

Singer's Principle and the 'Ought-Implies-Can' Criterion: 'Are We All Heroes in Waiting'?

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Abstract Singer's Principle is one of the best known and most demanding formulations of individual duties relative to the plight of others. While Singer's Principle is often criticised for being motivationally too demanding and thus violating the 'ought-implies-can' criterion, the empirical justification of this claim is largely neglected in the interdisciplinary literature on global ethics. Addressing this gap, this article draws on insights relating to moral heroism found primarily in social psychology to offer an empirically informed application of the 'ought-implies-can' criterion to Singer's Principle. The empirical arguments outlined, combined with the reference of a burden of proof to limit the costs of false evaluations, lead to the conclusion that acute and sustained compliance with Singer's Principle should be considered possible for ordinary persons.

Keywords Peter Singer; Ought-implies-can; Global Ethics; Motivation; Social Psychology; Moral Heroism

Unpublished Working Paper, available at: www.revolutionaere-ideen.de

Date: September, 7 2012

1 Introduction

Singer's Principle is one of the best known and most demanding formulations of individual duties relative to the plight of others. While most philosophical debates are concerned with the normative desirability of the demands made by Singer (Fishkin 1982; Murphy 2000), this article takes a different stance, looking at Singer's Principle from a motivational perspective. Is it true that Singer's Principle is 'motivationally too demanding', as various authors (Wolf 1982; Miller 2002) claim? Or is Singer (2004: 27) justified in his thesis that each of us is 'capable' to act heroically, even if most of us decide not to do so most of the time?

In order to examine this motivational criticism, this article offers an empirically informed application of the 'ought-implies-can' (OIC) criterion to Singer's Principle. The OIC criterion holds that, for a duty to be valid, an agent must be able to comply with the demands in question (Kant 1991).¹ In this way, the article addresses a significant gap in the interdisciplinary literature on global ethics where empirically informed applications of the OIC criterion to

¹ While the OIC criterion is concerned with the motivational basis of individual duties, the 'feasibility criterion' (Räikkä 1998) deals with the question of whether moral ideals can be realised by collectives. Complementing the desirability approach with regard to the evaluation of moral theories, both criteria are widely endorsed in philosophical literature. An exception is Cohen, who argues that ultimate normative principles should be fact-insensitive, having the form "One ought to do A if it is possible to do A" (2008: 251). See Levy (2009) for a general landscape of empirically informed moral theory.

Singer's Principle are largely missing. This echoes Miller's claim that "almost without exception political theorists have failed to consider the bearing that empirical findings might have on their formulations" (1992: 555).

The key finding of this article is that acute and sustained compliance with Singer's Principle should be considered possible for ordinary persons; Singer's so far undefended 'ordinary persons' thesis, holding that each of us is 'capable' to act heroically, thus finds empirical support. Apart from adding a range of new empirical arguments from social psychology to the debate, this article also develops the theoretical framework of the OIC criterion by integrating the burden of proof as a means to deal with the uncertainty of evaluations. The findings of this article are equally of practical relevance as Singer's Principle is widely discussed in academic and popular discourse (Singer 2006).

This article proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the normative and motivational demands of Singer's Principle; Section 3 offers a philosophically convincing and applicable definition of the OIC criterion. Section 4 scrutinises the motivational arguments offered in the philosophical literature with respect to Singer's Principle (Miller 2002), Section 5 explores how research findings on 'moral heroism' from social psychology (Oliner and Oliner 1988; Colby and Damon 1992; Zimbardo 2007) can be used to evaluate the possibility of compliance with Singer's Principle. Assessing the arguments outlined, combined with the introduction of a burden of proof to limit the costs of false evaluations, Section 6 concludes that compliance with Singer's Principle should be considered possible for ordinary persons. Section 7 summarises the key findings and identifies further research avenues formulated through the analytical work presented in this article.

2 Singer's Principle

To set a firm basis for the evaluation to follow, the normative and motivational demands of Singer's Principle are outlined in this section. Normatively, Singer's Principle holds that "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (Singer 1972: 231). The term 'comparable moral importance' signifies that individuals have to give to the point of marginal utility, that is to the point at which by giving more would cause oneself and one's dependants as much suffering as one would prevent (Singer 1972: 234).

Given the normative assumption that suffering caused by a lack of food, shelter or medical care is 'something bad', and the empirical assumption that the inhabitants of industrialised countries have the financial and technological means to affect living conditions in other parts of the world, Singer's Principle makes heavy demands on affluent citizens in today's world (Singer 1993: 232). And since Singer's Principle belongs to the domain of 'non-ideal theory'², claims that domestic or global institutions should fulfil all moral obligations or

² While 'non-ideal theory' deals with situations of partial compliance or injustice, 'ideal theory' assumes full compliance and is concerned with designing a blueprint for a perfectly just society (Rawls 1999: 8). Also note that in opposition to utilitarianism, Singer's Principle only requires the reduction of suffering

that the inactivity of other duty-bearers is unfair (Murphy 2000: 13) do not alter the demands in question.

To comply with Singer's Principle, individuals would have to dedicate their lives to the fight of extreme poverty. While this certainly means that individuals would have to give up their private wealth, a comparatively abundant lifestyle may be allowed under Singer's Principle if it is likely to increase an agent's overall social impact, for example, by allowing the agent to influence political decision-makers (Singer 1972: 238). Examples of such behaviour will be provided and discussed in Section 5.

In any case, even a life full of material deprivations does not necessarily lead to a low level of well-being; individuals may derive high (and mostly unintended) internal rewards from their moral behaviour (Batson 1991). The example of Suzie Valadez, who has worked with Mexican street children for 28 years, illustrates this case and shows what compliance with Singer's Principle may look like in practice.

In all, Suzie will put in a fourteen-hour day. This is no different from the day before or the day after. At the age of sixty-six, she shows not a trace of exhaustion at the fast-paced life she leads. Nor does she express any irritation at her material discomforts or humble surroundings; nor any worry about the obvious hazards of her trips through the squalor of urban Juarez up to the desolate *socosema* hills. Through it all, she shows only a love of life, a love of God, and a tangibly shining presence.
(Colby and Damon 1992: 41)

The life by Suzie Valadez is characterised by long time dedication to relieve the suffering of strangers, by accepting physical risks and by a renunciation of all material comfort unnecessary to carrying out her work. In light of this, cases like Suzie Valadez should be regarded as a real-world example of compliance with Singer's principle (cf. Section 5.2).

This section has indicated how compliance with Singer's Principle may look like in practice, that it is likely to but does not necessarily lead to a lifestyle full of material deprivations and that internal rewards may have a strong positive effect on the well-being of compliers. Having outlined the normative and motivational foundations of Singer's Principle, the next section will analyse and define the OIC criterion.

and not the promotion of the good, and that the demands are further limited by the deontological side-constraint that individuals may only use legitimate means to reduce suffering (Singer 1972: 231).

3 The ‘Ought-Implies-Can’ Criterion

To set a robust framework for the evaluation of Singer’s Principle, the OIC criterion will be outlined in this section. Defining the rationale and the parameters of the OIC criterion (evaluative standard, agency, motivational background and degree of compliance) in an explicit way, this article tackles the tendency of the philosophical literature to work with an ‘implicit’ (Griffin 1992: 122), and thus often imprecise, definition of the OIC criterion.

The OIC criterion is justified by the rationale that the concept of a duty presupposes the possibility of compliance, since “it would not be a duty to strive after a certain effect of our will if the effect were impossible in experience (whether we envisage the experiences as complete or as progressively approximating to completion)” (Kant 1991: 62). In a similar way, Griffin argues that “[a]ction-guiding principles must fit human capacities, or they become strange in a damaging way: pointless” (1992: 123).

This conceptual rationale implies that the *evaluative standard* of the OIC criterion is dichotomous in that compliance should be considered either possible or impossible, but not more or less possible, and that the OIC criterion functions as an absolute constraint where impossible duties are ruled out. Moreover, the OIC criterion only requires that an agent *could* act in a certain manner, and not that such behaviour is likely to happen. As Singer puts it, “[o]ught’ implies ‘can’, not ‘is likely to’”, adding that there “is nothing contradictory or incoherent in saying: ‘Everyone ought to do X’ and ‘It is certain that most people will not do X.’” (2004: 27).³

Turning to the *agency of compliance*, the question remains: for which individuals should compliance be considered (im)possible?⁴ As outlined in Section 1, Singer defends the highly optimistic view that “[e]ach of us, individually, is *capable* of acting impartially, even if most of us, most of the time, choose not to do so” (2004: 27; *emphasis original*). This ‘ordinary persons’ thesis where ‘ordinary person’ refers to all physically and mentally healthy individuals will serve as a starting point for the analysis to come. Should this thesis turn out to be inadequate, the next step consists in a differentiated analysis asking for which ‘exceptional individuals’ compliance with Singer’s Principle should be considered possible.

Looking at the *motivational background*, it is debated whether the OIC criterion should only apply to individuals who are already motivated to act or to all individuals, independent of their present motivational state. This distinction can be illustrated by the case of smoking, where we

³ It is only the ‘effectiveness criterion’ evoked by authors like Carens (1996) and Gross (1997) that deals with the likelihood of compliance. However, theorists often fail to clearly separate both criteria, which strongly undermines the cogency of the analysis. Nagel, for example, states that “[i]f real people find it psychologically very difficult or impossible to live as the theory requires, or to adopt the relevant institutions, that should carry some weight against the ideal” (1991: 21; see also Carens 1996: 158). For an overview of the role of the OIC criterion within the ‘empirical-normative collaboration in ethical reasoning’, see Schleidgen et al. (2010).

⁴ The definition of the agency distinguishes the OIC criterion from Flanagan’s Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism (PMPR), which holds that “when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral ideal”, one must ensure “that the character, decision processing, and behavior prescribed are possible, or are perceived as possible, for creatures like us” (1991: 32). The PMPR thus accepts that obligations may be impossible for some individuals; it only stipulates “that is irrational to ask persons in general (the ‘type’ person) to have personalities, motivational structures, and so on that they cannot possibly have” (Flanagan 1991: 340).

can ask whether it is possible for an individual who smokes and wants the opportunity to quit smoking or we can ask if it is possible for *any* smoker to quit smoking, regardless of desire. With regard to the OIC criterion, Elster defends the first view, claiming that “wanting to do X is a psychologically necessary condition of being able to do X, so that in one sense, one cannot do X if one does not want to do X” (2007: 64). Although the statement that wanting to do X is a necessary condition for action is correct, this argument is problematic; the OIC criterion has to include the question whether it is possible for an agent to be motivated to do X at some point in the future. This reading is also endorsed by Singer (2004: 27) and Huber (2008: 3), who argue that individuals should only be exempted from a duty if the incapacity is fundamental, instead of springing from moods, animosity or aversion of the obligated. It also corresponds to the empirical study of moral heroism, which examines the motivational capacities of individuals independently of their present motivational states (cf. Section 5). Accordingly, this article adopts the view that the OIC criterion applies to all individuals, independently of their present motivational state.

In addition, following Singer (2004) and Elster (2007), this article does not make any requirement about the *motive of compliance*. This broadly consequentialist perspective corresponds to most theories of global ethics where the motive of actions plays a minor role (Griffin 1992).⁵

Looking at the *degree of compliance* as the final parameter to be defined, this article suggests introducing a distinction between acute and sustained compliance to increase the precision of theoretical argument. In the case of acute compliance, the question is whether an individual can perform at least one action of moral importance in line with Singer’s Principle (like the sheltering of a persecuted stranger). In the case of sustained compliance, the question is whether an individual can act in line with Singer’s Principle over a significant period of time (such as the previous example of Suzie Valadez). Apart from offering the possibility of a nuanced analysis of human capacities, this distinction can be neatly connected to the distinction between ‘acute’ and ‘chronic’ moral heroism made in the literature of social psychology (Zimbardo 2007: 481; cf. Section 5).⁶

In sum, the research question to be addressed in the following sections is: Can ordinary persons, independently of their present motivational state and the motive of compliance, comply in either an acute or sustained manner with the demands of Singer’s Principle?

⁵ Since action complying with Singer’s Principle is less likely to be in an agent’s immediate self-interest, it is more likely that compliance is motivated by moral motives. As outlined in Section 2, an agent may benefit in the long run from a moral course of action in light of internal rewards (Batson 1991).

⁶ A further question is whether perfect compliance (i.e. that an individual always complies with a moral principle) is possible for *any* individual. While some philosophers like Kagan (1989) defend this view, most psychologists adopt a more critical stance, arguing that psychological research has to accept the “inevitable problem of human imperfection” (Colby and Damon 1992: 27; see also Flanagan 1991: 1). Since this article aims at a close link between empirical research and moral theory, the question about perfect compliance is left aside.

4 Miller on the Limits of Individual Capacities

To answer the question outlined above, the next step is to analyse Miller's (2002) evaluation of the motivational basis of Singer's Principle. The fact that – despite the prominence of Singer's Principle and frequent motivational criticisms – Miller is the only philosopher who refers to empirical literature to justify his evaluation of Singer's Principle has to be emphasised. This means the present linkage of philosophical and psychological literature with regard to Singer's Principle is a relatively new path and that, consequently, the limits of the present analysis must be kept in mind.

In his work, Miller holds that occasions of altruism⁷ typically arise in discrete settings where “altruism is a matter of a particular person taking action *now* to rescue a particular other” (2002: 118). Consequently, Miller offers a review of studies focusing on face-to-face situations between persons in need and potential helpers (e.g. Lantane and Darley 1970; Lerner 1980). In certain experiments about the reactions of individuals to other's suffering, participants are asked, for example, to fill out a questionnaire in a group setting, and suddenly one of the ‘participants’ collapses; in other experiments, individuals are instructed to retrieve an envelope from a neighbouring building, and must pass an unconscious homeless person. Various factors such as the number of participants, the appearance of the victim and even the weather are modified to see how situational factors affect behaviour.

According to Miller, the results of these studies show that people are more than willing to evade their responsibilities, that they are highly cost-sensitive, and that their behaviour is determined by morally arbitrary characteristics of the needy person like sex or race, or by the similarity to and assumed character of the victim (2002: 111-112). This means that situational factors – as opposed to personal factors⁸ – play a surprisingly large role in the explanation of altruistic behaviour. Using these insights to evaluate the motivational foundations of demanding duties of altruism, Miller's conclusion, which he calls a ‘basic intuition’, is that “people's altruistic capacities are limited” (2002: 125). He adds that people “are willing to go to considerable lengths to help – think about the Jews in Nazi Europe – once they see helping P as their particular responsibility...but, they are quite selective about who they will take responsibility for” (Miller 2002: 125). Regarding the problem of burden-sharing, Miller holds that perhaps each individual's share should reflect “each person's capacity for altruistic behaviour”, a solution that would be “in line with the famous formula ‘From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs’” (Miller 2002: 116).

⁷ Altruism is defined “as behaviour that is intended to meet the needs of others, where there is no immediate self-interested reason to help, and where there is no institutional requirement that one should” (2002: 108). Singer's Principle is evoked as the key example for demanding principles of altruism (Miller 2002: 115, 122), which may, in situations of severe need, be obligatory (Miller 2002: 109). While Miller (2002: 125) refers to the limits of people's ‘capacities’ instead of directly invoking the OIC criterion, this does not affect the substance of his argument.

⁸ The situational factors include ambiguity of need, severity of need, physical appearance of victim, similarity to victim, number of bystanders, location (urban versus rural) and cost of helping; personal factors refer to socio-economic characteristics (including education, sex and age) and dispositions (including authoritarianism, autonomy, deference, intelligence, Machiavellianism, nurturance, religiosity and self-esteem) (Batson 1993: 284).

Scrutinizing Miller's approach, it turns out that his conclusions remain unsatisfactory in various respects. First, the conclusion that demands of altruism should reflect 'each person's capacity for altruistic behaviour' is merely a different way to formulate the OIC criterion; what we are interested in, however, is the extent of this capacity. In addition, Miller does not explore to what extent people's capacities might change in the future; what is offered is only a static description of some determinants of moral behaviour. Finally, while the studies selected by Miller relate to face-to-face instances where the cost of helping is relatively low and physical risks are largely absent, cases of acute or especially sustained global altruism, where no face-to-face interaction takes place, are neglected. Accordingly, there is a misfit between the empirical evidence selected and the evidence needed to apply the OIC criterion to Singer's Principle.

For these reasons, Miller's empirically informed evaluation of Singer's Principle is of limited use, which means that a fresh look at the empirical study of moral heroism must be taken. What can be retained is Miller's emphasis on situational factors as well as the need to ensure a close fit between the demands of Singer's Principle and the design of empirical studies.

5 Empirical Explanations of Moral Heroism

This section outlines studies of moral heroism that can be used predict the possibility of compliance with Singer's Principle. To account for the different models of explaining moral behaviour, the following subsections concentrate on explanations of acute (5.1.) and sustained (5.2) moral heroism. Additionally, this section will provide analysis as to whether social psychologists' predictions about human potentials can be used to directly answer the research question of the OIC criterion (5.3).

Before doing so, it is worthwhile to deepen Miller's emphasis on situational factors by outlining the 'situational turn' of social psychology. Explaining extreme forms of behaviour, social psychologists traditionally regard personal factors like dispositions, genetic makeup and free will as being of primary importance (Zimbardo 2007: 6). Throughout the literature presented in the early half of the 20th century, people – as opposed to situations – are classified as good and bad, righteous and evil; this binary logic frees 'good people' from considering their role in creating the circumstances leading to immoral behaviour and allows individuals to believe that they are not susceptible to commit evil acts themselves. Since the Second World War, however, this traditional paradigm has been challenged by a range of studies showing the importance of situational factors in the causation of evil behaviour, both in real-world settings (Browning 1993; Arendt 1994) and in laboratory experiments like Milgram's (1974) Obedience to Authority experiment and Zimbardo's (2007) Stanford Prison Experiment. Summarising these findings about the importance of situational factors under the heading of Arendt's 'banality of evil' thesis, Zimbardo concludes that

[a]ny deed that any human being has ever committed, however horrible, is possible for any of us – under the right or wrong situation circumstances. That knowledge does not excuse evil; rather, it democratizes it, sharing its blame among ordinary actors rather than declaring it the province only of deviants and despots – of Them but not Us.

With regard to the present investigation, the question is whether, in analogy to the ‘banality of evil’ thesis, we should also speak about the ‘banality of heroism’: Can ordinary people, finding themselves in an unusual circumstance, be led to act heroically?

5.1 Acute Heroism

According to Zimbardo’s definition, acts of acute heroism must be engaged in voluntarily, conducted in service to others and without extrinsic gain anticipated at the time of the act. In addition, they must “involve a risk or potential sacrifice, such as the threat of death, an immediate threat to physical integrity, a long-term threat to health, or the potential for serious degradation of one’s quality of life” (Zimbardo 2007: 466).⁹ Since a close correspondence between this definition and the philosophical definition of acute compliance exists (cf. Section 3), the following empirical explanations can be used to evaluate the possibility of acute compliance with Singer’s Principle.

One of the most prominent real-world studies about moral heroism is Oliner and Oliner’s (1988) *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. The key purpose of this study is to explore whether an ‘altruistic personality’, a relatively enduring predisposition to act morally, could be identified as a major explanation for the rescue of Jews. To explore whether rescue behaviour was rather a matter of personal attributes or of external circumstances, Oliner and Oliner (1988: 6) compared the characteristics of 406 rescuers and 126 nonrescuers.¹⁰ Oliner and Oliner summarise their findings by the ‘altruistic personality’ thesis, which holds that nonrescuers and rescuers could be differentiated in light of their ‘constricted’ or ‘extensive’ personality, defined by a high capacity for extensive relationships, a strong sense of attachment to and responsibility for others, including those outside their immediate familial or communal circle (1988: 249). Overall, the respective personality orientations explained an important part of the behaviour of the two groups; in 70 percent of the cases, it could be used to predict whether an individual was a rescuer or not. But this also means that the distinction is “less than absolute” since “neither all rescuers nor all nonrescuers reflected one or the other pattern” (Oliner and Oliner 1988: 253).

This result can be retained as the ‘negative finding’ that no disposition necessary for moral behaviour could be identified, thus implying that personality assessments cannot establish the impossibility for a specific agent to act heroically.

Turning to laboratory experiments, researchers could question whether circumstances could be created that lead ordinary people to perform extraordinary moral acts. However,

⁹ Note that Zimbardo’s argument only speaks about a ‘risk’ or a ‘potential sacrifice’ but does not make a statement about the expected average consequences for the well-being of individuals acting heroically. Moreover, Zimbardo’s (2007: 466) requirement that actions are carried out for moral reasons is more demanding than the definition of acute compliance (where the fundamental definition necessitates no motive; see Section 3).

¹⁰ Rescuers were defined as individuals who sheltered persecuted Jews and fulfilled the three criteria of being motivated by humanitarian considerations only, risking their lives and receiving no monetary remuneration. Nonrescuers were defined as individuals living in a similar area without taking action to shelter persecuted Jews.

given the financial costs and ethical problems related to experiments dealing with extreme behavioural transformations (as seen in the harmful consequences for the participants of Milgram's obedience to authority experiment and Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment), such experiments have hardly been undertaken, as Lerner (2003) and Zimbardo (2007: 449) point out. For this reason, Zimbardo speculates that, in analogy to the slow descent towards cruelty related to the original Milgram experiment, a 'Reverse-Milgram' authority experiment could bring about a "slow ascent into goodness" (2007: 449). Participants would first be asked to write a thank-you note to friend, then to give advice to a troubled child and finally to babysit for a few hours a week, thereby establishing a step-by-step commitment to give increasingly more time to worthy causes. In addition, such experiments could use social models encouraging 'obedience to virtuous authority' and further tactics like 'identity labelling' (Zimbardo 2007: 449) to increase moral commitment. Ideally, the experiment "would end when the person was doing something that he or she could never have imagined doing before" (Zimbardo 2007: 449). If ordinary people could indeed be led to perform extremely moral acts (possibly over a certain period), the strength of situational factors and the corresponding possibility of acute heroism for ordinary people would be demonstrated.

To sum up findings regarding acute heroism, we can retain the 'negative finding' that no personal factor necessary for moral heroism can be identified, and the 'positive finding' that situational factors play a strong role in determining extreme forms of moral behaviour.

5.2 Sustained Heroism

Turning to the explanation of sustained moral heroism, this article focuses on Colby and Damon's (1992) pioneering study of the lives and development of 23 moral exemplars. In the study, 'moral exemplars' are defined as individuals who show a 'sustained commitment' to universal moral ideals, act in accord with these ideals over an extended period, show a consistency between the means and ends of their actions and are willing to risk their self-interest for the sake of their moral values (Colby and Damon 1992: 30).¹¹ While this definition captures an important part of what it means to comply with Singer's Principle, a problem remains in that it is less demanding than Singer's Principle, which requires individuals to maximise their expected social impact giving equal weight to their own well-being. In fact, despite making the needs of others the dominant aims of their lives, some moral exemplars do not give up their entire private wealth and they continue to consume luxury goods from time to time.

To account for this problem, a first option is to interpret the philosophical definition of sustained compliance in a lax manner, counting individuals as compliers even if they perform various actions that are not fully in line with Singer's Principle. For those who reject this interpretation, a second option is to link Colby and Damon's definition to the 'moderate' version of Singer's Principle. The moderate version, which is less demanding but also

¹¹ Two further and more demanding requirements alien to the definition of sustained compliance with Singer's Principle are that moral exemplars have "a tendency to be inspiring to others" and "a sense of realistic humility" about their own importance (Colby and Damon 1992: 30).

considered to be normatively less adequate by Singer, holds that “if it is in our power to prevent something *very bad* from happening, without thereby sacrificing *anything morally significant*, we ought, morally, to do it” (Singer 2004: 231; *emphasis added*). Proceeding with the analysis, the results can be linked to either of the two options.

Drawing on ‘goal theory’ as the theoretical framework, Colby and Damon (2002: 168) understand individual development as a process of goal transformation resulting from social interaction. This choice is informed by the need to gain a thorough understanding of each person’s life, how the person makes sense of it and how the interaction with peers contributes to each individual’s development. The moral exemplars selected for the study worked on civil rights and the fight against poverty focusing on issues such as food, housing and health in the USA and, in one case, Mexico (Colby and Damon 2002: 8). The group represented a large variety of educational degrees, professions, religious adherences and ‘stages of moral development’ (Kohlberg 1981).

The first key finding is that what is usually given up by moral exemplars are jobs, affluence and social status, financial security, leisure and family time. In general, however, there was no circumventing the risks to which the moral exemplars had exposed themselves or a sense of sacrifice about forgone opportunities. On the contrary, “many spoke of the hazards to which they would have exposed themselves had they *not* pursued their moral aims” (Colby and Damon 2002: 75; *emphasis original*). In fact, most moral exemplars considered their personal interests and moral goals as synonymous; the self is not denied but defined with a moral centre, which means that the fulfilment of personal goals and moral aspirations becomes one and the same (Colby and Damon 1992 : 292-295).

Second, the process of decision-making is characterised by “an unhesitating will to act, a disavowal for fear and doubt, and a simplicity of response”, the most striking fact being the “lack of attention to the risks and sacrifices that accompany their moral actions” (Colby and Damon 1992: 70). This means that abstract and highly rationalistic processes of decision-making, often evoked in psychological (Kohlberg 1981) and philosophical literature (Unger 1996; Mele 2003) are replaced by a ‘sense of great certainty’ and ‘feelings of moral necessity’ (Colby and Damon 1992: 68-69).

Third, moral exemplars rely on a variety of psychological mechanisms to maintain a positive attitude towards life and their present challenges (Colby and Damon 1992: 271, 291). Mental discipline is used to rule out feelings of fear, to ignore material consequences and to single-mindedly focus on a given activity where the individual has a significant degree of control. In the best case, such attitudes may lead to a ‘flow’ experience (Csikszentmihalyi 2002) even under the most adverse conditions.

Reflecting about the nature of these findings, Colby and Damon highlight that “unity between the self and morality” is the highly exceptional feature of moral exemplars (1992: 301). This exceptionality is, however, one of degree rather than of kind, being “an extreme version of a developmental process that accounts for self-formation and moral growth in every normal individual” (Colby and Damon 1992). This statement, to be referred to as the ‘developmental continuity’ thesis, will be of primary importance for the possibility evaluation discussed in upcoming sections.

5.3 Scientific Predictions and the OIC Criterion

At this point, it is interesting to examine whether social psychologists also make predictions about the potential of ordinary persons to act heroically and whether these predictions give a direct answer to the research question of this article.

Initial responses to this examination are positive. Regarding acute heroism, Oliner and Oliner argue that the courage shown by rescuers “is not only the province of the independent and the intellectually superior thinkers but that it is available to all through the virtues of connectedness, commitment, and the quality of relationships developed in ordinary human interaction” (1988: 261). In a similar way, Zimbardo concludes that

[t]he banality of evil shares much with the banality of heroism. Neither attribute is the direct consequence of unique dispositional tendencies; there are no special inner attributes of either pathology or goodness residing within the human psyche or the human genome. Both conditions emerge in particular situations at particular times when situational forces play a compelling role in moving particular individuals across a decisional line from inaction to action.
(2007: 485)

Zimbardo’s ‘banality of heroism’ thesis – holding that heroism should become an “egalitarian attribute of human nature rather than a feature of the elected few” (2007: 448) – is equally supported by the autobiographical statements of heroic individuals who report that what they did was nothing special; Nelson Mandela, for example, claimed that he was “not a messiah, but an ordinary man who had become a leader because of extraordinary circumstances” (quoted in Zimbardo 2007: 483). Similarly, Colby and Damon come to the optimistic evaluation that “[e]nduring moral commitment is available for all to acquire” (1992: 4).

The question remains: Can these predictions be used to directly evaluate the possibility of compliance with Singer’s Principle? Unfortunately, further analysis of these texts shows that these predictions cannot directly be used in his type of evaluation, since there are significant differences with regard to the evaluative standard. While Zimbardo’s ‘banality of heroism’ claims that each individual has the *potential* to act heroically, the actualisation of this potential strongly depends on the occurrence of supportive situational factors. Accordingly, the statement that acute heroism is ‘possible’ only signifies that the chances of a heroic action being carried out by a specific individual are at least unequal to zero (given the assumption that the chances that an individual will find herself confronted with supportive situational factors are unequal to zero). Alternatively, the OIC criterion requires that an individual *can* comply with a moral obligation at any point or period of time, independent of situational factors (cf. Section 3). Similarly, while Colby and Damon ascribe the potential to become a moral hero to each individual, it remains unclear whether specific circumstance may be necessary to initiate a developmental process and to determine at what stage of development the individual has achieved the capacity to show sustained moral commitment.

Overall, these comparisons highlight the different emphases of social psychologists and philosophers with regard to the prediction of extreme forms of moral behaviour. On the one hand, social psychologists are interested in the effects of dispositional and situation factors “moving particular individuals across a decisional line from inaction to action” (Zimbardo

2007: 485); on the other, the philosophical interest lies on the potential and limits of individuals as autonomous decision-makers (Mele 2003). As a consequence, the scientific predictions outlined cannot be used to directly replace philosophical possibility evaluations.

6 Uncertainty and the Burden of Proof

Although the empirical explanations outlined increase our understanding of moral heroism, possibility evaluations remain uncertain. This section thus suggests introducing the device of a burden of proof to limit the costs of false possibility evaluations.

In general, a burden of proof is “an allocation made in reasoned dialogue which sets a strength (weight) of argument required by one side to reasonably persuade the other side” (Walton 1988: 233). If one has the burden of proof on their side, it becomes their responsibility to provide evidence and support for their argument; this, then, relieves the other side, lightening the evidence required for their rebuttal. Summarising the general assignment procedure, Hahn and Oaksford state that the threshold of the burden of proof is the point where “the combination of subjective degree of belief (expressed as a probability) associated with action outweighs that associated with inaction”: consequently, it can be set “anywhere along the continuum from ‘absolutely convinced that not’ to absolute certainty with regard to the relevant beliefs” (2007: 44-45).¹² The burden of proof thus functions as a device that maximises the expected outcome, or limits the negative effects of false evaluations, under conditions of uncertainty, thereby ending ongoing theoretical or practical debates despite a lack of ‘conclusive evidence’ (Räikkä 2004b: 173).

In the literature on global ethics, the uncertainty of possibility evaluations and the burden of proof are only rarely discussed. One of the few examples is Elster, who suggests that, when considering the classification of all uncertain cases as being possible or impossible, it should be asked “which of these solutions will actually be more efficient in promoting the performance or moral duties” (2007: 73). But merely alluding to the efficiency of duties is problematic, since a variety of normative considerations have to be taken into account as show throughout the following discussion.

In the case of Singer’s Principle, the costs of a *false positive evaluation*¹³ are that the propagation of impossible moral obligations questions the very idea that the concept of duty, presupposing the possibility of compliance (cf. Section 3). Furthermore, demanding the impossible is unfair towards individuals who may try to comply with duty and necessarily fail. Finally, demanding the impossible may demotivate moral behaviour (Elster 2007: 72-73).

¹² In criminal trials, for example, the burden of proof is assigned to the prosecutor who has to prove guilt ‘beyond reasonable doubt’; the rationale is that it is a ‘greater injustice’ to convict an innocent person than to let a guilty person go free (Walton 1988: 244).

¹³ A false positive evaluation means that an obligation to comply with Singer’s Principle is assigned to an agent *despite* that fact that compliance is indeed *impossible* for the agent. An example is the assignment of the obligation to save all passengers of a sinking ship to an individual who cannot swim and has no other means to assist the drowning persons. *Vice versa*, a false negative evaluation signifies that an agent is exempted despite compliance being indeed possible.

Alternatively, a *false negative evaluation* leads to unfulfilled obligations – and thus unrelieved suffering – since an agent is less likely to act if she believes that there is no moral obligation to do so. In addition, an agent may feel disrespected by being considered too ordinary or weak to comply with Singer’s Principle.

Comparing these costs is a highly complex endeavour. From a normative perspective, how conceptual costs, considerations of fairness and consequentialist costs should be weighed remains an open discussion. Additionally, the empirical calculation of each expected cost is an equally challenging task; each of the costs is likely to vary with respect to different people, situations, cultures and periods.

Being aware of these difficulties, this article finds that the costs of a false negative evaluation should be seen as being relatively higher, which means that a moderately strong burden of proof is assigned to those who challenge the possibility of compliance.¹⁴ A first reason for this assignment is that, given the extent of suffering from absolute poverty in the world today, the costs of unfulfilled obligations should be considered very high. This reason gains further strength in light of the ‘vulnerability presumption principle’, which holds that the interests of individuals should matter more the worse-off they are and that one should, therefore, show “a willingness to err in favour of the acutely deprived subjects” (Barry 2005: 221). Finally, the fact that social psychologists expect positive predictions to motivate moral action also supports this assignment. Zimbardo, for example, argues that propagating the message that every person is a “hero in waiting who will be counted upon to do the right thing when the moment of decision comes” is likely to foster heroic behaviour (2007: 486; see also Oliner and Oliner 1998 and Colby and Damon 1992: 4).

Having assigned the burden of proof, we can now turn to the evaluation of Singer’s ‘ordinary persons’ thesis. The preceding analysis leads to some key insights worthy of further discussion; most notably, these are that no necessary dispositional determinants could be identified, that situational factors play a primordial role in explaining moral behaviour (as seen in the ‘banality of heroism’ thesis) and that the ‘unity between the self and morality’, reachable for all individuals, is the most important explanation of sustained moral heroism (Colby and Damon 1992). On the basis of these empirical arguments, the optimistic predictions made by social psychologists about individual capacities and the assignment of the burden of proof, this article concludes that ordinary persons should be considered to be able to comply in a sustained – and therefore acute – manner with the obligations of Singer’s Principle when Singer’s Principle is interpreted in a lax manner.

This conclusion has to be complemented by three further specifications. First, despite the enlarged empirical basis achieved by this article, the evaluation remains to a certain degree uncertain since it cannot be derived in a clear-cut manner from empirical findings. As this article has argued, the negative effects of the remaining uncertainty should be limited by introducing the device of a burden of proof. Furthermore, apart from having to acknowledge the general limits of the analysis in question, this points to the need of further research linking

¹⁴ Note that the stronger the burden of proof is, the less certain a philosopher has to be that her evaluation is correct (it might be sufficient, for example, to think that there is a 40 percent chance that a given person can indeed comply to assign the obligation to do so).

empirical research findings to the evaluation of Singer's Principle (as well as of other demanding principles). Second, it is more likely that the evaluation is correct for the less demanding case of acute compliance than for the more demanding case of sustained compliance; this is true since it is less difficult for an agent to act in an extremely moral way over a shorter period. Third, while the general evaluation refers to the capacities of ordinary persons, differentiated evaluations could be carried out with regard to the capacities of specific individuals. In this respect, the probability that a given individual can comply positively depends on certain dispositional and situational factors like an 'extensive' personality (Oliner and Oliner 1988).

7 Conclusion

In sum, this article has provided a philosophically convincing and empirically applicable definition of the OIC criterion, allowing for an improved understanding of the similarities and differences between the philosophical and empirical perspectives on moral heroism. Furthermore, the introduction of a distinction between two degrees of compliance (acute and sustained) and the discussion of the standard of possibility evaluations have proved beneficial to the analysis and to the greater literature regarding the OIC criterion. Finally, the key explanatory findings and the predictions outlined by social psychologists (Oliner and Oliner 1988; Colby and Damon 1992; Zimbardo 2007) have significantly increased understandings of the conditions of moral heroism and the ability to evaluate the capacities of individuals. Combining these insights, this analysis has led to the key finding that acute and sustained compliance with Singer's Principle (interpreted in a lax manner or with regard to the moderate version) should be considered possible for ordinary persons; Singer's so far undefended 'ordinary persons' thesis, holding that each of us is 'capable' to act heroically, thus finds empirical support.

Offering an empirically informed application of the OIC criterion to Singer's Principle, this article has contributed to the contemporary interdisciplinary literature on global ethics by connecting different strands from the philosophical and empirical literature in a new and innovative way. To further reduce the uncertainty of possibility evaluations, future projects may take the research question of the OIC criterion defined in this article as a starting point; such a basis is especially important for social scientists more interested in the empirical application than in the philosophical definition of metaethical criteria. It would be especially interesting to explore how differentiated possibility evaluations (according to the dispositions of individuals) could be carried out and how the conception and calculation of costs related to the burden of proof could be improved. To carry out these tasks, the creation of interdisciplinary research groups combining the explanatory understanding and methodological skills from various disciplines appears to be a promising endeavour.

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