

## beneficence

The principle of beneficence in its simplest form is that we ought to do good or, if expressed as an obligation, that there is an obligation to help others. A more substantial version is that human beings ought to be taught to be strongly benevolent and beneficent; where 'benevolence' signifies "a wish or disposition to help others"; where 'beneficence' signifies "actually producing good"; where by helping others is meant more than helping one's children, FAMILY, friends, or country; and, where the degree to which we ought to help as well as the question whether the relevant normative statement is best expressed as a virtue, definite or indefinite duty, rule, or cooperative project is left to the particular theory to specify.

One of the most sustained arguments against the principle is as follows: There is no good reason why we, as, moral agents, ought to be beneficent outside our own bailiwick, *i.e.*, outside our children, spouse, in lesser degree friends, and in time of danger our country. A rational person must first address herself to her own survival. Unless she duly cares for herself, her CARE for others is quickly ended by DEATH. Moreover, when there are more resources than necessary for subsistence, she should use them to attain the best possible life. If there is an even greater surplus, she should put it away as a form of protection, as insurance against loss. Expressed differently: In the case of bare subsistence or grinding poverty there is little to distribute; in situations of abundance, beneficence—or at least that special form of beneficence called kindness (intended helpfulness toward someone in need, not in return for anything, nor for the advantage of the helper herself)—is not conducive to her own welfare. It is not conducive because rational living requires that we live well before giving to others which, in turn, demands adequate savings or its like.

A few preliminary points need to be made before considering how some influential moral theories may be able to parry or meet this objection. First, it is necessary to distinguish between ALTRUISM and extreme altruism. Extreme altruism requires that we sacrifice our own good for the good of others. Typically, it does not place limits on what morality or a principle of beneficence can legitimately demand. Altruism, or to be more accurate, an altruistic theory, requires only that we contribute to the welfare

of other persons, where 'other person' denotes more than one's children, family, friends, or countrymen. It follows that all forms of the more substantial version of the principle of beneficence are part of altruistic theory; but not that all theories of altruism must have an explicit formulation of the principle of beneficence. It also follows that altruism, *per se*, does not require sacrifice. Sometimes sacrifice is involved; but often it is not. Thomas Nagel correctly observes that sometimes altruistic action involves neither self-sacrifice nor nobility—as when we tell someone he has a flat tire, or a wasp on his hamburger. Second, it is necessary to avoid the quagmire concerning the role of justice. Justice is often viewed as being synonymous with social justice or with morality as a whole. It also may be interpreted more narrowly as giving each person his due according to a rather stringent interpretation of merit and dis-merit. Given the latter, proponents of beneficence neither believe justice has the sufficient normative power a moral theory requires nor do they believe that when a benefit is conferred as not being due, it is gratuitous. Third, not all advocates of beneficence formulate their position in terms of the principle of beneficence. It is true that modern thinkers tend to do so. But others often begin from a larger or different frame of reference, *viz.*, the perspective of God's law, the law of LOVE, compassion viewed in its broadest sense, or, as in the empiricist tradition, from role played by sentiment and EMOTION.

### Traditional Judaism

Perhaps the most influential formulation of the principle of beneficence, one often referred to as the GOLDEN RULE, occurs in Leviticus 19:17–18. We are told: "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart. . . . thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." In the same chapter we find the additional injunction that thou shalt love the stranger as thyself (verse 34). These passages contain two elements: First, they mandate altruism; second, they instruct us to attach a *prima facie*, if not actual, weight to the well-being of another individual that is exactly equal to our own. In addition, there are other definite duties. These include leaving the gleanings of the grain fields and orchards and vineyards for the poor and for the stranger (Leviticus 19:9–10); allowing the products of the seventh year, when the fields lie fall-

low and the vineyards are not to be pruned, to be freely shared by all members of the community in order that the poor of your people may eat (Exodus 23:11, Leviticus 25:27); and canceling all debts at the end of the seventh year (Deuteronomy 15:2). More general formulations of this duty include the injunction to open one's hand to one's poor and needy brother (Deuteronomy 15:11) and to relieve the oppressed (Isaiah 1:17).

Traditional Judaism, conceived of as knowledge of divine law, commands and commends beneficence to the poor. It insists that there is a general duty of BENEVOLENCE, beneficence, and specific duties of kindness. Beneficence is considered the sacred duty of the individual who must return part of what he has received from God. It is the sacred duty of the community as well to protect its members against the basic vicissitudes of life; and to the extent that the community is rational, it recognizes that unless help and care are effectively institutionalized, the hopes of the poor and the needy will be in vain. In other words, beneficence is rational because it is part of the ideal way we are required to live in the world. It is rational because we are required neither to sacrifice to the point of, or even close to the point of, death, nor are we required to enrich our fellow man. We are only required to maintain life, to live more simply in order that others may live.

### A Christian View

Christianity, or at least a Thomist (THOMAS AQUINAS [1225?–1274]) interpretation of it, differs. It stresses the redemptive role of Jesus, the definitive AUTHORITY of the Church, and the importance of practical beneficence in all its forms, by exalting love as the root of all virtue. It also is largely responsible for explicating certain distinctions. Jesus declared the love of one's neighbor to be the second great commandment besides the love of God which is the first (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27). Combining this with the light of reason, we come to understand that the first principle of morality is the love of God. Because CHARITY is the efficient cause which unites man with God, it is a good which is of prime importance. Beneficence, doing good to someone, is an act of charity. It, therefore, follows that every act of beneficence brings us closer to God. Everything which is a duty is good; but the converse is not true—good is not always a duty. An obligation

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is imposed by reason and binds the FREE WILL to perform that act which is necessary for the attainment of the last and absolute end. Supererogatory acts, on the other hand, are desirable (as, for example, acts of exceptional goodness or heroism), but not mandatory. It is in this vein that the story of Jesus speaking to the rich young man and telling him to sell all that he has and distribute it to the poor (Matthew 19:16–30; Mark 10:17–31; Luke 18:18–30) is understood by the fathers of the Church as counsel, not precept.

To be worthy of full respect, beneficence cannot be autonomous. It must work from a system of NATURAL LAW and rules, including rules other than the injunction to be beneficent. Yet the authority of natural law does, indeed, mandate a general duty of charity and sometimes a definite duty of beneficence. We are not required to do good to every single person since that is impossible; but each one of us is bound to do good in some particular case; for charity binds us, not actually to do good to someone, but to be prepared to do good to anyone if we have time and the resources to spare. Whether a particular act is a duty is determined by comparing the relative needs of self and others, and requires the judgment of a prudent person. Some thinkers provide a more canonical formulation and conclude that one is morally required to help when a neighbor is in imminent peril of deadly EVIL to soul or body and is unable to help himself, when the act of help is neither a venial sin nor an exposure to the proximate occasion of sin, and when by helping one would not be so similarly imperiled.

### Kant

Immanuel KANT (1724–1804) also maintains that we have the duty to relieve the fortuitous distress of others when we can do so without great inconvenience to ourselves. The difficult question is whether he held more than this. He admits that the grounds for the duty of beneficence lie, in part, in the fact that human beings are in need of mutual help, and that only by means of mutual help can the systematic harmony of their purposes be attained. Kant often talks as though duty requires a person to share with others less fortunate than himself, right up to the point when all good fortune is equally divided. He maintains that it is a duty of every man to be beneficent (*i.e.*, to be helpful to people in need

according to one's means, for the sake of their HAPPINESS and without hoping for anything in return). He also explains why the altruistic maxim of beneficence toward those in need is a universal duty. The reason is that all men are to be regarded as fellow men, *i.e.*, as needy rational beings, united in one dwelling place for mutual aid. However, he does not conclude from this that we have a strict (inflexible) duty to help others. His reasons appear to be: first, that it is not within our powers to further the ends of all men equally, and that this "law" holds only for maxims, not for definite actions; and second, that we ought to regard the duty of beneficence only as a laxer (meritorious) duty because raising it to a stricter duty would deprive some men of their freedom, their autonomy as ends in themselves, and this simply will not do. In other words, because we respect and wish to preserve the SELF-ESTEEM of other human beings, and because indiscriminating beneficence may humiliate or encourage them to be less self-helpful than they would otherwise be, we cannot legislate that men must *always* be helpful to other men.

### Mill and Sidgwick

JOHN STUART MILL (1806–1873) distinguishes between the virtue and obligation of beneficence, and in the latter sphere, between the obligations of the individual and of the state. Professor Warnock suggests that Mill's thesis, that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness," where happiness "is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether" (*Utilitarianism*), reduces to "the contention that beneficence is really the sole and sufficient moral virtue."

The question of obligation is, of course, more complex. Mill maintains that there are "many positive acts for the benefit of others" which a person may "rightly be compelled to perform." Among these he includes certain acts of individual beneficence, such as saving a fellow creature's life or interposing to protect the defenseless against ill usage—things which whenever it is obviously a man's duty to do he may rightly be made responsible to society for not doing. He also adds that a person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but his

inaction and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury.

Mill does not say only that it is our duty to render aid because by not doing so, we harm another. Nor does he formulate a principle of beneficence that requires each person to perform the action, of those available, that will make the best outcome. What he does say is that it is our duty to render aid *in certain circumstances*, when if by not doing so we will harm others, and when we have evaluated that harm according to the principle of utility. Nor is Mill conflating the notion of having a moral obligation with having a legal one. There are many acts which, being directly injurious only to the agent himself or injurious to society only in the short run, ought not be legally interdicted. Rather, the ability to help oneself which may thereby accrue, more often than not, has overriding utility. He concludes that "a State which dwarfs its men, in order that they may be more docile instruments in its hands *even for beneficial purposes*—will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished" (*On Liberty*). Thus, we are left with a principle of beneficence which in part reads: society has an actual duty to aid others when by not rendering aid that omission is a causal factor in the harm fortuitously suffered by another, and when that harm would not be outbalanced by the general utility, the felicific beneficence, of having a society of autonomous, self-respecting, and often creative human beings.

In *The Methods of Ethics*, Henry SIDGWICK (1838–1900) admits that, although this duty is more or less unhesitatingly laid down by common sense, it is difficult or impossible to extract from it, so far as it is commonly accepted, any clear and precise principles for the determining the extent of the duty. What may be of more value is his implementation of the distinction between principle and method, and his fastidious exploration of the problem of how to reconcile rational self-interest and duty. Sidgwick is convinced that commonsense morality embodies different ultimate principles and that one of them is benevolence. Since benevolence (not in Aristotle, but in modern times) is frequently held to be a supreme and architectonic virtue, he believes this sufficient to give it the first place after the virtue of WISDOM. In his polemic against Kant, Sidgwick insists on the importance of the affection of (the emotional element contained in) love and kindness. Not only does benevolence demand at least the cul-

tivation of these feelings and the disposition to act lovingly, but there is a duty to cultivate them so far as it is possible to do. His discussion implies a distinction between having the strict duty to feel an emotion (which he admits is problematic) and the duty to inculcate these sentiments in such a way so that they will excite, when appropriate, love in both the helper and the individual helped, to the mutual benefit of both. He reminds us that UTILITARIANISM does not prescribe that we love everyone equally, but that we should aim at happiness "generally as our ultimate end, and so consider the happiness of any one individual as equally important with the equal happiness of any other, as an element of this total; and should distribute our kindness so as to make this total as great as possible, in whatever way this result may be obtained." Then, because of considerations of PRACTICAL REASON, he retreats from this formulation and seems unclear as to how it is to be best formulated. One attempt reads that the utilitarian doctrine "is that each man ought to consider the happiness of any other as *theoretically* of equal importance with his own, and only of less importance *practically*, in so far as he is better able to realize the latter."

One may respond that this and similar formulations represent an overaccommodation to practical reason or mistake PRUDENCE for morality. Prudence may say that we are entitled to give greater weight to our own INTERESTS and purposes simply because they are our own, but morality does not always. Although Peter Singer's formulation may be vulnerable to what Liam Murphy calls "the over-demandedness objection," Singer maintains (in his essay "Rich and Poor") that there is a relatively unqualified obligation to assist others. "Helping is not, as conventionally thought, a charitable act which it is praiseworthy to do, but not wrong to omit; it is something that everyone ought to do." One formulation of the obligation to assist others is this: "if it is in our power to prevent something very bad [as, for example, famine] from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it." He is aware of the charge that this may be too strong a formulation. Nonetheless he contends that, given the extreme evil of people starving to death, the more conventionally accepted standards are too weak and, therefore, are not as plausible as his own. He concludes the chapter with a titling suggestion, namely, that there may be some-

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thing to be said for contributing a round percentage of one's income, like 10 percent. This suggestion serves to remind us that compassion, when limited to working directly with the needy, is often self-defeating and is definitely so in the case of famine and similarly complex social problems. In this aspect Singer's utilitarianism invites comparison with one of the most important practical insights of Judaism and Christianity: as meritorious as acts of an individual (directly) helping are, unless help and care are effectively institutionalized, the hopes of the poor and needy will be in vain.

### John Rawls

RAWLS's arguments are similar to Kant's. The duty of mutual aid is a reasonable requirement because it is not rational for a person to assume that she will not need help during her lifetime and that she will not be better off in a society where everyone is prepared to render aid, when needed and when they can easily do so. But he also draws a distinction between actual beneficence and the sense of security, confidence, and TRUST which depends on knowing that one can count on others to come to one's aid. As such, a decisive rational advantage is gained. For "the primary value of the principle is not measured by the help we actually receive but rather by the sense of confidence and trust in other men's good intentions and the knowledge that they are there if we need them" (*A Theory of Justice*).

Rawls acknowledges that his definition and arrangement of this duty is untidy and that he has failed to deal with their more detailed specification and with questions of priority. Part of the explanation is that "there are no obvious rules for settling these questions." Other thinkers make a stronger claim and say that there are not (and, in principle, cannot be) any rules for making generic forms of the principle more substantial or for explicating how to adjudicate conflicts of principles or conflicts in particular cases. In their dispute with Clouser and GERT, Beauchamp and Childress suggest that their "open" formulation may be the best one can do, that we may be able to say only that the principle of beneficence expresses an obligation to help others further their most important and legitimate interests by preventing and removing harm, and an obligation to weigh and balance possible goods against possible harms of an action. What this, in part, means is that

the principle of beneficence is a *prima facie* obligation. It is always binding unless it conflicts with obligations expressed in another moral principle, in which case a balancing of the demands of the two principles is necessary.

Most important, Rawls's discussion of this duty occurs in the context of his discussion of the nature and duty of mutual SELF-RESPECT. Parties in the original position (where free and equal persons must choose to govern in terms of their cooperation) know that in a society they need first and foremost to be assured by the esteem of their associates and, therefore, understand that everyone benefits from living in a society where the duty of mutual respect is honored. Similarly, in *Political Liberalism*, he writes that the fundamental "importance of self-respect is that it provides a secure sense of our own value, a firm conviction that our determinate conception of the good is worth carrying out. Without self-respect nothing may seem worth doing, and if some things have value for us, we lack the will to pursue them." Thus, self-respect as well as other forms of protection seem to be confirmed, if not most effectively encouraged and supported, by the duty of mutual aid.

Finally, it should be noted that not all altruistic theories can be reduced to, or should be interpreted solely in terms of, moral principles. A principle of beneficence, even if it is combined with other principles, seems to make little sense, as far as many altruistic thinkers are concerned. Bertrand RUSSELL (1872–1970) argues that, since there is no conceivable way of making people do things they do not wish to do, being a moral person is less a matter of knowing correct principles, and more a matter of having right dispositions. Since the only way to motivate people is by ethical education, by strengthening certain desires and weakening others, what should be inculcated is a feeling of benevolence, not a principle of beneficence. Lawrence Blum suggests that the duty of beneficence, if it exists, must be regarded as encompassing only a small area of the potential aid we may bring to others. Instead of being content to solve problems by seeking principles that have universal applicability, a growing ethics of care movement (inspired in part by the writings of Carol Gilligan) stresses the need to develop altruistic dispositions and a sense of a broader self as well as the need to approach problems situationally, using the voice of RESPONSIBILITY and relationships.

The sentiment here being expressed is that a morality that effectively curbs the egoistic or antisocial tendencies of human beings cannot be achieved by means of moral principles alone or by placing the primary emphasis on such principles. Stated positively: The *first step* is to open the windows of wisdom and morality as wide as is reasonably possible by assisting human beings to feel more benevolent and to extend the scope of their beneficence beyond their own compatriots. If benevolent/beneficent people, when they have the power and are reasonably informed, produce more good than people motivated by other attitudes, then it may follow that we should employ the best means to achieve this end, including ideals and ideology, ethics and law, attitudes and emotions.

See also: ALTRUISM; BENEVOLENCE; CARE; CAUSATION AND RESPONSIBILITY; CHARITY; CHRISTIAN ETHICS; COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY; DUTY AND OBLIGATION; EMOTION; FINAL GOOD; GOLDEN RULE; INSTITUTIONS; INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE; DISTRIBUTION; JEWISH ETHICS; JUSTICE, DISTRIBUTIVE; KANT; LOVE; JOHN STUART MILL; MORAL COMMUNITY, BOUNDARIES OF; PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS; PRUDENCE; RAWLS; SELF-ESTEEM; SIDGWICK; SUPEREROGATION; SYMPATHY; THEORY AND PRACTICE; THOMAS AQUINAS; UTILITARIANISM; VIRTUE ETHICS; VIRTUES.

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