

24.231 Ethics – Handout 20 Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”

General Question: How much does morality demand of us? And how far short of living up to those demands do most of us fall?

Singer argues that it is pretty clear that most of us are in a position to dramatically increase total well-being by sacrificing some of our own well-being.

Singer is an act-utilitarian. But his argument is of considerably wider interest. Because, although he is a utilitarian, the principles he appeals to are in several important respects weaker, and less controversial, than the act-utilitarian principle.

AU: You ought to perform the action that, out of all the available alternatives, produces the most net welfare.

AU doesn't recognize any difference between *doing harm* and *allowing harm*, or any difference in stringency between requirements to *provide benefits* to people or *prevent harms* to them, or any *special obligations to our intimates*, or any *constraints* on what we may permissibly do in the service of the greater good.

Singer's argument rests on a considerably weaker thesis, which arguably leaves room for all of these intuitions:

The Strong Singer Principle: “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.”

He also offers a weaker alternative:

The Weak Singer Principle: “If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it.”

The Weak Singer Principle is weaker in two respects: it concerns only the *very* bad outcomes we could prevent, and let's us off the hook whenever preventing harm would require us to sacrifice *anything* of moral significance, even if it wasn't “comparably” significant.

Singer's principles are weaker than AU in a number of respects:

- They would not require us to prevent a harm when doing so would necessitate doing something arguably wrong in itself, like lying, stealing, killing, or directly harming someone.
- They require us only to prevent significant harms, not to positively help people who are not being harmed, even when helping would increase the total welfare.
- They remain neutral about whether we have special obligations to our intimates that may sometimes outweigh or trump the requirement to help.

Singer's argument:

- (1) The *Weak Singer Principle*: If it is in our power to prevent something *very* bad from happening, without sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it.
- (2) It is very often in our power to prevent something very bad from happening without sacrificing anything morally significant. For example, we could give much, much more of our income to famine-relief than we do, thereby preventing many deaths by starvation, simply by not buying new clothes and shoes when our old ones are still perfectly functional, and buying expensive meals out when we could eat much more cheaply.
- (3) We ought, morally, to give up such luxuries and give much, much more of our income to famine-relief.

Of course, if we substitute the Strong Singer Principle in for premise (1), we'll get a comparably stronger conclusion – the occasions on which we'll be required to sacrifice our own good to prevent harms will be significantly more numerous.

That (3) follows from (1) and (2) is clear. (2) is an empirical claim, and we'll come to some worries we might have about it in a moment.

Here's how Singer argues for (1):

The Pond Example: If you come across a small child drowning in a pond, and saving it would require you to damage some of your clothes, it is very clear that you'd be required to save the child.

Singer claims there is *no significant difference* between the Pond Example and the case of Famine Relief.

He considers two possible differences:

- (i) The child drowning in the pond is nearby, whereas the people starving in India are very far away. (Also, helping the child will prevent a death now, whereas giving to famine relief will prevent only future deaths.

Singer argues that there is no plausibility at all to the supposition that physical (or temporal) proximity could make any difference to our responsibilities. In general, that seems to be born out by our intuitions – we don't think our obligations to our "nearest and dearest" diminish if they happen to be on the far side of the world when they need us, or that we have reduced obligations to provide for our children's *future* needs.

Question: can some other kind of "nearness" that isn't physical do the work? ...

- (ii) As we've imagined the pond case, you're the only one in a position to save the child. But millions of people are in a position to help those starving as a result of the famine.

But the suggestion that we can be held responsible only for preventing those harms which we alone could have prevented is not plausible. I'm not relieved of the obligation to save the child if I see lots of other people standing by, doing nothing.

So Singer concludes that the Pond Example is not relevantly different from the case of Famine Relief. In the former case, the Singer Principle explains why we have a duty to help despite the (comparatively significant) harm to ourselves. And it explains this in the latter case, too.

Question: Is Singer's Principle the best explanation of our obligations in the Pond Example? His argument depends heavily on the claim that it is...

(iii) Singer considers the following argument for the conclusion that it does matter to our obligations if other people were also in a position to help:

- a. If everyone in my circumstances gave £5 to famine relief, that would be enough to provide those threatened with what they need.
- b. I'm under no obligation to give more to famine relief than anyone else in my circumstances.
- c. So I'm under no obligation to give more than £5 to famine relief.

Singer responds that while premise (a) of this argument is a conditional, the conclusion (c) is not. If the conclusion were stated as a conditional, he says, the argument would hold: it's true that if everyone in my circumstances gave £5 to famine relief, that's all I would be obligated to give. (I'd be obligated to give this much, not because that's what everyone else is obligated to give, but because that's what would be required of me to prevent the relevant harm.)

But unfortunately, it's not the case that everyone in my circumstances is giving those £5. And I know this. So in fact much more than £5 is required to prevent widespread starvation. And I'm obligated to give much more than just £5. So, incidentally, is everyone else in my circumstances, since their obligations are indeed the same as mine.

(iv) This last point invites another objection: How can it be, we might ask, that everyone is obligated to give most of their income to famine relief? After all, if everyone in fact did this, things would be much worse than they could be: people will have sacrificed much more than they needed to. And it can't be the case that the result, if everyone does as they ought, is less good than if people did less than they ought, or if only some people did as they ought. So our obligations must be determined by what it would be best that we give if everyone did their fair share. More formally:

- a. Our obligations can't be such that, if everyone fulfilled them, the results would be worse than if everyone did less than they were obligated to do, or if only some people fulfilled their obligations.
- b. If everyone gave much or most of their income to famine relief, things would be worse than if only some people did so, or if everyone gave less (because we'd have more aid than was needed, and people will have sacrificed unnecessarily).

- c. So it can't be the case that we're all obligated to give much or most of our income to famine relief.
- d. Furthermore, the obligations of people in relevantly similar circumstances are the same.
- e. So none of us can be obligated to give most of our income to famine relief.

Singer replies that, while my obligations are indeed the same as everyone else's in my circumstances, the fact that others won't do as they're obligated to do is itself a relevant feature of my circumstances, and one I can recognize. If I see that other people are indeed giving £5, then I'm released from my obligation to give more.

Since the decision concerning whether or not to give is not one we must all make simultaneously, or in ignorance of how others are likely to act, the paradox the objection imagines does not arise.

Here's another way of putting the last point. Right now, when we both have reason to expect that others aren't doing enough to prevent starvation, we are both obligated to give most of our income to famine relief. But if you've seen me and enough other people do so, then you're circumstances become relevantly different from mine – it's not longer a feature of your circumstances (as it was of mine) that you have reason to believe others aren't giving enough to prevent starvation.

Question: One interesting question this back-and-forth raises is: when is it relevant to our moral thinking to ask, "what if everyone did that?" It seems like asking that question partly explains why we ought, for example, to vote. But why is the question not relevant here? Must Singer concede that we may have no reason to vote?

- (v) Singer next considers a series of related objections, which attack his view as too revisionary.

But he argues, convincingly, it seems to me, that the fact that his argument shows that most of us fall far short of our obligations reflects badly on *us*, not on his argument. *Replies?*...

Singer next considers worries we might have about *premise (2)* of his original argument: Is it true that giving most of our income to famine relief will prevent many deaths from starvation, and so have much better results than not giving?

- (vi) One form this worry has taken is the objection that if we adopted a moral code that required *so much* of us, we'd be so discouraged and overwhelmed that we'd do even less good than we do now. The demandingness of the moral code would result in a general breakdown of compliance even with less demanding rules.

Does this seem plausible? As Singer notes, what we expect of ourselves often has a considerable, and beneficial, effect on what we're capable of. And in any case, as Singer points out, it at most effects what kind of behavior we should try to encourage in others, not what decisions we should reach ourselves.

- (vii) Maybe giving extensively to famine relief isn't actually the best way to prevent starvation. Singer considers several reasons we might think this, and I'll throw in one or two more:
 - a. Maybe giving to famine relief discourages governments from increasing foreign aid, as they should do.

This is of course an empirical thesis, but as Singer notes, it seems implausible. At most, it suggests we should, in addition to giving aid, heavily lobby our governments to give more.

- b. Maybe giving to famine relief won't prevent starvation – it'll just push it back a generation.

This is an empirical thesis Singer finds plausible; but he argues that it doesn't mean we shouldn't give aid, it just means we should adjust which "charities" we give aid to – instead supporting those that try to combat population growth. (Also, I believe advances in food science have made it seem more possible that our ability to produce more food won't be outpaced by our population growth.)

- c. Maybe giving aid just leads to the in the long run unhelpful dependence of people in developing nations on foreign aid.

Again, this is an empirical thesis, and a harder one to assess. It seems more likely to be true when problems are caused by a corrupt government, which "gets away with it" because foreign aid helps mask the problem. But it's much harder to make the case when problems are caused by drought or natural disaster. And harder still when what the aid does is, e.g., provide mosquito nets to babies who would otherwise die from malaria...

- d. Finally, there may be limits set on the amount we should give, well above the level at which we're no better off than those we're helping, by the anti-growth affects that massive giving would have on the economy/GNP of developed nations. A massive increase in giving would result in much less consumer spending, and a much smaller economy (lost jobs, lost wealth...).

Singer essentially concedes this point (although he thinks there'd be positive side-effects to decreased consumption). As he notes, it may, for this reason, turn out that we can give more in total if we give 25% of our GNP to charity than if we give 40%, since our total GNP would be that much bigger. Where the line should in practice be drawn is very hard to say.

But as Singer also notes, in the actual world, where there will be no mass movement in favor of more giving, his principles will still entail that we, as individuals, ought to give most of what we have to famine relief.

Finally, Singer says: it's not enough for us to acknowledge the force of his arguments – we must change how we behave!

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