

Handout: Peter Singer – “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”

I. Framing the Problem

Historical Context: The Bengal Emergency

- In **November 1971**, during the Bangladesh Liberation War, East Bengal (now Bangladesh) suffered a catastrophic **humanitarian crisis**:
 - Approximately **9 million refugees** fled to India due to the **Pakistan military crackdown** on Bengali independence supporters.
 - A **deadly cyclone, civil war**, and long-standing **poverty** worsened the situation.
 - Refugees suffered extreme deprivation: lack of food, clean water, shelter, and medical care.
- Governments of affluent nations responded with **minimal and inadequate aid**. For instance:
 - Britain gave £14.75 million—less than one-thirtieth of its funding for the Concorde project.
 - Australia's aid was dwarfed by the cost of constructing the Sydney Opera House.

Moral Problem

- *Why have individuals and governments in affluent nations failed to act in the face of mass suffering that could be alleviated at relatively small cost to themselves?*
 - Singer sees this as evidence that our **entire moral framework**—how we think about charity, duty, and moral obligation—is deeply flawed.
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II. Singer's Thesis: A Radical Revision of Moral Thinking

Central Claim

If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we are morally obligated to do it.

This deceptively simple principle leads Singer to a **radical ethical conclusion**: affluent individuals and governments are **morally required** to give substantial resources to alleviate suffering, even at significant personal cost.

III. Argument Structure

1. Two Assumptions (p. 231)

- Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are **bad**.
- We are morally required to **prevent bad things**, unless doing so involves sacrificing something **of comparable moral importance**.

2. Illustrative Analogy

- *The Drowning Child*: If you can save a drowning child in a shallow pond at the cost of muddying your clothes, you are **morally required** to do so.
 - Likewise, we must save the Bengali refugees if we can do so **without significant sacrifice**.

3. Rejecting Distance and Numbers as Morally Relevant (pp. 232–233)

- Physical proximity does **not** diminish obligation.
 - Whether a child is next to you or across the globe (e.g., Bengal) makes **no moral difference**.

- The fact that **millions of others** are in a similar position does **not** lessen your individual obligation.
 - Just because others are failing to help doesn't excuse **your** inaction.

4. Rejection of the Charity-Duty Distinction (p. 235)

- In Western moral discourse, giving to famine relief is seen as *charitable*, not obligatory.
 - But Singer argues: this distinction is morally indefensible.
- Acts commonly seen as **supererogatory** (above and beyond duty) are in fact **morally required**.
 - E.g., buying luxury goods instead of donating to famine relief is **morally wrong**, not morally neutral.

IV. Practical Implications

Radical Demands on the Affluent

- We are morally obligated to give **until we reach the point of marginal utility**—the point at which giving more would cause as much suffering to ourselves as it would alleviate (p. 241).
- Even a **moderate application** of Singer's principle requires drastic lifestyle changes:
 - No more luxury spending
 - Redirection of wealth toward famine relief and global poverty alleviation

Singer's Call for Systemic Change

- Our **moral conceptual scheme** must be transformed:
 - From seeing giving as *optional generosity* to seeing it as a *duty*.

- This has **political implications** too:
 - Governments must **increase aid substantially**.
 - Citizens must **pressure their representatives**, not just donate personally.
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V. Anticipated Objections and Replies

1. “It’s the Government’s Responsibility”

- Singer replies that even if governments **should** act, their current inaction means individuals **still have moral responsibility** (p. 239).
- Waiting for government action allows suffering to continue needlessly.

2. “Giving May Encourage Overpopulation”

- Famine relief might delay long-term problems without population control.
 - Singer grants this, but insists it **doesn’t negate the duty** to prevent current suffering.
 - Instead, we should **also support population control efforts** (p. 240).

3. “Too Demanding”

- The requirement to give so much may seem **too demanding** or **unrealistic**.
- Singer’s response:
 - This only seems unrealistic because of **deeply entrenched societal norms**.
 - Changing moral expectations **can influence behavior** (p. 237).

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- *"The fact that most people won't do what they ought to doesn't mean they don't ought to do it."*
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VI. Theoretical Influences and Historical Parallels

Utilitarianism and Consequentialism

- Singer's moral reasoning is **utilitarian in structure**:
 - Morality is about **maximizing well-being** and **minimizing suffering**.
 - He echoes **Mill** and **Sidgwick**, but gives utilitarianism **concrete, global scope**.

Aquinas on Natural Law and Property

- Singer cites **Thomas Aquinas**: property exists to serve **human need**.
 - "The bread which you withhold belongs to the hungry..." (p. 239)
 - Thus, the *superabundance* of the rich is *owed by natural right* to the poor.
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VII. Contemporary Relevance

Singer's argument retains its urgency in a globalized world:

- Famines, refugee crises, and global poverty persist.
- The wealth gap between affluent and poor nations has **widened**.
- Technologies of donation, charity, and information sharing are more accessible than ever.
- The moral dilemma is no longer about *possibility* but *will*.

VIII. Final Reflections

“What is the point of relating philosophy to public (and personal) affairs if we do not take our conclusions seriously?” (p. 242)

Singer ends with a **challenge to philosophers**:

- *Philosophy must not remain theoretical.*
 - It demands that we live according to our convictions—even when difficult.
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