

Singer Handout #1

Philosophy 4

In lecture we looked at a response to Singer's claim that we have an obligation to make any effort we can to end suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care (as long as that effort doesn't cause more harm than good).

The response we looked at came in the form of the following argument (this is a variation of the argument in the first full paragraph of page 8 from the course reader):

- Premise 1: If everyone in circumstances like mine gave 5 dollars to the Human Fund, there would be enough food, shelter, and medical care for all.
- Premise 2: There is no reason why I should give more than anyone else in the circumstances I'm in.
- Conclusion: There is no reason for me to give more than 5 dollars to the Human Fund.

This is an oversimplified version of the argument Singer entertains, but suppose each premise of this argument is true. If the argument is valid, then the conclusion is also true. But this runs contrary to Singer's claim - that each of us must give as much to global charities as we can to eradicate global hunger.

Singer responds that the premises may be true, but the argument is not valid. Premise 2 can be interpreted in two different ways:

- There is no reason why I should give more than anyone else in my circumstances actually gives.
- There is no reason why I should be obligated to give any more than anyone else is obligated to give.

On the first way of interpreting Premise 2, it is false. Recall our discussion of the Bystander Effect. It may be easier to refrain from helping others when nobody else is helping, but that doesn't mean it's okay. It just means more people are acting wrongly.

On the second way of interpreting Premise 2, it is true, but Singer is claiming that how much we are obligated to give depends on how much help the sick and hungry are already receiving from others. What follows then, isn't the conclusion of the above argument, but the following claims:

- If everyone in circumstances like mine were to give 5 dollars to the Human Fund, there would be no reason for me to give more than 5 dollars to the Human Fund.

Singer believes that numbers matter because they affect how many people are sick and hungry, and to what degree they are suffering. Since not everyone *does* give money to charities, the rest of us have an obligation to pick up the slack.