

Prospective Duties and the Demands of Beneficence*

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I argue that (1) an agent can be appropriately blamed for failing to assist someone in need, even if her failure to assist is not wrong, and that (2) an agent can be morally required to assist even if assisting is overly costly for her—more costly than what the relevant moral baseline is ordinarily taken to allow. Whether this is the case depends on whether the agent has previously failed (or not) to discharge her “prospective duties.” Once these duties are taken into consideration, even apparently moderate accounts of beneficence appear to be not very moderate after all.

I. INTRODUCTION

Suppose that I could help someone in severe need at little sacrifice to myself. As the only nurse on a plane, I could easily provide medical assistance to an injured passenger, at the mere cost of missing the end of my favorite movie. Or, as an agile swimmer, I could easily rescue a drowning child, at the mere cost of ruining my new dress. Few would deny that in these circumstances it would be wrong for me not to help and, in the absence of excuses, blameworthy. But what if, instead, I lack the capacity to help those who most need my help? Or, what if I could assist them but only at very great personal cost, for example, at the cost of giving up

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my career for a more beneficent one? In these circumstances, what would beneficence demand of me, if anything? And could I be aptly blamed for my failure to assist?

A common answer is that under both these circumstances I have no duty to assist, and that it would be neither wrong nor blameworthy for me not to assist.¹ I'm off the hook. Indeed, it is often claimed that the demands of beneficence are limited in important ways by considerations concerning both our existing capacities and the personal sacrifices that we can be reasonably expected to bear.² Failure to help others when (1) we lack the capacity to do so or (2) it would be "too costly" for us to do so is not morally wrong.³ It is also often assumed that the wrongness of an action is a necessary condition of being blameworthy for it.⁴ Jointly taken, these

1. I take it that it is (objectively) morally wrong for an agent (A) to φ if and only if A is morally required not to φ . By contrast, A is blameworthy for φ ing only if others would be justified in reproaching A for φ ing. To blame a person for an action is to judge her to be blameworthy for that action and to hold attitudes toward her that are different from the attitudes one would otherwise have and that are rendered appropriate by a revised understanding of our relations with that person, given what she has done. T. M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 150. It is generally (although not universally) agreed that we are presumptively blameworthy for our wrongful actions, and that freely and wittingly doing wrong is sufficient for blameworthiness. Excuses, e.g., nonculpable, nonmoral ignorance, are factors that defeat this presumption, by establishing that even if an agent acts wrongly she should not be blamed for it. For the purpose of this article, I can remain agnostic as to what factors, exactly, qualify as genuine excuses.

2. By "demands of beneficence" I mean duties to further other people's important interests. I will mainly refer to duties to assist other people in severe need rather than to duties to promote their happiness. I will use "duties" and "obligations" interchangeably. Duties of beneficence are not absolute. They can be overridden by other moral considerations without being dissolved.

3. Whereas agents cannot be morally required to do what they cannot do, agents are not morally required to comply with unreasonably costly demands, yet they are permitted to do so. Many of those who defend moderate theories of beneficence believe that individuals have a prerogative to devote resources to the promotion of their own projects to an extent that is disproportionate to the weight of those projects as assessed from an impersonal point of view. Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism: A Philosophical Investigation of the Considerations Underlying Rival Moral Conceptions*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). See also Richard W. Miller, "Beneficence, Duty, and Distance," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32 (2004): 357–83. For recent criticisms of the prerogative, see Richard Arneson, "Moral Limits on the Demands of Beneficence," in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 33–58; Sarah Buss, "Needs (Someone Else's), Projects (My Own), and Reasons," *Journal of Philosophy* 103 (2006): 373–402.

4. According to "the Objective View of Blameworthiness," necessarily, if A is blameworthy for φ ing, then it was objectively wrong for A to φ . Ishtiyaque Haji, "Frankfurt-Pairs and Varieties of Blameworthiness: Epistemic Morals," *Erkenntnis* 47 (1997): 351–77. This view is assumed in much work on moral responsibility. See, e.g., David Copp, "Defending the Principle of Alternative Possibilities: Blameworthiness and Moral Responsibility," *Noûs* 31 (1997): 441–56; John Martin Fischer, *My Way: Essays on Moral Responsibility* (Oxford: Ox-

assumptions support the further claim that I cannot be aptly blamed for my failures to assist others when at least one of the two conditions above applies.

Attractive as this answer might be, it is, I believe, misleading. For it neglects an important question: whether agents have—and if so, why and to what extent—what I shall call “prospective duties.”⁵ These are duties to (i) progressively acquire capacities those agents have never possessed that would enable them to perform beneficent actions in the future and (ii) either preventatively limit the personal costs for themselves of complying with the demands of beneficence in the future or anyway resolve to bear those costs when and if they arise.⁶

The question whether prospective duties can be justified is, I believe, crucial to understanding the extent to which considerations of both personal sacrifices and incapacities can, respectively, limit an agent’s obligations of beneficence and free her from blame for her failures to assist. Furthermore, as we shall see, this question raises and touches on a series of important philosophical questions concerning both the scope of the “ought implies can” principle and the diachronic application of a personal “prerogative” to give less weight, in the moral calculus, to the interests of others, as opposed to our own projects.⁷

By developing a justification for prospective duties, I aim to make a twofold contribution to both debates on the limits of beneficence and questions of moral responsibility. First, I will argue that (1) an agent

ford University Press, 2007), 24–25. Some reject this view on the grounds that one might be blameworthy for doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. Here I will advance a different argument that does not rest on an agent’s subjective reasons to perform or not perform a given action.

5. Prospective duties, as I understand them, are “prospective” in the sense that they are forward looking. They require us to build new capacities to discharge obligations in the future or to assume responsibility for the future costs of projects we are embarking on now. They are not to be confused with John Broome’s “prospective oughts,” which are “prospective” in the sense that their application depends on (subjective) probabilities. John Broome, *Rationality through Reasoning* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), chap. 3.

6. The first prospective duty resembles Pablo Gilabert’s “dynamic duties” to “change [those] circumstances so that certain desirable outcomes become achievable.” Yet, whereas Gilabert refers to agents’ duty to render desirable social outcomes politically feasible mainly by changing political and cultural circumstances, I refer to individuals’ deontic requirement to enhance their own capacities to discharge obligations they lack the immediate capacity to discharge. Pablo Gilabert, “Justice and Feasibility: A Dynamic Approach,” in *Political Utopias: Contemporary Debates*, ed. Michael Weber and Kevin Vallier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 119.

7. Samuel Scheffler first defended the prerogative in *Rejection of Consequentialism* as part of a moral theory that attempts to find a compromise between the demands of act consequentialism and the constraints of personal integrity. For an account of the demands of beneficence that is a close cousin of act consequentialism, see Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–43.

can be aptly blamed for not helping those in need, even if she genuinely lacks the capacity to help, and even if, since “ought implies can,” she does no wrong by failing to help. This is the case whenever the agent’s incapacities result from her previous wrongful and blameworthy failure to discharge a prospective duty, properly justified and qualified, to acquire those capacities. Agents who fail to assist others as a consequence of culpably lacking relevant capacities may also be required to incur extra costs so as to compensate those whom they have failed to assist.⁸ One important upshot of this analysis is that, as it turns out, the wrongness of an action or omission is not a necessary condition of being blameworthy for it. This conclusion alone should be of interest to those theorizing about moral responsibility, independently of questions pertaining to the demandingness of beneficence.

I will further, and more controversially, argue that (2) an agent can be morally required to help those in need even when, at the moment of the action, it is “too costly” for her to do so—more costly than what the relevant moral baseline, subject to the limits of the personal prerogative, is ordinarily taken to allow. It can thus be wrong for an agent to fail to assist others, even if assisting would impose great personal sacrifices on her, for example, abandoning her career for a more helpful one. Interestingly, this is so even if one assumes that the agent has a personal prerogative to give more weight to her own projects and pursuits. This is because, I will show, when consistently applied since the beginning of one’s adult life, the personal prerogative either would not allow an agent to acquire certain expensive projects in the first place or would anyway require her to prospectively resolve to bear the future costs of those projects once they arise.

If my argument is correct, an important implication follows. Once prospective duties are taken into account, even putatively moderate accounts of beneficence—which postulate the existence of a personal prerogative to depart from otherwise-standing demands of beneficence—end up being much more demanding than is often supposed. Indeed, they are almost as demanding as more extreme theories of beneficence, which moderate accounts explicitly reject. My argument thus provides a powerful internal challenge to moderate accounts of beneficence and should be interesting to all those working on moral demandingness

8. Christian Barry and Gerhard Øverland have pointed out that an agent’s initial failure to discharge a duty to assist others can increase the costs that an agent can be required to bear at a later point in time in order to assist those they have previously failed to assist. While Barry and Øverland focus on failures to directly discharge a duty that agents have the full capacity to discharge, I focus on failures to develop capacities that would eventually make agents able to discharge duties they are currently unable to discharge. See Christian Barry and Gerhard Øverland, “The Implications of Failing to Assist,” *Social Theory and Practice* 40 (2014): 570–90.

and on the ethics of assistance. Notably, even those who reject my previous argument that agents can be blamed for failing to assist others, even when they do no wrong by failing to assist them, may still find this conclusion compelling.

The structure of the article is as follows. Section II focuses on the first type of constraint on beneficence: *incapacities*. I explain and justify, on the basis of a principle of transmission, an agent's (qualified) prospective duty to progressively acquire new capacities. I then draw the implications of failing to discharge this duty for both the blameworthiness of the agent's failure to assist at present and the compensatory obligations this failure generates. Section III focuses on the second type of constraint: *personal costs of compliance*. I argue that taking seriously the diachronic application of the personal prerogative, as well as the duty to prospectively resolve to bear the future costs of one's own personal pursuits that this application grounds, commits us to the view that an agent can be required to act beneficently, even when, at the moment of the action, the costs of so acting surpass the relevant moral threshold, as set by a moderate theory of beneficence. Finally, I stress further theoretical advantages of taking seriously the diachronic nature of the prerogative and answer potential objections to my argument from the perspective of personal integrity. Section IV provides conclusions.

II. TAKING INCAPACITIES AS THEY ARE?

Suppose that I cannot rescue a child who is drowning in my proximity only because I cannot swim. Since "ought implies can," if I genuinely lack the capacity to rescue the child, it seems that I cannot be under a duty to help.⁹ Therefore, my failure to rescue the child is not wrong, nor, if blameworthiness implies wrongdoing, can I be blamed for my failure to assist.

This conclusion, however, comes too quick. After all, we often blame agents for not doing what they genuinely cannot do. We blame drunk drivers for causing car accidents, which they cannot avoid only because they are drunk. Note, however, that the driver's blameworthiness derives from the fact that, at an earlier time, it was wrong and (in the absence of excuses) blameworthy for the driver to get rid (by getting drunk) of an obligation (to drive safely), which already bound her and which she

9. The principle "ought implies can" needs unpacking. I take the claim that an agent A "ought" to φ to mean that A has an objective (pro tanto) obligation to φ . By "objective" I mean that the obligation refers to what is in fact the case about A's situation rather than to whether A is epistemically justified in believing it to be the case. I take the claim that A "can" φ to mean that A has both the ability (i.e., necessary skills) and the opportunity to φ . Finally, I understand the claim that ought "implies" can as the claim that, as a matter of conceptual necessity, if it is true that A ought to φ , then it is true that A can φ .

had the capacity to fulfill, by making herself unable to fulfill it, when she could have avoided doing so.

Yet, cases concerning our incapacities to help those in need are often relevantly different. In the case in which I fail to save a drowning child because I cannot swim, I did not deprive myself of a capacity that I already possessed, thereby impermissibly getting rid of an obligation—to save a drowning child—that already bound me.¹⁰ To the contrary, since “ought implies can,” my having that obligation would itself appear conditional on my already possessing the capacity to swim that I have never possessed. Unlike in the case of the drunk driver, it may seem, therefore, that I cannot be blamed for failing to help the child, assuming that I genuinely lack the capacity to do so.

But what if I could be attributed a *prospective duty* to acquire capacities that I have never possessed, so as to enable myself to fulfill moral demands that I am currently unable to fulfill? In this case, I may be aptly blamed for failing to help others, whom I lack the capacity to help, if my lack of capacity results from culpably violating that duty in the past—or so I will argue. As we shall see, justifying this prospective duty raises several philosophical problems. The next two subsections address these problems, provide an account of the grounds and extent of a prospective duty for capacity building, and explain its implications for agents’ blameworthiness. The ultimate aim will be to show that an agent can be aptly blamed for not helping those in need, even if she genuinely lacks the capacity to help, and even if, since “ought implies can,” she does no wrong by failing to help.

A. *A Prospective Duty to Develop Capacities: The Case of Harm Imposition*

In order to see why agents can be aptly blamed for failing to do what they have no obligation to do, we can start with an easy example featuring an agent who genuinely lacks the capacity not to harm others, before turning to more complex cases involving the inability to assist.

KLEPTOMANIA. At the age of forty-four, Kleptomaniac Tom steals Ann’s watch.

Should Tom be blamed for the theft? Since kleptomania, as an obstacle to the agent’s will, qualifies (by assumption) as a relevant incapacity, if “ought implies can,” one may conclude that Tom’s stealing is not morally

10. See, however, Henry Richardson, *Moral Entanglements: The Ancillary-Care Obligations of Medical Researchers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), discussing a case in which medical researchers are morally culpable for making themselves unable to help others.

wrong (by stealing Tom does not violate a moral requirement) and thus not blameworthy.¹¹

But now assume that Tom was diagnosed with kleptomania at the age of thirty-nine (T0) and that kleptomania can be cured with five years of appropriate therapy. Assume also that Tom failed to seek a cure for himself when he knew he could have done so at reasonable costs to himself. Now, at the age of forty-four (T1), Tom steals Ann's watch. In light of this extra piece of information, it intuitively makes sense to say that Tom is blameworthy for stealing (and not only for not undertaking therapy), even if Tom genuinely lacks the capacity not to steal. But how can Tom be blamed for stealing if, at the time of the action, he does no wrong (he violates no objective obligation) by stealing?

Perhaps we should deny that Tom, at T1, violates no obligation by stealing. The following principle, advanced by Onora O'Neill, lends support to this assessment:

Principle of qualified "ought implies can": "lack of capability always counts against an ascription of obligations, *except where the lack is chosen.*"¹²

Since Tom's lack of capacity at T1 results from his choice not to undertake therapy at T0, we should, according to the above principle, ascribe to Tom an obligation not to steal at T1. His act of stealing would then be wrong, and in the absence of excuses blameworthy, because it would violate this obligation.

However, this qualified version of "ought implies can" seems to me flawed. Indeed, it is unclear why the fact that our incapacities are chosen should make any difference as to whether we can be ascribed obligations to do what we cannot do. Suppose that yesterday I promised my mother that I would visit her at 4:00 p.m. today. It takes one hour to get to my mother's place. Now it is 3:00 p.m. If I start driving right now, I can get there in time, but my car is broken, so I cannot get there by 4:00 p.m. Can we say that I now ought to visit my mother at 4:00 p.m.? Whether I impaired the car myself in order to get rid of the obligation to respect my promise or the car broke down by accident would seem to make no difference as to whether I can now be ascribed an obligation to visit my mother at 4:00 p.m. If I cannot get to my mother's place by 4:00 p.m.,

11. Philosophers disagree about whether kleptomania counts as a relevant incapacity, but they tend to agree that if it does then kleptomaniac agents cannot be under an obligation not to steal. See Peter Vranas, "I Ought, Therefore I Can," *Philosophical Studies* 136 (2007): 167–216.

12. Onora O'Neill, "Global Justice: Whose Obligations?," in *The Ethics of Assistance*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 242–59, 251 (emphasis mine).

it cannot be true that I ought to visit my mother at 4:00 p.m.¹³ This is so regardless of whether I have lost the capacity to do so by choice or chance (although this fact may make a difference as to whether I can be blamed for failing to visit my mother).¹⁴ Similarly, Tom cannot be under an obligation not to steal, regardless of whether he failed to take therapy by chance or choice. We should therefore try to explain why Tom is blameworthy for stealing, even if he violates no obligation not to steal at T1. Several explanations are possible. I shall assess them in turn.

One explanation is that Tom is derivatively blameworthy for stealing because he is directly blameworthy for failing to undertake therapy, where the rationale to undertake therapy was precisely to avoid stealing. This account is supported by the following principle of derivative responsibility, defended by Joseph Raz:

Principle of derivative responsibility: if A is responsible for ϕ ing and, if by ϕ ing one does Ψ (i.e., brings about some consequences), then one is derivatively responsible for Ψ ing, provided that the rationale not to ϕ was to avoid Ψ .¹⁵

According to this principle, Tom, at T1, is derivatively responsible for a harm that he is incapable of avoiding because he is responsible for breaching, at T0, a previous *duty of due care*, the purpose of which was to avoid harming. In the case of Tom, due care would amount to undertaking therapy. This view, familiar from the law of negligence, has the advantage of not sacrificing “ought implies can.” This is because it separates (1) a duty not to wrongfully harm others (e.g., by stealing their property) from (2) a duty of due care to prevent harming others (e.g., by striving to acquire a capacity not to steal). While Tom, at T0, lacks the capacity to discharge (1), he has the full capacity to discharge (2). If, as a consequence of wrongly failing to discharge (2), Tom ends up

13. The “ought” in question should be understood as the claim that an agent “ought to bring about” a certain state of affairs, and not simply that some state of affairs “ought to be,” in the sense that it would be good if that state of affairs occurred.

14. Some argue that “ought” does not, in fact, imply “can.” See Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “‘Ought’ Conversationally Implies ‘Can,’” *Philosophical Review* 93 (1984): 249–61. However, rejecting “ought implies can” has high theoretical costs, and, in my view, compelling reasons have been provided against this rejection. See Vranas, “I Ought, Therefore I Can”; Bart Streumer, “Does ‘Ought’ Conversationally Implicate ‘Can’?,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 11 (2003): 219–28.

15. Joseph Raz, “Responsibility and the Negligence Standard,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 30 (2010): 1–18. Raz’s use of the term “responsibility” is ambiguous. At times (5), he seems to refer to responsibility as attributability—an agent is responsible when a fault can be properly attributed to her. Other times (17), he seems to have in mind responsibility as accountability—an agent is responsible when she is apt for reactive attitudes, including praise and blame.

harming others, then he ought to be held responsible and (in the absence of excuses) blamed for the harm caused even if, at the moment of the action, he does no wrong, for he could not have acted otherwise.

There is, however, a problem with this account. As stated, it does not explain where the duty of due care comes from. Why is Tom, at T₀, under a duty to acquire the capacity not to steal that he never possessed?

One possible answer would be to ground Tom's duty to acquire the capacity not to steal on independent reasons to avoid bad consequences. In this view, Tom's duty to acquire that capacity is a duty to reduce the risk of harming others (to the extent that can be done by taking due care). By failing to acquire the relevant capacity, Tom would then violate the following principle:

Principle of risk avoidance: it is wrong for an agent not to reduce, by taking reasonable precautions, the foreseeable risk of harming others.

If, as a consequence of failing to act on this principle, Tom ends up stealing, then, according to the principle of derivative responsibility, Tom would be derivatively responsible for stealing. This is an appealing proposal, but, as stated, it is subject to what we may call "the actualist challenge."¹⁶ If whether Tom ought to acquire a capacity that he previously lacked depends on whether this would lead to reducing the risk of other people being harmed, then we should conclude that Tom has no duty to undertake therapy if he may well end up stealing anyway (e.g., because he is a committed professional thief, who will steal only more effectively once freed from his compulsion). In other words, if what Tom ought to do at T₀ depends on what would actually happen (as opposed to what could happen) if Tom undertakes therapy at T₀, then we would have to conclude that, at T₀, a Tom who is anyway committed to stealing has no prospective duty to acquire the capacity not to steal by undertak-

16. Actualism is the view that whether A ought to ϕ depends on what would happen if A ϕ s, i.e., on whether the consequences of ϕ ing are likely to be better than the ones of not ϕ ing. Actualism is opposed to possibilism. Possibilists hold that whether A ought to ϕ depends on what could happen if A ϕ s. In this view, if the consequences of Tom undertaking therapy would be worse simply because of Tom's refusal to do what he ought to do (i.e., stop stealing), this would not change the fact that Tom ought to undertake therapy, since he could stop stealing (even if he will not stop) and would have most reason to do so. For a defense of actualism, see Frank Jackson and Robert Pargetter, "Oughts, Options, and Actualism," *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 233–55. For a (qualified) defense of possibilism, see Michael Zimmerman, *Living with Uncertainty: The Moral Significance of Ignorance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chap. 3. I cannot enter here in the long and complex dispute between actualism and possibilism in ethics. By presenting the duty to acquire relevant capacities as a necessary means for an obligatory end, my argument avoids the actualist challenge.

ing therapy. No responsibility could then be derived. This clashes with our intuitions that Tom should be blamed for stealing at T1 and that Tom's duty to undertake therapy ought not depend on whether Tom is committed to stealing anyway.

An alternative option, one that overcomes the actualist challenge, is to argue that, by failing to seek a cure for himself, Tom violates the following moral principle:

Principle of wrongful incapacitation: it is pro tanto wrong for A to do at T what will foreseeably make it impossible for A to carry out an obligation that already binds A at T.¹⁷

This is a promising principle. It clearly captures what is wrong with the drunk driver who, by getting drunk, makes it impossible for herself to discharge an obligation (to not drive while drunk) that she is already able to fulfill. However, without further specification, this same principle may seem unable to explain what is really wrong with Tom's failure to seek a cure for himself. For, at T0, Tom lacks the relevant capacity not to steal. Indeed, he never possessed such a capacity. It would then seem that, if ought implies can, he cannot be bound by an obligation not to steal. He could not therefore be under a duty not to make it impossible for himself to discharge an obligation that, at that time, he is not yet bound by.

We can, however, overcome this problem by ascribing a double time index to both "cans" and "oughts."¹⁸ We can then say that although at T0 Tom lacks the relevant capacity, and thus the *immediate* obligation not to steal at T0, Tom has the *remote* capacity not to steal at T1, since there is a sequence of actions, which are personally accessible and at reasonable cost to Tom, such that if Tom starts performing them at T0 he will have the full capacity not to steal at T1.¹⁹ Since stealing in the future would cause harm, which we have most reasons to avoid if we can at reasonable cost to ourselves, and since Tom has at T0 the remote capacity not to harm in the future, by refraining from stealing at T1, we can then say that Tom ought at T0 not to steal at T1. It follows that, by failing to un-

17. Frank Jackson and J. E. J. Altham, "Understanding the Logic of Obligation," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary* 62 (1988): 255–83, 282. The "pro tanto" clause indicates that it might not be, all things considered, wrong for an agent to make it impossible for herself to discharge an obligation that already binds her, e.g., if this is the only way in which she can fulfill a conflicting, non-corealizable and weightier obligation.

18. For a time-indexed version of ought implies can, see Michael Zimmerman, "Remote Obligations," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1987): 199–205; Vranas, "I Ought, Therefore I Can"; Ishtiyaque Haji, *Deontic Morality and Control* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Streumer, "Does 'Ought' Conversationally Implicate 'Can'?"

19. The idea of remote obligations was introduced by Zimmerman in "Remote Obligations."

dertake therapy, Tom does, in fact, violate an *indexed version of the principle of wrongful incapacitation*, for he makes it impossible for himself to carry out, at T1, an obligation that he already has at T0, albeit in remote form.

Some may object that it cannot be true that Tom, at T0, can refrain from stealing at T1. What Tom can do at T0 is simply to take the necessary steps that will likely make him able not to steal at T1. But, in order to say that at T0 Tom ought not to steal at T1, it would need to be the case that at T0 Tom is able to do something that ensures his not stealing at T1.²⁰ I find this point unconvincing. First, unless we agree that at T0 Tom ought not to steal at T1, it remains unexplained why Tom would then have a duty to undertake the necessary steps that will eventually make him able not to steal at T1. Second, if we assume that an agent at T0 can only be bound by an obligation to ϕ ing in the future if the agent, at T0, is able to do something that ensures his ϕ ing in the future, then most of our obligations would dissipate (e.g., we can almost never fully ensure that we will be able to deliver on our promises).

The indexed version of the principle of wrongful incapacitation thus provides a compelling explanation for why Tom has a “prospective duty” to strive to acquire a capacity that he never possessed. This principle is, however, parasitic on a more fundamental one. Ultimately, the reason for why Tom’s failure to acquire the relevant capacity is wrong is that, by failing to acquire that capacity, thereby making it for himself impossible to discharge an obligation that already binds him, Tom violates the following principle:

Principle of transmission: if A ought to ϕ , all things considered, and M is a necessary means to ϕ ing, then A should also do M, all things considered.²¹

If Tom, at T0, ought not to impose undue harm on others at T1, he also ought to take the necessary means to that end. Acquiring the capacity

20. See Michael Kühler, “Demanding the Impossible: Conceptually Misguided or Merely Unfair?,” in *The Limits of Moral Obligation: Moral Demandingness and Ought Implies Can*, ed. Marcel van Ackeren and Michael Kühler (New York: Routledge, 2016), 116–30. My rejection draws on Benjamin Kiesewetter, “Instrumental Normativity: In Defense of the Transmission Principle,” *Ethics* (2015): 921–46, 928–29.

21. See, e.g., Kieran Setiya, “Cognitivism about Instrumental Reason,” *Ethics* 117 (2007): 649–73, 660. The principle of transmission (or the transmission principle) is grounded on the idea that oughts transmit to necessary means. This is a widely endorsed principle. For some recent challenges to this principle (all deriving from an actualist stance), see Broome, *Rationality through Reasoning*, 126; and Niko Kolodny, “Instrumental Reasons,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*, ed. Daniel Star (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), sec. 9. For a compelling defense of this principle against these challenges, see Kiesewetter, “Instrumental Normativity,” which argues that actualism is incompatible with the joint satisfiability of oughts.

not to steal is a necessary means to satisfy that remote obligation. Therefore, assuming that the principle of transmission holds, Tom ought to acquire that capacity by starting therapy at T0. It is true that when Tom steals at T1 he violates no obligation, for as soon as Tom fails to undertake therapy (from T0 onward) he ceases to be under a duty not to steal at T1.²² Therefore, Tom's stealing is not wrong. However, since stealing at T1 is a bad consequence of his wrongful and blameworthy failure to undertake therapy at T0, and since it makes sense to hold people blameworthy for the bad consequences of their blameworthy actions, then Tom can be blamed not only for failing to undertake therapy and violating his remote obligation at T0 but also for stealing at T1.²³ If this is correct, the view that the wrongness of an action is a necessary condition of being blameworthy for it turns out to be mistaken.

It could, however, be further objected that Tom should be blamed not for stealing but only for *putting himself in the condition of not being able to refrain from stealing*. If this were the case, the view that the wrongness of an action is a necessary condition of being blameworthy for it would still stand. In support of this objection, consider the case of someone, whom I will call Tom 2, in all respects identical to Tom except for the fact that, due to good luck, he never encounters the occasion to steal. Wouldn't it be unfair to judge unlucky Tom as being more blameworthy than lucky Tom 2?²⁴ I do not think so. Whereas it would be unfair to blame people who could not have behaved in a manner that would have avoided re-

22. Suppose that between T0 and T1 (T0.5) a new, faster therapy is invented that allows Tom to be cured for free in three years' time, instead of five. It seems natural to say that Tom has a duty to start this therapy. Yet, doesn't this prove that Tom retains his obligation not to steal even after losing the relevant capacity at T0? I do not think so. True, at the moment in which the new therapy becomes available, Tom ought not to steal at T1. But this does not mean that between T0 and T0.5 Tom retains an obligation not to steal at T1. It simply means that, after having expired, this obligation is reactivated once Tom's ability to take necessary steps so as to be fully capable not to steal at T1 is recovered. On how expired obligations can be restored, see Vranas, "I Ought, Therefore I Can," 201–2 n. 13.

23. Haji identifies clear cases in which it makes sense to blame an agent A for ϕ ing, where ϕ "traces" a previous blameworthy action, even if A lacks responsibility-grounding control over ϕ ing. These are cases in which "the agent intentionally executes a plan in the belief that by carrying through with the elements in her plan, she will achieve her end, a component of which is comprised by her not being able to refrain from doing something." See Haji, "Frankfurt-Pairs and Varieties of Blameworthiness," 355. Haji's account is, in my view, incomplete, for it ignores cases of blameworthiness deriving from previous negligent (rather than purposive) actions or omissions. Later I will consider possible objections to these cases from moral luck.

24. Moral luck—the idea that an agent's degree of blameworthiness for her actions varies in accordance with factors beyond her control—is often rejected on grounds of fairness. See discussion in Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 194. I cannot enter here into the details of the long dispute on moral luck. I will limit myself to providing two independent and, in my view, powerful explanations for why blaming Tom for stealing is neither unfair nor unreasonable.

proach, it is not clear why it should be unfair to blame people for the unlucky consequences of actions that they could have avoided performing but voluntarily took the risk of performing (when they could be expected to have been aware of that risk). After all, it is not unfair if one of two equally situated gamblers ends up poorer than the other as a result of losing a game of chance they both voluntarily entered.²⁵ Similarly, the risk that Tom would end up more blameworthy if, as a matter of luck, he ends up harming someone is a risk that Tom voluntarily decided to endorse when he decided not to undertake therapy. Because of this, there is no unfairness in blaming Tom for the bad consequences of his blameworthy actions.

Furthermore, understanding blame not merely as an *evaluation* of an agent's character or attitudes but also as "a revised understanding of our relations with a person, given what he or she has done,"²⁶ helps explain why we tend to blame more those agents whose faults significantly impair their relationships with us, as opposed to those equally faulty agents who, for reasons of mere luck, do not end up impairing their relationships with us to an equal extent. Even if a reckless driver's lack of consideration for people's safety may impair his relation with them and provides the latter with reasons to revise their attitudes toward him and to criticize his behavior, the fault of a driver whose recklessness actually leads to a child's death impairs his relationships with those affected (e.g., the child's parents) in a much more profound way. If to blame someone is "to hold attitudes toward him that differ, in ways that reflect this impairment [of his relationships with others], from the attitudes required by the relationship one would otherwise have with the person,"²⁷ then blame can reasonably vary in degrees according to the gravity and significance of the impairment. It is, therefore, neither unfair nor unreasonable to blame Tom not only for failing to undertake therapy but also for stealing (even if by stealing he violates no obligation).

So far I have argued that we can be aptly blamed for harming others even if at present we lack the relevant capacity not to harm them, and thus we violate no objective obligation by harming them. This is because we have a prospective duty, grounded on the principle of transmission, to act so as to acquire capacities we never possessed, when doing so is a necessary means to discharge remote obligations not to harm, which we lack the capacity to fulfill immediately. When harming others is a bad consequence of a wrongful and blameworthy failure to act on that prospective duty, we can be blamed for it insofar as we can be blamed for the

25. Here I follow Michael Otsuka, "Moral Luck: Optional Not Brute," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009): 373–88.

26. See Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, 150.

27. *Ibid.*, 145.

bad consequences of our wrongful and blameworthy actions or omissions. To this we may add that, since it seems reasonable to make people compensate others for the harmful consequences of their wrongful actions and negligent conduct, we may also be expected to compensate others for the harmful consequences of our culpable failure to discharge prospective duties. For example, in *KLEPTOMANIA*, it seems fully reasonable for Ann to expect an apology from Tom, beyond claiming her watch back.

I now turn to defending a prospective duty to overcome incapacities that make us unable to carry out positive duties to assist, beyond negative duties not to harm. I then argue that an agent can be aptly blamed for not helping those in need, even if she genuinely lacks the capacity to help and does no wrong by failing to help, if the agent's incapacity results from her previous wrongful and blameworthy failure to discharge that prospective duty.

B. A Prospective Duty to Develop Capacities: The Case of Assistance

Consider the following scenario:

SWIMMER. Gill passes in front of a deep pond where a child is drowning. Gill is well intentioned to help but genuinely lacks the capacity to do so. He cannot swim. The child dies.

Given the circumstances, Gill's failure to assist the child would seem to be neither wrong nor blameworthy. But now suppose that Gill, at T₀, could have taken swimming lessons that would have made him able to rescue the drowning child at T₁. It would then be the case that at T₀ Gill can save the child at T₁, for there is a sequence of acts that are accessible to Gill such that he would eventually become able to rescue the drowning child. One could then argue that, as in the case of Kleptomaniac Tom, and compatibly with ought implies can, Gill at T₀ ought to rescue the drowning child at T₁, if he has the opportunity to do so. If this is correct, we can then appeal to the transmission principle to argue that Gill ought to acquire the capacity to swim as a necessary means to fulfill an obligation that already binds him at T₀. A wrongful and blameworthy failure to do so in the past would then render Gill blameworthy for the bad consequences of that failure.

However, as it stands, this argument faces a complication: the mere fact that at T₀ Gill *can* save the child at T₁ does not entail that Gill, at T₀, *ought* to save the child at T₁, if he has a chance to do so. Whether Gill ought to do so seems to depend (among other things) on whether Gill can be reasonably expected to acquire the capacity to swim between T₀ and T₁. If, say, acquiring the capacity to swim would require Gill to sacrifice a limb, then Gill would not be, at T₀, morally required to acquire

that capacity. But then, it seems, Gill could not be required to rescue the child at T1 even if he could, as a matter of fact, learn how to swim, for if Gill between T0 and T1 does everything he ought to do, he would not be able to rescue the child at T1. From this it would seem to follow that whether Gill ought to learn how to swim cannot depend on whether swimming is a necessary means to fulfill an obligation at T1, which already binds Gill at T0, because whether Gill has that obligation itself depends on whether he can be reasonably expected to learn how to swim (to take the necessary means). Unlike in the case of Kleptomaniac Tom, it would then be tempting to conclude that in SWIMMER we cannot appeal to the principle of transmission to justify Gill's duty to acquire the relevant capacity. Gill could not then be blamed for failing to rescue the child.

But this conclusion would be mistaken, for the problem of circularity dissolves if we understand Gill's duty at T0 in a way that already takes costs into account. At T0 Gill has an obligation to rescue the child at T1 if and only if, as of T0, Gill's situation is such that it is not unreasonably costly for him to rescue the child, because the combined cost of taking swimming lessons and then effectuating the rescue at T1 is not unreasonably high. We can then say that if at T0 Gill's situation is such that he ought to rescue the child at T1, then, on grounds of the transmission principle, he ought to learn how to swim, for and insofar as this is a necessary means to fulfill a remote obligation that already binds Gill at T0. Also in Gill's case, therefore, like in the case of Kleptomaniac Tom, the principle of transmission grounds a prospective duty to acquire a capacity that Gill never possessed.

When would the costs for Gill of acquiring the capacity to rescue the child be "unreasonably high" so that Gill at T0 would not have a prospective duty to acquire that capacity? In the case of obligations to prevent harming others, what counts as a reasonable cost that an agent can be expected to bear in order to prevent possible harm is generally set by a standard of "reasonable precautions." What counts as reasonable precautions in turn depends on a variety of factors: (1) the *magnitude* of the harm to be prevented versus (2) the magnitude of the costs for an agent (or society) of avoiding or preventing that harm, as well as (3) the *likelihood* of the harm.²⁸ The more severe and likely the damage to others of engaging in a certain (otherwise socially beneficial) conduct or practice (e.g., driving), the more demanding the level of "reasonable precaution" an agent is expected to shoulder in order for her to be permissible to engage in that conduct.

28. See T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 208.

Similar considerations seem relevant when determining the level of reasonable precautions, in terms of the costs entailed in capacity building that an agent can be reasonably expected to bear in order to avoid failing to prevent others from being seriously harmed by external factors.²⁹ These considerations include the following:

1. The magnitude and likelihood of the costs to the agent (A) of taking the necessary precautions (e.g., developing the capacities necessary to rescue or aid others). This includes considerations as to whether and to what extent taking those precautions would likely disrupt the agent's plans and pursuits (in the next section, I will further discuss the extent to which an agent can appeal to personal costs to escape otherwise-standing demands of beneficence).³⁰
2. The magnitude of expected harm to others resulting (in part) from A not taking those precautions.
3. The likelihood of the expected harm to others resulting from A not taking those precautions. This includes considerations concerning both the likelihood of certain harmful events happening (e.g., someone falling into a pond or, say, dying from hunger) and the likelihood that the agent's acquiring certain capacities will be nonsuperfluous.³¹

29. Even if one agrees that doing harm is worse than failing to prevent harm, this does not suffice to rule out a case for due care in relation to harm prevention. At most it would prove that duties not to impose (risk of) harm are more stringent than duties to prevent or reduce (risk of) harm caused by external factors. Further, in cases of conflict, duties to avoid imposing undue risk of harm may have priority over duties to simply prevent or reduce risk of harm caused by external factors. See James Rachels, "Killing and Letting Die," in *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, 2nd ed., ed. Lawrence Becker and Charlotte Becker (New York: Routledge, 2001), 947–50.

30. Costs must be understood aggregatively (as opposed to iteratively). For example, the cost of developing a given capacity may be very small, but if the costs incurred by an agent in order to develop other capacities are already high, even a little extra cost may disrupt the pursuits of the agent in a way that would trigger a prerogative not to incur those costs.

31. These criteria can also be employed to determine which sets of capacities (S) agents ought to prioritize. The prospective duty to acquire capacities should be understood disjunctively rather than conjunctively. We have a duty to develop a set of capacities S1, S2, or S3 but may not have a duty to develop all sets simultaneously. This is because if we try to do so, we could easily overwhelm our limited abilities to learn new skills or develop new strengths. Suppose, then, that Gill at T0 faces a situation of uncertainty in which there is a 50 percent chance that, say, climate change will result in sea-level rises and another 50 percent chance that the main effect of climate change will be widespread desertification. Assuming that it would be excessively costly for Gill to acquire both swimming skills and the skills necessary to revive people from serious dehydration, and assuming that the potential harm to be prevented is of similar magnitude, then Gill would be morally permitted to choose which set to cultivate according to his own inclinations. If he decides to develop the set that won't in fact be needed in the future, then he is not to be blamed for this.

For example, in SWIMMER, if it is very unlikely (because of external factors outside of Gill's control) that Gill will find himself in a situation where he could rescue a child, even if Gill could learn how to swim at moderate cost to himself, and even if the benefits to the child of Gill acquiring that capacity would certainly be worth the costs to Gill, still, given the extremely low probability that that situation would ever occur, Gill may not be morally required to incur the costs involved in developing that capacity. However, Gill can be required to learn how to swim if and when the following conditions are met: (a) the likelihood of a child drowning in a pond is high (e.g., the phenomenon of drowning children is frequent where Gill lives), (b) the likelihood of the child needing his help to escape harm is high (e.g., there are very few lifeguards in that area and so Gill's effort is not superfluous), and (c) the costs for Gill of developing the capacity to swim, compared to the magnitude of the harm he could avoid, are not excessive (e.g., there are affordable swimming training courses, and Gill could spread the costs of learning how to swim over several years of his life). In this case, it makes sense to say that Gill ought to learn how to swim, and we could then say that at T0 Gill ought to rescue the child at T1, for if he does everything he ought to do between T0 and T1, he will be capable of rescuing the child at T1, which is what Gill has most reason to do.

It follows that, at T1, Gill should be blamed for failing to rescue the drowning child, even if he genuinely lacks the capacity, and thus the obligation to do so, if and insofar as this lack derives from a wrongful and blameworthy failure to prospectively acquire that capacity. Suppose that Gill, at T0, ought to learn how to swim so as to save a drowning child at T1 if the necessity arises. By not starting swimming lessons, Gill violates both the obligation to rescue drowning children at T1 and the obligation to undertake necessary means to fulfill that obligation (as required by the principle of transmission). From T0 onward he no longer has an obligation to rescue the drowning child. If the necessity to rescue a drowning child does not arise, then all he can be blamed for is not learning how to swim. If the necessity does arise, then Gill does not violate an immediate obligation, but he is blameworthy for both failing to acquire that capacity in the past and failing to rescue the drowning child, since this is a bad consequence of his previous wrongful and blameworthy failure to acquire the relevant capacity. His failure of rescue is therefore blameworthy, even if not wrong.³²

32. Someone may object that Gill's failure to rescue the child is blameworthy because it is wrong. After all, there is an obligation that Gill violates in not rescuing the drowning child at T1. I believe that this objection fails to consider the time at which Gill's obligation is violated. The obligation, I take it, is violated as soon as Gill refuses to take swimming lessons. However, at T1 Gill is no longer under an obligation to effectuate the rescue. It cannot therefore be true that Gill's failure to rescue the child at T1 is blameworthy because it is wrong.

We can generalize this argument. Not only ought we to assist those in need, if it is in our power to do so, but also, within certain limits, we ought to actively make ourselves capable of assisting those who will likely need our help. If we culpably fail to act on this prospective duty by failing to acquire the relevant capacities, we can be aptly blamed for our failure to help others, even if it is not wrong for us not to help. Further, we may also owe compensation for the harms we failed to prevent, at least to the extent to which these harms could have been successfully prevented, were it not for our wrongful and blameworthy past failures. One purpose of compensation is to make people as well off, or as close as possible, as they would have been had it not been for the loss for which they are being compensated (in the case of Gill, compensation may be owed to the family of the victim since the victim is no longer alive). Compensation, given this purpose, may entail higher costs than those we would have incurred to assist, had we made ourselves able to do so.³³

III. TAKING COSTS AS THEY ARE?

So far I have argued that agents can be aptly blamed for failing to assist others, even when they genuinely lack the capacity to assist. Now I turn to arguing for the further thesis that agents can be morally required to assist others even when, at the moment of the action, it is “too costly” for them to do so—more costly than what the relevant moral baseline is ordinarily taken to allow.

Even when agents possess the relevant capacities to help others, they might not be required to help if doing so would impose excessive personal sacrifices on them, or so it is often claimed. For example, even if I could change my career for a more helpful one, say, by becoming a nurse or a doctor, and I could do so without seriously diminishing my welfare, many would argue that I have a “personal prerogative” not to do so.

Samuel Scheffler was the first to formulate and defend this prerogative.³⁴ At any given point in time, the Schefflerian prerogative allows an agent to depart from otherwise-standing demands of beneficence, understood as demands of consequentialist morality, whenever it is unduly costly for the agent to comply with them.³⁵ The prerogative authorizes each agent to give, in the moral calculus, greater weight to her own personal projects or pursuits than to those of strangers. This reflects the special normative importance that personal projects and commitments

33. This raises the question of how much extra cost exactly agents can be required to bear, so as to make up for their failure to assist. For a thoughtful answer to such a question, see Barry and Øverland, “Implications of Failing to Assist.”

34. See Scheffler, *Rejection of Consequentialism*, 20.

35. *Ibid.*

have from the perspective of those who care about them. The prerogative covers pursuits and commitments that are “naturally generated from a person’s point of view” quite independently of how those concerns are ranked from an impersonal moral point of view, as long as the agent cares about them authentically.³⁶ The result is the following principle, which provides an attractive compromise between the demands of act consequentialism and those of personal integrity:

Prerogative principle: whenever the forgone benefits to others of not performing a morally optimal action (ϕ), as assessed from a consequentialist moral point of view, are less than M (the prerogative multiplier) times as great as the costs of ϕ ing to A’s personal pursuits and commitments, A is not required to act beneficently, although she is still permitted to do so.

The view that, at any given point in time, agents should not be required to incur personal sacrifices that surpass a certain proportional, costs-to-the-agent-versus-benefits-to-others threshold (hereafter “proportional threshold”) in order to help others is widespread, despite disagreements about where exactly to set the threshold.³⁷ Against this view, in the next subsection I will argue that agents may, in many instances, be required to act on the demands of beneficence, even when the costs of so acting surpass the proportional threshold and, in some cases, even when this would entail abandoning important personal projects. Importantly, I will reach this conclusion not by abandoning the prerogative as such but rather by showing that this is a necessary consequence of appropriately applying the prerogative diachronically, throughout the course of a person’s life.

A. *Past Choices and Present Prerogatives*

Consider the following case:

DOCTORING. The best way (ex hypothesi) in which twenty-four-year-old Tara could effectively help those in need is by deciding to go to medical school and become a doctor rather than choosing to continue her studies and become a philosopher. Tara, however, wants to become a philosopher. During her previous studies, she has invested a significant amount of time and effort in reading and writing philosophical essays. She now believes, and reasonably so, that studying philosophy is her most important project.

36. Ibid., 10.

37. See, e.g., Garrett Cullity, *The Moral Demands of Affluence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Richard W. Miller, “Beneficence, Duty and Distance,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32 (2004): 357–83.

Is Tara morally permitted, by her personal prerogative, not to become a doctor? If we consider the personal burdens that beneficence would impose on Tara at the moment of her choice, the answer would likely be yes. Becoming a philosopher is not just an extemporaneous desire for Tara. She has endorsed this project as her own and authentically cares about it. We can further stipulate that, once the prerogative multiplier is applied, the costs for Tara involved in not pursuing her career as a philosopher would meet the relevant proportional threshold, that is, they would be sufficiently higher than the costs that her choice not to become a doctor would have for others. Those who adopt the prerogative would then be committed to conclude that Tara is not required to go to medical school.

The problem with this answer, however, is that it fails to consider the implications of applying the prerogative diachronically, over the course of an agent's life, including the prospective duties that might bind agents at various points in time. To see why this matters, we should add an extra piece of biographical information to the DOCTORING example.

Tara, at the age of twenty-one (T₀), faces a choice: she must decide whether to major in biology in preparation for attending medical school or to major in philosophy. Tara is equally talented in both fields, and at this stage of her life she is undecided about which of the two options she will choose. She is aware that studying biology would help her get into medical school, and she also knows that becoming a doctor would provide her with the capabilities necessary to save lives. Lacking any strong motivation in one direction or the other, she decides to mimic her friend who has already decided to major in philosophy. She thus decides to major in philosophy. By the end of her degree, Tara is persuaded, and reasonably so, that philosophy is part of her own identity. When faced with the choice of going to medical school and becoming a doctor, Tara, now twenty-four years old (T₁), believes that she is morally permitted not to become a doctor, since it would be unreasonably costly for her to abandon philosophy.

Should Tara be morally permitted not to become a doctor, just because the personal costs to her of doing so meet the relevant proportional threshold? One could answer that the fact that Tara could have, at some previous point in her life, decided to study biology at little cost to herself, thereby making it less costly to become a doctor in the future, should not change what Tara can be required to do now. Something like this view is clearly stated by Richard Miller: "Perhaps I could have identified with . . . less expensive goals . . . so that these would have been the goals giving point and value to my choices. However, since the Principle of Sympathy regulates my duty of beneficence by what threatens to worsen my own life,

the limits of my duty are set by the demands of the worthwhile goals with which I could *now* readily identify.”³⁸

Since now Tara cannot readily identify with the goal of becoming a doctor and since, given her attachment to philosophy, doing so would threaten to worsen her life, even if Tara could have endorsed that goal in the past at lower cost, this makes no difference to what beneficence can require of her now. The prerogative still permits Tara to depart from the demands of beneficence.

I think that this view is mistaken and that Tara is morally required to become a doctor. The reason why, at present, not becoming a philosopher is sufficiently burdensome for Tara, so as to trigger a prerogative to depart from moral demands, is that Tara, at a previous point in time, decided to mix her agency with the philosophical project. But, at that previous point in time, the very same personal prerogative did not allow Tara to depart from the demands of beneficence. We can assume that, at the age of twenty-one, Tara was bound by the same moral principles that would bind her at the age of twenty-four. She was under a moral obligation to promote the best moral outcome, as assessed from the impersonal point of view, unless a departure from this requirement could be justified by appeal to her personal prerogative. Yet, at the age of twenty-one, Tara’s personal prerogative did not permit a departure from the demands of beneficence in light of the importance of the philosophical project for Tara, because she had not yet endorsed, engaged, or identified with it. At that time, the philosophical project was not her own yet. It would not have been very burdensome for Tara to choose otherwise. We can then say that at T₀, Tara ought to become a doctor at T₁, since the personal costs for Tara of doing so, at T₀, do not meet the relevant proportional threshold.

At this point it might be tempting to argue that, by choosing philosophy, Tara wrongly gets rid of an unwanted, remote obligation (becoming a doctor) by making it unreasonably burdensome to discharge that obligation in the future. By choosing philosophy, then, Tara would violate the same indexed version of the principle of wrongful incapacitation that, I argued, Tom and Gill are guilty of violating. If this argument were correct, we could then claim that Tara has a prospective duty, grounded on a principle of transmission, to refrain from studying philosophy. We could further argue that, if Tara violates this duty, she cannot at a later point in time appeal to the personal costs of abandoning the philosophical project to escape the demands of beneficence, for these costs would

38. Miller, “Beneficence, Duty, and Distance,” 362. See also Cullity, *Moral Demands of Affluence*, 154; Scheffler, *Rejection of Consequentialism*.

themselves be the consequence of her previous morally objectionable choice. We would have found a reason to reject Miller's view.

However, there is an obvious problem with this argument. Tara's choice to study philosophy (unlike Gill's choice not to learn how to swim) would not make it impossible for Tara to discharge her remote obligation. It would just make it more costly for her to do so. If Tara then still goes to medical school and endures the additional costs of having to study without a biology background, then she would seem to do no wrong by majoring in philosophy, for this would not prevent her from discharging her remote obligation. Therefore, while Tom and Gill had a prospective duty to develop certain capacities so as not to make it impossible for themselves to discharge remote obligations, Tara would seem to be under no obligation, at T0, to prospectively reduce the costs for herself of discharging her remote obligations in the future, by refraining from studying philosophy. She would then violate no duty by embarking on the philosophical project.

Indeed, suppose that at T0 Tara asks you, "What ought I to do?" A reasonable answer would be to say, "Tara, you ought to become a doctor and, because of this, you ought to make sure (bring it about) that, *if* after studying philosophy you will not become a doctor, you refrain from studying philosophy." So Tara has two options to satisfy her duty by making this conditional true: she can either refrain from studying philosophy and then become a doctor at very reasonable costs to herself or study philosophy but prospectively resolve to bear whatever additional costs of becoming a doctor in the future may arise as a consequence of her choice. This means that Tara can study philosophy and still satisfy her remote obligation.

But this does not mean that Tara should now be permitted to appeal to the costs attached to her philosophical project in order to escape the demands of beneficence. For recall that, even taking account of the very prerogative principle, at T0 Tara ought to become a doctor at T1, since Tara can do so and it is not very costly for her to do so. This means that, by majoring in philosophy, Tara makes it more costly for herself to do what at T0 she ought to do at T1. But these extra costs are a consequence of a choice (majoring in philosophy), the moral permissibility of which was itself conditional on Tara prospectively resolving to bear those costs at T1. So we have no reason to change Tara's obligations because of those costs. From T0 onward—as a result of Tara's choice to major in philosophy—the only way in which Tara can satisfy her remote obligation to become a doctor is to incur extra costs. Incurring these extra costs then becomes a necessary means to fulfill her obligation, and it is therefore required by the principle of transmission. If Tara at T1 refuses to bear extra costs and thus fails to become a doctor, she would then violate this principle and, consequentially, also an obligation that she in-

curred at T0. Therefore, the present personal costs that Tara faces cannot justify a departure from what beneficence requires, even if these costs go well beyond the threshold. Tara ought to become a doctor, in spite of the high costs this choice imposes on her.

But how much cost above the proportional threshold, exactly, can Tara (and all agents similarly positioned) be expected to bear? My argument supports a fairly radical answer to this question. At least *prima facie* there is no limit to the costs that Tara can be required to take on, beyond the proportional threshold. Since she could have avoided taking the risky option (choosing philosophy rather than biology at T0) at reasonable costs to herself, and since bearing the costs that result from her taking the risky option is a necessary means to fulfill a remote obligation that already bound Tara at the moment of her original choice, it is reasonable, on grounds of the transmission principle, to expect Tara to bear whatever costs derive from that gamble, insofar as incurring these costs is necessary to fulfill that original duty (nor, for reasons I will explain below, can expecting agents like Tara to do so be said to violate their integrity). Further, the mere fact that Tara's original duty was not very stringent, insofar as the initial threshold of costs she could be required to bear was low, does not *per se* limit the costs that can be imposed on Tara at a later point in time. Perhaps it would have been enough for Tara to have a moderate yet genuine interest in philosophy at T0, in order to be freed from her obligation to become a doctor at T1. The point remains that as long as Tara lacks that interest, and thus she is at T0 under a duty to become a doctor at T1, then she is also under a duty, grounded on the transmission principle, to prospectively resolve to bear whatever costs may develop as a consequence of choosing philosophy instead of biology.³⁹ This is not to deny, however, that there might be other values that could impose an upper limit on the costs Tara can be expected to bear, all things considered. It could be argued, for example, that it would be inhumane (a violation of a principle of humanity) to expect Tara to become a doctor if this would prevent her from living a minimally decent life, and this is so regardless of her past choices. The demands of humanity could then be said to impose an absolute, upper limit to imposable costs. I cannot here discuss this possibility in detail. For my argument to succeed, it is sufficient to say that even if we endorse an upper limit on imposable costs, it would still be the case that the costs Tara may be required to bear could still surpass the proportional threshold significantly.

39. If Tara could not have been reasonably expected to know that studying philosophy would likely increase the costs for her of becoming a doctor in the future, then Tara would still be, at T0, under an objective obligation to become a doctor at T1, but her nonculpable ignorance may (arguably) excuse her from having to subsequently bear costs beyond the proportional threshold.

My argument can be generalized. At any point in time in our lives we may face costs due to projects we endorsed at a previous point in time.⁴⁰ At present, the costs involved in abandoning a project may meet the relevant normative threshold and thus *prima facie* allow us to depart from the demands of beneficence. But, at a previous point in time, the very same prerogative would not have generated a permission to depart from those demands, because, at that time, that project was not yet our own and it would not have been very burdensome for us to refrain from embarking on it.⁴¹ I am here assuming that giving up a project we have identified with counts as much more costly than simply refraining from embarking on a project we have not yet mixed our agency with. If this is correct, in many cases we cannot legitimately appeal to present costs, in order to escape the demands of beneficence here and now. For most (albeit not all) of the costs we face make it, through our own choices, more difficult for us to discharge obligations that we had before embarking on those projects. Bearing these costs in the present is a necessary means to fulfilling obligations that already bind us. We cannot therefore appeal to them in order to change the requirements that beneficence imposes on us.

Note the implication that follows from my argument. Even apparently moderate accounts of the demands of beneficence—accounts that do not require agents to do what they cannot do and that allow agents a personal prerogative to depart from otherwise-standing demands of beneficence—are much more demanding than is generally thought, even by those who endorse them.⁴² Not only can agents be required to de-

40. How far back in time should we go to establish the point at which we develop a responsibility for the costs generated by our projects? The answer is linked to a difficult, but orthogonal, issue concerning when we develop a sufficiently sophisticated amount of agency that we can be held responsible for our own values and projects. There is a debatable, yet morally significant, line between childhood and adulthood. Although adults' values and preferences may be strongly influenced by their parents' and teachers' values and previous choices, still adults, unlike children, have a capacity to critically examine and reflectively endorse or reject their acquired values and inherited preferences. See Richard Arneson, "Liberalism, Distributive Subjectivism, and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 19 (1990): 158–94, 179.

41. Of course, we do not choose all of our projects. Although we may have a duty to revise some of our unchosen projects, my account mainly applies to those kinds of projects that we are able to choose or reflectively endorse.

42. Brian Berkey supports the view that moderate moral principles generate non-moderate demands. He argues that, given the level of unmet needs in our world, a policy of modest sacrifice is inconsistent with a commitment to the equal worth of persons, which those who support moderate principles themselves endorse. See Brian Berkey, "The Demandingness of Morality: Toward a Reflective Equilibrium," *Philosophical Studies* 173 (2016): 3015–35. One advantage of my argument is that, by distinctively focusing on prospective duties and the diachronic application of the prerogative, its implications are not confined to current states of affairs. Even in a better world, moderate accounts of beneficence could lead to nonmoderate demands.

velop capacities they have never possessed and to incur the cost of blame, as well as compensation costs, for failing to assist others, even if and when they genuinely lack the capacity and thus the obligation to assist (as argued in the first part of this article); they can also, and compatibly with the existence of a personal prerogative, be required to help even if and when it is very costly for them to do so—more costly than what the proportional threshold would allow. Those who think that high demandingness is not a fatal problem for moral theories can continue to adopt these accounts but must concede that they are far from moderate after all.

B. The Diachronic Prerogative, Expensive Pursuits, and Personal Integrity

In this final subsection, I want to provide further support to the view that the prerogative should be understood as applying diachronically. I will then answer some possible objections to my overall argument. Taking seriously the diachronic application of the prerogative is theoretically important because it helps moderate theories of beneficence overcome internal problems. One such problem is what I shall call the *expensive pursuits problem*. To illustrate this problem, consider the following case. Spoilt and Frugal are two equally wealthy, adult agents. Spoilt happens to deeply care about expensive projects, say, collecting Ferraris. It would thus be very burdensome for Spoilt to comply with the demands of beneficence that would require her to make a relevant economic sacrifice (say, to give 20 percent of her wealth to Oxfam). Frugal, instead, has inexpensive projects. Therefore, Frugal can easily comply with those very same moral demands without having to give up any of the things she cares about.

Are Spoilt and Frugal morally required to make the economic sacrifice? If we simply apply the prerogative at the present point in time, we reach a counterintuitive conclusion. Indeed, once the multiplier prerogative is applied, other things being equal, Frugal may be morally required to comply with the demands of beneficence and to give 20 percent of her income away, while Spoilt is not morally required to incur the same sacrifice.⁴³ This is because what beneficence requires is much more burdensome for Spoilt than for Frugal, given that it would make it impossible for Spoilt (but not for Frugal) to pursue her own projects.

This conclusion seems problematic. We should be suspicious of a moral theory that systematically imposes lower burdens on those who pursue expensive pursuits over those who do not. I call this the *problem of expensive personal pursuits* because it resembles the famous expensive

43. I am assuming that the forgone benefits to others are not more than M times greater than the costs for Spoilt of giving up her pursuits.

tastes problem in theories of distributive justice.⁴⁴ It is true that in the case of expensive pursuits, unlike in the case of expensive tastes, those with more frugal tastes are simply required to do more, but not to subsidize the expensive projects of others.⁴⁵ Yet there are good reasons to reject a moral theory that distributes moral burdens in this way.

One reason is that this theory would allow people to easily get rid of moral obligations by carelessly making it “too costly” for themselves to fulfill them. The more I endorse and genuinely identify with expensive projects, without giving much thought to the compatibility of these projects with the needs of others, the less my other-regarding obligations. Further, if everyone could appeal to the costs attached to their expensive projects to justify a departure from the demands of beneficence, in a world where very many people desire to develop expensive projects this would be tantamount to rejecting the maxim of beneficence—assist those in need, unless it is excessively costly for you to do so—for it would lead to a universally justified failure to assist. This is an outcome that should be avoided.

A second reason is that a moral theory that distributes moral burdens according to people’s expensive pursuits can have problematic distributive consequences. For even if Frugal is not required to subsidize Spoilt’s expensive pursuits, she is likely to bear costs with regard to her opportunities to form, pursue, and revise the projects she happens to care about. Were, at a later point in time, Frugal to decide to change her projects and endorse more expensive ones, she would likely be left with less resources than Spoilt to do so.⁴⁶ Imagine in the distant future that both Frugal and Spoilt develop a strong desire to collect rare paintings that are even more expensive than Ferraris. Other things being equal, Spoilt can simply sell her Ferraris to buy expensive paintings, but Frugal could not cash out her past charitable donations into funds to buy expensive paintings.

One way to solve the expensive pursuits problem would be to objectivize the content of the prerogative. In this account, the prerogative would only cover pursuits and projects that have objective moral worth. Spoilt’s expensive pursuits may not then ground a departure from the demands of beneficence because they lack sufficient objective worth. The problem with this solution is that it would not solve or even mitigate the expensive pursuits problem. Objectively valuable projects can be very expensive, and it is not at all clear that we can permissibly develop a taste for these pursuits if there are less costly alternatives that are equally objec-

44. Ronald Dworkin, “What Is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981): 185–228.

45. The term “expensive” can refer to financial, temporal, or other resources.

46. Note that Frugal’s prerogative in the present would not cover costs involved in Frugal’s possible future projects, for these projects are not her own yet.

tively valuable and that would not seriously diminish our flourishing.⁴⁷ I will return to this point below.

Taking into account the fact that the prerogative applies diachronically provides, I believe, a solution to the problem of expensive pursuits, which avoids this shortfall. This is because the prerogative principle, so understood, requires individuals to endorse responsibility for their choice of pursuits or for the costs these entail, since the very beginning of their adult life. Consider what the prerogative principle would require of Spoilt at the beginning of her adult life. When Spoilt is faced with the opportunity to acquire a very expensive project, as opposed to a more frugal one, Spoilt may not be allowed to pursue the expensive project, according to the prerogative principle itself. Since acquiring her project (collecting Ferraris) is itself expensive and costly in terms of beneficence, and since refraining from acquiring that project may not be too costly for Spoilt at that point in her life (for refraining to acquire a project one is not identified with yet is generally much less costly than abandoning it once the project is formed), then it would follow that at that previous point in time the prerogative principle itself would not permit Spoilt to acquire her expensive project. Or, in any case, it may permit her to do so only under the condition that she prospectively resolves to bear extra costs to fulfill the demands of beneficence in the future, which would in turn likely require her to revise her expensive project (this is true for Tara, since the acquisition of her philosophical project was not itself costly in terms of beneficence).⁴⁸ This means that, if applied diachronically, the prerogative would significantly reduce the circumstances under which Spoilt (and all those with expensive tastes) would be allowed to bear lower burdens than Frugal (and all those with frugal tastes).

One could object that expecting agents to adopt less expensive pursuits or to be ready to revise their tastes for these pursuits in the future violates their personal integrity and therefore undermines the very rationale of the prerogative. Personal integrity “involves a relation of consistency between an agent’s values and his actions within the structure of a unified personality,”⁴⁹ and asking agents not to adopt or to revise certain

47. See Buss, “Needs, Projects, and Reasons,” 373–402, 388.

48. I am assuming that the Ferrari project is expensive to acquire. There are cases, however, where it might be cheap to acquire an expensive project, e.g., if there is a free Ferrari-lover club where you can drive Ferraris for free. I thank a reviewer for suggesting this point.

49. Scheffler, *Rejection of Consequentialism*, 18. Bernard Williams famously argues that to expect individuals to regard their projects as dispensable is an attack on integrity. See Bernard Williams, “Integrity,” in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, ed. J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 108–17. Whether Scheffler agrees with Williams that expecting a person to progressively revise her nonharmful projects would necessarily compromise her integrity is unclear, but Scheffler does think that this would fail to take seriously the independence of her personal point of view.

projects, it may be argued, would compromise this relation. This objection, I think, assumes an implausibly static notion of integrity. The integrity and unity of our personality do not depend on having a coherent set of projects, or even values, across time. We often change, either by will or by necessity, our projects over the course of our lives. As long as we successfully come to identify with our new projects, no fragmentation of our personality, or loss of integrity, need occur. Further, while requiring someone to abruptly suspend a project in a way that is incompatible with her held values may lead to inconsistency between her values and actions, requiring her to form a less expensive project rather than a more expensive one when she is young and does not yet possess a fully formed system of values would not create inconsistency between her values and actions. If the person then decides to develop the more expensive project anyway, resolving, like Tara, to revise it at a later point in time, then expecting her to revise her project does not violate her integrity but rather is required by it. Indeed, being willing to comply with one's own obligations and commitments, whether immediate or remote, seems necessary to live a life of integrity.⁵⁰

But let us assume that revising our fully formed projects does pose a threat to our integrity because it in part entails rethinking our own values and convictions. Still, this is not necessarily a bad thing.⁵¹ As David Velleman puts it, "The mobster is irrational to commit murder, not because he doesn't have reasons for committing such an act, but rather because he has reasons against being the sort of person who has those reasons."⁵² Similarly, even if Spoilt, like Tara, has reasons to pursue her expensive projects because, by now, she profoundly cares about them, she also has reasons (deriving from the diachronic application of the prerogative) to progressively change what she cares about.

Someone could further object that my reading of the prerogative is incompatible with the moral independence of the personal point of view from the impersonal one, insofar as it asks us to evaluate or rank our projects and pursuits with an eye to the demands of impersonal morality.⁵³ But this objection is unwarranted. For one thing, it is unclear whether postulating two distinct moral points of view makes sense. As Sarah Buss convincingly argues, "My commitment to being guided by reasons is an integral part of every point of view from which I evaluate my options. . . .

50. See Elizabeth Ashford, "Utilitarianism, Integrity, and Partiality," *Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2000): 421–39, 58.

51. See Buss, "Needs, Projects, and Reasons."

52. J. David Velleman, "Willing the Law," in *Self to Self: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 284–311, 306.

53. The fact that an agent's concerns are naturally generated and valued from a person's point of view, quite independently of the weight of those concerns in an impersonal ranking, is Scheffler's fundamental reason for adopting the prerogative. See Scheffler, *Rejection of Consequentialism*, 56.

So, if I discover . . . a reason to alter my commitments, there is, necessarily, no point of view from which I am indifferent to this discovery.”⁵⁴ However, even assuming a distinction between the two points of view, it would still not be the case that a requirement to not endorse or subsequently revise one’s expensive projects would require too much deference, in the evaluation of personal pursuits, to the impersonal point of view. This is because, if my argument is correct, this requirement can itself derive from the prerogative principle, when applied diachronically, and is not an abandonment of it. I am not arguing for an independently motivated duty to direct all our projects to achieving best states of affairs. I am rather arguing that the prerogative principle itself, if applied since the beginning of our adult life, is likely to widely constrain the range of projects we can acquire or that we can develop without being expected to revise them in the future.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this article, I questioned the extent to which an agent’s incapacities and the expected personal costs of beneficence to her can, respectively, free her from blame for her failures to assist and limit her duties to help those in need. Against what is often thought, I have argued that (1) an agent can be aptly blamed for failing to assist someone in need, even if the agent genuinely lacks the capacity to assist and, therefore, does no wrong by failing to assist; and (2) an agent can be morally required to help those in need even if it is, at the moment of the action, overly costly for her to do so—as measured against a proportional threshold. Whether this is the case depends on whether the agent has previously failed (or not) to discharge her prospective duties, properly justified and qualified, (a) to progressively acquire the capacities necessary to act on those demands and (b) to either limit the expected costs to herself of complying with the demands of beneficence in the future or resolve to bear those costs when they arise.

Once we take prospective duties seriously, apparently moderate accounts of the demands of beneficence end up being not very moderate after all. Indeed, they can be as demanding as more extreme theories, which moderate accounts explicitly reject. Not only can agents be required to develop capacities they have never possessed (and to incur the cost of blame, as well as compensatory costs, for failing to assist others, as a consequence of culpably failing to acquire those capacities); they can also, and compatibly with the personal prerogative, be required to bear personal costs far beyond what the proportional threshold would normally allow, to fulfill the demands of beneficence.

54. Buss, “Needs, Projects, and Reasons,” 388.