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Against shallow ponds: an argument against Singer's approach to global poverty

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For 40 years, Peter Singer has deployed the case of the child drowning in the shallow pond to argue for greater donations in foreign aid. The persistent use of the shallow pond example in theorizing about global poverty ignores morally salient features of the real world, and ignoring such morally salient features can have a variety of harmful implications for anti-poverty work. I argue that the shallow pond example should be abandoned, and defend this claim against possible objections.

Keywords: Poverty; ethics; Singer; shallow pond

> A lot of people arrive in Africa to assume that it's a blank empty space and their goodwill and desire and guilt will fix it. And that to me is not any different from the first people who arrived and colonized us. This power, this power to help, is just about as dangerous as hard power, because very often it arrives with a kind of zeal that is assuming 'I will do it. I will solve it for you. I will fix it for you,' and it rides roughshod over your own best efforts. (Wainaina 2010)

Peter Singer's shallow pond argument, and the ongoing debate among philosophers around this case, encourages an overly simplistic and sometimes harmful narrative about poverty alleviation. Shallow pond thinking, characterized by oversimplification, reductionism, and abstraction, encourages and justifies well-intentioned but poorly informed actions in the name of 'saving' poor people from global poverty. Shallow pond thinking should be abandoned, and philosophers should focus on the complex, difficult, and messy questions that are raised by the existence of global poverty in the real world. Academics, activists, policy makers, and citizens should also move beyond simple narratives of 'us helping them' to better understand, and thus address, the complex causes of and potential solutions to global poverty.

The value of Singer's work on poverty

Singer's (1972) 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' made two distinctive contributions to contemporary philosophy. Singer made poverty a legitimate and important object of philosophical reflection. Before Singer's article, poverty was rarely discussed as an important ethical problem. When it was discussed, it was usually only within the boundaries of the nation-state. Singer challenged those (then prominent) philosophical frameworks that took the nation-state to be the natural boundary of moral consideration.

These two contributions stand as critical achievements that are partially responsible for the current, and better, focus of ethics and political philosophy on (a) questions of human rights and poverty in (b) a globalized context. Though philosophers are still, in many cases, at the initial stages of engaging these topics, the proliferation of work on global poverty, human rights,

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and globalization shows that both an outward (beyond the nation-state) and a downward (focusing on the most deprived) turn have occurred in practical philosophy, with Peter Singer, among others, to thank.

His work on global poverty is largely based on a single hypothetical case – that of the man walking past the shallow pond. The shallow pond case stands as one of the most famous thought experiments in contemporary philosophy. Perhaps, only Thomson's famous violinist has had his or her fate considered more times than Singer's drowning child.[1] The case is simple. You are to consider a person, maybe yourself, who is walking to an appointment of minor importance and comes across a pond where a helpless child is drowning. If the person wades in to save the child, he or she will incur some small cost in dry cleaning and be late for his or her next appointment. Singer asks: should the person save the drowning child even if he or she would incur minor, insignificant costs? Singer concludes that we ought to save the drowning child.

On the basis of our intuitions in this particular case, he thinks we can draw out a single normative principle that can be applied to the case of global poverty. This principle can be stated in a strong version or in a weak version. The strong version is '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' (Singer 1972, 231). This version is strong because it requires us to make sacrifices up until the point at which something of comparable worth would be lost. In the case of saving a life, presumably few things would be of comparable worth, except for other human lives. Applying the strong version of the principle in the shallow pond case, even if the person entering the pond thought he or she would lose a limb in the effort, he or she still ought to save the child because a limb is not of comparable worth to the drowning child's life. Singer's moderate version is that we should prevent bad things from happening unless we have to give up something of moral significance. Therefore, anything of moral significance, say, saving one's limb, justifies a decision to fail to prevent bad things from happening.

Singer then uses this moderate principle to do all of the normative work in a three-step argument regarding donating to poverty alleviation. In the argument's most recent statement in *The Life You Can Save*, Singer (2009a) writes:

> First Premise: Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad. Second premise: If it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so. Third premise: By donating to aid agencies, you can prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, without sacrificing anything nearly as important. Conclusion: Therefore, if you do not donate to aid agencies, you are doing something wrong (15–6).

There are three basic strategies that one can take in responding to Singer's shallow pond case. The first is to reject that the shallow pond case tells us anything about the obligations of wealthy people to poor people. Commentators have argued that shared membership in a community or nationality, physical proximity, or epistemic certainty of outcomes would change our obligations in the case of poverty alleviation.[2]

The second strategy is to reject that we actually do have strict positive obligations of aid to strangers, despite the apparent plausibility of Singer's claim that we ought to save the child in the shallow pond case. This strategy emphasizes that while we may have some positive duties to strangers, which explains the case of saving the drowning child, these duties are imperfect and, therefore, do not need to be fulfilled to all strangers or any particular strangers.[3]

The third strategy is to accept Singer's conclusions, although perhaps issuing qualifying statements regarding why the author or other apparently morally decent people do not do more to address global poverty.

In this paper, I will not discuss whether (a) we have strong duties of beneficence or (b) ought to give much more than we do in foreign aid. Instead, I will show that the shallow pond case is

incapable of doing the philosophical work necessary to guide action on the many difficult questions raised by real world global poverty, and that the vast oversimplification in this case can have very harmful impacts on efforts to address global poverty.

What is missing from the shallow pond case

In this section, I will highlight some of the important features that are missing from the shallow pond case that make it disanalogous to the contemporary circumstances in which global poverty persists.[4]

Agency

In the shallow pond case, there is one agent. There are two persons, each worthy of moral consideration, but only one person capable of making choices and acting on those choices. The savior stands at the pond's edge, deciding whether or not to save the helpless child. The child awaits this savior, incapable of doing anything to respond to his or her unfortunate circumstances.

People who actually live with and struggle against poverty on a daily basis might reasonably be offended by being compared to drowning children. Poor people are rational actors who make a variety of decisions, many difficult, to attempt to survive and prosper despite the circumstances they face. Taking the shallow pond case seriously, one could reasonably infer that the fate of poor people rests entirely on the moral choices of the wealthy, and poor people are entirely incapable of having any influence over their chances of surviving and flourishing.[5]

Treating poor people as mere receptacles of consumption or deprivation, rather than as agents, is both objectionable in itself and likely to lead to bad development outcomes. In *Portfolios of the poor: How the world's poor live on $2 a day*, Darryl Collins, Jonathan Murdoch, Stuart Rutherford, and Orlanda Ruthven study financial diaries from the poorest households in Bangladesh, India, and South Africa. They find that not one family, not even among the poorest families, lives hand to mouth – that is, consuming all of the income it receives. Rather, poor people are savvy financial actors, managing cash flows that are quite high as a percentage of overall income throughout the year, despite the fact that their total incomes are extremely small. Constantly borrowing and lending, making investments, and cashing them in, poor people are very active money managers. In fact, they find that lower incomes require *more* financial management (Collins et al. 2009, 33).[6] The uniformed might imagine that poor people simply consume everything they can get their hands on, just as a drowning child will grasp onto anything that will get him or her above the surface. But this view is mistaken, and treating poor people as such both fails to respect their agency and results in misguided policies.

Context

In the shallow pond case, there is no context: no geography (well, there is a pond), no ethnicity, no religion, no gender, no history, no power, or no race. There are simply two people, one deciding whether or not to save the other.

In the real world, poverty is always embedded in context. It is instructive that Singer's initial article on foreign aid was specifically on famine relief. The unexamined conception of famine relief in the west is that there are large numbers of starving people around, and if there were just enough food purchased and delivered by outsiders, these people would be saved.[7] But the significant reduction of famine (O'Grada 2009) has not been a result of increased donations reaching potential famine victims in the form of food. Amartya Sen argues that 'no major

famine has ever occurred in a functioning democracy with regular elections, opposition parties, basic freedom of speech and a relatively free media (even when the country is very poor and in a seriously adverse food situation)' (Sen 2009, 342).

Sen's entitlement view of famine situates this sudden and extreme deprivation in context:

> What is crucial in analyzing hunger is the substantive freedom of the individual and the family to establish ownership over an adequate amount of food, which can be done either by growing the food oneself (as peasants do) or by buying it in the market (as the nongrowers of food do). A person may be forced into starvation even when there is plenty of food around if he loses his ability to buy food in the market, through a loss of income . . . On the other side, even when food supply falls sharply in a country of a region, everyone can be saved from starvation by a better sharing of the available food (Sen 1999, 11).

Sen's analysis depends crucially on sensitivity to the context in which potential famine victims live, and this context sensitivity is necessary to develop a theory of famine prevention. Similarly, there is a context in which people suffer from other poverty-related deprivations. Understanding this context is necessary to alleviate poverty.

In writing about the Bengal famine, Singer wrote that, 'People are dying from lack of food, shelter and medical care in East Bengal. Constant poverty, a cyclone, and a civil war have turned at least nine million people into destitute refugees . . . So far as it concerns us here, there is nothing unique about this situation except its magnitude' (Singer 1972, 229). Absent a few other facts about the cost of assisting refugees, no other context is provided.

But even if he had said more, or if his more recent work on foreign aid were context sensitive, the shallow pond case would still do very little for us. It is instructive that a civil war, a cyclone, and constant poverty were all cited as causes for suffering. Surely, it is at least worth considering that a cyclone (Natural in what sense? Did the authorities warn the population? What was the response? Did pre-existing social, economic, or political inequalities exacerbate the cyclone?), a civil war (Was it just or unjust? Will the aid go to refugees or war criminals? Is aid going to be an incentive for further fighting? Is it used as a political weapon?), and constant poverty (Was the poverty really constant or increasing or decreasing? Who is responsible for alleviating it? Who is constantly poor?) might be morally distinct cases and require more sophisticated normative treatment, not to mention different policy responses. But shallow pond thinking does not require context sensitivity. Poor people are just somewhere out there, in need of saving.

Institutions

The shallow pond case also lacks institutions. Of course, it is possible to reconstruct the shallow pond case to include institutions. There could be lifeguards or a municipality responsible for the pond or a voting electorate that has jurisdiction over the pond. But the better job one does of building institutions into the shallow pond case, the less relevant the shallow pond becomes.

Singer's (2002) book *One World* helpfully focuses attention on institutions. He assesses the role of institutions in governance regarding the environment, the economy, international law, humanitarian intervention, and global poverty. It is strange that he then returns to the shallow pond case and abstracts away from institutions in *The Life You Can Save*. In his 2009 book, Singer briefly notes that institutions should play a role. He only spends a page and a half arguing that 'bad institutions can undo good projects' and argues that 'if we can improve institutions, we should do so . . . [but] sometimes conditions may be so bad that nothing we can do will diminish the misery of unfortunate citizens. Then we have to go elsewhere. But at other times aid can directly help the poorest, making a significant and sustainable difference to them, even if it does not lead to better institutions. In that case, we should not withhold it'

(Singer 2009a, 117). He ignores the ways in which merely pushing for more aid dollars might deliberately undermine poor people's own efforts to reform institutions.[8] It is also illustrative that he writes 'we' can sometimes reform institutions, but when we cannot, we must 'go elsewhere'? There is no recognition of the poor people who are working to reform such institutions, and have little choice to go elsewhere.

There can be no doubt that wealthy individuals have a role to play in institutional reform.[9] Separating questions of institutional reform from discussions of individual obligations to alleviate global poverty is a mistake.

Complexity

The shallow pond case lacks complexity. Various iterations of the shallow pond case can be imagined that make it slightly more complex.[10] But none will reflect the complexity of poverty and poverty alleviation in the real world. And the closer one comes to describing the world in which foreign aid actually occurs, the less relevant the shallow pond case becomes.

Singer recognizes the complexity of foreign aid. He writes:

> working out the likely real world consequences of aid is often more complicated than we thought, and that is true of any large-scale human activity. Whether the complications involve Dutch disease, bad institutions, or population growth, they introduce an element of uncertainty into our efforts to provide assistance. Nevertheless, some degree of uncertainty about the impact of aid does not alleviate our obligation to give. If an aid project has a good chance of bringing great benefits to the poor, and the cost to us of making that aid project possible is comparatively minor, then we should give the money. (Singer 2009a, 124–25)

Singer seems to suggest that once he has decisively shown that we have obligations to give money to global poverty, we only need to take account of the complexity of the world in figuring out how to give. He assumes that the complexity will have no impact on our obligations (assuming that it does not interfere with our ability to give) and that there are no important philosophical questions that need to be addressed in giving, merely technical or practical questions.

More could be said about the deficiencies of the shallow pond case. But this starting point – a lack of agency, a lack of context, a lack of institutions, and a lack of complexity – is sufficient to raise very serious concerns for the relevance of the shallow pond case to global poverty. In the next section, I will argue that these deficiencies are not mere weaknesses in Singer's example, but have harmful implications for poor people and for wealthy people's approach to poverty alleviation.

Harmful implications of shallow pond thinking

I have shown that Singer's thought experiment is disanalogous to real world poverty in a variety of problematic ways. Below, I list some of the most undesirable implications of shallow pond thinking. Shallow pond thinking is defined by *abstraction, reductionism, and oversimplification*. Shallow pond thinking abstracts far away from the real world to idealized cases. Shallow pond thinking reduces many difficult moral problems to a small number of easy moral choices. Shallow pond thinking oversimplifies very complex cases to very simple narratives.

Any modeling exercise requires abstraction, simplification, and reduction. However, my claim here is that shallow pond thinking excludes morally salient features that could feasibly be included in an exercise of moral reasoning about poverty – it is overly abstract, overly simplified, and overly reductionist, but could feasibly have been otherwise. These exclusions are, therefore, not merely the consequence of engaging in analogy, but are unnecessary and harmful exclusions. It is important to note that shallow pond thinking is not a necessary

product of the shallow pond case. It is possible that one could use the shallow pond case, and then never engage in shallow pond thinking. Conversely, many shallow pond thinkers will have never heard of Singer's work. Nonetheless, the persistence of shallow pond thinking, especially in the work of Singer, suggests that it is a probable by-product of the shallow pond case. The best work in philosophy on global poverty should provide a basis for criticizing the worst lines of thought in development practice, and Singer's work does not currently do that.

Below, I explicate some of the most harmful implications of shallow pond thinking for poverty alleviation.

Do not do that which is hard to evaluate, or less certain to succeed

An implication of shallow pond thinking is that we should do that action which is easiest to evaluate, and most likely to succeed.[11] Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, among many other important human rights research and advocacy organizations, have long attempted to raise awareness about human rights abuses and, when possible, have mobilized activists to halt human rights abuses. Any serious attempt to quantify the impact of their comprehensive body of work is going to be fraught with impossible to evaluate counterfactuals. How many more government dissidents would be in jail if human rights organizations had not named and shamed those governments that do jail political opponents? How many more government offensives would there have been against innocent civilian populations if governments were not aware that human rights groups would raise alarm? How many wars of aggression have been prevented by the emergence of the human rights regime? It is quite difficult to know. It is also difficult to evaluate one's efficacy in these areas. But in the shallow pond case, it is easy to evaluate one's actions. Shallow pond thinking implies that we should not spend resources on the hard to evaluate cases.

Part of what makes the shallow pond case compelling is that there is a high probability that if one does decide to act, he or she will successfully save a life. The sole normative principle in Singer's argument ('If it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so'), among other things, says nothing about probability.

In discussing the argument that we ought to focus on trade, not on aid (which I will revisit below), Singer writes that we should focus our efforts where we are most likely to succeed. Therefore, on his account, if it is hard to evaluate success, or success is less certain, we should opt for the easier option.

You, wealthy westerner, are the savior!

Singer's shallow pond narrative encourages the view of wealthy westerners as the saviors of poor people (see the title of the book, *The Life You Can Save*, and the website, www.thelifeyoucansave.com). This is problematic for at least three reasons.

First, it is true that poverty plays a causal role in a large number of human deaths worldwide. It is also true that donations to foreign aid can reduce the number of these deaths. But saying that there is a 'life you can save' and comparing it to a child drowning in a pond is misleading. When we think about a child drowning in a pond, we imagine that if we go save that child, he or she will go on to live a full and decent life. To save a life generally implies this. When an elderly cancer patient receives treatments that extend his or her life by a year, we do not usually say that the treatments saved his or her life, they just extended it. Similarly, when we say you saved a poor person's life, presumably we mean that the poor person went on to live a full, decent life. There was some moment at which all could have been lost, but was not. However,

poverty alleviation is not only about saving lives. It is about making small, progressive realizations of better lives with fewer deprivations – many of these improvements would not save lives, but they will improve them.

Second, casting westerners as saviors ignores the causal and historical relationship between wealthy individuals and global poverty. This point has been made most forcefully by Thomas Pogge. He argues that the global institutional order foreseeably and avoidably inflicts significant harms on the poor, and that citizens in western democracies bear responsibilities for the institutions that act on their behalf in harming the poor.[12] We are, in the words of Ha-Joon Chang, bad Samaritans. In the instance in which an individual takes action by giving to poverty relief and that results in improved circumstances for a person who might otherwise have lost his or her life, it seems overly charitable to the donors to say that they have 'saved' a life. If you had significantly harmed a person, such that his or her life was threatened (say, in a fit of rage, you drive over him or her with a car) and then decide to at least try to make amends by caring for the person (say, you drive him or her to the hospital), we would not say you have 'saved' his or her life.[13]

Third, even if we set aside questions of responsibility for global poverty, there is a further question regarding the stance and perspective that one ought to take in alleviating global poverty. Shallow pond thinking implies that wealthy individuals are the saviors of poor people. They are (in some cases, secular) missionaries, not saving souls, but saving lives. The 'missionary position' in development thinking and practice has been widely criticized for at least two decades. Firoze Manji and Carol O'Coil argue that NGOs'

> role in 'development' represents a continuity of the work of their precursors, the missionaries and voluntary organisations that cooperated in Europe's colonization and control of Africa. Today their work contributes marginally to the relief of poverty, but significantly to undermining the struggle of African people to emancipate themselves from economic, social and political oppression. NGOs could, and some do, play a role in supporting an emancipatory agenda in Africa, but that would involve them disengaging from their paternalistic role in development. (Manji and O'Coil 2002, 568) [14]

Though I do not think that this is a fair characterization of the work of many NGOs, I agree that the paternalistic impulse in development practice is inherently objectionable and instrumentally detrimental to progress in human development. At one point, Singer quotes approvingly of this saving, missionary impulse. He commends Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church, who visited a church in South Africa and became committed to the cause of global poverty. As a result of his preaching, 'more than 7500 Saddleback Church members have paid their own way to developing countries to do volunteer work fighting poverty and disease. Once they have seen the situation, for themselves, many want to keep helping' (Singer 2009a, 21). It is unclear what these disease and poverty fighters do, or what happens when they leave, or why they pay for themselves to travel to do the work rather than employ local labor, or whether proselytizing is part of their work. But for the shallow pond thinker, this does not matter. They are saviors![15]

You do not need to know very much to save

In the shallow pond case, one needs to know very little, if anything, to be able to save the child. In fact, Singer argues that two police community support officers in the UK who failed to jump in a pond after a drowning child, and defended their actions by arguing that they were not trained for such situations, were not justified in failing to act (Singer 2009a, 4). But if the shallow pond case is similar to poverty alleviation, then wealthy westerners also do not need to know a lot about poverty. They should just jump in.

Singer spends much time recommending GiveWell, a non-profit organization set up to recommend the best charities. The recommendations are based entirely on the charities

submitting their information to GiveWell, and responding to any questions that GiveWell might have. At the time of writing, GiveWell had recommended 9 out of 397 charities reviewed. As far as I can tell, GiveWell has established a set of criteria for evaluation, is run by smart people who can effectively apply these criteria, and is attempting to provide a service to wealthy donors. That being said, it is reflective of shallow pond thinking that Singer holds up GiveWell as the paradigmatic case of effective philanthropy.[16]

My point here is not to criticize GiveWell, but it is worth examining how this organization that is so highly recommended by Singer is exemplary of shallow pond thinking. First, the personnel and board have almost no experience in any kind of development work, or in poor countries, more generally. The three current staff members have undergraduate degrees in social science, economics, and religion from prestigious American universities. Two of the three are former employees in the hedge-fund industry. There is no evidence on the website that any have either studied or worked on development. Of seven board members, only two appear to have experience in development or philanthropy. And this is consistent with shallow pond thinking – you do not need to have any experience or background in child saving, you just jump in and do it. They are, as Singer says, 'a couple of very bright guys' (Singer 2009b).

But this is not a decisive charge. In fact, I think that it is good for enterprising young people to want to change course and make positive contributions to the world. The lack of background or experience is not a necessary reason that an organization should not be our best guide to poverty alleviation, but it should give us pause.

More importantly, GiveWell's method of evaluation seems to lack the epistemic rigor needed to effectively assess the implications of different charitable organizations. GiveWell uses an approach that largely is based on engaging with the publicly available information from a particular organization, that organization's staff, and some independent experts who may provide further insight. Once GiveWell has identified a 'cause' that it wants to investigate, it identifies charities within the cause and reviews the charities' materials, identifying the charities 'most likely to be able to demonstrate proven, effective, scalable methods of helping people' (GiveWell 2010).[17] GiveWell (2010) then studies these charities in depth, rank orders them, and writes up and publishes the results.

Again, poor people might be reasonably offended to learn that expert evaluations about anti-poverty work can be made entirely by assessing the websites, reports, and testimonials from NGOs that are themselves under great pressure to please donors while keeping administrative costs down. To GiveWell's credit, it recognizes this as a problem and has begun making site visits. Following its first international site visits (which occurred *after* its report on international aid was released), one GiveWell staffer wrote a blog about visiting two recommended charities in South Africa and Mozambique, noting that he was an inexperienced observer with no expertise, whose judgments could not prove anything about the efficacy of the program (Karnofsky 2010).[18] In general, the transparency and willingness to be self-reflexive by GiveWell are commendable. But the fact that this organization is held up as the paradigm of good giving by Singer shows the influence of shallow pond thinking. First, figure out that you ought to give. Then, give to the most effective organization. There is no need to know a great deal. In fact, those who admit to knowing very little can be the best guides to effective anti-poverty philanthropy. The input or consultation of poor people themselves is certainly not needed.

Singer's lack of engagement with the rich body of critical literature in development studies is further exposed when he cites approvingly of Jeffrey Sachs' Millennium Villages Project. The Millennium Villages Project is an effort led by Sachs under a mandate from the United Nations Development Program to show the effect of providing aid to communities in a variety of sectors all at once for a short period of time.

The Millennium Villages are subject to a number of criticisms, which are not discussed in *The Life You Can Save*. First, and most importantly, who is making decisions? Second, why should the same approach work everywhere? Third, why are not the results of the Millennium Villages subject to peer review? Fourth, why are not the Millennium Villages subject to more rigorous evaluation? Fifth, how could the Millennium Villages ever be scalable? And, finally, could they be sustainable – or will the gains be lost after the aid ends? (Cowen 2007; Schleshinger 2007; Freschi 2009; Blattman 2009; Barder 2010; Clemens 2010).

My discussion here is not intended to decisively reject the approach of GiveWell or the Millenium Villages Project. Rather, I merely want to illustrate that the weak epistemic position of the savior in the shallow pond case is replicated in Singer's more general argument for giving foreign aid. All you have to know is that there is a child in a pond, and you can save him or her. All you have to know is that poor people are out there, and with almost no knowledge of global poverty, you can save them.

The action you take can be apolitical

Perhaps, the most disappointing part of Singer's book is his discussion of 'Trade, Not Aid'. Responding to common arguments that trade reform could confer far more benefits than aid ever will, and that countries which have made strides in eliminating poverty have done so largely through trade, he writes that rather than taking on political issues such as trade, 'our efforts are better spent elsewhere, where we can be confident of making a difference', because many political campaigns to reform trade have been unsuccessful (Singer 2009a, 114).

Consider this argument in different circumstances. We should not march for civil rights in the USA, because we can be more certain of making a difference if we spend our time and money on aid projects in Latin America. We should not agitate for an end to apartheid. Rather, we should just give aid that reaches black South Africans. We should not struggle for independence. Instead, we should just give money to colonized people. I find these arguments highly implausible. Why should we think, in the case of global poverty, that we should focus our attention on apolitical acts? Poverty is political (Green 2008). It becomes depoliticized in the hands of institutions and individuals who think of it as a scientific or technical problem (Green 2006). But people are impoverished, at least in part, because of their structural relations to others. Some get more and some get less not only because of bad luck or poor decision-making, but also because of political institutions, from the state to the family, that create and sustain an unjust distribution of resources. Poverty eradication, therefore, is unlikely to be successful if approached in an apolitical manner.[19] The proper response to failed efforts at trade reform is not to abandon such efforts, but it is to redouble them.

And you do not have to make choices regarding scarce resources

In the shallow pond case, there are really only two choices. Either one saves the drowning child, or not. But in the real world of foreign aid and poverty alleviation, difficult choices must be made in the allocation of scarce resources.

Singer advocates individual donations to reputable NGOs. But in a world of great need and scarce resources, where should NGOs act? Should it merely be the donors' preference? Or in the places with the greatest need? Or in the places with the greatest efficacy? And how will efficacy and need be assessed?

These are some of the most important normative questions in foreign aid. But shallow pond thinking does not require reflection on the allocation of scarce resources (or provide guidance),

because in the presented case, there is only one resource, the capable adult, and one person in need, the drowning child.

Possible responses

Thus far, I have shown that there are very serious and often unrecognized problems with the simplicity of the shallow pond thinking that Singer employs. There are four responses that Singer could make to the charges raised here.

The first response is to be strictly consequentialist. In defense of shallow pond thinking, he could argue that his persistent use of the shallow pond has led to significant positive outcomes, most notably, increased foreign aid.[20] Consequentialist reasoning would then have to take into account all of the harmful consequences from shallow pond thinking that I have listed above. Singer might respond that the overall consequences justify the use of shallow pond thinking. However, a good consequentialist should not simply assess whether the good consequences outweigh the bad, but instead select the action out of the range of possible options which produces the best possible outcome. Presumably, an argument which reaches the same conclusion and has the same beneficial impact on fundraising can be given without the many harmful implications listed above.

The second response is to avoid using consequentialist reasoning, but simply argue that independent of the consequences of the argument, it is the case that his argument follows true premises to their logical conclusion, and therefore, deserves to be made. But this strategy is problematic as well. For any conclusion, there are frequently several different arguments that can be given to arrive at the same conclusion. Consider the following: when driving a car, one should stop at the stop sign when there are pedestrians on the street, because if one were to run them over, it would result in bad consequences for the driver, including possible jail time. Alternatively, when driving a car, one should stop when pedestrians are on the street, because they are unique human beings with interests, projects, and feelings that are morally salient and deserving of consideration. Both arguments arrive at the same conclusion. Both follow from true premises. But surely we should not go around making the first argument to new drivers when the second has fewer bad consequences, and the reasoning involved in the second can help address a host of other important ethical questions.

The third response is to distinguish between arguments for the immediate responsibility for alleviating suffering and the distinct responsibilities for eradicating global poverty.[21] It is not implausible to think that the reduction in immediate suffering, particularly, in emergency cases, is normatively distinct from long-term poverty eradication. However, Singer is not arguing that we should save children in nearby ponds, period. His arguments are consistently applied to the case of global poverty. In fact, he gives us a seven-point plan that 'will make you part of the solution to global poverty' (Singer 2009a, 168–9). Furthermore, it is not clear that a distinction between emergency aid (toward immediate relief of suffering) and development aid (toward long-term deprivation reduction) should be strictly maintained.[22] One can see this quite clearly in particular cases. The 2010 Haitian earthquake was an unpredictable natural disaster. But the devastation of the earthquake was due in large part to long-term underdevelopment in Haiti. It is neither possible nor advisable to separate emergency relief in Haiti from the long-term project of poverty eradication.

The final response, and the one that I recommend, is to abandon the shallow pond case and shallow pond thinking.

Conclusion

I believe that wealthy individuals do have significant moral obligations to address the abhorrent deprivations that much of humanity faces every day. But I have shown that shallow

pond thinking frames questions regarding poverty and poverty alleviation in a way that is disanalogous to the case of real world poverty, disrespectful to poor people, and unlikely to lead to good development outcomes. Furthermore, shallow pond thinking is incapable of critically engaging the difficult questions that are raised by the existence of global poverty in a complex, globalized world.

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Notes

1. A similar point was recently made by Thomas Nagel, reviewing Singer's recent work (Nagel 2010). For Thomson's original article, see Thomson (1971).
2. Singer responded to many of these objections in his initial 1972 article.
3. Alternatively, one could just reject that we ought to save the drowning child.
4. This is not a comprehensive list, but merely what I take to be some of the central features necessary for evaluating obligations in relation to contemporary global poverty which are absent in the shallow pond case.
5. Maia Green argues that poverty is represented as something that people fall into, which must be attacked, while ignoring the agency of both those who become poor and those who are causally involved in creating poverty. She writes, 'Such descriptions are in fact part of a long established intellectual tradition of perceiving poverty in ways which, in making poverty the focus of analysis, obscure the social processes that make people poor and, in abstracting poverty from people, obliterate the agency of social actors in creating and transcending the limitations of their resources and entitlements' (Green 2006, 1112).
6. Collins et al. also find that poorer households have even higher turnover of financial assets than less poor households. In India, rural households had an average year-end asset value of US $18, but with an annual financial turnover of US $590.
7. Jamieson (2005) calls this the 'Live Aid' conception of foreign aid.
8. Michela Wrong argues that the push for more aid often leads to a reluctance to address institutional reform. In her excellent book *It's Our Turn to Eat: The Story of a Kenyan Whistle Blower*, she writes that 'in the wake of pledges made at Gleneagles to double and triple aid, Western development ministries needed to hike disbursement if they were to use the fresh funds coming their way. DfID's development budget for Africa more than quadrupled in the ten years after Labour's 1997 election win. And if Kenya was deemed to fall short of the criteria which made a country a deserving recipient of aid, which African nation would qualify?' (Wrong 2009, 62). For a general survey of the relationship between aid and institutions, see Moss, Petterrson, and van de Walle (2006).
9. This is true at least in so far as they bear responsibility for the unjust institutions that cause and perpetuate poverty in the first place. Notable contributions include the international resource privilege and the international borrowing privilege conferred on illegitimate governments (see Pogge 2002).
10. Imagine that there are 10 people around the pond and a single drowning child. Imagine that there are 10 people around the pond and 10 drowning children. Imagine that there are 10 different ponds, each with a child drowning and you are on your way to work, so closer and others further away. One can imagine further shallow pond cases.
11. This is Singer's response to a question from Alice (asked on the Development Drums podcast) about whether it might be better to spend our time and money on NGOs advocating for political change – say, to change agricultural policies or address climate change. 'Suppose that you are able to give, let's say, $5000 per year or something, whatever your income allows you to give. With that amount of money, I think you could make, if you pick the right NGO as I was just talking about before in response to Errol Tresland, if you pick the right NGO, you could save maybe five lives, maybe more for that amount of money. If you give it to a campaign to cut greenhouse gas emissions, it may do nothing at all. We don't know. We don't know to what extent the money is going to influence that issue. It may be that it'd be

better to spend some time writing to your representatives about that, getting on the streets with people. There are all sorts of things. So I am definitely in favor of trying to make the changes that Alice referred to. I am just not really convinced that something that we should do with our money instead of giving it to NGOs. So you might want to give some to those causes to encourage those as well as giving some, perhaps more to NGOs' (Singer 2009a).

12. See Pogge (2004).
13. In *The life you can save*, Singer notes that wealthy individuals have harmed poor people globally (30–2). But it does not seem to change his argument that wealthy individuals can be life savers. He might respond here by saying that the second act of aiding the person does, in fact, save a life. While this is true, taking the person's actions on the whole as life saving is highly implausible. Furthermore, when assessing the whole situation and the person's actions, it is mistaken to merely isolate the second action and not address the first in terms of both morally assessing the individual and guiding practical action in the future.
14. They continue: 'Development NGOs have become an integral, and necessary, part of a system that sacrifices respect for justice and rights. They have taken the 'missionary position' – service delivery, running projects that are motivated by charity, pity and doing things for people (implicitly who can't do it for themselves), albeit with the verbiage of participatory approaches . . . But the missionary position is not the only option . . . If they stand in favour of the emancipation of humankind (whether at home or abroad), then the focus of their work has inevitably to be in the political domain, supporting those social movements that seek to challenge a social system that benefits a few and impoverishes the many. The closing years of apartheid in Africa were illustrative of the choice that NGOs face today: either they supported the emerging popular movements (in South Africa and internationally) that supported the overthrow of a brutal system of exploitation, or they stayed silent and continued their philanthropic work, and became thereby complicit in the crimes of the system of apartheid' (Manji and O'Coil 2002, 582). I do not intend here to take a position on the degree to which this is an apt characterization of NGO work. Rather, I simply highlight that NGOs which think about the world in a certain kind of way will be more prone to the kind of failures that Manji and O'Coil criticize.
15. One is reminded of the more egregious cases of 'savior syndrome'. Two recent attempts of westerners to effectively kidnap children come to mind. In February 2010, following the devastating Haitian earthquake, 10 Baptists from Idaho were charged with attempted kidnapping of 33 Haitian children. They claimed that the children were orphans and they were trying to help them, despite the fact that they had no way of verifying the children's status (Robinson 2010). In October 2007, 16 members of a French NGO named Zoe's Ark were charged with kidnapping after attempting to take 103 children in Chad to France. It was later learned that many of the children were taken from living parents (Beardsley 2007).
16. On a (very informative and well-respected) podcast with development economist Owen Barder, Barder reports that a listener has told Singer that he will give $2000 to any charity that Singer recommends. Singer recommends GiveWell, which directs the money it raises to the charity that shows itself to be most deserving according to some pre-determined set of criteria (Singer 2009a).
17. It is notable here that GiveWell admittedly focuses on those organizations that are more proficient at demonstrating their effectiveness, rather than on those organizations that are most effective. On its website, it says 'In our limited experience, small/start-up charities rarely have the capacity to strongly document their effect on people's lives' http://www.givewell.org/about/FAQ. But there is no word from GiveWell on whether small/start-up charities have the capacity to change people's lives!
18. He noted: 'I was only in Africa for two weeks; I was a complete outsider; I certainly don't think that anything I saw "proves" anything about the programs or areas I was looking at. In many cases what I saw (and what I discussed with staff) prompted me to discuss and think harder about issues I'd already thought about a little. So as I share thoughts from the trip, think of these as thoughts that were partly inspired by what I saw and discussed, not as "things I've learned"'.
19. In fact, it is impossible to be fully apolitical – any aid project will have political impacts, one way or another, regardless of one's desire to remain neutral.
20. This would be a hard argument to assess, given that we do not have reliable information on the impact of his argument. His website, thelifeyoucansave.com, currently registers 5292 people who have taken the pledge to give some percentage of their income to global poverty. Presumably, some larger number of people have been moved to give by Singer's argument, but have not registered their pledge on this website, or been moved to give by those who have pledged.
21. I am grateful for this suggestion by an anonymous reviewer.
22. For a discussion of the distinction between development aid and emergency aid, see Rubenstein (2007).

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