

# ALTRUISM AND AMBITION IN THE DYNAMIC MORAL LIFE

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Some people are such impressive altruists that they seem to us to already be doing more than enough. And yet they see themselves as compelled to do even more. Can our view be reconciled with theirs? Can a moderate view of beneficence's demands be made consistent with a requirement to be ambitiously altruistic? I argue that a reconciliation is possible if we adopt a dynamic view of beneficence, which addresses the pattern that our altruism is required to take over time. This frees up theoretical space for understanding how a moral duty of self-development can intersect with the requirements of beneficence, so that the amount that we are required to sacrifice increases without our beneficence becoming immoderate.

**Keywords:** Beneficence, partiality, demandingness, moral development, altruism, requirement.

## 1. Introduction

Consider Amy, who became disillusioned with her career as a corporate lawyer, and now helps make vaccines available in developing countries. As well as helping people in her career, she sets aside a generous portion of her salary towards charitable donations. There is more to her life than curing the world's ills, though. She is supportive and loving of her family; keen on amateur dramatics, leisure and travel. Amy is not a saint, but she is still doing pretty well when it comes to altruism. Even so, she tries to increase how much she devotes to helping people in need. Amy is an *ambitious* altruist. But while

her former law colleagues' ambitions were driven by their preferences, Amy's ambition is driven her conscience. As an affluent person in a world pervaded with poverty, she feels morally *required* to try to do better, even if she is already doing well. With respect to the sacrifices beneficence requires her to make of her resources—her time, money, effort, and anything else that she values—Amy accepts the following thesis:

**AMBITION.** Beneficence requires an impressive altruist like Amy not to be content with how much she is giving, but to ambitiously increase how much she sacrifices.

This thesis will consequently appeal to those of us who think that a virtuous person like Amy has moral insight [Hale 1991; Kawall 2009; Carbonell 2012].

However, many of us are also inclined to judge that Amy is doing well, and hence we feel pulled towards another thesis:

**MODERATION.** Beneficence is not so demanding that an impressive altruist like Amy is failing to sacrifice enough of her resources to help people in need.

Our reasons for limiting beneficence's demands are familiar.<sup>1</sup> With Barbara Herman [2007: 108], we think that there are limits to how *difficult* beneficence can be given that 'a reasonable morality is well integrated into ordinary living, not something we are endlessly at war with (like a diet) or a distant goal toward which we direct substantial amounts of our energy'. With Susan Wolf [1982: 420], we think that there is a limit to how *suffocating* beneficence can be of our other worthwhile interests, such as 'the

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<sup>1</sup> Some retort that our intuitions in favor of moderation are unreliable [Braddock 2013], or only support abstract principles that are consistent with extreme demands of beneficence [Berkey 2016].

enjoyment of material comforts,' engaging in 'the intellectual and physical activities of our choice,' and 'the love, respect and companionship'.<sup>2</sup>

But a moderate view of beneficence seems to preclude Amy from being required to be ambitious. If Amy is already doing enough, then how could she be required to aim for more? For example, if Amy were merely required to give away some quota of her resources, then it would be supererogatory for her to give more than this amount.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, if Amy is required to sacrifice more, then how could it not be that she is failing to meet beneficence's demands? For example, if we were to accept a demanding view of beneficence [Singer 1972; Kagan 1989; Cummiskey 1996; Unger 1996; Goodin 2009; Sin 2010], then we would conclude that Amy is falling short. So while AMBITION and MODERATION are both attractive, they are in tension. Of course, we should not be surprised by the fact that two opposing moral views both have something going for them. This is the hallmark of robust philosophical debates about morality. But we should think that there is more at stake with this particular tension when we reflect on the phenomenology of Amy's experience. A morally decent person like Amy can experience herself as compelled to sacrifice more, without thereby needing to feel guilty

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<sup>2</sup> For a response to Wolf that defends the lives of some actual saints, see Adams [1984]. Along similar lines to Wolf, Bernard Williams objects that utilitarianism inadequately values both moral integrity [Williams 1973] and our personal projects [Williams 1981]. Elizabeth Ashford [2000] responds that moral integrity can require demanding obligations, while Sarah Buss [2006] replies that we can rationally reconsider our projects in light of others' needs.

<sup>3</sup> This could be a universal quota [Urmson 1958: 70, 71] or a quota fixed by everyone's fair shares [Murphy 2003]. For examples of non-quota moderate views, see Hooker [2000]; Cullity [2004]; Miller [2004]; Arneson [2004] which discusses Hampton [1993] and Scheffler [1994]; Noggle [2009]. For criticism of Cullity [2004], see Sonderholm [2015].

for how much she has been sacrificing. This does not seem to be a morally confused outlook. Instead, it has at least some *prima facie* plausibility as the correct view for us to adopt.

Reconciling AMBITION and MODERATION is the puzzle that I aim to address.<sup>4</sup> My solution will involve defending a *dynamic* view of beneficence, which frames the relevant, central questions as concerning what pattern our altruism is required to take over time. Within this framework, I will argue that we are required to develop morally, and increase our sacrifices as we do. This type of dynamic view of beneficence has been defended on the Aristotelian eudaimonist grounds that we have reasons to develop, in order to aim at our own flourishing as virtuous people [Flescher 2003].<sup>5</sup> By contrast, I will argue that the developmental requirement has an instrumental rationale: our reasons to develop morally derive from our goal of doing more to help people in need. However, the developmental view does not provide a full account of beneficence's demands, until we add a static requirement that we give a bare minimum, regardless of how morally developed we are. So the final view of beneficence that we are left with is variegated, combining a multiplicity of dynamic and static requirements.

## 2. Dynamic Beneficence

Much of contemporary ethics is fruitfully investigated *statically*, by considering what we should do *at a time*. For example, to discover which actions are right, it is helpful to

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<sup>4</sup> It has some similarities to Vanessa Carbonell's [2012: 231] puzzle based on the fact that '[m]oral saints habitually perform actions that are, intuitively, beyond moral obligation. Yet the moral saints sometimes consider these actions to be obligatory, not supererogatory.' Carbonell's solution is that these saints are mistaking their sacrifices as obligatory, but they provide us with evidence of what we can reasonably demand of each other, and hence 'ratchet up' how much we must to sacrifice.

<sup>5</sup> This was brought to my attention after completing the substance of this essay.

consider our intuitions about cases in which agents must act at particular moments. But in addition to knowing which actions are right in specific circumstances, we should also like to know which courses our lives ought to take. This requires investigating ethics *dynamically*, by considering what we should do *over time*. For example, the question of how to reconcile one's career with one's family only atypically concerns which specific actions to perform. Instead, it is primarily a matter of how to structure the course of one's life while giving due regard to both concerns. The same is true of beneficence. Outside of acute emergencies, the key ethical questions typically concern how to plan one's life.

A dynamic view of beneficence helps us understand an altruistic ambition like Amy's. If we are in the grip of a static view, and limit our focus to agents' obligations in particular cases, then judging that Amy ought to give more will pressure us into concluding that she is not giving enough. But once we think of beneficence as having a temporal profile, we can distinguish what Amy must do *now* from what she must do in the *future*. We can see the AMBITION thesis as capturing the fact that Amy is required to increase her sacrifice over time. This leaves room for the MODERATION thesis, as we can say that Amy is currently sacrificing as much as she is required.

But freeing up theoretical space is one thing; providing good reasons to occupy it, another. How could Amy increase her sacrifice without this being excessively difficult, or suffocating her other worthwhile interests? The answer also lies in a dynamic view of beneficence. When we think about beneficence diachronically, we need not take our characters, abilities or interests as fixed. Instead, someone like Amy can change them to bring her altruism and self-interest into a closer harmony. Indeed, I propose that she would be required to do so, and increase how much she sacrifices. In saying that she is

required, I mean that all things considered she has most reason to do so, and that it would be blameworthy for her not to do so (although it may be that this blame can only be voiced by those who have themselves met the requirement in question).

Framing this proposal in terms of a requirement may seem unduly tendentious. After all, there are less controversial claims that we can make about Amy. For example, we can clearly say that Amy has moral reasons to develop herself and sacrifice more; moreover, we can say that since Amy is an impressive altruist with a particular tendency to act on moral reasons, we could also expect her to do more and hope that she does; in addition, we can say that she would be a better person for doing so, and come closer to a virtuous ideal. Given that we have this rich array of moral claims with which to characterise Amy's situation, why invoke duty and hold that she is *required* to improve herself and increase her sacrifice?<sup>6</sup> Why not instead say that developing and increasing her sacrifice would be supererogatory — something that would be morally good of her to do, but not required?

In general, whether an option is required or merely supererogatory turns on how the moral reasons for the option stack up against non-moral reasons for alternatives. Whenever we have an opportunity to help others, we have some moral reason to do so. This explains our general requirement to provide aid at no cost or negligible cost. Of course, some of these moral reasons can be fairly weak. The fact that Amy could delight a child sitting next to her on a plane with a story provides her with only a weak reason for action, and one that is easily outweighed by Amy's inclination not to do so. But the reason's weakness is grounded partly in the fact that a story is a trivial benefit. Not so, when it comes to providing basic necessities like water, food, protection from disease

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for articulating this objection.

and violence, education, and shelter. People's urgent needs for these essentials give us powerful moral reasons for alleviating them, when possible, even when we stand in no special relation to these people.<sup>7</sup> To invoke an image of Sarah Buss's [2006: 380], if an affluent person like Amy is to stand up in front of a crowd of desperately needy people, then she had better have a powerful justification for failing to bring them succour. In the absence of such a justification, she would, all things considered, have most reason to help them, and it would be blameworthy in her not to do so. In other words, she would be required to do so.

We have encountered two plausible candidates for considerations that could provide this justification. The first was Herman's point that beneficence should not require so much that meeting its requirements is excessively difficult. The second was Wolf's point that beneficence should not be so suffocating that Amy is left with insufficient room for other worthwhile interests. In exploring a moderate view of beneficence, I am assuming that both Herman's and Wolf's considerations are sufficiently weighty that they can counterbalance Amy's moral reasons to do more to help others. But crucially, on this moderate view, the demands of beneficence result from two competing pressures: the moral pressure generated by others' urgent needs, and the countervailing pressure generated by the agent's legitimate concerns with her own life, experiences, and agency. When there is no opposition from considerations of difficulty or suffocation, the needs

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<sup>7</sup> These needs' moral significance is reflected in the fact that they allow strangers to make defeasible claims on us, when they address us from the 'second-personal standpoint' [Darwall 2006]. Along these lines, Kate Manne [forthcoming] argues that just as our own needs play an imperatival role in our own first-personal decision-making, others' needs play an imperatival role in terms of the second-personal reasons they give us.

of others win out: the corresponding moral reasons generate moral requirements for someone like Amy.

What this means is that if Amy can direct the course of her life in a way that allows her to do more to alleviate people's needs, without this coming at the expense of her leading a manageable life based around interests that appeal to her, then she is required to do so. Suppose that this can be achieved through a combination of moral development and a concomitant increase in her sacrifice. Assuming that is possible—and I will shortly give reasons for thinking that often it is possible—others' needs generate an instrumental rationale for a duty to chart this path:<sup>8</sup> Amy ought to develop

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<sup>8</sup> This beneficence-based rationale contrasts with—but need not compete with—other rationales for moral development. On an Aristotelian eudaemonist view, we ought to develop virtuous states of character as ends that are valuable both for their own sake and as constituents of our ultimate end of flourishing [Aristotle 1999; Flescher 2003]. By contrast, a beneficence-based rationale for moral development focuses on others' needs rather than our own flourishing, and has an instrumental structure: we are required to develop morally as a causal means to helping others. In its instrumentality, the beneficence-based rationale is similar to Kant's rationale for an imperfect duty to perfect ourselves morally: Kant held that we ought to develop morally in order to act from the motive of duty. But while Kant's duty of moral development is one that we owe to ourselves and is grounded in his view that the motive behind an act determines its moral worth [Baron 1987: 249; Wood 2009], my beneficence-based duty is owed to others for the sake of alleviating their needs. In addition, personal development can feature elsewhere in Kantian ethics. For example, Katja Vogt [2008] argues that Kant's duty to develop one's talents delineates duties of beneficence owed to others. Meanwhile, Robert Johnson [2011] argues that we have duties to develop ourselves in non-moral respects, which do not derive from a duty aimed at improving our moral selves.

morally at a moderate pace in order to help others more, while still leading a good life herself.<sup>9</sup>

### **3. Moral Development that Enables Altruism**

That was to put the proposal programmatically. To fill in the details, we must ask how moral development can enable altruism. The answer is complicated by the fact that Herman and Wolf identify separate reasons for moderation. To make our inquiry more tractable, let us split it into two parts that address Herman's and Wolf's points respectively.

If we start with Herman's point that beneficence should not be excessively difficult for most of us, then we should look for ways to make altruism easier. The first way to do so is by forming appropriate habits. Habituation's role in building character is an insight of Aristotle, who claims that

what we do in our dealings with other people makes some of us just, some unjust; what we do in terrifying situations, and the habits of fear or confidence that we acquire, make some of us brave and others cowardly... To sum it up in a single account: a state of character results from the repetition of similar activities

[Aristotle 1999: 1103b14–1103b22].

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<sup>9</sup> The requisite rate will be determined by the same two pressures. Others' needs will put pressure on us to take any steps that allow us to do more to help others in the long run. This will be met by an opposing pressure from considerations of difficulty or the value of other interests. Just as moral heroics are not required in our sacrifices at any point in time, they are not required for changing ourselves over time.

**On Aristotle's view, by repeating actions we engrain dispositions to perform certain actions and feel certain emotions in certain situations.<sup>10</sup> This is an ancient doctrine but one supported by the picture of habituation emerging from the psychology literature on automaticity [Hassin, Uleman, and Bargh 2005]. By repeating actions in response to environmental cues, we come to make these responses automatic. In this way, 'habits are learned dispositions to repeat past responses. They are triggered by features of the context that have covaried frequently with past performance' [Wood and Neal 2007: 843]. Once we have these dispositions, we need not engage in conscious, effortful decision-making to perform these actions. Instead, our actions are triggered directly by these cues.**

**Which dispositions would be helpful? The most obvious are habits of helping others. The more that we perform altruistic actions unthinkingly, the less mental effort we expend in doing so. In addition, we can develop habits of empathising with others.<sup>11</sup> Psychologist Daniel Batson claims that 'perceiving the other's need . . . lead[s] to a unique internal response: a feeling of empathy . . . This unique emotional response to perceived need is a result of the perceiver adopting the perspective of the person in need' [Batson and Shaw 1991: 112]. (See also Hoffman [2000].) Batson completes his 'empathy-altruism hypothesis' with the claim that this emotional response motivates pro-social behaviour. We can apply Batson's insight to habituation. Our ability to**

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<sup>10</sup> Situationists have critiqued Aristotle's view of character as a stable and general disposition [Doris 2002]. We need follow Aristotle only in holding that we form behavioural and emotional dispositions to a significant extent.

<sup>11</sup> These habits would be to empathise on action-guiding occasions. If someone constantly shares in others' suffering, then this would be costly to them. For discussion of obstacles to empathy and altruism, see Lichtenberg [2004].

empathise is increased the more that we know about, and pay attention to, others' plights. Consequently, forming habits of inquiring into, and attending to, others' plights would allow us to develop our powers of empathy. To illustrate the benefits both of habitual giving and of habitually attending to others' needs, consider Meira. Meira was raised in a religious community, in which the children were all provided with a penny to put in a charity collecting can at communal celebrations. Meira has cut her ties with the community, but has kept the symbolic practice. Whenever she passes by someone asking for money, she always gives *something*, even if it is a small amount. Her reasons are that it ensures that she gives regularly and keeps her open to the needs of others, stopping her from turning a blind eye.

Besides acquiring behavioural and affective dispositions, there is a second way to make altruism easier: developing our capacities for will-power. Kant puts this at the heart of his account of moral development. He conceives of developing morally as strengthening our 'capacity... to overcome all opposing sensible desires' [Kant 1785: 200]. In more prosaic terms, we might refer to this as our ability to resist temptations. Kant singles out a key way of strengthening our will-power: 'by practicing virtue' [ibid.]. Again, this insight from yesteryear is lent support by contemporary psychology. Roy Baumeister's research program into self-control has defended the view that it is analogous to a muscle: 'not only does self-control show short-term fatigue effects like a muscle does, it also shows long-term improvement, just as a muscle gets stronger through exercise' [Muraven and Baumeister 2000: 254]. (See also Holton [2006].) So just as a gym-rat can become more physically powerful by using her muscles to lift weights, so someone can increase her will-power by using it to resist temptation.

Why would helpful habits and strong will-power facilitate giving more to help others? Partly, these make it more likely that we perform helpful actions and pay attention to others' needs. Also, they would make altruism easier. Outside of the realm of conscious decision-making, performing habitual actions would not be so taxing. Similarly, if we have strong faculties of will-power, then it will be less strenuous to act contrary to other desires. By analogy, if someone has to make a conscious decision not to eat cheese at each meal, then this regimen may well be highly taxing. On the other hand, if she has engrained a habit of passing on post-prandial cheese, then refraining will be much less of an ordeal. Further, if the cheese-abstainer has strong will-power, then it will not be such a struggle to stick to her resolution, should the thought of cheese arise. In this way, habituation and strong will-power can help someone keep to a stricter diet without this upgrade being experienced as excessively difficult. The same is true of altruism.

Those forms of moral development work around Herman's constraint that beneficence not be excessively difficult. Now let us turn to Wolf's constraint that beneficence should leave room for other worthwhile interests. To work around this constraint, we can shape our interests over time. We acquire new interests while other interests fade away, and we often develop our interests into new forms. By directing these processes, we can better reconcile our altruism with our own flourishing.

First, we can shape our interests towards less expensive forms.<sup>12</sup> We can come to rely less on material comforts, and we can take cost into account when deciding which new activities to engage in. Typically, many different interests could appeal to us, and

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<sup>12</sup> Chiara Cordelli [manuscript] argues that we have a preventative duty to limit our expected costs of complying with the demands of beneficence, and this requires us to choose less expensive interests.

life is too short to take an interest in all that is worthwhile. For example, on a Thailand holiday, we might choose whether to learn how to cook panaeng curry or learn how to scuba-dive. Both interests would be life-enriching, yet by choosing the former, we could free up resources with which to help others. This is not to suppose that our interests are infinitely malleable. For some people, expensive activities like scuba-diving will already be passions, and cannot easily be replaced with alternatives that would bring them the same joy. But others' tastes are more flexible, and they can let expensive interests fall by the wayside, to be replaced by others. Indeed, many altruists gradually lose a taste for expensive pursuits when they reflect on the extent of material inequality.

As well as economising, we can develop interests into forms that benefit others. We often have this opportunity because many worthwhile interests have social dimensions, bringing people together in various ways. Consider Adam, a beefy soccer player with a shaven head—quite an intimidating proposal for opponents. This appearance turns out to be deceptive, as Adam is a big softie, who volunteers his time to promote youth sport among disadvantaged children in his neighbourhood. Adam has taken his passion for soccer, and developed it into a way of helping others. While enabling children to enjoy the sport, he gives them the opportunity to learn about cooperation, sportsmanship, and discipline. Crucially, Adam has found a way to help others that is not at the expense of having a good life built around interests that appeal to him. By all accounts, he seems to be positively thriving in his work with kids, and this altruism is built around something that marks him out as an individual—his love of soccer. His life is still coloured by his appreciation of one of the many forms of 'personal excellence' [Wolf 1982].

Opportunities like Adam's are not unusual, since valuable activities often become

available to successive generations through social interaction. With one's own enjoyment of an activity, typically comes the chance to share this enjoyment with others.

Let us bring these points together. We have discovered a catholic list of forms of moral development: habituation, strengthening will-power, developing more economical interests, and developing more altruistic interests. The list's diversity reflects the fact that our moral agency is underpinned by different faculties and the fact that its direction should take account of non-moral values. But the common thread to the list is that these forms of moral development allow us to sacrifice more of our resources to help others, without this sacrifice being excessively difficult or suffocating other worthwhile interests.

In light of our earlier argument, this leads us to the view that beneficence places on us two constraints. First, it *pro tanto* requires us to develop ourselves morally in these ways. Second, the more morally developed we are, the more that beneficence *pro tanto* requires us to give.<sup>13</sup> If we like, then we could think of these two requirements in terms of an analogy with learning the high jump. At any particular jump, a novice athlete should aim to clear the bar. But she should also aim to improve over time, and raise the bar higher. Similarly, at any particular time, beneficence requires us to give a certain amount to help others, and also to develop morally. As we become better people, we should increase the amount that we sacrifice to help others. In the long run, the possibility of moral development allows us to marry ambition in altruism with a moderate view of beneficence.

#### 4. Variable and Fixed Requirements of Beneficence

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<sup>13</sup> These are only *pro tanto* requirements, since there may be countervailing considerations. For example, if one's child developed an expensive illness, then one might legitimately spend less on strangers.

Call the position that beneficence requires us to develop morally and increase how much we sacrifice the 'developmental view'. It entails that beneficence's demands will vary across times and persons. To see the temporal variation, note that as Amy develops morally, she will be required to give more than she was previously required. As such, her required sacrifice is indexed to stages of her moral development. To see the personal variation, suppose that Belinda is less morally developed than Amy, but this is solely because Belinda is younger. The developmental view would hold that Amy is required to give more than Belinda. Consequently, there is no one-size-fits-all account of beneficence's demands. Instead, these vary according to each individual's circumstances, including her stage of moral development.

In one light, this variation might look objectionable. It might seem more fair if everyone were required to sacrifice a uniform amount. Indeed, the grounds for the lack of uniformity may appear particularly unfair, since Amy is required to give more precisely because she is the better person. Thus, morality seems to ask more of Amy for becoming a morally better person, while Belinda is let off the hook for being less virtuous. This might remind us of the unfairness that occurs when dependable colleagues are saddled with tasks, while irresponsible colleagues are not.

However, we should resist seeing Amy as penalised for her moral development. We need to pay attention to how each person experiences her sacrifices. As a more developed moral agent, Amy would be required to sacrifice more of her time, money, and effort than Belinda. But this sacrifice would not be more arduous or more constrictive of her own interests. Having developed, Amy finds it easier to make sacrifices, and can do more good while pursuing her own interests. In effect, Amy's moral development has created a 'moral surplus' that she could distribute in two ways.

**First, she could be the one to receive the benefits: as the result of her development, she is entitled to keep her level of sacrifice constant, and lead an easier life that allows her to enjoy her interests more. Second, people in need could receive the benefits of her moral development: she could increase her sacrifice, without making altruism any more difficult or suffocating for her. On the second approach, Amy is at no net loss compared to where she was before developing. The developmental view makes the second approach compulsory, on the grounds that others' needs make Amy required to develop morally.**

**Those conclusions follow because we assumed that Amy is more morally developed than Belinda simply because she is older. But what should we say about the sacrifice of Clara who has persisted with comparatively expensive interests despite having the opportunity to develop more economical interests? If we assume that the only difference between Amy and Clara is that only Amy has fully met the requirement to develop morally, then how do their required sacrifices compare?**

**Consider the counterfactual scenario in which Clara had cultivated more frugal interests. Then, Clara could live a good life by enjoying these frugal interests. With the resources that she saves, she could help a certain number of people to a certain degree. (Clara would produce a 'certain amount of good'.) In the actual world, Clara can still help these people in her uncultivated state. But this would come at the expense of pursuing the particular interests that she actually has, and so would involve a loss to her. Alternatively, Clara can pursue the particular interests that she actually has. But as a result Clara would do less to help others. (She would produce a 'lesser amount of good'.) Thus, whichever option Clara takes, someone ends up paying a cost: either Clara fails to pursue her actual interests or other people's needs go unmet.**

I argue that Clara should bear this cost for the following reason. If a cost arises solely as the foreseeable result of someone culpably failing to meet a moral requirement, then all else equal the cost should be paid by that person. To illustrate, suppose Daniela has delayed booking her tickets for a holiday, and the prices have predictably risen. If the delay has foreseeably been caused by her companion's negligence, then her companion ought to offer to pay the additional costs; but if the negligence is Daniela's, then she ought to shoulder the costs herself. The underlying principle is that, all else equal, it is unfair for others to bear the costs of an agent's culpable mistakes, when she could instead internalise these costs herself. In the case of Clara, she is the person at fault, and so in the absence of a valid excuse, Clara should be the one to pay the cost.

However, it may be that there are reasons why Clara should not be held fully responsible for her previous failure to develop morally. I want to highlight three potential reasons. First, Clara may have changed so much that she is no longer fully responsible for moral failures during her youth. Plausibly, certain forms of psychological continuity undergird the moral responsibility that we have for our past actions. So, the more that we change in these psychological respects, the less responsible that we would be. Second, Clara may have failed to appreciate that she has a duty to develop morally. If so, then her previous moral ignorance may be a partial excuse. In particular, moral ignorance may function as an excuse when the relevant moral truths are difficult to discover and are not yet widely shared in her moral community.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Clara might plead that her moral ignorance of the developmental view was not mere negligence on her part; instead, it was an easy mistake to make, and one

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<sup>14</sup> For discussion of the relationship between oppressive social contexts and the responsibility of people with objectionable moral views, see Calhoun [1989]; Moody-Adams [1994]; Isaacs [1997]. For discussion of whether moral ignorance is an excuse, see Rosen [2003]; Harman [2011]; Mason [2015].

that is widely made by others. Third, we might think that morality should be lenient towards people who turn over a new leaf. Suppose that Clara has undergone a moral epiphany, and only recently begun to appreciate that she was required to develop her interests. Now that she sees her obligations aright, she has fully resolved to do what she ought. While this change of heart does not absolve her of responsibility for her previous actions, we might think that it provides grounds for not holding her fully responsible for the costs that have resulted from her previous errors. We might think morality should leave room for making a fresh start.

While these considerations each have appeal, they raise issues that are not local to beneficence: these issues arise whenever we must decide whether to be lenient on people who have erred in the past.<sup>15</sup> I am unable to resolve these issues here, and so, I will leave open whether they provide grounds for not holding people fully responsible for their past moral failures. Instead, I will only state the implications for beneficence, on the assumption that these considerations turn out to be probative. It is in light of Clara's previous failure to develop morally that her current sacrifice would increase to the level that would be required of her as a developed person. So, to the extent that Clara is excused from her previous failures to develop morally, she is not required to increase her sacrifice in this way.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, if Clara has no such excuse, then she is morally required to do as 'much good' as she would have done in the counterfactual scenario where she had met all her requirements. In other words, if Clara is fully responsible for failing to develop as much as Amy, and this is the only difference between them, then Clara is still required to sacrifice as much as Amy.

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<sup>15</sup> In addition, there is the question of whether we are required to sacrifice more to assist someone when we have previously failed to assist that same person [Barry and Overland 2014].

<sup>16</sup> It would matter whether the excuses are fully exculpatory or merely mitigating.

Of course, if Clara did sacrifice as much as Amy, then Clara would be foregoing some of her particular interests. Does this mean that we have lost sight of Wolf's insight that beneficence should not be so demanding that we are unable to enjoy our particular interests? I suggest not. There is potency to the complaint that a moral theory is too demanding in virtue of the size of the costs that we would bear when meeting the theory's requirements.<sup>17</sup> Much less powerful is the complaint that a theory is too demanding in virtue of the additional costs that we would bear as a result of failing to meet our requirements. While Clara faces high moral demands, she cannot complain that beneficence is too demanding. After all, beneficence gave her the opportunity to continually pursue interests that appeal to her. To grasp this opportunity, she would have needed to develop her interests over time. But by failing to meet the requirement to develop morally, she failed to grasp this opportunity. That is why she now faces high demands. So we should attribute Clara's need to make these additional sacrifices to her own failures. As a result, she cannot appeal to these additional sacrifices to complain that beneficence is too demanding.

**So far, I have defended the developmental view, according to which beneficence's demands depend on an individual's stage of moral development. The developmental view posits two requirements. First, each individual is *pro tanto* required to realise her potential for developing morally at a moderate rate. Second, at each stage in her life, she is *pro tanto* required to make sacrifices that would be moderate, were she to have previously met her requirement to develop morally. Should we stop there and fully relativise all of beneficence's demands to an individual's potential to develop morally?**

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<sup>17</sup> For recent collections of essays on the so-called demandingness objection, see Chappell [2009]; Van Ackeren and Kühler [2016].

While this would make our account of beneficence pleasingly unified, it comes at too great a cost: it leaves us with counterintuitive commitments with respect to abnormally undeveloped agents. Suppose that Edwina is a libertine, with stunted moral potential. She has limited self-control, and empathy, as she hedonistically lives for each present pleasure. Her interests are at best amoral, and at worst morally repugnant. In short, Edwina is in a state of moral disrepair, and consequently she finds even modest demands of beneficence difficult and restrictive. Holding a door for a stranger feels an excruciating waste of her time. Coughing up a few pounds for a charity collector directly interferes with her ambition to be as filthy rich as possible. Worse, Edwina has scant potential to improve herself. An unusual degree of selfishness is a fixed part of her character, regardless of whatever attempts she now makes to better herself. I take it that Edwina's gross shortcomings do not absolve her from having to make sacrifices. When Herman and Wolf ask us to take seriously how altruism can be difficult and restrictive, they are advocating moderation in beneficence, not unfettered laxity.

The case of Edwina brings out the fact that we can expect a certain amount of sacrifice from everyone. As such, it motivates postulating a bare minimum requirement that all must meet, regardless of what they find difficult or restrictive, and regardless of their potential for development. There is room for further discussion as to the form that this requirement should take, but my inclination is towards a 'minimally decent' person standard [Thomson 1971]. A minimally decent person standard is somewhat vague, but this makes the standard flexible enough to take into account personal features, such as the amount of resources that each individual possesses. Still, a vague standard will still have determinate implications for clear cases of behaviour that falls below the standard. For example, since it would be indecent in Edwina to find holding the door difficult, this

difficulty does not place a limit on what beneficence requires of her in this circumstance. But we would need to investigate fully the comparative advantages and disadvantages of alternative formulations of a bare minimum requirement, before settling on a minimal decency standard. In the absence of such an investigation, I only suggest it.

Regardless of whichever way that we end up formulating the bare minimum requirement, it provides a basic amount of sacrifice required of everyone. Consequently, a wholly person-variable approach to beneficence cannot be right. In addition, the bare minimum lacks a temporal profile, and is insensitive to someone's stage in her moral development. Consequently, a wholly dynamic view of beneficence cannot be right. Instead, beneficence makes multiple demands of us, some static and some dynamic. The static, bare minimum requirement marks a floor for our sacrifices, while the dynamic, developmental requirements specify how far above this floor each of us must aim over time. In terms of our high-jump analogy, for even the most novice athlete, the bar has to be placed at a certain height. After all, someone is not engaging in the high jump, if she steps over a bar that is at ankle height. But the novice athlete should aim at developing her skill and raising the bar that she clears. Similarly, in altruism, there is a static threshold that everyone should aim to meet, but over time, everyone should develop as moral agents and exceed this threshold.

A similar position might be defended for other virtues besides beneficence.<sup>18</sup> We have seen how beneficence provides an instrumental rationale for cultivating traits germane to helping others. It seems plausible that morality could provide us with analogous instrumental rationales for cultivating other traits. For example, take courage. There is a bare minimum of courage that can be expected of everyone when

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<sup>18</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

taking risks for moral ends. But the more courageous that we become, the more capacity that we have to perform morally good acts for which courage is an asset. For example, we have reasons to speak out against injustices, even when doing so risks our reputations, our relations with others or other interests of ours. For the sake of these reasons, morality might place on us a requirement to develop into more courageous people. In so far as this is an instrumental rationale for a developmental requirement, it would be analogous to the beneficence-based rationale for the developmental view.

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued for a view of beneficence that combines multiple requirements. There is a static requirement that specifies a bare minimum that everyone must meet. In addition, according to the developmental view, we are required to develop morally and increase how much we sacrifice as we do. These dynamic requirements allow us to solve the puzzle with which we began. Let us return to Amy. The developmental view implies that looking forward into the future, Amy ought to be ambitious about how much she gives—she ought to aim to give more *then*. As such, Amy's ambitious attitude is the correct one for her to take, and so we have validated the AMBITION thesis. Importantly, though, the developmental view allows us to hold that Amy is already giving what she ought *now*. As such, the view leaves room for the MODERATION thesis, on the grounds that beneficence's demands should not be too difficult or suffocating. We can take these considerations into account as limits both on the rate at which Amy is required to develop and also on the sacrifices that she must make at each stage of her development. In this way, we can reconcile the AMBITION and MODERATION theses. We have arrived at a moderate view of beneficence, which finds a role for ambition.

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