1 Applied ethics

The field of applied ethics is concerned with pretty much what it sounds like, the application of concepts and principles from moral theory to actual (and hypothetical) cases.

One of the primary tools of the applied ethicist is **moral intuition**, in which the theorist describes essential non-moral features of a hypothetical case and asks us to apply a judgment regarding the moral features of the case. Moral intuition can be utilized for at least two purposes:

1. To explore the consequences of normative theories and compare those consequences to our moral intuitions. If the theory conflicts with our intuition, then there is a need to resolve the conflict. Perhaps a change in theory will be called for; perhaps we might rethink the significance of our intuition in this particular case.
2. To develop general principles of morality, based on moral intuitions in particular cases, and thereby motivate particular judgments in harder cases. If the principle developed is particularly strong, that should motivate us to act as it specifies in the hard cases; but maybe the hard cases will convince us that we ought to modify the principle.

2 Famine, affluence, and morality

Peter Singer's quintessential paper on obligations to provide aid is an example of 2 above. Singer attempts to argue from rather mundane and obvious premises to the bold conclusion that each of us is obligated to do vastly more to prevent suffering than almost any of us actually do. Switching around his order of presentation a bit, we can think of his argument as involving the following steps:

2.1 A moral principle

First, Singer imagines a simple case. The essential non-moral features of the case are as follows:

- A healthy adult *A* walks by a shallow pond and sees a small child drowning in it.
- If *A* does nothing, the child will die.
- If *A* attempts to save the child, she will easily do so, although she will muddy up her brand new shoes.

Singer then asks for our moral judgments, if any, regarding this case. He takes it that we will all agree that *A* **ought to save the child**.

Next, Singer abstracts away from the particulars of the case, and suggests that our moral intuition is based on the following principle:

> If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comprable moral importance, we ought morally to do it.

In effect, Singer maintains that the *reason* we have the moral intuition in this case that we do is because it is an instance of this principle: The child's death is a bad thing, and muddying of one's shoes is not comparably significant.

There are a number of interesting features of this principle:

- It does not make any specific claims about what makes an event bad. Thus, the principle is compatible with a variety of specific normative theories. For instance, "comprable moral importance" could be:

  - an alternative bad event
  - something that is wrong in itself
  - a failure to promote some comparable good

- The principle does not require us to promote any particular good, only to prevent bad things that it is in our power to prevent. Thus, the principle is compatible with a variety of value systems.
- The principle does not require us to prevent bad things *at all costs*, only to prevent those that we can prevent without incurring a significant sacrifice.
- Singer notes that in the case of suffering in Bengal, we really only need the weaker principle:

  > If it is in our power to prevent something *very* bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing *anything* morally significant, we ought morally to do it.

- The principle says nothing about the proximity to the agent of the bad to be prevented. As long as it is in our power to prevent it, it does not matter where it takes place.
  - In irrelevance of proximity follows from many normative theories, such as those that advocate **impartiality**, **universalizability**, or **equality** regarding moral patients.
  - It may be true that if the event is farther away, we are less likely to prevent it, perhaps because we can separate ourselves psychologically from the suffering. But this fact about our psychology has no bearing on the fact of our moral obligations.
  - It may also be true that we are often in a better position to *judge* whether a bad has taken place and *provide* the requisite need when it is nearby. But this is a merely practical concern, and the presence of worldwide communication and transportation makes it easy to both judge need and provide aid across the globe
- The principle says nothing about how one's obligation changes when greater numbers of people are in a position to help. As long as we can help, we are obligated to do so, regardless of who else also has the obligation.
  - It may be true that if there are others capable of preventing a bad event, we are less likely to prevent it, perhaps because we can psychologically pass the blame. But this fact about our psychology has no bearing on the fact of our moral obligations.
  - This feature of the principle might seem to have an absurd consequence. It seems to say that if we all give as much as we can, as a group we'll give more than can be used, and our efforts will make us worse off without improving the overall situation.
    * To avoid this consequence, we need only recognize that the principle is sensitive to the *circumstances* the agent finds herself in. In the earlier stages of giving, there is more need, so those who give have a larger obligation. But as they give and alleviate the bad, those who come later have a lesser obligation because they are in different circumstances.
  - It may be that we are not fully aware of what our obligation is. For instance, we might not know how much those before us have given. Thus, we may be reasonably confused about our obligation, but this doesn't undermine the fact of our obligation.

2.2 A fact about our world

Singer then points to an actual world scenario in which great and extensive suffering is taking place. His focus is on famine in Bengal in the 1970's, but the story could be told many times over. There are millions of people in Africa suffering from worm and mosquito transmitted diseases that bring about pain, and humiliation, as well as preventing those suffering from being able to work or attend school.

There should be little debate over whether these events are bad. They most definitely are.

And prevention of these bad events is a relatively easy thing to do. As little as $5 can reasonably be expected to protect a child from worm based diseases for 10 years.[1]

[1] This statistic is drawn from the Give Well website. Give Well's mission is to assess various charities for their effectiveness.

2.3 A moral obligation

It follows from the discussion in theprevious two subsections that each of us is obligated to give money to alleviate the suffering in the world to the extent that giving any more would result in a comparable bad for us.

Notice that according to our principle it wouldn't just be a *nice* thing for us to give; it is *wrong* for us not to. We might think of actions as falling into one of a variety of moral categories:

- **impermissible** actions are not to be performed. *Murder* is a likely candiate.
- **permissible** actions are acceptably performed, but garner no moral virtue. Such as, *smoking outdoors*.
- **supererogatory** actions are good to perform, but not wrong not to. Perhaps, *helping old ladies across the street* would count.
- **obligatory** actions are to be performed (when circumstances call forit). Just as one must *stop at red lights*.

Singer's argument suggests that giving aid to prevent suffering is obligatory; thus, it is wrong not to do so. In this sense, calling such action "charity" doesn't seem to respect the force of the argument.

We should be careful not to understate the breadth of this result. In effect, it says that every time we forgo sending aid to Africa to prevent suffering, and every time we use our money to buy a fancy dinner or a new smartphone app, we are shirking a moral obligation. That is to say, we are almost always doing something wrong. It is as if we are simply walking along and ignoring the child drowning in the pond.

- In fact, the strong formulation of the moral principleseems to require us to give up to the **level of marginal utility**. This is the point at which were I to give any more, I would bring about more suffering for myself (and dependents) than I would prevent. This is essentially to give until I and those I am helping are equally well off. This is the required level because as long as the bad I prevent is comparable or greater than the bad I incur, I ought to give.
- The weak formulation, on the other hand, maintains only that I give so long as I don't incur any significant loss. Once my giving requires me to endure a significant loss, even if it is not comparable to the bad I prevent, my obligation ceases.
- The problem is that any understanding of "significant" that doesn't equate to "comparable" seems to be arbitrary. So the strong principle seems to be just as well motivated as any weak alternative.

2.4 Some interesting points regarding moral obligation

Throughout Singer's discussion, he makes some substantive claims about the nature of moral obligations. He notes that obligations must be distinguished from each of the following:

- Psychological tendencies to act in certain ways. Features of our psychology might **explain** our actions, but they don't *justify* them.
- Reasonable beliefs about what our obligations are. The fact that we have mistaken beliefs about our obligations might give us an **excuse** for our actions, but they don't justify them.
- General moral sentiment regarding moral virtue. The fact that people tend to treat charity as supererogatory might explain their complacency, but it doesn't make the complacency right.
- Practical concerns about implementing moral codes. The fact that people are not morally perfect means that we have to be careful in how we design and promote moral codes, but these practical concerns don't make wrong actions right.
  - Additionally, we shouldn't overstate this worry. Strict moral codes are hard to follow, but it's not clear that they will lead to societal collapse.

2.5 Objections to the argument

Isn't giving foreign aid a governmental responsibility? It may be true that governments have a responsibility to give more aid as well as individuals, but simply passing the responsibility off on them doesn't prevent the bad that we are capable of preventing as individuals.

Perhaps some individuals can do more good by lobbying the government to use its vast resources to give more aid. Of course, as few individuals who actively give to charities today, there are probably even fewer who actively lobby governments for aid.

Won't saving people's lives today just lead to population explosion and more suffering in the future? It's true that our planet has limited resources, and we must worry about overpopulation.

Notice that even if this worry is warranted, it doesn't eliminate our obligation to help prevent suffering. What it means is that we must be more careful about the **method** of aid we provide. Perhaps our services would be better put to use in supporting effective population control initiatives.

If we give now to the point of marginal utility, then we'll undermine our ability to produce more in the future. The result would be that we end up doing less good than we could have if we had given less in the beginning.

Once again, this worry does not eliminate our obligation. It only requires us to be smarter about how we exert our efforts. Perhaps it is better for me to invest my money in the stock market now, so that I can give much more in the future. The problems we are facing are massive, so many different strategies are probably necessary. The issues here are very complex, but not insurmountable.