequentialism, and not just on the very high demands it can impose on individual agents.

Thus I defend the view that principles of beneficence should not demand more of agents as expected compliance by other agents decreases, and formulate a principle of beneficence that meets this condition. This view about beneficence and compliance is supported by a particular conception of beneficence. Rather than as an aim we each have as individuals, beneficence could be understood as a cooperative project, where each of us aims to promote the good together with others. If so, it would be natural to

This article evolved out of a part of my doctoral dissertation; from the beginning I have benefited enormously from the criticisms and suggestions of Charles E. Larmore and Thomas W. Pogge. Of the many other people who have helped me with their comments on various versions of this material I would in particular like to thank Sibylle Maria Fischer, Muhammad Ali Khalidi, Robert H. Myers, Gisela Striker, the Editors of Philosophy & Public Affairs, and, especially, Shelly Kagan and Samuel Scheffler. My greatest debt is to Derek Parfit, who gave me very many extremely helpful comments and suggestions on several different drafts of this article.
resist taking on, in addition to one's own share of the burdens of this cooperative project, the shares of noncomplying agents.

I. THE SIMPLE PRINCIPLE OF BENEFICENCE AND OVER-DemandINGNESS

The simplest principle of beneficence requires each person to perform the action, of those available to her, that will make the outcome best. When it stands alone, unencumbered by deontological constraints or special obligations, this Simple Principle of Beneficence, or Simple Principle, is equivalent to consequentialism. Now the "over-demandingness objection," as I will call it, asserts that there is a limit to how great a sacrifice morality, or at least a principle of beneficence, can legitimately demand of agents. However high this limit is set, it is of course theoretically possible that the demands of the Simple Principle will exceed it—for the Simple Principle

1. More exactly, each is required to perform the action, of those available to her, that, given what she has reason to believe, will produce the highest expected goodness. This states the principle's subjective criterion of right action, which, in practice at least, is the only criterion we need (I follow Derek Parfit, "What We Together Do," unpublished ms., 1988, and Allan Gibbard, Wise Choices, Apt Feelings [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990], 42–43). In this paper I leave open the question of what conception of the good should be employed by a principle of beneficence. My arguments are incompatible with only those conceptions that do not count even the eradication of suffering as a good. It is also irrelevant for my discussion that a plausible principle of beneficence will, in some way, be sensitive to the distribution of well-being among people.

2. Deontological constraints are prohibitions on actions of various kinds, such as violations of peoples' rights; special obligations are obligations an agent has to people to whom he stands in some special relation, such as the obligation of a parent to care for his children.

3. The Simple Principle has been embraced by many nonconsequentialists; see, e.g., W. D. Ross, The Right and the Good (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), p. 27. Unless the context indicates otherwise I from here on use "consequentialism" to mean "act-consequentialism."

4. As directed against utilitarianism, this objection is long-standing. Richard B. Brandt puts it succinctly: "Act utilitarianism makes extreme and oppressive demands on the individual, so much so that it can hardly be taken seriously; like the Sermon on the Mount, it is a morality only for saints" (A Theory of the Good and the Right [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979], pp. 276–77). Essentially the same objection is made by Kurt Baier in The Moral Point of View (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), pp. 203–4. And Sidgwick considers the problem that "Utilitarianism seems to go beyond the standard of duty commonly prescribed under the head of Benevolence"; see Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics, 7th ed., (London: Macmillan, 1907; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p. 431. The objection does not, however, seem to have been of much concern to nineteenth-century critics of utilitarianism (for a survey see J. B. Schneewind, Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977], chaps. 4 and 5); see also n. 5 below.
admits no such limit. But it is also clear that any limit on required sacrifice that is likely to be suggested will typically be exceeded in practice. In the face of world poverty, to take the most obvious aspect of the problem, the Simple Principle would, for most people in the First World, require of each that she give up most of her energies and resources for the sake of others. Of course the reduction in each agent’s well-being is a bad outcome, but the loss to her from giving up most of her time and money to development aid or famine relief would easily be outweighed by the good achieved. Though it is not clear exactly what the best way to alleviate world poverty is, there can be no doubt that for most individuals trying to act according to the Simple Principle today, the loss imposed on them would be very great. 5

The claim that the Simple Principle is too demanding seems straightforward enough, but three important complications must be mentioned. The first is that assessment of moral demands requires a prior notion of entitlement. The need to determine the relevant notion of entitlement is made more urgent, moreover, by the fact that some natural candidates have the effect of defining away the over-demandingness objection. Suppose that we are consequentialists—the Simple Principle is our only moral principle. If the requirement that I give up most of my resources to development aid counts as a demand made on me by the theory, then the theory must also count me as having been entitled to those resources in the first place. But what sort of entitlement to possessions does consequentialism grant me? According to Godwin, I am entitled to only those of my possessions which are such that, if I gave them away, that would make the

5. Though I say “there can be no doubt,” this claim is often disputed by appeal to epistemological and practical considerations. Part of Sidgwick’s answer to the over-demandingness objection is that since we know more about our own good, and have greater opportunities to promote it, than is the case for the good of people far removed from us, we can for the most part expect to produce the most overall goodness by aiming at our own good (and at the good of nearby people whom we know well); see Sidgwick, Methods of Ethics, pp. 431, 434. For a recent version of this argument, see Frank Jackson, “Decision-theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection,” Ethics 101 (1991): 461–82. Apart from exaggerating the extent of our ignorance about how to benefit those remote from us, this argument requires, if it is to have more than an accidental impact on the over-demandingness objection, an a priori assumption that these considerations will always bring the demands of the Simple Principle down to a “livable” level. In fairness to Sidgwick, however, it should be said that the argument was much more plausible before twentieth-century technological developments; on this point, and for a discussion of other attempts to show that the Simple Principle is not extremely demanding, see Brad Hooker, “Brink, Kagan, Utilitarianism and Self-Sacrifice,” Utilitas 3 (1991): 268–69.
outcome worse. If this is the right way for consequentialists to understand demands, then we can argue that in requiring us to give up possessions, consequentialism makes no demands at all.

Similar arguments can be made for any moral theory's principle of beneficence. If I am not entitled to hold onto something (since I am required to give it up), in what sense is the theory making a demand on me in requiring me to give it up? This argument seems intuitively convincing in the case of the commonsense requirement that one return stolen goods to their owner—what can block it for principles of beneficence?

The problem apparently comes from seeking the relevant notion of entitlement "inside" the moral conception under discussion. It seems that intuitive talk of moral demands depends upon a notion of entitlement that is external to any given theory. Either that or we employ no notion of entitlement at all, and instead measure demands from some nonmoral benchmark. There is not space here, however, to discuss the various possibilities. For the purposes of this article, I simply assume that the intuitive problem of over-demandingness cannot be defined away. And thus I will adopt this simple "external" conception of demands: when a moral theory requires that you perform or refrain from some action, a demand is made to the extent of the loss you will suffer if you conform to this requirement. On this view a demand is made whenever I am required to give up something in my possession, and this seems implausible in some cases, such as returning stolen goods. For our purposes, however, we can simply stipulate that this conception of demands applies to principles of beneficence only; with this restriction, controversy should be reduced.

We must next distinguish the over-demandingness objection from the recent but by now familiar complaint that modern moral theories are alienating. The general idea behind the "alienation objection" is that impartial morality makes various demands on our motivations that are incompatible with the motivations necessary for fully valuable personal projects and relationships. One influential claim is that if we can only have projects and


7. One reason for this would appear to be our tendency to appeal unwittingly to legal entitlement as the benchmark.

relationships when morality "gives" them to us (by saying that they are morally permissible, or that they would bring about the best outcome), then we will not be able to see our projects and relationships as having intrinsic value, and as a result will not be able to have genuine projects and relationships at all.⁹

Bernard Williams's "integrity" critique of utilitarianism and Kantianism involves both objections. There is, first, the claim that these theories are too demanding: it is too frequently morally impermissible to pursue projects and relationships. And then there is the second claim that to the extent that we are permitted to pursue our projects and relationships, impartial morality alienates us from them.¹⁰

Though the alienation objection is of central importance, I will not discuss it here.¹¹ Indeed it is to some extent unfortunate that the two objections have become intertwined. For one thing, the discussion of over-demandingness that has emerged out of Williams's work tends to focus only on the effect severe demands have on our relationships and projects. This can seem somewhat precious, since the severe demands of, say, consequentialism affect all aspects of our well-being. Such discussion is also partly based on a probable mistake, since it is not obvious that I would be better able to promote the good if I abandoned my relationships. It is true that if I complied with consequentialism under current conditions I would probably not be able to pursue any personal projects other than that of promoting the good. But this brings up another reason to insist on a clear distinction between the objections of over-demandingness and alienation: insofar as consequentialism prohibits my pursuit of projects or relationships, it cannot be said to alienate me from them.

The third point to make about my statement of the over-demandingness objection is that it presents the situation of individual agents. This is for a

---


good reason, because it is not the case that if everybody now did whatever they could to make the outcome best, then each person would be required to give up most of her resources and energies. It is usually only in situations of partial compliance with the Simple Principle—where not everyone is acting optimally—that the principle is so extremely demanding on each complying agent; it is usually much less demanding in situations of full compliance.12 Nevertheless, our current situation contains very minimal compliance with the Simple Principle, and it is plausible to assume that this situation will persist.

II. The Limited Principle of Beneficence

Consequentialism, which just is the Simple Principle, is obviously subject to the over-demandingness objection. But it is usually assumed that Kant’s imperfect duty of beneficence is not nearly so demanding as the Simple Principle, and thus that Kantianism is not subject to the over-demandingness objection. However, while on some interpretations Kant’s duty of beneficence requires, in effect, only token beneficent action, on others its demands are potentially as extreme as those of the Simple Principle.13 Formulating a nontrivial but also not over-demanding duty of benefi-

12. See Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 31. The Simple Principle is also much less demanding when political institutions take beneficence out of the hands of individuals; this point is often made, see, e.g., Railton, “Alienation, Consequentialism,” pp. 161–62. But since existing political institutions do not do this, the over-demandingness objection must be faced.

13. As an imperfect duty, the duty of beneficence “holds only for maxims, not for definite actions”; the “duty is only a broad one; it has a latitude within which we may do more or less without being able to assign definite limits to it.” To the “casuistical question”—“How far should one push the expenditure of his means in beneficence?”—Kant just says “Certainly not to the point where he would finally need the beneficence of others” (The Metaphysics of Morals [1797; Prussian Academy Edition, vol. 6], pp. 393, 454; translated by James W. Ellington in Ethical Philosophy [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983]). For an interpretation on which the duty requires very little, see Thomas E. Hill, Jr., “Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation,” Kant-Studien 72 (1971): 55–76. For a discussion of Hill's position, and for an interpretation on which Kantian beneficence is not supererogatory, but still perhaps trivial as a requirement on action, see Marcia Baron, “Kantian Ethics and Supererogation,” Journal of Philosophy 84 (1987): 237–62. From the point of view of the (first formulation of the) categorical imperative, Kantian duties of beneficence of widely differing degrees of demandingness could be defended; see Thomas Nagel, Equality and Partiality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), chap. 5.

Onora O’Neill understands Kantian beneficence as a “selective” obligation that does not require us to try to meet all needs. She argues that this fairly minimal duty is not “ethically
icence seems likely to require an appeal to the idea of a rough limit to demands; Kantians who espouse such a duty of beneficence owe us an account of how to understand and formulate that limit.

A similar point can be made about "commonsense morality." This moral conception (the content of which is, I believe, quite indeterminate) is also often assumed to contain a principle of beneficence with limited demands; but, as Sidgwick showed, the nature of that limit is unclear.\(^{14}\)

We can now see the full importance of the charge that the Simple Principle is over-demanding. Far from being a problem just for theories that include or are constituted by the Simple Principle, we have a problem for all moral theories that include a principle requiring us to promote the good. Some writers concerned about over-demandingness simply point out that consequentialism, because it does not limit its demands, is unacceptable. But while this may be true, it misleadingly suggests that other moral conceptions are better off in this respect; in the absence of any account of how to understand and justify a limit to the demands of a principle of beneficence, they are not.

(The scope of the problem is actually not limited to theories that contain a principle of beneficence. For theories that do not contain a principle of beneficence must surely, if they are to be plausible, contain a fairly extensive set of special obligations.\(^{15}\) The problem of over-demandingness may thus reappear in connection with, say, a special obligation to benefit one's compatriots.)

So if we assume that a principle of beneficence of some form must ultimately be defended, but are inclined to reject the Simple Principle as too demanding, then it is incumbent on us to show how to understand and justify a limit to the demands of beneficence.\(^{16}\) Now many philosophers have felt that this would require telling a story about why the extreme

---

\(^{15}\) This claim is not uncontroversial, but I will not try to defend it here.
\(^{16}\) There is actually another option. Michael Slote suggests the possibility of dropping the notion of a required level of beneficence altogether and of embracing instead a "scalar" principle of beneficence, according to which the more good we produce, the better; see \textit{Common-sense Morality and Consequentialism} (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), chap. 5. I cannot discuss this suggestion here.
demands of the Simple Principle are objectionable, thus uncovering the underlying rationale for a limit. But if we stick strictly to the over-demandingness objection (and ignore alienation), it seems to me that there is actually nothing to uncover. The basis of the over-demandingness objection is simply the belief that there are limits to the demands of morality's requirement that we promote the good. Though this belief is shored up by self-interest in the case of the better-off, it is nevertheless a belief that any person might reasonably have, whatever their level of well-being. And I see no reason why we should not accept this belief at face value, no reason why we should think it essential to find some underlying rationale. Moreover, though some of the rationales that have been offered may add to the case for a limit to the demands of beneficence, none of them considered alone seems to have any greater plausibility than the simple claim that there is such a limit.

Nevertheless, this claim begins to seem both less simple and less obviously plausible when we reflect on ways in which the limit might actually be formulated. One promising formulation can be taken from the work of Samuel Scheffler. Scheffler proposes, in The Rejection of Consequential-
ism, that we recognize an “agent-centered prerogative.” If I am subject to the Simple Principle but also have a prerogative, I am always permitted to promote the best outcome, but I am not always required to do so; for I have the prerogative, when assessing what I am required to do, to give my own interests proportionately greater weight than I give to the interests of others. I can multiply the value of my own interests by some factor when assessing what I am required to do. Obviously, the greater the multiplying factor, the less will be demanded of me. The Simple Principle plus the prerogative add up, in my terms, to a principle of beneficence with limited demands; we can call this the Limited Principle of Beneficence, or the Limited Principle.

This account has the flexibility to allow for changes in the level of demands as circumstances change—as there is more or less good to be done. It is not flexible enough, however, for it cannot accommodate the effect on demands of changing levels of compliance with the Limited Principle. I noted earlier that the demands of the Simple Principle were much greater under partial compliance than under full compliance. For a limit even to begin to shield me from the demands of the Simple Principle under partial compliance and in present circumstances, I must be able to give my interests enormously much greater weight than they receive in an impartial assessment. The problem is that a multiplying factor large enough to do anything about over-demandingness under partial compliance would be too large under full compliance: under full (or nearly full) compliance we would find that our own heavily weighted interests almost invariably would outweigh the interests of all others, and that as a result we would hardly ever be required to make any sacrifices at all.

Now of course the multiplying factor could be indexed to levels of compliance and this problem could be avoided. This would not be the only indexing required, however. We have just noted that the Schefflerian Limited Principle has the intuitively desirable feature that it demands more of us when there is more good to be done. But suppose that poverty and hunger became very much worse than they already are. Might this not bring the demands of the Limited Principle up to unacceptable levels, and would we not have to resort to a higher multiplying factor in that case?

It seems that the multiplying factor would have to be continually readjusted for changes in circumstances and in levels of compliance. This is because our fundamental criterion here is that the demands of a principle of beneficence should be limited—that they should not interfere with
agents' pursuit of their own lives beyond a certain point. But having remembered this, it now seems clear that there is actually no need for a multiplying factor; all that is required is a rough upper limit to demands, so that, say, no one is required to sacrifice more than a given percentage of her well-being. 20 A multiplying factor would be at the center of things if the fundamental criterion were that agents should be able to accord their own interests disproportionate weight of some fixed degree. But since this criterion, as stated, says nothing at all about how high demands can go, it cannot be the whole of a response to the over-demandingness problem. 21

However, the criterion of limited interference with agents' pursuit of their own lives, though it is the obvious and direct way to respond to the over-demandingness objection, faces a serious problem of its own. The source of this problem has already been introduced. We seem to believe, on the one hand, that the demands of a principle of beneficence cannot increase indefinitely, as the amount of good to be done increases. This is why we rejected a fixed multiplying factor in favor of a simple upper limit. On the other hand, however, the multiplying factor is attractive precisely because it does not decouple the extent of the demands of a principle of beneficence from the amount of good to be done. Consider that on the

20. This statement raises many difficult issues. One is the question of the unit over which demands are measured—it could be an agent's life as a whole, or her life from now, or some smaller interval. Each of these possibilities would require us to estimate the agent's total well-being during the relevant period so that we could calculate the required percentage. This would not be necessary if we were to formulate the limit in absolute terms, to the effect that demands on each agent could not exceed some fixed amount over the chosen time period.

21. The criterion of disproportionate weight for the agents' interests is suggested by Scheffler's "liberation strategy" in The Rejection of Consequentialism, see esp. p. 62. Though the liberation strategy is not referred to by name in Human Morality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), the following quotation from that book succinctly expresses its core idea: "It is a basic tenet of our commonsense moral outlook that we are justified in devoting some disproportionate degree of attention to our own basic interests" (p. 122). But also prominent in Human Morality is the different concern that morality should not interfere with our lives beyond a certain point. Scheffler's "moderate" believes that "under favorable conditions, morality permits people to do as they please within certain broad limits" (p. 100), and that "moral norms should be capable of being integrated in a coherent and attractive way into the life of the individual agent" (p. 102). In this paper I do not try to do justice to Scheffler's arguments in either book. To avoid misunderstanding, however, I should note that Scheffler does not claim that the liberation strategy in itself justifies any particular degree of disproportionate concern with our own interests, nor even a prerogative of the precise form he offers; see The Rejection of Consequentialism, pp. 211., 69. Moreover, Scheffler offers the liberation strategy as a response to Williams's "integrity objection," not to the over-demandingness objection as I have defined it.
upper limit suggestion, in the face of world poverty, the level of required sacrifice would never fall below the limit. But of course the amount of good to be done could increase dramatically. And here is the problem: unless the upper limit is set *very high*, at a level near the limits of human possibility (which would certainly be higher than we are likely to think is legitimate for “normal” circumstances), it is hard to accept that the demands on us are fixed, regardless of changes in the amount of good to be done. To respond here that the Limited Principle could include some allowance for emergency demands would be implausible, since to deny that our current situation counts as an emergency seems, in this context, ad hoc.

On reflection then, the claim that we have a conception of how much morality should impinge on our lives, *whatever the circumstances of those lives*, starts to seem dubious. 22 Given what else has been said, this in turn suggests that we lack a clear conception of what the appropriate limit to the demands of beneficence would be. Much more discussion is obviously required here, but the project of formulating the Limited Principle seems problematic enough at least to justify an interest in other possible alternatives to the Simple Principle.

III. The Compliance Condition

Something seems to be wrong with the demands the Simple Principle makes on agents. But perhaps the problem is not that these demands are too great.

Consider the position of someone who tries to act in accordance with the Simple Principle today. She will be aware that she must go on promoting the good until her level of well-being is very low indeed, and aware that she is one of very few people headed in that direction. Moreover, she will know that one main reason why her compliance with the Simple Principle will result in such great sacrifice from her is that she is one of very few people who are complying with the principle. She knows that she has to do so much, *just because* most others are not doing what they ought to do. If everyone acted according to the Simple Principle, much less would be required of her. In the face of this she may well ask: “Why should I do more,

22. Thus while I agree with Scheffler that the relation between “the moral point of view and the point of view of the individual agent” is one of “potential congruence” (*see Human Morality*, p. 4), I doubt that there is a general reason to rule out the potential for great incongruence in sufficiently adverse circumstances (such as those we currently live in).
just because others will do less? Surely I should only have to do my own fair
share."23

Our agent may be unmoved by the reply that indeed she “should” only
have to do her own fair share, but that unfortunately the wrongdoing of
others makes this impossible. She may deny that the only target for com-
plaint is the noncomplying agents, and insist that the principle that de-
mands more of her because of their noncompliance is itself objectionable.

The over-demandingness objection focuses only on the demands faced
by individual agents, considered alone. When thinking in this way about
the demands of the Simple Principle, it is natural to conclude that there is a
limit to the demands of beneficence. But if we allow a broader perspective,
there is another natural thought that should be explored: the thought that
it is objectionable to expect agents to take up the slack caused by the
noncompliance of others. We should do our fair share, which can amount
to a great sacrifice in certain circumstances; what we cannot be required to
do is other people’s shares as well as our own.

Let us then suggest a Compliance Condition: a principle of beneficence
should not increase its demands on agents as expected compliance with
the principle by other agents decreases. We thus suggest that at least one
problem with the Simple Principle is that it fails to meet the Compliance
Condition.

To evaluate this suggestion, we first need to see whether we can formulate
a principle of beneficence that meets the Compliance Condition; if no such
principle is possible, the Compliance Condition must be rejected. How we
should proceed is obvious enough: if it is objectionable to demand more of
an agent as the compliance of others decreases, we should modify the Sim-
ple Principle so that agents only have as much demanded of them under par-
tial compliance as would be demanded of them under full compliance.

Now it might seem that we do not need to invent a principle of benefi-
cence for this purpose, since we are already familiar with versions of conse-
quentialism that meet the Compliance Condition, and we can use these
consequentialist theories as models for our new principle.

I have in mind collective versions of consequentialism, such as rule-
consequentialism (collective act-consequentialism and collective motive-
consequentialism are also possible).24 Any collective version of consequen-

23. I am influenced by related remarks in a similar context in Parfit, Reasons and Persons,
24. In this paragraph I borrow some terminology from Parfit, ibid.
tialism determines the rightness of action by appeal to the consequences of *everybody* following a certain rule (or performing a certain action, or having a certain motive). In *nonideal* forms of collective consequentialism this appeal does not assume full compliance—in effect “everybody” is understood to mean everybody who is expected to comply. Nonideal forms of collective consequentialism infringe on the Compliance Condition, however, because it is clear that, for example, the appropriate rule could become more and more demanding as levels of expected compliance drop.

Thus we must turn to *ideal* forms of collective consequentialism. These theories determine rightness of action by appeal to the effects of everyone following a certain rule (etc.), even in circumstances where it is clear that not everyone will follow the rule (etc.). This idealization to full compliance means that such theories meet the Compliance Condition, since under partial compliance each person is required to act in just the same way as she would be required to act under full compliance.

But the idealization to full compliance when determining rightness of action is responsible for a well-known objection to ideal collective versions of consequentialism. Under partial compliance these theories can require us to act in a way that, since not enough others are also acting in that way, is entirely pointless, or perhaps makes the outcome worse—possibly very much worse—for no good reason. One possible way to avoid some aspects of this problem—available to rule- and motive-consequentialists—is to suggest an overriding rule or motive to prevent great harm.\textsuperscript{25} But such a solution would bring the theory back into conflict with the Compliance Condition; indeed it is hard to see how any solution to this objection could avoid conflict with the Compliance Condition.

Though ideal collective versions of consequentialism cannot be models for the principle of beneficence we need, they do point us in the right direction. What attracted us to such theories was that they demand the same of agents under partial compliance as under full compliance. They do this because they use an ideal of full compliance to determine rightness of action. Of course the use of this ideal is also the cause of the theories’ problems. But we could avoid those problems by using the ideal not to determine rightness of action, but only to fix the limit to how much can be

demanded of agents. A principle of beneficence that meets the Compliance Condition could hold that an agent should assess rightness of action in terms of the goodness of the outcomes she could promote in the actual circumstances she is in. So far the new principle—which, for reasons to be given below, we can call the Cooperative Principle of Beneficence, or the Cooperative Principle—is like the Simple Principle and unlike the ideal collective theories. But the Cooperative Principle differs from the Simple Principle in not requiring that agents always promote the best outcome. For the extent to which the Cooperative Principle requires each person to promote the good is determined in the following way: each agent is required to sacrifice only as much as would optimally be required of her under full compliance. The Cooperative Principle does not prohibit agents in situations of partial compliance from sacrificing as much as would be optimal in those circumstances, but it only requires as much sacrifice as would be optimal under full compliance. 26

So we now have a principle of beneficence that meets the Compliance Condition, and yet does not have the problems of the ideal collective theories. We can state the Cooperative Principle as follows:

Each agent is required to act optimally—to perform the action that makes the outcome best—except in situations of partial compliance with this principle. In situations of partial compliance it is permissible to act optimally, but the sacrifice each agent is required to make is limited to the level of sacrifice that would be optimal if the situation were one of full compliance; of the actions that require no more than this level of sacrifice, agents are required to perform the action that makes the outcome best. 27

26. Thus the Cooperative Principle is structurally the same as the Simple Principle coupled with a prerogative. However, my preference is to think not in terms of a prerogative to do less, but of the Cooperative Principle of Beneficence itself setting the level of demands beyond which beneficent action will be supererogatory.

27. If the Cooperative Principle is the only moral principle, we can call it Cooperative Consequentialism (not to be confused with Donald H. Regan’s “cooperative utilitarianism,” see n. 36 below). Cooperative Consequentialism would not seem to be subject to an objection made to Scheffler’s “hybrid” theory (which is consequentialism coupled with a prerogative, equivalent in my terms to the Limited Principle), that in the absence of deontological constraints it would allow harming others for personal gain; see Kagan, “Does Consequentialism Demand Too Much?” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1984): 251; and Frances Myrna Kamm, “Supererogation and Obligation,” *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985): 126n. Scheffler responds to this objection in “Prerogatives Without Restrictions,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (1992): 377–97. One of Kagan’s main arguments against a limit to the
Now it should be emphasized that “full compliance” here does not mean what can be called “ideal full compliance”—a situation where everybody is complying and the world is in much better shape so that much less good needs to be done than is the case now. The Compliance Condition does not warrant idealization to that situation, but only to “nonideal full compliance”—a situation that is in every respect like the actual one, except that we can count on everyone’s compliance. Moreover, we are not to imagine full compliance throughout history (with results similar to imagining ideal full compliance), but only full compliance from now on. A fuller discussion would have to explain why it is objectionable to expect an agent to shoulder the burden of contemporary noncompliers, but not objectionable to expect agents to do more now because people did less in the past.\footnote{28} 

IV. THE DISTRIBUTION OF MORAL DEMANDS

We have formulated a principle of beneficence that meets the Compliance Condition. We must now say more about the central intuitive idea behind the Compliance Condition: that one should not be required to do more than one’s fair share of the demands of beneficence. It may be wondered, first, whether there are such things as fair shares of the demands of a moral principle.

The idea of “doing my fair share” emerges out of a concern with the distribution of the demands of moral theories. Elsewhere I discuss various possible views about what fairness requires of a moral theory in its distribu-

demands of beneficence in The Limits of Morality is that a limit makes deontological constraints necessary, and that these cannot be defended.

However, Cooperative Consequentialism, as formulated here, would face a different problem. On that theory, the overall demands on agents would not be increased by the need to intervene to prevent, or to alleviate the likely effects of, present or future violence or thieving (such as the situations in the former Yugoslavia and in Somalia in the early 1990s), since under full compliance with Cooperative Consequentialism there would be no such violence or thieving. A defender of Collective Consequentialism has several possible responses to this apparent problem, but none of them is simple, and I will not discuss the matter further here. The problem does not arise if we assume that the Cooperative Principle is accompanied by deontological constraints against violence, thieving, and the like. For in that case we would not characterize the actions of wrongdoers like those in the former Yugoslavia and in Somalia as failures in beneficence.

\footnote{28. There are two different issues here: the noncompliance of previous generations, and the previous noncompliance of contemporaries. There are other problems, of a broadly meta-ethical nature, concerning the membership of the group within which compliance is to be idealized.}
tion of demands among agents.\textsuperscript{29} Without listing these various views here, I will briefly discuss what lies behind the interest in the distribution of demands.

To begin with, we must, obviously enough, presuppose a conception of morality that makes sense of the idea that demands can be distributed among people; we must see morality or a moral theory as presenting people with a collective project. If, for example, I saw my morality as emerging from my own radical choices, I would not even be able to ask whether my morality made greater demands on me than on someone else—it would only make demands on me. And on such a conception there could be no interest in whether others have more or less demanded of them by their moralities than I do by mine.

If morality is a collective enterprise we can look at the distribution of its demands among people. But this does not in itself guarantee that it will make sense to ask whether that distribution is fair. One could follow Sidgwick and conceive of moral principles as exclusively requirements of individual practical reason—so that, for example, every person has a reason to alleviate pain since they can recognize its (agent-neutral) badness.\textsuperscript{30} Since on such a conception moral reasons arise directly for each agent, the question of the fairness of the distribution of moral demands could not arise.

On other conceptions of morality, however, the question clearly could arise. In particular, the idea of fairness in the distribution of demands fits very easily into contractualist conceptions. If we think of moral requirements as grounded in a hypothetical agreement, one plausible constraint on the agreement might be that the demands of those requirements must be fairly distributed among the parties. Moreover—to approach the point from the other direction—a concern with the way demands are distributed itself suggests the adoption of contractualist methodology. For one way to help make this idea perspicuous is to regard moral agents as voluntary parties to an agreement.

Now suppose that we were to conclude that the only fair distribution of the demands of a principle of beneficence is an equal one. The Simple


\textsuperscript{30} Cf. Nagel, The View From Nowhere, chap. 8, esp. p. 160.
Principle would then be guilty of distributing its demands unfairly since it imposes greater overall demands on some people—those with special abilities or in special circumstances—than on others. (It does this under both full and partial compliance.) Here is a sense, then, in which we can say that the Simple Principle demands more of some people than is their fair share. But this purely distributive sense of “more than a fair share” is not the sense that is appealed to in motivating the Compliance Condition. The Compliance Condition is a response to the fact that the Simple Principle demands more of a complying agent when others do less; it demands more of an agent than is his fair share, in the sense that it demands more than what would fairly be demanded of him under full compliance. Since there are these two senses of “more than a fair share” at play here, it will be simpler to ignore the purely distributive sense. So I assume in what follows (and in fact already assumed in my formulation of the Compliance Condition) that the distribution of the demands of the Simple Principle is in fact fair. Thus, we assume that what would be demanded of me under full compliance by the Simple Principle is also what would fairly be demanded of me under full compliance. Our focus here is on the fact that under partial compliance agents are required to do more than that.

V. Beneficence as a Cooperative Aim

The intuitive idea behind the Compliance Condition is that a principle of beneficence should not, under partial compliance, demand more of agents than is their fair share under full compliance. Like the belief that there are limits to how much a principle of beneficence can demand of individual agents, this idea can be taken at face value. But it is an unfamiliar idea, and we need not rest with its initial intuitive appeal. What other considerations can be offered in support of the Compliance Condition?

One thing that cannot be said, it is important to note, is that it is unfair to demand more of agents than would be their fair share under full compliance. For every agent is affected in the same way: under the Simple Principle each is required to do what would be his own share under full compliance plus the shares of noncomplying agents, so far as that continues to be optimal. It is true that noncomplying agents could be accused of acting unfairly, in that they know that complying agents will face greater demands because of this noncompliance. But in increasing its demands as expected compliance decreases the Simple Principle does not affect any
one agent differently than another, and thus the Compliance Condition cannot be supported by an appeal to fairness.\textsuperscript{31}

The Compliance Condition would, however, be supported by the adoption of a particular conception of beneficence. I have in mind a cooperative conception of a substantive sort—one that does not simply follow from the use of contractualist methodology. To illustrate this with a pertinent example, let us adapt T. M. Scanlon's version of contractualism and stipulate that the parties to a hypothetical agreement are guided by three motives: beneficence, self-interest (understood broadly), and consideration for what can be reasonably rejected by others.\textsuperscript{32} On these assumptions a hypothetical agreement, if reached,\textsuperscript{33} would yield the Limited Principle. But this principle would not present beneficence as a cooperative enterprise. It would give each agent an individual aim: to promote the good up to the required level of demands. Agents with this aim can, in a secondary sense, cooperate with each other. If they take part in a search party, for example, agents can coordinate their beneficent actions so that more good is achieved than would otherwise be possible. But at the primary level of how each agent understands the moral principle, cooperation plays no role. What each is required to do is not, at this primary level, determined or affected by the attitude others have to the principle—other than that their compliance or noncompliance, just like the rest of their behavior, and indeed just like changes in nature, affects each agent's circumstances, and thus what it would be best for her to do. In this respect the contractually derived Limited Principle is just like utilitarianism—the contractualist mechanism does not in itself give expression to a cooperative conception of beneficence.

\textsuperscript{31} I argued that the Compliance Condition did depend on an appeal to fairness in my doctoral dissertation. Derek Parfit (raising the points I make in this paragraph) convinced me of my mistake. Recently the suggestion that it is unfair to demand more of complying agents as others do less has been made by Dan W. Brock, "Defending Moral Options," \textit{Philosophy and Phenomenological Research} 51 (1991): 912–13.

\textsuperscript{32} In "Contractualism and Utilitarianism," in \textit{Utilitarianism and Beyond}, ed. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 110, Scanlon offers the following contractual account: "An act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any system of rules for the general regulation of behaviour which no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced, general agreement." My adaptation of this proposal follows that of Nagel in \textit{Equality and Partiality}, see esp. p. 172; the major difference is that I have, for the sake of simplicity, replaced Nagel's complex motive of "impartiality" with beneficence.

\textsuperscript{33} Nagel (ibid., pp. 50–51, 172) thinks this unlikely, since he believes that it may not be unreasonable for the better-off to reject a degree of sacrifice higher than a certain level, where that level may nevertheless be reasonably rejected by the worse-off as insufficient.
Now there is of course a traditional association between contractualism and a certain kind of cooperative conception of morality: that which sees morality as a cooperative enterprise for mutual advantage. On this conception agents are assumed to be motivated by self-interest, but to recognize that by cooperating with each other they can all do better than they otherwise would. The parties to this kind of cooperative enterprise all have different aims, and the point of the cooperation is to enable better achievement of these different aims than would be possible otherwise. The most important aspect of such cooperation is mutual restraint, but it might also be mutually beneficial to agree on a principle of beneficence of some form. If so, this principle would be cooperative in a primary sense—the commitment of each to the principle depends fundamentally on the commitment of the others. This picture remains essentially the same if, in an effort to make this conception of morality more plausible, we add in one shared aim: fairness. The resulting position, which can be called the “fair reciprocity” view, adds to the strict mutual-advantage view a commitment on the part of each not to free-ride, and perhaps also a commitment to a fair distribution of the fruits of cooperation.

The cooperative conception of beneficence I want to introduce here bears no relation to mutual-advantage views or fair-reciprocity views. Unlike those views, which involve an idea of cooperation among people with different aims, my suggestion is that beneficence can be understood in terms of a shared cooperative aim. Let me try to explain the difference between a cooperative aim and an individual or noncooperative aim. If two of us have individual aims to promote the good, what I should do may depend on what you do. For what I can best do to promote the good can vary depending on what you are going to do, and, as already noted, I might be best able to achieve my aim by cooperating, in a secondary way, with you. But if you cannot cooperate, or if you fail to promote the good, this in no way affects my understanding of, or commitment to, my own aim. If we both have a cooperative aim to promote the good, by contrast, we do not see ourselves as engaged in separate solitary enterprises. The other person’s relevant behavior affects the attitude of each to his own requirements.

Indeed, we can say that if we all have a cooperative aim to promote the

34. This term comes from Allen Buchanan, “Justice as Reciprocity versus Subject-Centered Justice,” Philosophy & Public Affairs 19, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 229.
35. For criticisms of such views, see, e.g., Buchanan, ibid., and Brian Barry, Theories of Justice (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), esp. secs. 29–30.
good, each of us does not, strictly speaking, aim to promote the good. Each sees himself as working with others to promote the good. Thus the best way to describe the aim of each might be: “to promote the good together with others.” As a sort of test, we can say that a necessary condition for an aim to be cooperative is that the impact of the compliance or noncompliance of others on each agent’s pursuit of that aim is not the same as the impact of natural phenomena. To illustrate this, we can contrast cooperative-aim beneficence with the Simple Principle. For the Simple Principle, the compliance behavior of others impacts on what I am required to do in just the same way as other changes in my circumstances. If I know that poverty has substantially worsened, it is irrelevant to the pursuit of my individual aim to promote the good whether this is due to a drought or instead to a reduction in donations to relief organizations by other people; in either case, the Simple Principle requires me to give more than before just because the need for my help has increased.\(^{36}\)

When beneficence is a cooperative aim, in contrast, it does make a difference whether the increased need is due to noncompliance of others or to other changes in my circumstances. Exactly what difference it makes depends on the particular cooperative aim in question—there are a range of possible principles of beneficence that would count as cooperative-aim principles. At one extreme the description “to promote the good together with others” could be taken very strictly to mean that unless all the others are contributing, it is impossible for me to pursue exactly that aim, and so under partial compliance I will do nothing. Then there are a range of possible principles, decreasingly responsive to the noncompliance of others. A principle of beneficence could require me to promote the good when others do not, but up to a lower level of sacrifice than I would face.

\(^{36}\) My characterization of a cooperative aim sounds similar to Donald H. Regan’s description of morality as a community or cooperative enterprise in Utilitarianism and Co-operation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), chap. 12. However, on the cooperative-aim conception of beneficence I have outlined, a crucial point is that the compliance or noncompliance of others is not on a par with other changes in circumstances. Regan, on the other hand, is concerned with cooperation among complying agents; on his view, when someone ceases to comply she is no longer part of the cooperating group. Thus Regan and I are concerned with quite different kinds of cooperation. His “cooperative utilitarianism” directs each agent to “cooperate, with whoever else is co-operating, in the production of the best consequences possible given the behaviour of non-co-operators” (p. 124); the aim here is to ensure that complying agents, by engaging in what I called secondary-level cooperation, will do the best that they can as a group (see, e.g., p. 6).
under full compliance. Next in line is the Cooperative Principle as I have defined it: where others do not do their part, I am required to do no more nor less than I would have been required to do under full compliance. The Cooperative Principle, in turn, could be moderated in the direction of the Simple Principle to form a principle that requires me to take up some but not all of the slack caused by the noncompliance of others.

All these principles can be said to present beneficence as a cooperative aim. The principle of beneficence that clearly does not present beneficence as a cooperative aim is, to repeat, the Simple Principle. Where each is required to take up all the slack caused by the noncompliance of others, each has an individual aim to promote the good.

The cooperative-aim conception of beneficence offers significant support for the Compliance Condition and the Cooperative Principle. If this conception of beneficence is appealing, then we have reason to favor the Cooperative Principle over the Simple Principle and the Limited Principle—for the first principle, but not the latter two, is compatible with it. Moreover, the Compliance Condition is elucidated by, and receives a general kind of support from, the cooperative-aim understanding of beneficence. Of course, the weight of these points depends upon how much independent plausibility the cooperative-aim conception of beneficence has.

In any case, these points support the Cooperative Principle only in comparison with the Simple Principle and the Limited Principle. They do not show the Cooperative Principle to have any advantage over other principles of beneficence that also present beneficence as a cooperative aim.37 However, we must remember here that the Cooperative Principle stands out among possible cooperative-aim principles of beneficence because of the prior and independent intuitive grounds we have for embracing the Compliance Condition. A defense of one of the other cooperative-aim principles would require questioning the initial intuitive thought that agents should not have to do more just because others do less, that agents should not be required to do more than their fair share.

37. A particularly strong competitor might seem to be the principle that requires me to do some more when others do less, but not to take up all the slack. One way of defending this principle would be to claim that it would be downright uncooperative not to take up some of the slack. But this thought is most compelling for cases where the noncompliance of others is involuntary, or accidental; we are interested in cases of voluntary noncompliance.
In what follows I continue to offer supporting considerations for the Cooperative Principle, but it should be acknowledged that some of what I say would apply equally to other possible cooperative-aim principles.

VI. Beneficence and Mutual Advantage

A different kind of support for the Cooperative Principle comes from the fact that even where beneficence is not understood in terms of cooperation for mutual advantage, many of the beneficiaries of a group’s beneficence will be members of that very group, and so promoting the good will in fact be to some extent mutually advantageous. For insofar as beneficence is, as a matter of fact, a mutually beneficial project, it is natural to resist taking on the shares of people who could contribute to the project but do not.\textsuperscript{38} Defenders of the Cooperative Principle cannot take this too far, however, for we must resist the idea that if some others (who are among the beneficiaries of my efforts) do not do their share, then I cannot be required to contribute anything at all. One way to resist this is to note that not all beneficiaries are people who could themselves contribute to the project. This argument for the Cooperative Principle over the Simple Principle casts the latter as extreme, and places the former in an attractive moderate position between that extreme and another.

VII. The Cooperative Principle and Over-Demandingness

The path to the Cooperative Principle began at the over-demandingness problem. However, the Cooperative Principle is not a response to the extreme demands that the Simple Principle imposes on individuals. That is to say, it is not motivated by a belief that there are limits to the degree of sacrifice that can be required of individual agents. It is true that the demands of the Cooperative Principle are in fact much less than those of the Simple Principle. This is because, as we have seen, the optimal sacrifice for agents under full compliance is usually far less than is the case under the current minimal compliance. But the considerations offered in support of the Cooperative Principle do not have anything to do with the \textit{amount} of sacrifice a principle of beneficence requires of individual agents.

Now the strongest claim that could be made here is that the Compliance Condition expresses what was worrying us about the Simple Principle all

\textsuperscript{38} I am here indebted to Derek Parfit.
along. Thus we could argue that the over-demandingness objection does not need to be solved on its own terms, but rather dissolved—we never were that worried about the amount of the demands; instead, we were all along concerned about doing the work of others. A way of testing this is to think of the case of an extremely well-off minority in an extremely badly off country, isolated from the rest of the world. Both the Simple Principle and the Cooperative Principle would impose great sacrifice on this minority even under full compliance. 39 Similarly, extreme demands could be imposed by both principles in certain emergency situations where an agent is the only person in a position to prevent some disaster or bring about some great good. 40 But would we feel that the extreme demands in these cases were objectionable, in just the same way that the demands made on us every day by the Simple Principle seem objectionable? And if not, what could explain the difference? So another supporting consideration for the Compliance Condition, and thus for the Cooperative Principle, might be that it can help us to dissolve the problem of over-demandingness.

On the other hand, reflection on such cases may lead us to conclude that the demands of beneficence must meet the Compliance Condition and be limited. If we could come up with a criterion for setting the limit that avoided the problems discussed in Section II, we could go on to develop a Limited Cooperative Principle of Beneficence. No new criterion would be required, however, if we were to conclude that only especially extreme demands were objectionable. As we saw in Section II, setting a limit by appeal to the criterion of limited interference with one’s life is plausible so long as that limit is set at a very high level of demands. A very high limit is not likely to be offered as the whole of a solution to the over-demandingness problem, but if we have already moved to the Cooperative Principle, such a limit may be sufficient to take account of the part of our concern about the Simple Principle that is not captured by the Compliance Condition. So even if the Compliance Condition does not completely dissolve the over-demandingness objection, it may nevertheless sufficiently dissolve it to make what remains tractable.

39. To make this a pure case, we have to imagine that the well-off minority has not wrongfully exploited the badly off majority. This weakens the force of the example, since the most striking actual cases are not of this kind.

40. Some such cases, where agents are required to risk death or serious injury, or to endure great suffering, raise separate special issues concerning what sorts of motivation agents can reasonably be expected to have, and what sorts of motivations a moral theory would require them to have.
VIII. Immediate and Distant Sources of Demands

The claim that each of us in the First World is required to give to development aid the amount that it would be optimal for us to give under full compliance seems to me very plausible. But though the Cooperative Principle may yield plausible results in the case of world poverty, and for impersonal promoting of the good generally, we will now see that this might not be the case for all situations where we think our beneficence is required. As a result, the proper application of the Compliance Condition and the Cooperative Principle must perhaps be limited.

In contexts similar to ours, Peter Singer and Shelly Kagan have both discussed an example of a person being able to rescue, at negligible cost, a child drowning in a lake. Kagan uses this example to illustrate his view that commonsense morality will require me to promote the good where the cost to me is slight, but typically not where the cost to me is high, as it can be in the case of famine relief. But the example can be easily modified into an atypical case.

Suppose that I am walking through a park on my way to the airport. If I do not get there on time, I will miss my flight and, given the cheap ticket I have, will lose both my holiday and my money. I see a child drowning in the lake. I will lose an hour if I wade out there and bring her back; this means I will miss my flight. It seems that I have no choice but to curse my bad luck and wade in. If I am required to do this but not to contribute the same amount of time and money to famine relief (suppose that I have already contributed a modest amount this year), then it cannot be the cost to me

41. Suppose that I have already given the amount that would be optimal under full compliance, and that this reduced my fairly high level of well-being only a little. I learn that you have not done your fair share, and that if I took this on I would, at little extra cost, certainly save a distant life. Is it really plausible to say that I am not required to give this extra amount? Now on one interpretation this objection applies equally to the Limited Principle. At any level of demands short of the optimal it will seem hard to accept that a small extra burden for the sake of a great benefit is not required. But this quickly leads to the Simple Principle. However, it might be accepted that once the demands on me are already high a small extra burden can be resisted; the claim would be that this is not so when, as in this case, the demands on me so far are not significant. This version of the objection brings us back to our starting point, for it requires an account of the limit to the demands of beneficence. It is worth noting here that for any principle of beneficence other than the Simple Principle we will probably be able to imagine cases where it seems hard to deny that some extra beneficence is required. But we must not consider such cases in isolation—we must keep in mind the problems facing all other possible principles of beneficence and make a judgment of overall relative plausibility.

that explains this difference. This actually remains true if we vary the case to lower the cost to the agent: I stand to lose the cost of my new suit and shoes if I jump in the mud to rescue the child, but perhaps I am not required to give an equivalent extra amount to famine relief. Again, the cost to me could not explain the difference in requirements.

Now this example looks good for the Cooperative Principle as compared to the Limited Principle. For the Cooperative Principle can explain why I am required to save the child but not required to sustain an equivalent sacrifice for famine relief, whereas the Limited Principle cannot. Confronted with a drowning child, I know that my optimal level of sacrifice would be no different under full compliance; whereas in the case of famine relief it would clearly be much less under full compliance. The Limited Principle, tying demands just to the cost to the agent, cannot distinguish between the two cases. I would be excused from sacrificing my holiday and my money in both cases, and this seems clearly wrong.

However, a further modification of the example produces an apparent counterexample to the Cooperative Principle.43 Suppose that there are two people walking through the park, both on their way to the airport with cheap tickets, etc. They pass by the lake and see two children in danger of drowning. Due to the location of the two children in the water, each person has just enough time to save one child and still make his flight. If either person saves both children on his own, then that person will miss his flight. Obviously, the best thing would be for person A and person B each to save a child. Unfortunately, however, A (W. C. Fields) has no intention of sustaining any loss to help a child. Here the whole burden would appear to fall to B (Jimmy Stewart), and he just has to put up with it. But this is not the position of the Cooperative Principle. According to this principle, since B is in a situation of partial compliance he is only required to make as great a sacrifice as he would be required to make under full compliance, which is here that of getting his clothes wet but not missing his plane, so he is only required to save one child.

Surely the Cooperative Principle gives the wrong answer in this case. Though it seems plausible to require only as much of agents as would be required under full compliance for distant potential objects of beneficence, this does not seem to be plausible when the object of my beneficence confronts me directly.