

Thesis

We are morally obligated to sacrifice many of our present luxuries to prevent others from starving, for if we can prevent something bad without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral worth, we ought to do so. In layman's terms: If we can prevent something bad, we ought to do so, if doing so doesn't disregard our morals.

The Situation in Bengal

- At the time of writing, there were at least 9 million impoverished refugees in East Bengal in need of food, water, and shelter.
 - Most of the refugees have been in camps for more than 6 months.
- Britain has given £14.75M to famine relief in Bengal.
 - Compare that to the £275M they spent on the Anglo-French Concorde aviation project.
 - Suggests that British gov't values fast transport of the better-off rather than the lives of the refugees.
- Australia has also given to famine relief, but their aid amounts to less than 1/12 of the cost of Sydney's Opera House.
 - Sydney's opera house costed A\$102M.
 - 1/12th of that would be around A\$8.5M.
 - ...which is equal to only £3.95M in British pounds.
- From all sources, the amount given stood at about £65M. The estimated cost of keeping the refugees alive for one year stood at £464M.
 - The amount needed is more than 7.1 times more than what is supplied.
- India had a dilemma of its own: let the refugees starve, or diverting funds from their own developmental programs, which leads to their own people starving in the future.
- There were other situations like Bengal's out there, though Bengal was chosen because of the size and severity of the issue.

Singer's Stance

- "...the way people in relatively affluent countries react to a situation like that in Bengal cannot be [morally] justified" (Singer, 265)
- What Singer proposes would require a dramatic alteration of the way we think about moral issues in order to alter the overall way of life in society.

Bases for the Principle

- "...suffering and death from food, shelter, and medical care are [inherently] bad." (Singer, 266)
 - Singer takes this assumption as accepted and does not attempt to argue with this view.
 - He does acknowledge the position that some hold other positions, one of which being that it would not follow that death by starvation is in itself bad, but it is difficult to refute such positions, and that is not the point of his essay.
- "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, 266)
 - 'without... importance':

Bases for the Principle (cont)

- Without causing anything else comparably bad to happen
- Doing something that is wrong in and of itself
- Failing to promote a moral good comparable in significance to the bad thing one can prevent
 - Requires us to prevent what is bad and not to promote what is good.
 - Requires this only when we can do so without sacrificing anything morally significant.

Application of the Principle

- Example given: "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."
 - Assuming the person is capable of doing so, they have the ability to prevent something bad from happening, i.e. the child drowning.
 - Rescuing the child does not cause anything comparably bad to happen — sure, the person might get dirty in the process, but ultimately, saving the drowning child is significantly more important.
 - This is not doing something that is wrong in and of itself.
 - This does not fail to promote a moral good comparable in significance to the bad thing they would prevent— the death of the child would be a very bad thing.

Implications of the Principle

- According to Singer, if [the principle] were acted upon, our lives, society, and world would be fundamentally changed.
- The principle does not take proximity or distance into account, nor does it matter the amount of people involved in a situation.

Why Distance and Proximity Do Not Matter

- The fact that a person is physically near to us may make it more likely that we shall assist them, but this does not show that we ought to.
- If we accept any principle of impartiality or universalizability, we cannot discriminate against something merely because of their distance.
- It is possible that we are in a better position to judge what needs to be done to help a person that is closer, but this justification is nullified by developments in transportation and communication.

Why the Amount of People Does Not Matter

- Singer admits that there is a psychological difference between two cases in which one person or millions of people are able to help in a situation, but this difference does not excuse our moral obligation.
- Is a person less obliged to pull a drowning child out of a pond if they have seen other people that have noticed the situation but are doing nothing?
 - Debunks the notion that numbers lessen obligation.
- Most major evils are problems where everyone is almost equally involved.

Numbers Can Make A Difference

- If everyone capable of doing so gave £5 to the Bengal Relief Fund, there would be enough to care for the refugees.
 - There is no reason why anyone should give more than anyone else in similar circumstances.
 - This may look sound, but this argument is based on a hypothetical.
- Revised: If everyone capable of doing so were to give £5, one would have no obligation to give more than £5.
 - This argument does not influence the typical case that everyone could give differing amounts, even not at all.
 - Therefore by giving more, one can prevent more suffering than they would if they had given less.
- If very few people are likely to give substantial amounts, everyone in similar circumstances ought to give as much as possible, up to the point of marginal utility.
 - Known as the strong version of Singer's principle.
 - **Level of marginal utility**: the point at which giving more would cause as much suffering to the giver as the receiver.

The Paradox

- If everyone gives to their level of marginal utility, some of the sacrifice will have been unnecessary, and there will be more given than that can be used to help.
- "If everyone does what he ought to do, the result will not be as good as it would be if everyone did a little less than he ought to, or if some do all that they ought to." (Singer, 268)
- This paradox comes into play if the actions are unexpected and performed more or less simultaneously.
- The result of everyone doing what they ought to cannot be worse than the result of everyone doing less than obligated; however, the result of everyone doing what they reasonably believe they ought to could be worse.

Consequences of the Argument

- Our traditional moral categories would have to be adjusted to fit with Singer's principle.
- "The traditional direction between duty and charity cannot be drawn."- (Singer, 269)
- Giving money to relief funds is generally regarded as an act of charity. Because of this, it is not thought that there is anything wrong with not giving.
- Superfluous spending versus giving to famine relief cannot be justified, because Singer's principle says that we are in a position to help, so we ought to give, and it would be wrong not to do so.
- Supererogatory: Quality of an act that it would be good to do but not wrong not to do; charitable.
- The present way of drawing the distinction between duty and charity, where it makes it a supererogatory act for a man living at the level of affluence to give money to save someone from starvation, cannot be supported.

Anticipated Objections

- Adapting this position changes our morals too extremely.
 - Singer did not plan to take a morally neutral stance when he wrote the essay, and he draws his conclusions from the premises. Unless someone else refutes his position, he retains his conclusion.
- Taking this position means we should be working full time to increase pleasure over pain.
 - Utilitarian theory- Hume
 - Singer acknowledges this view and potential circumstances where it might not be necessary to be working full-time, but retains at the end of the way, we ought to be preventing as much suffering as we can.
 - Refuted in Timmerman's "A Reply to Singer"
- This position does not exactly detail how much we should give.
 - Two positions: strong and moderate
 - Strong: we should give up to the level of marginal utility
 - Moderate: we do not necessarily have to give up to the level of marginal utility