

Review of Liam B. Murphy, Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Published in Ratio 17 (2004): 357-62.

Consider the following moral principle, which we can call the optimizing principle of beneficence:

You are required to act such that you will produce as great an expected overall benefit, given what you have reason to believe, as you would acting in any other way available to you.

You have reason to believe that there millions of desperately needy people living in the world today. You have reason to believe that, by donating money to organizations like Oxfam, you can give much greater benefits to these people than this money could give to you. But you also have reason to believe that most other people are not going to donate any money to organizations like Oxfam. It therefore follows from this principle that you are required to donate most of your money to organizations like Oxfam.

Are you required to do this? In this excellent book, Liam Murphy argues that you are not. He supports this claim by comparing the optimizing principle of beneficence to two alternative principles of beneficence. The first is what Murphy calls the limited principle of beneficence, which can be formulated as follows:

You are required to act such that you will produce as great an expected overall benefit, given what you have reason to believe, as you would acting in any other way available to you, but only if the burden this imposes on you stays within a certain limit.

The second is what he calls the collective principle of beneficence, which can be formulated as follows:

You are required to act such that you will produce as great an expected overall

benefit, given what you have reason to believe, as you would acting in any other way available to you, but only to the extent that this does not make you less well-off than you would be if everyone from now on acted in accordance with this principle.¹

It may seem plausible to object to the optimizing principle of beneficence that it can be too demanding, and it may seem plausible to adopt the limited principle of beneficence instead. But Murphy argues that we cannot defend the limited principle of beneficence without begging the question against the optimizing principle. His arguments for this conclusion are detailed and intricate, but the main points he makes are quite straightforward. First, if we want to defend the limited principle of beneficence, we have to specify the limit that the burden the principle imposes on us must stay within. And there is no convincing way of doing this that does not simply appeal to common-sense morality, which defenders of the optimizing principle reject. Second, there are many other moral principles that can be extremely demanding, such as a principle forbidding murder, or a principle requiring us to keep our promises. Given that it is implausible to object to these moral principles that they can be too demanding, we need an explanation of why it is plausible to make this objection to the optimizing principle of beneficence. Again, there is no convincing way of giving such an explanation without simply appealing to common-sense morality, which defenders of the optimizing principle reject.

Murphy concludes from this that the prospects of giving a plausible defence of the limited principle of beneficence look dim. And that is no surprise, he thinks, since what is wrong with the optimizing principle of beneficence is not that it is too demanding. Instead, what is wrong with the optimizing principle is that if most people fail to comply with it, the principle imposes enormous sacrifices on people who do comply with it, because other people fail to comply with it. And in that case, Murphy claims, people who comply with the optimizing principle can ask:

‘Why should I have to do more just because others won’t do what they ought to do? Why would I have to take up the slack caused by their wrongdoing?’
(p. 76)

This question, Murphy thinks, brings out what is really wrong with the optimizing principle of beneficence. And if we adopt the collective principle of beneficence rather than the optimizing principle, this question will not arise. Therefore, this diagnosis of what is wrong with the optimizing principle of beneficence is an argument for adopting the collective principle instead.

As Murphy is well aware, however, it is not a knock-down argument. For the collective principle faces a problem of its own, as is shown by the following well-known example. You and a stranger are walking past a pond in which two children are drowning. The stranger and you can each save one of the children, but instead of jumping into the pond and trying to save a child, the stranger simply walks away. What are you required to do? According to the optimizing principle of beneficence, the answer is straightforward: you are required to save both children, since this will produce the greatest expected overall benefit, given what you have reason to believe. A limited principle of beneficence will give the same answer, if the limit on the burdens that the principle can impose on you is not set implausibly low. But the collective principle of beneficence, it seems, will tell you that you are only required to save one of the children. For given that the stranger can save the other child, your saving both children is likely to make you less well-off than you would be if everyone, including the stranger, acted in accordance with the collective principle from now on.

Defenders of the optimizing principle of beneficence can use this example to claim that the optimizing principle of beneficence is more plausible than the collective principle. They can say that, if the stranger walks away, you are clearly required to save both children. They can say that, though desperately needy people on the other side of the world are further away from you than the children and though their plight is less vivid to you than the plight of the children, these differences are not morally significant. And they can say that our intuitions about the example of the two children are more reliable than our intuitions about desperately needy people on the other side of the world, given the effects that factors like physical proximity and vividness are known to have on our emotional responses. Therefore, they can claim, the optimizing principle of beneficence is more plausible than the collective principle, even when we are considering how much money we should donate to organizations like Oxfam.

Given that the example of the two drowning children can be used to defend the optimizing principle of beneficence in this way, it is rather disappointing that Murphy devotes only seven pages to this example (pp. 127-33). And what he has to say about it is less than fully convincing.

One thing he points out is that, for all the collective principle of beneficence says, you may be required to rescue the second child, since it may be the case that this does not make you less well-off than you would be if everyone from now on acted in accordance with the collective principle. That is true, but what we would want to say is that you are required to rescue the second child. Another thing he points out is that the limited principle of beneficence will not require you to rescue the second child either, once the burden this imposes on you exceeds a certain limit. Again, that is true, but it remains the case that the optimizing principle will almost always require you to rescue the second child.² Finally, Murphy considers the suggestion that there are special moral principles that apply only to rescue cases, and that are distinct from the principle of beneficence that we should accept. However, since rescuing is a form of beneficence, and since there do not seem to be morally relevant factors that distinguish rescue cases from other cases that involve saving people's lives, he rejects this suggestion.

Murphy thus finds himself forced to say that, contrary to appearances, you are not required to save the second child from the pond. The appearance that you are required to rescue the second child can, he claims, be explained away in two ways. First, the collective principle will tell you that you are required to follow a rule of thumb that tells you to rescue others if the costs of doing so are not extremely high. And second, if you do not rescue the second child, you are displaying a bad character that would make us want to avoid having anything to do with you. These two things, Murphy claims, explain why your not rescuing the second child seems wrong, even though, according to the collective principle of beneficence, you are not actually required to rescue the second child.

Of course, it can be plausible to make a claim that goes against our initial intuitions for the sake of theoretical neatness. There may therefore be cases in which it is plausible to interpret what seem to be judgements about the rightness or wrongness of actions as judgements about something else, such as rules of thumb, or

a person's character. But interpreting the two children example in this way seems to take the appeal to theoretical neatness a step too far. It is simply not plausible to claim, as Murphy does, that if you do not rescue the second child merely because the stranger fails to do his fair share, you are only violating a rule of thumb and displaying a bad character. Surely, if you do not rescue a drowning child merely because someone else fails to do his fair share, you are failing to do something that you are morally required to do.

Earlier in the book, Murphy suggests that the underlying motivation of the collective principle of beneficence is that we should treat other people as agents who are responsible for their own behaviour, rather than as mere forces of nature (pp. 115-6). And he is surely right that it is often appropriate to treat others as responsible agents. But the problem for the collective principle of beneficence seems to be that, in some cases, it is more appropriate to treat another person as a force of nature – for example, if the other person is a stranger who simply walks away from two drowning children. And if that is so, perhaps we should not look for theoretical neatness by trying to provide an all-or-nothing defence of either the optimizing or the collective principle of beneficence. Perhaps we should instead try to formulate a unifying account that tells us when it is appropriate to treat other people as responsible agents, and when it is appropriate to treat them as mere forces of nature instead.

Though I am not convinced by Murphy's defence of the collective principle of beneficence, I do think that this is an excellent book. Murphy sets up a powerful framework for dealing with questions about beneficence, he provides many detailed and insightful criticisms of the views of others, and he is honest about the problems that his own view faces. This makes the book engaging and rewarding, regardless of whether the reader agrees with its conclusion.³

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Notes

1. The final formulation that Murphy gives of the collective principle is more complicated than this, which enables him to deal with certain objections (see p. 117). I here leave out these complications.
2. As Murphy rightly says, an exception to this are cases in which the costs of saving the second child would be so high that more lives could be saved by not rescuing the second child, and by doing something else instead. But such cases will be very rare – and it seems that, in such cases, if we are sure that more lives would be saved by not rescuing the second child, it is at least not obviously wrong to say that you should save these other lives rather than rescue the second child.
3. I would like to thank Brad Hooker for helpful comments.