The Problem with Yuppie Ethics

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How much personal partiality do agent-centred prerogatives allow? If there are limits on what morality may demand of us, then how much does it permit? For a view Henry Shue has termed 'yuppie ethics', the answer to both questions is a great deal. It holds that rich people are morally permitted to spend large amounts of money on themselves, even when this means leaving those living in extreme poverty unaided. Against this view, I demonstrate that personal permissions are limited in certain ways: their strength must be continuous with the reasons put forward to explain their presence inside morality to begin with. Typically, these reasons include non-alienation and the preservation of personal integrity. However, when personal costs do not result in alienation or violate integrity, they are things that morality can routinely demand of us. Yuppie ethics therefore runs afoul of what I call the 'continuity constraint'.

In the 2005 movie *Thank You for Smoking*, the fast-talking protagonist, Nick Naylor, appeals to the 'Yuppie-Nuremburg defense' when seeking to deflect criticism of his work as a lobbyist for Big Tobacco. As Naylor wryly notes, personal behaviour, that would otherwise be deemed morally unacceptable, is often thought to be unproblematic once a person has noted that they are simply trying to pay off their mortgage or fulfil some other personal goal. In a similar vein, Henry Shue has coined the term 'yuppie ethics' to describe a set of arguments used to defend the lifestyle choices of affluent people, including the purchase and consumption of luxury goods.[1] These arguments include the view that the wealthy have a right to seek out gourmet dinners, as part of the 'good life', and that this right overrides 'even the right of helpless children to adequate nutrition.'[2] Typically, those who affirm this perspective are economically and socially privileged. By lending a veneer of respectability to morally questionable behaviour, these arguments help to deflect blame away from their conduct and perpetuate it over time.

[1] Henry Shue, 'Mediating Duties', *Ethics* 98 (1988), pp. 687–704.
[2] Shue, 'Mediating Duties', p. 697.

Yuppie ethics can take many forms. In the present case, it holds that morality contains a set of radical permissions or entitlements that provide people with near total insulation against the positive moral claims of others, such that it would not be wrong to wrong to deny them life-saving resources when one could alternatively acquire high-end goods for oneself.[3] This kind of ethical perspective is sometimes motivated by wishful thinking or bad faith on the part of its proponents. Yet the problem it raises cannot be dismissed so easily. Indeed, what the yuppie identifies, and uses to good effect in his argument, is genuine theoretical uncertainty about the limits of acceptable partiality in moral life. We may suspect that he stretches the idea of moral permissiveness to breaking point. However, if this is the case, we need to know why his claims are mistaken.

This task is made harder by two interlocking considerations. The first is widespread recognition that fully impartial moral theories (such as act consequentialism or impartial contractualism) may need to be revised so that they better accommodate personal goods and relationships. To this end, act consequentialists have tended to endorse an agent-centred prerogative, which allows each person to dedicate to her own ends some attention out of proportion to the impartial value of those ends.[4] And contractualists have often included a non-comparative threshold for reasonable rejection in their theories: one that would allow any agent to object to a moral principle when the demands it imposes are sufficiently great.[5] The second issue is that, having made these concessions to agent partiality, new forms of

[3] This is distinct from the libertarian argument that the state cannot, as a matter of justice, require one to forgo these things even if there is compelling moral reason for one to do so.

[4] Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism: A Philosophical Investigation of the Considerations Underlying Rival Moral Conceptions* (Oxford, 1982).

[5] Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford, 1991) and *The View From Nowhere*, (Oxford, 1986); Richard W. Miller, *Moral Difference: Truth, Justice and Conscience in a World of Conflict* (Princeton, 1992) and 'Beneficence, Duty and Distance,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32 (2004): pp. 357–383.

uncertainty arise in the moral realm. It is hard enough to weigh different kinds of moral consideration against each other when using an impartial standard to assess them. This task becomes harder still when the challenge is to consistently weigh the force of different considerations in a suitably disproportionate way. Once we have granted that personal permissions exist, the yuppie ethicist may legitimately ask how we know for sure they do not extend as far as he claims.

To date, few philosophers have tried to tackle this question directly. Among those who defend the existence of moral options, few have tried to explain what exactly they permit in a world such as our own. Furthermore, those who have turned their attention to this matter often endorse conclusions surprisingly close to the yuppie's. For example, Richard Miller argues that affluent people *are* allowed to spend money on fashionable cloths, fancy meals, and high-quality stereo equipment.[6] In a similar vein, Kwame Appiah believes that affluent people may spend money on opera tickets when they see fit to do so.[7] These authors agree that it is morally acceptable for rich people to spend some part of their disposable income on 'luxuries and frills'.[8]

I aim to show that these claims are mistaken and that the permissions generated by prerogatives and thresholds are constrained in important ways. More specifically, I argue that the justifications behind prerogatives and thresholds also entail limits on what they permit. If concessions to partiality are justified on the grounds, for example, that they prevent people from losing their integrity or becoming alienated, then it follows that the resulting permissions must be consistent with that aim – and help agents avoid incurring integrity-

[6] Miller, 'Beneficence', p. 361.
[7] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York, 2010), pp. 166–7.
[8] Miller, 'Beneficence', p. 361.

damaging or alienating losses. However, they cannot permit more by way of personal partiality than that. Most obviously, they cannot sanction widespread refusal by affluent people to incur even minor costs for the sake of people living in extreme poverty overseas. By mapping out the limits to acceptable partiality in moral life, I aim to show that the choices the yuppie defends are not permitted by an account of morality that accords human life equal respect.

The first section of this paper looks at the moral challenge that act consequentialism and impartial contractualism pose to the lifestyle of affluent people. The second considers the yuppie's response to this charge of wrongdoing, namely that morality contains options that permit the behaviour in question. The third discusses efforts to ground wide-ranging moral options in intuitions about demandingness but argues that these groundings are unreliable. The fourth therefore turns to philosophical arguments about the nature of morality that could lead us to grant personal partiality greater room in moral life. Building upon these arguments, the fifth looks at the ramifications they have for the personal prerogative, and the sixth explores their implications for a contractualist theory that includes a non-comparative threshold for reasonable rejection. In no case do permissions extend as far as the yuppie contends.

I. THE CHALLENGE OF IMPARTIAL MORALITY

Impartial moral theories tend to demand a lot of affluent people who live in a world blighted by extreme poverty.[9] Act consequentialism is perhaps most strident on the point, requiring each person at all times to perform the action that would make things go impartially best. Any action that does not meet this strict criterion is morally wrong. It follows that affluent people may only act on personal considerations, such as their attachment to projects or relationships, when doing so would make things go best overall. Indeed, they ought to focus on these when it helps them to avoid 'burn out' or achieve better long-term outcomes. However, most often affluent people will be called upon to forgo personal projects, family time, holidays, and possessions because the time and money used in these ways could achieve greater impartial benefit if it were instead used to help the global poor.

Impartial contractualism, too, demands a great deal of affluent people. According to the version developed by Thomas Scanlon, morality comprises a set of principles that no person could reasonably reject.[10] A moral principle passes this test if the reasons for opposing it are weaker than the reasons that anyone else has for opposing an alternative principle. Importantly, this theory is strictly non-aggregative.[11] What counts in contractualist justification is the impact that a moral principle would have on an individual's life. Bearing this in mind, someone living in extreme poverty would have good reason to propose the following moral principle: 'If you can prevent something very bad from happening, or alleviate someone's dire plight, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable

[9] This paper is concerned with people who are 'absolutely affluent' in global terms. These people have more than enough income to procure the things they need (Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 193).
[10] Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge Mass., 1998), pp. 189, 195–196.
[11] Scanlon, *What We Owe*, p. 229.

importance, then it would be wrong not to do so.'[12] If this principle is accepted, she stands to be assisted. Furthermore, she could object to a less demanding alternative on the grounds that it would lead to her death or force her to undergo extreme hardship.

Can anyone resist the force of this argument? It might seem like an affluent person could do so by pointing to the serious costs she stands to incur. Yet, this impression is mistaken. In each case, these costs are less serious than those that would accrue to others if a weaker version were adopted. For example, while an affluent person might object to the impact such demands would have on her ability to meet special responsibilities towards her children, someone living in extreme poverty could reply that a weaker principle would leave her unable to care for her children in any way *at all.* In this way, as Elizabeth Ashford notes, she would 'appeal to a reason of the very same kind, to give [her] children a good start in life, but [one] which has far greater urgency.'[13]

A second objection might be that moral agents must keep in mind how different requirements will affect their prospects over the course of a complete lifetime and adjust their claims accordingly. Someone who stands to benefit from a strong principle of assistance, in one context, could find her action constrained by it at a later point in time. Hoping to avoid this narrowing of options, she might be prepared to accept a less demanding principle from the outset. However, this is unlikely to be true of those living in extreme poverty today. What matters most from their perspective is that their basic needs are met. Indeed, the prospect of eventually having to assist other people is not a high price to pay for the assurance that you

[12] This principle is similar to the one Peter Singer defends in 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1979), pp. 229-243, at 231.
[13] Elizabeth Ashford, 'The Demandingness of Scanlon's Contractualism', *Ethics* 113 (2003), pp. 273-302, at 289.

will not die in the near future. Therefore, it seems likely that someone living in absolute poverty would still object to a weaker principle of assistance.

Finally, Scanlon allows that the way a principle imposes costs on different agents can itself be considered grounds for reasonable rejection.[14] In this regard, several authors have argued that the strong principle of assistance is unfair because it requires complying agents to shoulder the cost of non-compliance by others.[15] A morally motivated person could object on the grounds that it requires her to do more than her fair share, and propose an alternative that requires each person to do only what would be needed in a world where everyone else did likewise. But it is not clear that this proposal changes much. For while the revised principle allocates duties more fairly, in the sense that no one is required to pick up the slack caused by the non-compliance of others, it also leads to the foreseeable death and suffering of people who could otherwise lay claim to assistance. The stronger principle avoids this outcome. Considered impartially, the claim to protection against serious harm – such as premature death – outweighs potential donors' claim to maximally fair treatment of the type promoted by the revised principle. Therefore the stronger principle of assistance remains one that no one could reasonably reject, while the weaker is open to clear objection.

Taken together, these arguments demonstrate a degree of convergence. Both act consequentialism and impartial contractualism require people living in rich countries to assist those living in extreme poverty up to the point at which they would incur serious costs if they were to do more.[16] It follows that the vast majority of affluent people fall well short of what

[14] Scanlon, *What We Owe*, pp. 196, 211–212.
[15] Liam Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory* (Oxford, 2000).
[16] Other impartial moral theories such as rule consequentialism plausibly require less of wealthy people, given the tension between stringency of moral duties and expected rates of compliance. Brad Hooker, who defends a rules-based account, argues that the cost of internalizing stringent moral principles should lead us to adopt a more limited duty of assistance (*Ideal Code, Real World* (Oxford,

is required and that they are firmly on the hook, morally speaking. In order to avoid this negative appraisal, they must either change their behaviour or demonstrate that the theories considered so far are mistaken.

II. YUPPIE ETHICS AND THE CONTINUITY CONSTRAINT

Faced with the charge of serious wrongdoing, the yuppie ethicist responds by arguing that affluent people possess wide-ranging moral options that allow them to strongly prioritize their own desires. However, the yuppie is not a moral egoist: he does not believe that it would be wrong to help other people at the expense of oneself.[17] Nor does he view the moral imperatives as unimportant or fundamentally misguided: he does not take issue with the authority of moral claims or entertain skepticism about morality in general.[18] Rather, the yuppie ethicist argues that, in the present case, no wrongdoing has occurred. In short, he is concerned to demonstrate that wide-ranging options are consistent with the notion that morality requires equal respect for others.

To achieve this end, the yuppie ethicist makes three claims. First, he argues that consequentialist and contractualist interpretations of morality are mistaken. Here he appeals both to the common notion that impartial moral theories demand too much of affluent people, and to philosophical arguments about the nature of morality and its relationship to the personal point of view. Second, he notes that there are plausible alternative accounts of

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2000) p. 166)). However, the fact that act consequentialism and impartial contractualism both point to serious wrongdoing indicate that the charge deserves to be taken seriously in its own right.

[17] Indeed, he is concerned to show that affluent people cannot be blamed for their conduct, a goal that is unlikely to be achieved if his argument rests upon wider acceptance of an egoist moral doctrine.

[18] See, for example, Susan Wolf, 'Moral Saints', *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982), pp. 419-439, and Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford, 1996), respectively.

morality that accord a greater role to personal partiality in moral life. He directs our attention to Samuel Scheffler's claim that act consequentialism should be amended to include an 'agent-centered prerogative', which would allow each person to assign proportionately greater weight to her own interests when deciding what to do.[19] The yuppie can also appeal to the idea that contractualism ought to include a non-comparative threshold for reasonable rejection that would allow anyone to object to a moral principle that imposes sufficiently large costs. Finally, he argues that these 'hybrid' moral theories generate the extensive moral permissions he defends and that arguments to the contrary are question begging.

He is aided in this last task by the existence of deep uncertainty about the scope of legitimate partiality in moral life. To begin with, there is uncertainty about the strength of prerogatives and thresholds: little is known about the *ratio* by which people may favor themselves in moral deliberation or about the *level* of cost a person may reasonably refuse to incur.[20] Second, even if these questions can be settled in principle, there is further uncertainty about what prerogatives and thresholds entail in practice. It is not clear what is and is not permitted once different reasons for acting are weighed in a suitably disproportionate way. Indeed, once we have accepted that personal partiality can be justified on non-spurious grounds, the yuppie will want to know what reason there is for thinking that moral options do not extend as far as he contends. From his perspective, claims to the contrary appear to 'dangle': they lack philosophical justification and reflect a tendency towards moral austerity within the academy.

[19] Scheffler, *Rejection of Consequentialism*, p. 20.

[20] Scheffler says little about this matter although he recognizes that it must be addressed (*Rejection of Consequentialism*, p. 21). Defenders of hybrid contractualism, such Thomas Nagel, have said only that 'perspective enters into what is reasonable' for each person (Nagel, *Equality*, p. 171).

I respond to the yuppie's challenge by defending a set of principled and practical limits on moral options. To this end, I address both kinds of uncertainty in turn, showing that moral options are constrained and that these constraints rule out the kind of affluent lifestyle the yuppie defends. We will soon turn to look at the nature of prerogatives and thresholds in greater detail. However, before doing so, it is important to note a more general reason why the yuppie is likely to be mistaken, namely that there is a connection between *how* personal options are justified in a moral theory and the *content* of what they permit. Importantly, concessions to agent-partiality tend to be made only for specific reasons. These reasons include things like the fact that morality would otherwise demand too much of people or damage those who are subject to its requirements.[21] Yet, it follows from this, purposive, understanding of moral options that the permission to favour oneself may also run out, which happens when the permission to act in some way is no longer needed to protect a legitimate aim of moral theory.[22] The considerations that justify moral options therefore also entail the existence of limits to what they permit.

Stated formally, my claim is that moral options are subject to a *continuity constraint* which holds that:

[21] One might argue that the claim that moral partiality stands in need of justification reflects prejudice in favor of the impartial point of view. My response to this charge is twofold. First, the idea that there is a robust connection between morality and the impartial standpoint finds broad support in contemporary moral philosophy (see Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford, 1997), p. 119-124). Second, the yuppie ethicist accepts this premise: he aims to demonstrate that strong forms of personal partiality are compatible with a moral code that accords normative standing to people on a universal basis.

[22] This argument is agnostic about what the correct aim of moral theory should be. A theory could seek intuitive fit, coherence, reflective equilibrium, or congruence with philosophical arguments about the nature of morality. What matters is only that a justification of some kind is forthcoming.

If

> There is independent reason to believe that personal concerns and commitments should be accorded a place inside the basic structure of a moral theory

And

> Prerogatives or thresholds are an appropriate response to these considerations

Then

> The considerations that justify the place of prerogative and thresholds inside a moral theory also determine what it is that they permit.

By way of illustration, a hybrid moral theory that tempers the demands of impartial morality on the grounds that it would otherwise demand too much, should only allow forms of partiality that are needed to prevent morality from being excessively demanding. In a similar way, prerogatives or thresholds that are needed in order to prevent people from losing integrity or becoming alienated will only allow people to avoid incurring costs that are continuous with this rationale. What they cannot sanction is the refusal to incur costs that do not damage people in these specific ways.

Foreshadowing what is to come, I believe that the continuity constraint forces the yuppie ethicist onto the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, he can attempt to ground personal permissions by appealing to intuitions about demandingness, which support the permissive moral code he favors. However, the approach fails because intuitions about demandingness are especially prone to debunking and do not provide us with independent reason to believe that prerogatives or thresholds form part of the correct moral theory in the first place. On the other hand, philosophical arguments about the nature of morality do plausibly provide an independent justification for prerogatives and thresholds. But closer

inspection reveals that they cannot anchor the kind of radical permissions the yuppie defends. In this way, the continuity constraint works to falsify the yuppie's central claims.

III. DOUBTS ABOUT DEMANDINGNESS

In order to motivate his defense of moral options, the yuppie can appeal directly to the intuition that the accounts of beneficence considered in Section I demand too much. The yuppie can also appeal to the authority of common-sense morality. Unlike act consequentialism and impartial contractualism, it contains only limited duties of assistance that are compatible with the pursuit and retention of luxury goods.

However, the attempt to ground these permissions in everyday thought and practice immediately encounters difficulties. To begin with, it is extremely hard to provide an account of the demandingness objection that is both coherent and non-question begging. Importantly, most versions of this complaint privilege the cost of assisting over the cost of going unaided in a way that lacks antecedent justification.[23] Furthermore, even if we overlook this difficulty and focus only on active costs to the giver, the approach fails for another reason, namely that intuitions about demandingness are particularly vulnerable to debunking. Debunking arguments do not challenge the truth of moral claims directly. Rather, they aim to undermine the epistemic basis of those claims by identifying off-track causal processes that explain why we might believe certain things regardless of their truth or value.[24] In the present case, there is special reason to doubt that affluent people's intuitions about their duties to the global poor reliably track the truth in the moral domain.

[23] David Sobel, 'The impotence of the demandingness objection', *Philosophers' Imprint* 7 (2007), pp. 1–17; Murphy, *Moral Demands*, pp. 59–60.
[24] Guy Kahane, 'Evolutionary Debunking Arguments', *Nous* 54 (2011), pp. 103-125, at 105.

To start with, the idea that strong accounts of beneficence demand too much of them can be explained as the product of self-interested bias. Evidence from experimental psychology shows that the tendency to unconsciously favour oneself in moral deliberation is widespread.[25] Furthermore, people living in high-income countries have powerful reason to not *want* to believe that they are required to do more for those living in poverty: the truth of this proposition would force them to accept that they act wrongfully, which is psychologically painful, or otherwise forgo things to which they are deeply attached. Forms of motivated moral belief, such as denial or wishful thinking, allow them to avoid this dilemma.[26] Indeed, a person who is affected by either kind of bias may reason from the motivated belief that she is morally virtuous to the conclusion that conflicting accounts of morality must be mistaken. However, the distorting effect of self-interest on this judgment means that it cannot be taken seriously. The conclusion is vulnerable to *psychological* debunking.

Second, the yuppie's intuitions are epistemically dubious because the desire to suppress recognition of burdensome moral duties is reinforced at a societal level. Social psychologists have long noted that human beings tend to take their epistemic and behavioral cues from one another. But this process can lead to cumulative distortion and error. In the present case, those living in high-income countries have a roughly symmetrical stake in denying the existence of robust duties to assist. Noticing that others also reject these duties in

[25] People frequently demonstrate self-serving bias when proposing a settlement with others that they believe to be fair (Linda Babcoc and George Loewenstein, 'Explaining bargaining impasse: The role of self-serving biases', *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 11 (1997), pp. 109-126).

[26] Wishful thinking is the unconscious tendency to form beliefs because we prefer states of the world in which they are true to ones in which they are false (Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 148–9). Denial is the more complicated process by which we discard, discount, ignore or overlook information that is difficult or challenging (Elster, *Sour Grapes*, pp. 149–155).

public, or ignore them in practice, they may find apparent evidence that their position is correct. But this is an illusion because the thought and behaviour of others is equally compromised. Writing about the tendency of motivated beliefs to reinforce each other, the sociologist Stanley Cohen argues that the need to be free from troubling recognition has led to the emergence in Western countries of a 'culture of denial', which distorts ordinary moral judgment.[27] Intuitions about demandingness are also, therefore, vulnerable to *sociological* debunking.

Finally, the epistemic value of intuitions about demandingness should be questioned on historical grounds. This is because common-sense morality emerged over time as the product of tacit bargaining between actors about the terms on which social life should be conducted. In this context, the powerful have an important advantage: they can leverage their resources to strike a deal that benefits them most overall. Furthermore, they have prudential reason to prefer rules that limit duties of assistance while still protecting themselves against active harms.[28] This historical trend explains 'why our morality contains a strict principle of non-injury and a somewhat weaker principle of mutual aid, the exact relative strengths of each depending on the relative bargaining positions of the rich and powerful versus the poor and weak.'[29] If moral truth is not, as I assume, a product of this type of social construction, then the independent effect of bargaining on everyday moral judgment provides us with a final reason to question the validity of ordinary beliefs about demandingness and duties of assistance. They are subject to *historical* debunking.

[27] Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 278–01.
[28] Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York, 1977), pp. 110–111.
[29] Gilbert Harman, *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford, 2000), p. 70.

Taken together, these considerations make intuitions about demandingness especially unreliable. Like anyone called upon to justify their behavior, the judgment of affluent people is impaired in certain ways. This is not to say that their claims are mistaken: even motivated beliefs may be true some of the time. However, the yuppie needs to place the presence of moral options inside morality on firmer ground.

IV. THE BASIS OF LEGITIMATE PARTIALITY IN MORAL LIFE

Recognizing that this is the case, he may turn instead to philosophical arguments about the nature of morality itself. In the words of Scheffler, he may try to uncover 'comprehensible and rationally defensible explanations of the salient features of different moral theories', including expansive moral options.[30] Philosophical arguments are particularly useful when we have doubts about the reliability of our pre-theoretical intuitions.[31] There is also a strong tradition opposing impartial theories such as act consequentialism in this way. The most plausible version of yuppie ethics incorporates these philosophical arguments into its foundation. Later, I will argue that these arguments bear decisively on what that foundation permits.

One of the most important objections to the strong accounts of beneficence discussed earlier is that they make *unreasonable* demands of moral agents. On this view, the problem is not with the size of the demands that they make *per se*, but rather that they ask people to deliberate in ways, or to forgo certain goods, that prevent them from leading complete and fulfilling human lives. To see why this might be the case, we should note that much of what

[30] Scheffler, *Rejection of Consequentialism*, p. 67.
[31] Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 11–12.

we most value is constituted by attitudes of personal partiality. This is true of both personal projects and loving relationships. To value these things involves seeing them in a certain light: as providing one with an independent source of reasons for action.[32] A person must then be able to act on these reasons if she is to partake in these goods at all. Under the right conditions, her subjective attachment to family members, friends and vocation will track and help to comprise goods that are objectively valuable. She will derive happiness from these things and be able to identify meaning and value in her life.[33]

Impartial moral theories sit in tension with these facts insofar as they ask people to deliberate about their life-choices in a way that precludes direct responsiveness to personal concerns. Considered from an impartial vantage point, each person must view the projects comprising her identity as lacking special significance. In this way, the intimate connection between person and personal goods may be broken: their reason-giving force is called into question and their value correspondingly diminished. In fact, a person who *always* thought about the world in this way would struggle to sustain a coherent identity and eventually come to feel lost.[34] She would thus lose what I call *project integrity*.[35] She would also have to submit her most intimate relationships to a kind of impartial surveillance. While she might try hard to maintain decent relationships with friends and family members, her attachment to

[32] Samuel Scheffler, 'Projects, Relationships and Reasons', in R Jay Wallace, Philip Pettit, Samuel Scheffler, and Michael Smith (eds.) *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 247-269, at 247; Scanlon, *What We Owe*, p. 161.

[33] On the account developed by Susan Wolf, 'meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.' It stems from loving objects that are worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way (Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, (Princeton, 2010), pp. 8–9).

[34] In this context, Williams speaks of a person having 'ground projects' that provide 'him with the motive force which propels him into the future and gives him a reason for living' (Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973–1980*, (Cambridge, 1981), p. 12–13).

[35] Project integrity is a form of objective integrity (Elizabeth Ashford, 'Utilitarianism, Integrity and Partiality', *Journal Of Philosophy* 97 (2000), pp. 421-439, at 424). What matters from this standpoint is not that the person in question *feels* detached from personal projects or is unable to maintain a stable identity but rather that in feeling this way her *actual connection* to valuable personal goals is severed.

them would be both mediated and conditional. As a result, these attachments might never become truly good and she would risk losing *relationship integrity* as well. Finally, having adopted an impartial standpoint, she would come to view her own natural dispositions and propensities as flawed. The desire to lead a moral life would constantly bring her into conflict with the more basic tendency to form attachments that detract from this goal. Indeed, she might come to regret being human or at least certain aspects of her own nature.[36] This is a tragic situation. Unable to identify coherence or worthiness in herself, she would become fragmented and lose a third quality, namely *integrity-as-wholeness*.[37]

Taken together, these considerations create significant subjective costs for the agent. They also contribute to a serious state of *objective alienation*. Indeed, the major problem is not so much that this person would *feel* alienated (although that is likely to be the case) but rather that, unless the world changes, she would be stranded, placed at a remove, and unable to access much that is essential to human flourishing.[38]

Faced with these complaints, one common response is to argue that act consequentialism (at least) requires each person to cultivate the disposition that would bring about most good overall. Given that their own well-being matters impartially, people will

[36] According to Richard Miller, this person would view her 'own psychology as a machine for producing good consequences, taking any difficulty in freely detaching and attaching [to personal projects and relationships] to be a defect if it reduces efficiency.' When personal partiality detracts from this aim, it would be viewed 'as an inevitable but unfortunate limitation, as an engineer might reject that an otherwise ideal alloy is brittle' (Miller, *Moral Difference*, p. 339).

[37] I take this term from Frances Kamm, *Morality, Mortality: Volume II: Rights, Duties and Status* (Oxford, 2001), p. 211.

[38] This objective notion of alienation bears certain similarities to the one developed by Karl Marx. While the proletarian laborer may not *feel* or *understand* that she is alienated from her own nature, from others, or from her labor, the capitalist mode of production alienates her from these things nonetheless.

sometimes need to entertain attitudes of partiality that make a good life possible.[39] However, it is far from clear that this settles the matter. To begin with, people would still have to undertake bouts of impartial re-assessment, at which point they may experience distancing of the kind that is problematic. More importantly, even if they were allowed to develop the *attitudes* that are needed in order to have meaningful projects and relationships, well-off people would still have to forgo these things most of the time as a result of the *substantive*, rather than psychological, demands of act consequentialism and impartial contractualism. Therefore, the problem of alienation remains intact: there will be little room for personal value in their lives, regardless of how they think about meeting moral obligations.

Against this, it might still be said that the moral life itself is a project worthy of esteem, that attachment to projects and relationships is flexible and robust, and that any challenge to personal integrity arising in this context is simply an accurate reflection of how difficult it is to lead a well-integrated life in a world that contains extreme poverty.[40] It might also be argued that these problems are offset by other great advantages that impartial moral theories have. I do not aim to settle this disagreement here. However, we should note that the yuppie ethicist can draw upon three further assumptions about the nature of morality in order to defend his claim act consequentialism and impartial contractualism should be abandoned or revised.

To begin with, the yuppie may argue that morality requires us to show due concern for the value of persons, including whatever is valuable about their nature. These features include the fact that each person has a distinctive point of view, which makes meaningful

[39] Peter Railton, 'Alienation, consequentialism, and the demands of morality', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 13 (1984), pp. 134–171.
[40] See, for example, Sarah Buss, 'Needs (Someone Else's), Projects (my Own), and Reasons', *The Journal of Philosophy* 103 (2006), pp. 373-402; and Ashford, 'Utilitarianism', p. 435.

projects and relationships possible. Alternatively, the yuppie may argue, more directly, that the nature of what we care about determines the meaning of concern for that thing. If this is true, then respecting the independence of the personal point of view may be tantamount to showing respect for persons themselves.[41] On either account, the central claim is that fully impartial moral requirements overlook important natural facts about human beings.[42] By imposing certain types of cost on moral agents, those that damage integrity and alienate, impartial moral requirements can be said to *do violence to who we are*.

Second, the yuppie may note that these findings also call the rational authority of morality into question. Because impartial moral theories accord no direct weight to reasons that issue from the personal point of view, their requirements are less likely to be decisive in all-things-considered practical deliberation. It follows that people will often have sufficient personal reason to act in non-moral ways, which is problematic if we believe that morality should serve a regulatory function in human life.[43] To perform this role successfully, morality must provide people with authoritative guidance in practical matters. In contrast to this, impartial moral requirements risk being *unworldly.*

Finally, the yuppie may hold that these requirements ignore important non-natural facts about moral agents, such as the Kantian notion that each person is an end-in-herself. For this reason, he will argue that it is a mistake to view human beings as only, or even primarily, means of producing improvements in each other's lives. Individual lives have a point, the value of autonomy reflects this, and such autonomy serves as a basic normative

[41] Robert Noggle, "From the Nature of Persons to the Structure of Morality," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 31 (2001), pp. 531-565, at 552.
[42] Scheffler, *Rejection of Consequentialism*, pp. 56-58.
[43] Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 4, 6, 101–2.

constraint upon what the correct moral theory can be.[44] More precisely, the yuppie will maintain that the correct moral theory must accord all agents some measure of meaningful choice in action. In contrast to this, the accounts considered so far should be rejected because they are *inattentive to the true nature of persons*.

These arguments provide independent reason to question the act consequentialist and impartial contractualist accounts of beneficence. They cannot be dismissed solely as the products of bias or rationalization on the part of affluent people. By appealing to these arguments in defense of moral options, the yuppie ethicist is at last on firmer ground. Given the limits imposed by the continuity constraint, the salient question is whether prerogatives or thresholds, grounded in this way, give rise to the kind of moral options he defends.

V. THE EXTENT OF THE PERSONAL PREROGATIVE

In *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, Scheffler defends the idea of a prerogative that would allow each individual to 'assign a certain proportionately greater weight to his own interests than to the interests of other people' in moral matters.[45] This frees people from the act consequentialist 'demand that their actions and motives always be optimal from the impersonal perspective.'[46] On this view, a person is allowed to perform her preferred action (P) only when there is no alternative action (A) open to her such that:

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[44] Kamm, *Morality*, pp. 227–230.

[45] Scheffler, *Rejection of Consequentialism*, p. 20.

[46] Strictly speaking, the prerogative does not place limits on morality's demands – understood as a level of sacrifice beyond which agents are not required to go. For as Liam Murphy points out, 'whatever demands flow from a principle using a given multiplying factor in given circumstances, changes in circumstances could increase the amount of good to be done, and thus the demands, without limit' (*Moral Demands*, p. 64; Scheffler, *Rejection of Consequentialism*, p. 20, original quotation).

1. A would produce a better overall outcome than P, as judged from an impersonal standpoint which gives equal weight to everyone's interests

And

2. The total net loss to others of her doing P, rather than A, is more than M times as great as the net loss of her doing A rather than P.

In our world, the first condition is usually satisfied. In order to know what the prerogative allows, we therefore need to know more about the factor by which affluent people are permitted to favour their own interests in moral deliberation.

The personal prerogative is justified on the grounds that it respects the natural independence of the personal point of view and also ensures that morality remains recognizably human.[47] In order to perform this function successfully, the factor must be great enough that people are not required to incur *serious* costs most of the time. Indeed, a theory would be alienating if it asked people to routinely endure serious suffering, sacrifice ground projects and loving relationships, or give away so much time and money that these projects and relationships were permanently enfeebled. Such theories would do violence to people and plausibly limit the authority of morality in daily life. They are therefore ruled out.

However, it is not clear that the same argument applies to even moderate sacrifices and costs. For example, there is little reason to believe that morality becomes unworldly or does violence to people if it requires them to give up non-essential personal projects, to

[47] In *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, Scheffler conceives of the personal prerogative as a response to facts of the first kind. In his later work, Scheffler defends the ideal of moral moderation by appealing to the second type of consideration (Scheffler, *Human Morality*). Given that the personal prerogative forms part of a moderate conception of morality (on Scheffler's definition), it makes sense to conclude that it could be grounded in either way.

refrain from spending large amounts of money on those they hold dear, to repay their mortgage at a slower rate, or to forgo foreign holidays altogether. And morality definitely does not do violence or become unworldly when it requires people to abstain from luxury goods or to donate money that would otherwise not be spent. Such moral injunctions are compatible with the personal point of view and the reasons it contains. Indeed, the objection that morality does violence to who I am because it does not allow me to wear fashionable cloths or eat at expensive restaurants is not really an objection at all.

The yuppie may respond to this argument by holding that it rests upon an objectionable form of moral elitism. Indeed, sociologists have shown that luxury goods can contribute positively to personal identity and that people who give up these goods sometimes experience a sense of real loss.[48] Yet, the present argument does not claim that these goods are valueless – only that they do not respond to any of the deeper concerns that the personal prerogative aims to address. We have already established that a person loses integrity or suffers from alienation when she is separated from something of objective value and central to flourishing. In this regard, the defender of luxury entitlements is on shaky ground.

To begin with, luxuries are not central to human flourishing.[49] A person may *feel* like she has lost integrity by abandoning luxury goods, but this is rarely the case in practice.[50]

[48] Russell Belk, 'Possessions and the Extended Self', *The Journal of Consumer Research* 15 (1988), pp. 139–168.

[49] Economists define luxury goods as things for which demand increases more than proportionally as income rises. In this respect they are unlike 'necessity goods', which are the things that people do not cut back on, even when income falls. On the plausible assumption that people are not wholly misguided about the things that make their lives go well, it follows from this behavioural definition that luxury goods are not basic to flourishing.

[50] As noted previously, the kind of project integrity that concerns us here is *objective integrity*. Whereas subjective integrity requires only the possession of a coherent self-conception, objective integrity goes further and requires that this conception be grounded in reality. In Ashford's words, 'It must be based on the person not being seriously deceived either about the moral facts or about the moral obligations that she actually has' (Ashford, *Utilitarianism*, p. 424).

She will often be better off once she has realigned her aims.[51] Beyond this, luxuries are also positional goods: they confer status on one person only by diminishing the holdings of others. This is a second reason for doubting their ability to ground entitlements in this context. Given the rivalrous nature of luxury goods, the poor need not respect a claim to them. In doing so, they would both allow resources to be diverted away from the things that they need, and also see their meagre holdings decline in relative worth. [52]

A second response to the argument presented so far focuses on the instrumental role of luxury goods. While they may not warrant direct protection by the personal prerogative, perhaps they are needed in order to pursue other personal goods and are permitted for this reason. By way of illustration, someone who dedicates her life to fashion may need to buy an expensive commodity in order to fulfil this ground project. Another person might enter a relationship that depends on the continued exchange of expensive gifts. And a third person might be shunned by her immediate social circle if she decides to forgo luxury goods altogether. There is some merit in the argument that a moral theory does not respect loving relationships or personal projects if it denies people the things they need to purse them effectively.

However, luxury goods are usually not necessary in this way. This is because there are almost always ways in which to realise deep personal values that are not luxury-dependent. They only *become* necessary as a result of people's contingent choices. As a

[51] For empirical evidence that people feel more fulfilled once they engage in other-regarding behaviour, see Elizabeth Dunn, Lara Aknin, and Michael Norton, 'Spending Money on Others Promotes Happiness', *Science* 319 (2008), pp. 1687–1688.

[52] Robert Frank argues that 'luxury fever' – driven by the desire to keep up with the wealthiest in society – has produced no overall gain in well-being, increased working hours, driven huge credit card debt, created pervasive anxiety about the future, and led to the misuse of funds that could be better spent providing lunches for hungry school children (*Luxury Fever: Weighing the Cost of Excess* (Princeton, 1999), pp. 3–6, 45–57).

consequence, affluent people often have hard decisions to make. But this is not a problem with morality. Any alienation that results from it is something that they have brought upon themselves.

This reply is perhaps less persuasive when the personal good in question is objectively valuable, important, and hard to substitute. Such conditions are met, for example, in the case of a parent whose child wants to possess expensive toys, because she has seen other children receive them, and mistakenly believes that the gift of such toys is an important mark of parental affection. In this case, the demand for luxury cannot be traced back to the parent's own behaviour (so long as they have tried to morally educate their child) and a refusal to provide them would imperil their relationship in a serious way. Therefore, the personal prerogative may generate a special dispensation to procure the things that are needed to safeguard relationship integrity in this context.

However, the force of this dispensation is radically circumscribed in the case of the fashionista or of the adult embedded in a luxury-dependent social milieu. This is because the objective value of fashion as a ground project, and of associates who only want you if you are prepared to spend freely, should be questioned.[53] Beyond this, one can forge vocations and relationships that are not dependent on luxury.[54] Of course, it may still be difficult to change one's vocation or to find like-minded peers. But as adults who have reached the age

[53] Susan Wolf, who is generally sympathetic to the force of eudemonic considerations, doubts that any 'plausible argument can justify the use of human resources involved in producing a *paté de canard en croute* against possible alternative beneficent ends to which these resources might be put' and suggests that an interest in high fashion should be treated in the same way (Wolf, Moral Saints', p. 422).

[54] A separate issue concerns goods that are needed in a given society for a citizen to maintain an appropriate level of self-respect (Judith Lichtenberg, *Distant Strangers: Ethics, Psychology and Global Poverty* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 133–5). Although the nature of these things may vary according to time and place, they are not luxuries. Their loss would be a serious and potentially alienating cost. Unlike someone who struggles to fit in with her immediate social circle, someone who lacked these things would have nowhere left to turn on a society-wide basis.

of reason, we can be called upon to make the adjustments required by a moral life, so long as that life does not necessarily entail alienation or loss of integrity at a deeper level.

Finally, the yuppie might argue that the loss of luxury goods in any one of these ways would be a *little bit* alienating or *somewhat* damaging to personal integrity and that the personal prerogative allows people to hold onto them for this reason. But moral options cannot be justified on these grounds. The personal prerogative responds to serious concerns about act consequentialism by allowing individuals to favour themselves even when this leads to greater death and suffering overall. Weaker claims about alienation and integrity are not sufficient to justify the existence of moral options in the first place. Indeed, a moral theory that took these claims seriously would accord personal considerations a certain primacy in moral life. By focusing only on the status of the giver, it would pay scant attention to other facts about human beings such as their mortality or their ability to feel pain.[55] Therefore, it would conflict with a central rationale governing the prerogative, namely that morality should reflect the nature of those whose conduct it aims to regulate. Thus the yuppie's claim that the personal prerogative permits luxury expenditure must be rejected in all but the most exceptional circumstances.

VI. A THRESHOLD LEVEL OF COST?

In his defence of moral options, Richard Miller builds upon an idea that Scanlon rejects, namely that there is a threshold level at which 'it would be reasonable to reject any principle that would lead to one's suffering a cost that great, and reasonable to do so no

[55] Shelly Kagan, *Normative Ethics* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 286–7.

matter what objections others might have to alternative principles.'[56] Several concerns drive this shift to a non-comparative standard of reasonable rejection. To begin with, Miller aims to develop an account of beneficence that better fits ordinary intuitions. He also argues that demanding principles of assistance threaten integrity-as-wholeness and limit personal autonomy in objectionable ways. By way of illustration, he argues that a village doctor should be allowed to spend some time with her family, as a matter of right, even when the community could use her skills to save additional lives.[57] Morality requires the doctor to treat each life with equal respect, but a theory that denied her this much personal freedom would be inattentive to her nature as a person and could be rejected for that reason.

Bearing these considerations in mind, Miller argues that no one could reasonably reject the 'principle of sympathy', which holds:

> One's underlying disposition to respond to neediness as such ought to be sufficiently demanding that giving which would express greater underlying concern would impose a significant risk of worsening one's life, if one fulfilled all other responsibilities; and it need not be any more demanding than this.[58]

In certain ways, the principle of sympathy establishes limits on beneficence resembling those of the personal prerogative. For example, Miller maintains that a person's life would be worsened in a relevant manner if she were deprived of resources needed to pursue a worthwhile goal with which she intelligently identifies and from which she could not readily

[56] Scanlon, *What We Owe*, p. 196.
[57] Miller, *Moral Difference*, p. 337.
[58] Miller, 'Beneficence', p. 359.

detach.[59] This argument mirrors the concern earlier that a person would be alienated if she were unable to pursue a central class of goods that are both central to human flourishing and also valued by her. However, Miller goes on to endorse a series of much more permissive claims.

To begin with, he argues that protected personal goods do not need to be ground projects in the classic sense. Rather, they include secondary and tertiary goals such as 'presenting myself to others in a way that expresses my own aesthetic sense and engages in the fun of mutual aesthetic recognition', 'eating in a way that explores a variety of interesting aesthetic and cultural possibilities', and 'enjoying the capacity of great composers and performers to exploit nuances of timbre and texture to powerful aesthetic effect.'[60] Second, he believes people are entitled not only to what is necessary for the pursuit of these goods but also to a further category of things that make it possible to partake in them enjoyably and well. For this reason, he believes that affluent people are allowed to buy some stylish cloths, have meals at nice restaurants, acquire decent stereo equipment, and sometimes purchase 'luxuries and frills'.[61] Finally, he argues that a person may refuse to help others whenever this creates a 'non-trivial chance' that her life 'would be worse than it would otherwise be.'[62] Ultimately, a person may favour herself whenever there is a small risk that, by doing more for others in need, she would, even for a short time, no longer be able to pursue any one of these goals enjoyably and well. The principle of sympathy, therefore, permits far more by way of personal expenditure than any of the accounts considered so far. In fact, it incorporates much of the terrain that the yuppie ethicist sets out to defend.

[59] Miller, 'Beneficence', p. 360.
[60] Miller, 'Beneficence', p. 361.
[61] Miller, 'Beneficence', p.361
[62] Miller, 'Beneficence', p. 359.

It is hard to see how Miller's principle could be justified without appealing to problematic intuitions about demandingness. To begin with, it is not the case that someone who encountered the kind of setback that Miller envisages would experience alienation or fragmentation of the self. Sartorial and culinary aspirations, and the acoustic fidelity of one's audio equipment, are not important enough to entail these consequences directly. Nor could a person who was impeded in one of these ways claim that morality was inattentive to her nature as a person. Miller's central claim is that moral agents must have some space in which to cultivate the goods that give their lives meaning, but this is not continuous with the more radical position that each person must be accorded room to pursue a large portfolio of projects simultaneously and well.

The flipside of all this is that someone who lost out on Miller's principle could press a legitimate complaint against it. When we imagine this negotiation over moral principles taking place, it is tempting to view the impoverished person as both passive and deferential. At a stretch, we might imagine she is prepared to grant affluent people, like us, permission to pursue our own personal ends, even when this means taking serious hardship upon herself. However, this view is clouded by wishful thinking, personal bias, and tacit belief in the *ex ante* legitimacy of the status quo.[63] For while it seems possible that those living in absolute poverty would not begrudge affluent people licence to pursue essential goods, commitments, and relationships, the same cannot be said for fancy clothes, expensive meals, and stereo equipment.

Indeed, even if people who live in poverty today could be persuaded to accept these claims, it is not clear that they ought to. After all, they too have been conditioned by social

[63] Liam Murphy and Thomas Nagel, *The Myth of Ownership: Justice and Taxes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 32–5

norms that deny their entitlement to basic goods. They have also often developed adapted preferences so as to better tolerate their situation.[64] What matters for our purpose is whether it is *reasonable* to ask someone living in absolute poverty to forgo an adequate diet, suffer from disease, or die so that a better-off person may pursue all of her personal goals at a high level of fulfilment. The answer is certainly no. When we cannot appeal to grounding considerations such the ability to lead a life with integrity or to achieve basic forms of flourishing, the contrary argument in favour of moral permissiveness is hard to make. Faced with the gaze of a malnourished child or starving mother, many of us would feel ashamed to defend luxury purchases. Knowing that potentially life-saving resources had been diverted away from them, and towards luxuries and frills, both parent and child could rightly feel aggrieved. As a conception of moral equality, the principle of sympathy sells them short and fails to accord them equal respect.

To accommodate this criticism, the contractualist who endorses a threshold-based notion of reasonable rejection may revise her position in one of three ways. First, she may accept that people living in extreme poverty could insist on a more robust account of what morality requires, without pushing affluent people below the threshold of reasonable rejection. Second, she could defend the principle of sympathy but insist on a much narrower interpretation of it. Specifically, she could jettison the claim that there is a significant risk of having one's life worsened simply when there is a non-trivial trivial chance that you will be impeded in the pursuit of a secondary or tertiary aim. Finally, the contractualist could argue that Miller's principle provides an adequate characterization of what it means to have a sympathetic disposition but hold that this is not in itself sufficient to guarantee that all of a

[64] Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, (Cambridge, 2001), p. 139.

person's moral responsibilities to the global poor are successfully discharged. Miller himself suggests that his principle needs to be augmented by a 'principle of nearby rescue.'[65] It may also need to be augmented by a more robust account of beneficence. Each revision gives rise to moral requirements considerably more demanding than the one he entertains. Given the requirements imposed by the continuity constraint, hybrid contractualism cannot allow the lifestyle choices that the yuppie defends.

CONCLUSION

The central claim of yuppie ethics—that affluent people have moral permission to spend money on luxury goods even when other people who could use their help continue to die unaided—is unjustified. While there is some reason to think that morality includes personal options in general, no rationale that justifies their place inside morality can stretch far enough to include the kind of choices that the yuppie sets out to defend.

The most promising defence of moral options holds that fully impartial moral theories, such as act consequentialism and impartial contractualism, damage integrity or cause alienation in a way that does violence to agents, undermines the rational authority of moral requirements, and ignores salient facts about the type of creatures we are. Prerogatives and thresholds grant people the latitude needed to avoid these outcomes much of the time. However, refusal to acquiesce in expensive lifestyle choices or the pursuit of luxury goods does not entail these consequences. Therefore, the yuppie's claims are mistaken.

Unfortunately, none of this is to say that yuppie ethics will simply disappear from the scene. So long as affluent people ignore the plight of those living in extreme poverty and

[65] Miller, 'Beneficence', p. 378.

maintain existing patterns of expenditure and consumption, yuppie ethics will still have an important psychological and social purpose to serve. The idea that morality demands so little of us is therefore likely to find a receptive audience, both among affluent people in general and among philosophers who are themselves well-off by global standards.[66]

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