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Prompt: *Singer argues that we are not acting as we should: we should be considerably more generous. Perhaps we should even be "reducing ourselves to the level of marginal utility," but in any event we should be making "a great change in our way of life." Set out and critically examine Singer's argument for that conclusion.*

Singer's Argument

In *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*, Peter Singer argues that we are morally obligated to do everything we can to prevent human suffering, even "reducing ourselves to the level of marginal utility." While as a romantic ideology this is hard to refute, the actual implementation of such a societal standard has complex implications. In this paper, we will walk through Singer's argument and critically analyze his assertion.

We start by summarizing Singer's argument, emphasizing key examples and claims. Singer appeals to pathos, describing the suffering of victims of the Bengal emergency and arguing that the refugees are not receiving enough help. He claims this "is the latest and most acute of a series of major emergencies" and argues that "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." This is the *strong* version of Singer's principle. He also introduces a *weak* version, which replaces "comparable moral importance" by "moral importance". Singer illustrates the principle by arguing that a passer-by should save a drowning child, even if it means ruining her clothes. and claims that neither proximity nor the number of other people in a position to help should affect our willingness to help others. Singer then proceeds to argue that we must reevaluate societal moral standards, penalizing those that waste money on luxurious goods instead of directing it to charitable donations. He gives the example of hunger relief, claiming we should not avoid helping those in need out of fear of overpopulation. Instead, he argues, we should both help and enforce population control. Finally, Singer addresses "just how much we all ought to be giving away." The strong principle would require reduction to the level of "marginal utility," whereas the moderate principle would potentially dissipate the consumer society.

Before beginning my analysis, I would like to point out that I will solely consider the *strong* version of Singer's principle. I believe the *weak* principle can be disregarded, since it would have less

societal impact and does not represent the full extent of Singer's argument. Even Singer himself states "that the strong version seems [to him] to be the correct one. [He] proposed the more moderate version – that we should prevent bad occurrences unless, to do so, we had to sacrifice something morally significant – only in order to show that even on this surely undeniable principle a great change in our way of life is required."

We will now consider Singer's fundamental assertion, that "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it." At the surface, this seems irrefutable. Why should a millionaire not spend money to save lives? However, this is an extreme case. The difficulty is to precisely define "moral importance." Even more difficult is to assess that two situations are of "*comparable* moral importance." For example, is a dog's life of "*comparable* moral importance" to that of a human? Most humans would disagree, at least in the sense that a human life should not be sacrificed to save a dog. This seems clear cut. However, if we are able to assess "comparable" we should also be able to quantify when the decision should be reversed. What if a kennel containing $1,000$ dogs is about to burn down? Should the kennel workers risk their lives to save them? What would be comparable to $1,000$ dogs? Five human lives? One? None? And what if the animal is in risk of extinction, such as the heavily poached Javan Rhinoceros?[1] Park rangers routinely risk their lives to protect such animals and sometimes die. Does this mean that a human life is of "comparable moral importance" to a few rhinos? If so how many? When does it become "morally imperative" to save the rhinos? And why spend millions of dollars on this when, in the same continent, children die of starvation?

In these situations, where it is impossible to quantify "comparable moral importance," the "without sacrificing" clause of Singer's argument renders the whole argument useless. Since we do not know if we are sacrificing anything of comparable importance, it is impossible to know if we are

[1] `https://www.activesustainability.com/environment/top-10-animals-in-danger-of-extinction/#2`

morally obligated to doing it. So, we don't. Hence, the argument only really applies to a small set of clear cut cases, where most people would find themselves in agreement anyway and almost everyone would accept the argument. In fact, I would claim that society already executes the argument in most cases where it is clear that that there is no sacrifice of anything comparable. This is what we call "the law." Because there is clearly no moral equivalence between the inconvenience (to me) of being late to work and (to someone else) of being crushed to death, it is illegal for me to run over pedestrians when I am in a rush. This is also the rational behind anti-pollution laws, economic fraud laws, criminal law, etc. It, however, does not mean that the argument is broadly applicable. On the contrary, I would argue that the "without sacrificing" clause renders the argument useless for the vast majority of societal situations that have not been enshrined into laws. Thus, I would claim that there are no situations where it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, *without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance,* which have not already been deemed illegal (or will be in the near future).

One could try to raise a counter-example with Singer's drowning child example. The claim would be that it is clear the passer-by should save the drowning child. So, why is this not mandated by law? I would argue that it is actually *not* clear that *all* passer-bys should attempt saving the child, since they will be putting themselves at risk. If the passer-by is a poor swimmer, there is a high likelihood they would also drown and two lives would be lost. Singer's clause prevents this from happening since, in this case, something of comparable moral importance would be lost (the passer-by's life). Hence, the passer-by is off the hook. But what about a confident swimmer, who has not been trained to rescue the child, and does not have proper rescuing equipment? Since they are placing themselves at risk, it is not clear that "nothing of comparable moral value would be sacrificed." Hence, Singer's clause voids the argument and the passer-by is again off-the-hook. In fact, there is only one situation in which it is clear that "nothing of comparable moral value will be

lost." This is when the passer-by is a trained 'life-guard.' But in this case, the law *mandates* that the passer-by should save the child *unless* his professional judgement determines that something morally equivalent (his life) could be lost. Thus, the law *already* implements Singer's principle. In summary, the problem is not that there is something wrong with societal moral standards, but that it is usually impossible to assert that "nothing of comparable moral value is sacrificed."

Singer then argues that proximity and distance should make no difference in our willingness to help the suffering. However, as illustrated by the Trolley Problem[2] thought experiment, this is very difficult to put into practice. If total strangers (all assumed to be good and have long lives ahead) lie on both sides of the track, then the clear decision is to try to save as many people as possible. However, if on one track lies your family and on the other hundreds of strangers, could you truly be blamed for saving those that you care about? Most affluent families spend small fortunes to send their kids to college. If that money was instead channeled towards buying water and malaria nets for children in Africa, thousands of lives with bright futures could be saved. Since the lack of a college degree is morally insignificant when compared to starvation, strict compliance with Singer's principle would have these parents donate the money instead. However, this does not seem like a decision anyone would make and in fact challenges the importance of family ties and structure within society. Regardless of whether it is right or wrong, it is programmed in human nature to protect and help those that we are close to. Furthermore, by sending a child to college, the parents are investing towards a more valuable member of society. What if, armed with the critical thinking skills and knowledge acquired in college, the kid eventually comes up with a way to eradicate malaria? When this poissiblity is considered it is again not clear that "something of equivalent moral value" is not being sacrificed by donating the money.

Singer tries to evade this "law of unintended consequences" by considering the scenario of famine

[2] `https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trolley_problem`

relief, where providing food to the hungry encourages population growth and can result in even more hunger later on. Singer claims that there are always ways to prevent such consequences, e.g. population control. While this is a plausible solution, I would argue that it only works because there is *strong causal link* between abundance of food and population growth. Imagine, instead, that donating food somehow led to a government overthrow and population massacres. Such an act, intended to increase happiness, would do quite the opposite in the long term. This is one of the critical flaws of Singer's view. In the real world, there are too many factors that need to be considered in the happiness cost-function espoused by a utilitarian view of the world. Many of these are hidden, unpredictable, or unquantifiable. Hence, the utilitarian view has to rely on an ill-defined utility function. What brings happiness today could be terrible tomorrow, simply because some hidden factors have changed. The history of US intervention in third world countries during the Cold War is a great example of this. Clearly, someone carefully assessed the utility of arming Bin Laden with American weapons to fight the Soviets. However, a decade later this would culminate in 9/11. While extreme, this example illustrates the difficulties of comparing, quantifying, and predicting the moral value of societal actions. This is the main reason why Singer's principle is not applied more broadly and why the law does not fall more heavily on the side of preventing human suffering. It is not because there is something wrong with the moral standards of modern societies.

Ultimately, while Singer brings up several good points, it is irrational to think that his principle can be implemented in the real world as it is viewed ideally.