

Our duties to the poor

In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” Peter Singer discusses the example of refugees in Bengal (in 1971, at the time of writing) and says the following:

What are the moral implications of a situation like this? In what follows, I shall argue that the way people in relatively affluent countries react to a situation like that in Bengal cannot be justified; indeed, the whole way we look at moral issues—our moral conceptual scheme—needs to be altered, and with it, the way of life that has come to be taken for granted in our society.

To understand Singer's position and argument, we need to do two things: (1) understand what sorts of situations he is talking about, and (2) understand what he thinks we are morally obliged to do in response to such situations.

Singer describes the situation in Bengal as follows:

As I write this, in November 1971, people are dying in East Bengal from lack of food, shelter, and medical care. The suffering and death that are occurring there now are not inevitable, not unavoidable in any fatalistic sense of the term. Constant poverty, a cyclone, and a civil war have turned at least nine million people into destitute refugees; nevertheless, it is not beyond the capacity of the richer nations to give enough assistance to reduce any further suffering to very small proportions. The decisions and actions of human beings can prevent this kind of suffering.

Singer emphasizes two aspects of this situation: that it involves massive human suffering, and that it is, at least in large part, avoidable.

Singer makes a persuasive case that the situation in Bengal in 1971 was avoidable, and did involve massive human suffering. That might lead us to ask: are there any situations now, in 2008, which are like this -- both in that they involve massive human suffering, and that they are in large part avoidable?

The following data from the United Nations and UNICEF suggests that there are:

Roughly 25000 people per day, or just over 1000 people an hour die of starvation.

About 25,000 children per day under the age of 5 die. More than half of these are due to the following preventable causes: depleted immune systems due to chronic malnourishment, lack of safe water and sanitation, and insect-borne disease.

2.2 million people per year, or 6000 people per day, die from drinking contaminated water due to lack of access to safe drinking water.

Each of these situations involves massive human suffering, and each seems, in large part, preventable.

So it seems that there are situations in the world which both involve massive suffering and which are, in large part, avoidable. The main point of Singer's article is to defend a particular view about what we ought to do in response to such situations; and his argument depends on a general principle about right action:

My next point is this: 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. By "without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance" I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent. This principle seems almost as uncontroversial as the last one. It requires us only to prevent what is bad, and not to promote what is good, and it requires this of us only when we can do it without sacrificing anything that is, from the moral point of view, comparably important. I could even, as far as the application of my argument to the Bengal emergency is concerned, qualify the point so as to make it: 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. An application of this principle would be as follows: if I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing.

In this passage, Singer states two principles, which might be stated as follows:

The strong Singer principle

One always ought to prevent something bad from happening if one can do so without sacrificing anything with moral importance comparable to the thing to be prevented.

The moderate Singer principle

One always ought to prevent something bad from happening if one can do so without sacrificing anything of any moral importance.

Why reflection on examples seems to support these principles.

Singer thinks that even the Moderate Principle is enough for his argument, but that the Strong Principle is true as well. Let's suppose for now that these principles are true -- we'll consider some objections later -- and ask what follows about what we ought to do in our present situation. Here is what he says:

The outcome of this argument is that our traditional moral categories are upset. The traditional distinction between duty and charity cannot be drawn, or at least, not in the place we normally draw it. Giving money to the Bengal Relief Fund is regarded as an act of charity in our society. The bodies which collect money are known as "charities." These organizations see themselves in this way—if you send them a check, you will be thanked for your "generosity." Because giving money is regarded as an act of charity, it is not thought that there is anything wrong with not giving. The charitable man may be praised, but the man who is not charitable is not condemned. People do not feel in any way ashamed or guilty about spending money on new clothes or a new car instead of giving it to famine relief. (Indeed, the alternative does not occur to them.) This way of looking at the matter cannot be justified. When we buy new clothes not to keep ourselves warm but to look "well-dressed" we are not providing for any important need. We would not be sacrificing anything significant if we were to continue to wear our old clothes, and give the money to famine relief. By doing so, we would be preventing another person from starving. It follows from what I have said earlier that we ought to give money away, rather than spend it on clothes which we do not need to keep us warm. To do so is not charitable, or generous.

This raises the question: how much should we give?

The answer to this question depends on which of Singer's two principles we accept:

The strong Singer principle

One always ought to prevent something bad from happening if one can do so without sacrificing anything with moral importance comparable to the thing to be prevented.

The moderate Singer principle

One always ought to prevent something bad from happening if one can do so without sacrificing anything of any moral importance.

How much should we give if the Strong Principle is true? How about the Moderate Principle?

The cost of feeding one child per day is (as of March 2008, on average) about \$0.25. Given this, what does the strong Principle imply about the decision to go to Notre Dame for one year?



Let's now consider some objections to Singer's argument:

- “If everyone gave to alleviate world hunger, it would only take very little money per person. So why should I give more?”
- “Giving money to alleviate hunger only delays the problem, since doing so would only lead to further population growth, which in turn will just lead to more starvation.”
- “If everyone gave the amount Singer recommends to alleviate world poverty -- even if we assume only the Moderate Principle -- rich country economies would collapse. And then there would be no one in a position to help with future disasters.”

To evaluate this last objection, it might help to know some facts about world economic aid: the United Nations suggests that developed nations should contribute 0.7% of their gross national product to assist developing countries. Countries which meet this target include Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands. A more typical nation is Japan, which contributes roughly 0.3%. The United States is one of the worst contributors of rich nations, at 0.1% of gross national product. Americans give more than most others in private contributions, but the total national contribution, including private contributions, is still only about 0.15%.

One common response to Singer's argument is that its conclusions are so radical, that it just have gone wrong somewhere. One of the most interesting suggestions Singer makes in the article is the idea that his suggestions only seem radical from the point of view of our society, and that many others throughout history would have regarded his suggestions as far from radical.

This suggestion gets powerful support from the following quote from Thomas Aquinas, cited by Singer:

Now, according to the natural order instituted by divine providence, material goods are provided for the satisfaction of human needs. Therefore the division and appropriation of property, which proceeds from human law, must not hinder the satisfaction of man's necessity from such goods. Equally, whatever a man has in superabundance is owed, of natural right, to the poor for their sustenance. So Ambrosius says, and it is also to be found in the *Decretum Gratiani*: "The bread which you withhold belongs to the hungry; the clothing you shut away, to the naked; and the money you bury in the earth is the redemption and freedom of the penniless."<sup>4</sup>

It is an interesting fact about ethics that moral claims which seem obvious from the perspective of one society may seem outlandish from the perspective of another. The example of slavery.