

Paper 2

In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”, Peter Singer’s argument that most people in the affluent world morally ought to be giving far more money to humanitarian aid than they currently are, is reconstructed into the following two premises and one conclusion:

P1. Those in the affluent world can afford to prevent something bad from happening by giving a certain amount of money to humanitarian aid.

P2. If it is in one’s power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then it is morally wrong to not do it.
(edited quote from Singer’s *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*, pp.231)

C. It is morally wrong for an affluent individual to not give an affordable amount of money to humanitarian aid.

Singer’s argument starts with premise 1, where “something bad” refers to “suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care” (pp.231) and to humanitarian crises such as starvation and famine. It is a universal agreement that any humanitarian crisis is bad and is worth preventing. Moreover, premise 1 claims that any individual in the affluent world can afford to give a certain amount of money to humanitarian aid.

Premise 2 further states that if it is within one’s ability, or one can afford to “prevent something bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance”. In other words, the sacrifice would not cause harm to other equally moral correct things; then “it is morally wrong to not do it”. The phrase “morally wrong to not do

it” emphasizes the fact that the societal perspective on this is that it is a morally admirable action to donate money to humanitarian aid, and those who perform such actions deserve praise and admiration. In fact, it is morally wrong to not do it. One should be blamed and punished for not donating money when one can afford it.

Assuming all the premises are true, one is able to conclude that it is morally wrong for an affluent individual to not give an affordable amount of money to humanitarian aid. One application which Singer gives to rephrase his argument is the following: “if [someone is] walking past a shallow pond and [sees] a child drowning in it, [he/she] ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting [the] clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing” (pp.231). This analogy provides a good understanding of premise 2 and the conclusion, where the expensive clothes equal a sacrifice that is not of comparable moral importance. Singer’s principle, however, is very difficult to accept. It challenges the usual societal perspective on donation, that is “giving money to the Bengal Relief Fund is regarded as an act of charity” (pp.233). It is, in fact, not a charity or generosity, but indeed, a moral responsibility for one to give the money.

One of the possible objections to Singer’s conclusion is that paying taxes to the government already fulfills one’s moral obligation as a means to prevent the humanitarian crisis in the world. The government is responsible for it, and the citizens are no longer responsible after the payment. Although they can afford more money than just the amount of taxes to donate (drawn from premise 1), it is not morally wrong to withhold donations. They believe that they deserve the money from their hard work, and they would use the money to pay for entertainment and the pleasure gained from material items. Some

questions they could ask Singer are: “I agree famine is bad, but why do I ought to give away more money that I worked hard for after paying taxes? Do I not deserve to keep what I put effort into? I agree that it is nice to help them out, but I am not doing a morally wrong action by not donating. It is not my responsibility anymore”. Singer would reply to them with the drowning baby application. Assuming one can agree that if they see a drowning baby in the pond, they would save the baby, regardless of the result of ruining their expensive clothes or shoes. Even if they see multiple drowning babies, they would always jump into the pond and save them. Similarly, donating to famine relief will save many people’s lives, and the sacrifice is only a little amount of money, which is the equivalent of not hesitating to save the drowning babies despite ruining the clothes. Singer challenges the societal perspective on donation. It is no longer a charity action, but a moral compulsion to prosperous individuals, as they cannot bear to let the baby drown by doing nothing.

However, one could argue that there is a clear distinction between the drowning baby case and the donating to famine relief case. Paying taxes does not keep one from continuing to save drowning babies, but it draws a line for one to continue donating whenever they can afford it. People could be criticized and blamed for not saving a drowning baby when they can, but not the action of not donating when they can donate. In other words, in the donation case, people have “saved enough” lives by paying taxes to the government. It is not morally wrong to not donate more after “donating” enough taxes. Both the objection and Singer’s argument seem persuasive, and it is uncertain to know who is correct on the matter of fact.

Another possible objection doubts the correctness of premise 3. Although premise 1 is without controversies true, premise 3 restricts the donation target to be only the humanitarian aid. This objection to Singer’s argument is that research on global warming

and many other medical diseases are equally in need for donations, and some of them are affecting a greater amount of people than humanitarian crisis worldwide; even the developed, affluent countries are being affected. It argues that one should not prioritize humanitarian aid over other aid such as medical aid for cancer research. Singer's conclusion should be altered into the following – it is morally wrong for an affluent individual to not give the money to medical aid as well. Nevertheless, this does not deny one's moral responsibility to donate to humanitarian aid if they can still afford it after donating to medical aid or scientific research aid. Another point of view as a counterargument to this objection is that giving money to humanitarian aid provides effective consequences and save many people's lives directly, by example, from lack of food or shelter, while donating money to add to the funding of research on diseases requires a longer waiting time for any direct outcomes, such as the production of a no side-effects drug that cures cancer. In other words, humanitarian aid is more urgently needed because thousands of people are dying every second, and a small amount of money from everyone in the affluent world can save their lives immediately. Donating to other aid requires a risk of having no results in the short term. Singer's argument seems to be true, which leads to the question of whether if people are aware of their moral obligations as a citizen and should change their action accordingly, or they can remain to be bystanders and watch others dying.