



How should I live?

I should give
most of my
possessions 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 what general rule might determine whether an action is right or wrong.

Today, rather than asking these questions, we will address a particular moral question: the question of what, if anything, the affluent owe to the poor.

This is the topic of Peter Singer's 1971 paper "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." Singer describes the contemporary example of refugees in Bengal 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.

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 today any situations of this sort — in other words, situations that both involve massive human suffering and are avoidable?

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.

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.

About 29,000 children under the age of 5 die every day. More than 70% 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.

300 million children go to bed hungry every day.

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

The next question is: what are our moral obligations, given this fact?
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.

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.

Can you think of any examples where we seem to take for granted principles of this sort?

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:

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.

It is natural to think of Singer's view as extremely radical. But, as Singer points out, 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

It is also worth pointing out that, for most of human history, moral opposition to slavery would have seemed extremely radical.

Let's look at a concrete example of what these principles imply, starting with the strong principle.

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 importance of an ND education (vs an education at one's state university) is not of comparable importance to the lives of 30 people.

A Notre Dame education costs \$140,000 more than an average education in a state university

It costs roughly \$1 to feed one child in Africa for one day

The difference between an ND education and a state school education could feed 30 children in Africa, who would otherwise die of starvation, from age 5 to adulthood

1. 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. (Strong Principle)
2. A Notre Dame education costs \$140,000 more than an average education in a state university.
3. It costs roughly \$1 to feed one child in Africa for one day.
4. The difference between an ND education and a state school education could feed 30 children in Africa, who would otherwise die of starvation, from age 5 to adulthood. (2,3)
5. The importance of an ND education (vs an education at one's state university) is not of comparable importance to the lives of 30 people.

C. No one should attend Notre Dame. (1,4,5)

Is the argument valid?

It is difficult to reject premises 2 or 3. So if one wants to reject the conclusion of the argument, one must reject either premise 1 or premise 5.

5. The importance of an ND education (vs an education at one's state university) is not of comparable importance to the lives of 30 people.

How might one argue against premise (5)?

Let's turn instead to the first premise: Singer's strong principle.

1. 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. (Strong Principle)

“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 the strong principle recommends to alleviate world poverty, rich country economies would collapse. And then there would be no one in a position to help with future disasters.”

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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 Sweden, Norway, and the United Kingdom. A more typical nation is France or Ireland, which contributes roughly 0.4%. The United States is one of the worst contributors of rich nations, at 0.19% 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 0.3%.

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It is plausible that something like this principle will follow from most versions of consequentialism.

But one might also use the sorts of examples — like David the surgeon — which are used to argue against consequentialism, to argue against Singer's principle.

Imagine, for example, that killing one of my children will, for whatever reason, lead to 30 lives being saved. Is it clear that I must kill my child?

Note, though, that these sorts of cases do not appear to be counterexamples to Singer's moderate principle.

This principle, though, can also be used to derive some surprising results.

The moderate principle

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

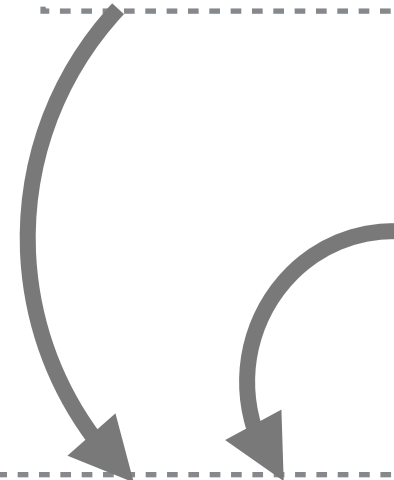
It is bad for children to starve to death.

Starbucks coffee is of no moral importance.

A Starbucks coffee costs \$3.

It costs roughly \$1 to feed one child in Africa for one day

One can prevent three children from starving for a day by donating the amount of money you would have spent on a Starbucks coffee.



1. One always ought to prevent something bad from happening if one can do so without sacrificing anything of any moral importance (the moderate principle).
2. A Starbucks coffee costs \$3.
3. It costs roughly \$1 to feed one child in Africa for one day.
4. One can prevent three children from starving for a day by donating the amount of money you would have spent on a Starbucks coffee. (2,3)
5. Starbucks coffee is of no moral importance.
6. It is bad for children to starve to death.

C. No one should buy a Starbucks coffee. (1,4,5,6)

Is the argument valid?

Suppose that one were to argue that if no one drank Starbucks coffee, then the company would go out of business, and lots of people would lose their jobs, and that this would be of some moral importance. If all of this were true, would this falsify any premises in the argument?