

## Explain and critically assess the “Singer Solution” to Global Poverty

### Introduction

In this essay, I will summarise Singer's “solution” to world poverty, and then consider some of the objections that may be made to it, with thoughts on how effective those objections can be.

### Singer's Argument

In various written work, notably the article “Famine, Affluence and Morality” [FAM], Peter Singer argues that people living in affluent societies have a duty to help those in famine-stricken countries, and that this duty is so compelling that it requires a fundamental change in our way of thinking about the issue of poverty in those situations. Singer does not attempt to provide a complete moral framework to justify his position; rather he advances what appears on the face of it to be a simple argument for which the conclusion, should we accept it, has far-reaching implications.

Singer's argument rests on three premises, the first two of which are explicitly stated as:

- P1: “suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad”. [FAM]
- P2: “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.”

[FAM]

The third premise is implicitly:

- P3: We, as citizens living in the developed world, have the power (in the form of our relative wealth) to prevent suffering and death without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.

From these premises follows the conclusion that:

- C1: An individual in the western world has a moral obligation to give to famine relief any money she has which is not needed to prevent something else that has comparable moral importance.

Singer refers to this as the “strong” version of his principle, but says that even a “moderate” version, which has as the second premise:

- P2b: if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything *morally significant*, we ought, morally, to do it.

still results in an argument which, if accepted, means that “our traditional moral categories are upset”: we are forced to acknowledge that giving away our money in these cases is not a charitable act which we can choose to perform, but a fundamental duty which we are morally bound to fulfil. Moreover, the amount of money we should give is significant: even acting on the qualified argument would mean giving substantial amounts of our money away.

Both “strong” and “moderate” versions of the argument make uncomfortable reading: few, if any, live lives in accordance with either principle, and many people have challenged Singer's position. Singer anticipates some of these objections, but perhaps there are still grounds for questioning his arguments, and I think that this can be done from two starting

points: either we accept - as Singer appears to - a “utilitarian” view of morality, and look for inconsistencies in his reasoning, or we provide reasons why the utilitarian view (and therefore the foundation of Singer's whole thesis) should be rejected. In the sections below I shall explore both of these lines of arguments.

### Accepting the Utilitarian View

The utilitarian view of morality “holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.” (Mill:1879). In other words, if I have a choice of two or more actions, then the “right” action to take is the one which will result in the greatest increase (or least decrease) in human happiness. Singer puts forward an argument which appeals to a utilitarian framework: that there is a moral requirement of me to perform actions which most increase happiness (or decrease unhappiness).

If this is the way that we judge morality, then it would appear to follow that if I have \$200, I should give it to Oxfam rather than spend it on dining out for a month: “what is one month's dining out, compared to a child's life?” [Singer 1999:122]. While my happiness would be increased if I dined out, this increase must be far outweighed by the happiness (or reduction in unhappiness) I could effect by donating the money instead.

However, in this, and other examples, Singer is implicitly comparing the effects of my spending choices on *my happiness* (and that of my partner, in Singer's example) with that of the people my donation may help. He misses, or neglects to mention, the side-effects of my

dining experience: the restaurant staff get paid, as do the food suppliers and utility companies used by the restaurant. In other words, when I spend money “on myself”, in fact I am contributing to a chain of economic effects which all have effects on the aggregate level of human happiness. Perhaps if I don't go out for a meal, then the restaurant will have to lay off staff, which might lead to a waiter becoming unemployed and suicidal.

Accepting the utilitarian view also gives us reason to question Singer's first premise: “suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad”. Singer says that he “will not argue for this view”, but if we can demonstrate that it is not a universal truth, then it would seem that the whole argument is weakened. And certainly it not impossible to conceive of situations where one person's suffering in this way might result in an increase in happiness of others: for example in cases of extreme self-sacrifice, where one person might give his life to save others. In a wider context, it has been argued (e.g. Hardin 1974) that by giving money in cases like this, we only make the problem worse, by contributing to over-population, and thus a lower level of happiness for the human race overall.

Perhaps a more thorny issue is raised if we consider exactly what we should do in order to bring about the best results: although giving money seems on the face of it the most effective path, it may be that the different action from the country as a whole would be more beneficial. If all western countries acted, it seems probably that effects of famines could be totally alleviated, and so there is arguably a moral obligation on the west to help, but it is less clear how that duty percolates down to individuals. “There is .. no obvious way, once we know what a group's obligations are, of reading off the resulting obligations of members of the group” (McKinsey 1981:321). This is not quite the same as saying “it's

the government's responsibility"; rather that my acting individually may not be the part of the optimal way for the west as a whole to resolve the problems due to famine.

However, I think Singer would have little difficulty in countering these criticisms. In the first place, although the effects of my spending money are not restricted simply to my own happiness, neither are the effects of donating restricted to the well-being of a single famine victim: for example, there are other family members and networks of people involved, and by saving someone's life, we allow them to make a positive contribution to their society later on. So the issue of what we might call secondary effects, which in any case could be good or bad, probably cannot be counted as significant in comparison to the known primary effects.

And while it may be possible to construct scenarios where we could imagine that suffering and death might lead to some long-term benefits, it has to be admitted that they are unlikely to be representative of the majority of cases. Besides this, Singer's "moderate" position would not require us to help in cases where doing so might result in the sacrifice of some other moral good. As for the "lifeboat" type objection, "the available evidence does not support the conclusion that efforts to reduce severe poverty must multiply human suffering and deaths over time." (Pogge 2002:7).

As to the distinction between my obligations and that of western society as a whole, I think that even though it *may* be the case that maximum utility could be achieved in some way that didn't include my giving money, it's hard to envisage how my donations could be harmful. And without evidence that the west as a whole is seriously attempting to resolve these problems, it seems very difficult to justify my not doing what I can.

## Rejecting the Utilitarian View

A more productive line of attack might be if we question the underlying basis on which Singer's line of thought is constructed, namely that the actions which we are morally required to perform are those which result in the greatest increase in human "happiness".

At first glance this appears a practical way of assessing the virtue of an action: if I give £100 to Oxfam, then it would seem likely that this will do more good, and therefore be more morally commendable, than if I give nothing. But it also sounds as if I can "buy" virtue just by spending money. Would my actions be twice as virtuous if I give £200? If Bill Gates gives \$1000 to charity, is that a "better" thing than my (not very wealthy) grandmother giving £20 of her £80 pension? Singer appeals to our moral intuition when he asks us to agree with the first two premises of his argument; but he surely cannot then deny the intuition which tells us that Jesus is right when he said that the "widow's offering" is of more moral value than that of the rich man (Luke 21:2-4).

Some go so far as to suggest that Singer's "solution" to world poverty is simply a means whereby we can pay for the privilege of having a clear conscience, rather than a meaningful strategem for relieving poverty, and that those who follow Singer's arguments are simply adopting "the ethic of anyone who believes that he can buy, with a mixture of guilt and cash, an exemption from the responsibility to focus his intellect." (Roentsch 2002).

Singer's argument also appears to assign equal value to all human lives, which may be reasonable if we adopt strictly impartial perspective, but fails to take into account the

subjective reality of each person's situation. Perhaps in my own actions I am justified in assigning greater importance to my own happiness, or that of my loved ones, than to someone who I have never, and will never, have any connection with. Cottingham, for example, argues that behaving in a way that shows partiality to people who are close to oneself is perfectly legitimate: "To choose to save one's own child from a burning building when an impartial consideration of the balance of general utility would favour rescuing someone else first, is *not* (as impartialists must claim) a perhaps understandable but nonetheless regrettable lapse from the highest moral standards; on the contrary, it is the morally correct course" (Cottingham 1986:357).

This brings into focus an important point about the utilitarian point of view, which is that the motivation which leads to my performing an action counts for nothing when it comes to judging whether the act is morally good: only the results of my action are important. As before, this is a case where moral intuition (which Singer implicitly appeals to), seems to suggest that in the case of an individual, morality must (at least partly) be determined by his intentions, regardless of their results.

How would Singer respond to these attacks? I think perhaps he would be forced to admit that, according to his view, you can "buy" virtue: while the aim of his argument is to address poverty, it does so by implying to the reader that his behaviour has hitherto been morally deficient, and that he can ameliorate this by giving more. But Singer doesn't say that giving is the *only* useful way to act ("I would sympathize with someone who that that campaigning was more important" (FAM)), and anyone who claims that giving is just a way to ease one's conscience is implicitly conceding that one's conscience is in need of being

eased: the challenge is then on the objector to provide an alternative solution to Singer.

As regards the issue of partiality, the “moderate” version of his argument would allow someone sufficient moral leeway to give priority to people close to them, while still compelling action to help the starving.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, while there may be aspects of Singer's thesis which we can pick over, and details which we can argue with, it is very difficult to see what is fundamentally wrong with the overall thrust of what he is saying. While some may take issue with some of Singer's justification for his argument, it seems to me that this is a bit like debating the colour of exhaust smoke from an approaching enemy tank: the important thing is that a tank is coming; we should be thinking what to do about it, not debating about whether I described the smoke coming out of the back as blue or grey.

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