

What are our duties
to the poor?

So far we have been discussing a number of general questions about what it means to say that actions are right or wrong, and whether anyone is ever morally responsible for their actions.

Beginning today we will be discussing more “applied” questions. We will be asking what makes one action, rather than another, the right thing to do -- in other words, what standard should we use to judge right from wrong?

Here is one very simple, but also very plausible, answer to this question:

Consequentialism

An action is the right thing to do in certain circumstances if, of all the actions available in those circumstances, it would produce the best outcome.

Consequentialism says, simply, that we should judge actions by their consequences. Whatever will lead to the best overall outcome is what one ought to do.

A slightly different way to get the general idea is this: if I am deciding between doing action A and action B, I should try to figure out what the world would be like if I did A, and what the world would be like if I did B; and I should do whichever action would lead to the better world.

A natural objection is: wouldn't this approach to my actions lead to me spending all of my time figuring out the consequences of my actions? And wouldn't this be a very bad thing to do?

How should the consequentialist respond?

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A more serious concern about consequentialism, as stated, is that it does not really give us much help in deciding which actions are the right actions to perform; and this is because it does not tell us what makes one outcome **better than** another. And without this information, consequentialism simply does not tell us what is right and what is wrong.

This point shows that each consequentialist owes us some way of telling which outcomes are better than others. Next time we will be discussing this question in some detail. But for today, we will just stick with one basic consequence of consequentialism, which does not make many controversial assumptions about what makes some outcomes better than others.

This consequence involves our moral obligations toward the poor. In his 1971 paper “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” Peter Singer discusses the contemporary example of refugees in Bengal and said 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.

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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.



There seem to be two relevant aspects of the situation in Bengal: that it involves massive human suffering, and that it is, at least in large part, avoidable.

This leads to a natural question: are there now, in 2009, any situations of this sort -- in other words, situations that both involve massive human suffering and are avoidable?

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

- Every 3.6 seconds, someone dies of starvation. Usually it is a child under the age of 5.
- About 25,000 children under the age of 5 die every day. 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 6,000 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.

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Here is what Singer says:

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.

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

The strong 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 principle

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

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One thing to note is that each of these principles seem to be consequences of Consequentialism; if Consequentialism is true, then so are both of Singer's principles.

Also, as the names of the principles indicate, the strong principle implies the moderate principle, but not the reverse.

But we can leave general questions about Consequentialism to the side for now. Do either, or both, of Singer's principles seem plausible to you?

Singer thinks that both of these principles are true. He also thinks that they have profound consequences for the way we ought to live our lives.

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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.

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In this passage, Singer is discussing the consequences of these principles for our responses to situations like those described above -- in which there is massive and avoidable suffering. As he says, these principles imply that giving to alleviate these situations is a moral obligation.

How much is one morally required to give, if the strong principle is true?

How much is one morally required to give, if only the moderate principle is true?

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

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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%.

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A different sort of response to Singer's argument is that its conclusions are so radical, that it just **must** 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.

It may still be thought that my conclusions are so wildly out of line with what everyone else thinks and has always thought that there must be something wrong with the argument somewhere. In order to show that my conclusions, while certainly contrary to contemporary Western moral standards, would not have seemed so extraordinary at other times and in other places, I would like to quote a passage from a writer not normally thought of as a way-out radical, Thomas Aquinas.

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."⁴

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Singer's idea is that contemporary Western attitudes toward the poor of the third world are akin in some ways to the attitudes of slave owners at different times throughout history. At many times throughout history the idea that slave-owning should be completely abolished would have been regarded as radical. (It might even have been claimed that the world economy could not survive without slaves.) But we now regard the view that slave-owning is morally prohibited as not just true, but obvious.

Could the same situation eventually come to pass with Singer's views about what we are morally obliged to give to the poor?