
Key Passage for Weak Principle:

"If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything else morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it. Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad. When we buy new clothes not to keep ourselves warm but to look "well-dressed" we are not providing for any important need. We would not be sacrificing anything significant if we were to continue to wear our old clothes, and give the money to famine relief. By doing so, we would be preventing another person from starving. The outcome of this argument is that our traditional moral categories are upset. The traditional distinction between duty and charity cannot be drawn, or at least, not in the place we normally draw it. We ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so." (pages 231-5)

The Argument

1. Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.
 2. If it's in one's power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, one is morally obligated to do it.
 - a. "Without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance" =df not causing anything else comparably bad to happen or failing to make good on some other moral demand of the same moral significance.
 - b. Strong Version: Requires us to prevent bad things from happening unless doing so we would be sacrificing something of comparable moral significance; requires: giving up our resources to the point of marginal utility (even where one begins to cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents).
 - Weak Version: Requires us to prevent bad occurrences unless, to do so, we had to sacrifice anything morally significant. (Even on this surely undeniable principle a great change in our way of life is required.)
 3. If it's in one's power to prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, one is morally obligated to do so.
 4. By giving some of one's money away, one can prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care.
 5. If one can give some of her money away without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance (thereby preventing suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care) she is morally obligated to do so.
 6. We can give a substantial amount of our money away by simply giving up buying things that we do not really need; that is, without sacrificing anything of moral importance (comparable to suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care).
 7. We ought, morally, to give a substantial amount of our money away. (Singer's Website: <http://www.thelifeyoucansave.com/>)
- (Argument replicated from Andrew T Forcehimes's handout on this same paper)

Singer then raises some common objections and replies to them.

Objection 1. The child in the example is close by and the global poor one might aid are far away, spatially distant. Also, the child will drown right now if you do not help, but in many cases, giving to relief agencies will only prevent deaths in the future.

Singer's reply: Mere distance in time and distance in space are in and of themselves irrelevant to the determination of what one ought to do. It's no less wrong to kill an innocent non-threatening person if one shoots a bullet a short way or a long way in order to hit the victim.

Objection 2. In the drowning child example, you are the only one who could help. In the case of disaster relief, you are one of many people, perhaps millions, any of whom could help.

Singer's reply: It does not matter morally to the question, what you ought to do, how many people could help the situation. Suppose 10,000 people are on the beach, and see a child drowning in shallow water. Any of the 10,000 could help. If no one helps, all do wrong by failing to prevent the evil of the child's death by drowning. That others could have helped does not lessen your responsibility. Of course, if another person actually moves forward to save the child, the obligations of the others lapse.

Objection 3: Suppose a famine threatens, and the following holds: If everyone who could help gave ten dollars to famine relief efforts, there would be enough resources to save all who are menaced by famine; there is no reason why I should give more than anyone else in circumstances exactly similar to those I face. Conclusion: therefore, I have no obligation to give more than ten dollars to the famine relief efforts.

Singer's reply: The reasoning is faulty. The argument would be sound if the conclusion were stated hypothetically: If everyone in circumstances exactly similar to those I face gave ten dollars, I would have no obligation to give more than ten dollars. But what it would be right for me to do in non-factual, hypothetical or imaginary circumstances does not determine what it is right for me to do in actual circumstances.

Objection 4. Suppose there is a drowning child on the beach, and 10,000 people could help. According to your argument, each of the 10,000 is bound to help, but if all did try to help, the result would be mass confusion and trampling of people underfoot by would-be crowds of helpers.

Singer's reply: This could not happen if people were actually behaving correctly according to my principle. Once one person is observed going to the rescue, that changes the circumstances in which others decide what to do. The others are in relevantly different circumstances than the first person who acted, and they are not bound to try to help at that point (which would be counterproductive).

Objection 5. The argument's conclusion is drastically at odds with our current moral beliefs so cannot be right.

Singer's reply: Why assume our current moral beliefs are all correct? I have asserted a principle, and tried to show what conduct is required by the principle. If the principle is acceptable, and the reasoning from the principle is sound, the conclusion, even if at odds with current opinions, stands.

Objection 6. The imperatives of duty, strict moral requirements, only concern what is

strictly necessary for people to live together peaceably in society and sustain mutually beneficial cooperation.

Singer's reply: Morality requires us to look beyond the interests of the people in any one

particular society. Morality requires impartial consideration of those who might be affected by our choices.

Objection 7. "We need to have a basic moral code which is not too far beyond the capacities of the ordinary man, for otherwise there will be a general breakdown of compliance with the moral code." The morality that Singer is proposing is far beyond the capacities of the ordinary person, so should not be accepted and established in society.

Singer's reply: "The issue here is: Where should we draw the line between conduct that is required and conduct that is good although not required, so as to get the best possible result?" This looks to be a hard empirical issue, and it is far from obvious that the answer is that moral requirements should be minimal. Anyway, these types of considerations don't apply to the first person question: what ought I to do. What would happen if one or another moral code were enforced against other people is clearly not relevant to the question, what makes most sense for me to do.

Further comment: Why private charity rather than government aid?

Singer's reply. One should do whatever works. The issue always is, what would be the consequences of my doing one thing rather than alternatives, doing nothing at all being one alternative.

Further comment: Do charity relief projects really do good in the long run?

Singer's reply: Again, one should do what is maximally efficacious. For example, if contributing to birth control efforts aimed at reducing population growth would do more to relieve misery over the long run than contributing in other ways, one should do the former.