

Singer on Our Obligations to the Distant Needy

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Two Cases: The Pond and The Oxfam Letter

Consider the following two situations.

The Pond. You are on your way to an important job interview. You are wearing a pair of very expensive shoes that you bought for the interview. On your way, you come across a small child drowning in a pond. You are the only person around who can hear the child's cries for help. You do not have time to go get help. You could wade into the pond and easily save the child. But if you do so, you will ruin your new pair of very expensive shoes (and be late for your important meeting).

INTUITION: You ought to wade into the pond and save the child.

The Oxfam Letter. In the mail today, you receive a letter from Oxfam — a very reputable organization committed to aiding impoverished child in the developing world — which asks you to please donate \$10 to their relief efforts. The letter informs you that about 3 million children die each year from dehydrating diarrhea. But, for each \$3 that Oxfam receives, they will be able to save one child's life (by sending him or her a packet of oral rehydration salts). So, by sending \$10 to Oxfam, you would be able to prevent at least 3 children from dying soon.

INTUITION: It is okay to not send the \$10 to Oxfam.

Disanalogies? Are the two cases the same in all morally relevant respects? Is there a relevant disanalogy between the two cases that vindicates our intuitions that it is permissible to not give money to Oxfam, but impermissible to not save the drowning child?

Singer's View about Our Obligations to the Distant Needy

1. **Questions:** *What are our obligations to the distant needy? In general, how demanding is morality? Are we meeting those demands?*

2. **Singer's Position.**

Singer thinks that our intuitions in **The Pond** and **The Oxfam Letter** are inconsistent. If morality demands that you save the child in the former case, it does so in the latter case as well. Consequently:

- (a) How demanding is morality? *Very demanding.*
- (b) Are we meeting those demands? *No. Not at all.*

Ultimately, Singer's position is this.

Famine Relief. We ought, morally, to forgo many luxuries and give much, much more of our incomes to famine relief.

Do you agree with Singer about this? Is it morally wrong to spend your money on non-necessities?

3. **Singer's Argument.** How does Singer come to this conclusion. First, he floats two different moral principles (which differ in strength). Then, he uses the weaker of the two principles to argue that we owe a great deal more to the distant needy than we might've intuitively thought.

Strong Singer Principle: "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."

Weak Singer Principle: "If it is in our power to prevent something *very* bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally importance, we ought, morally, to do it."

The weaker of the two principles is weaker because: (1) it only concerns *very* bad outcomes, and (2) it doesn't apply when preventing harm would require the sacrifice of *anything* of moral importance (even if it isn't *comparably* significant).

Singer's Argument

- P1** If it is in our power to prevent something *very* bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally importance, we ought, morally, to do it.
- P2** By giving money to organizations like Oxfam to aid in famine relief, you will prevent something very bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything morally important.

Note: **P1** of the argument is the Weak Singer Principle.

Singer uses **The Pond** to motivate the first premise: the best explanation for why we are, morally, obligated to wade into the pond is the truth of one of the Singer Principles.

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- C** You ought, morally, to give much of your income to famine relief.

The argument is valid. So if you disagree with the conclusion, you have to deny one of the argument's premises.

Objections?

1. Issues with P1

- It is too demanding.
- If everyone gave, say, \$3 to famine relief, that would be enough; and no one is obligated, morally, to do more than anyone else in relevantly similar circumstance; so, no one is obligated to give more than \$3 to famine relief.

2. Issues with P2: Giving to famine relief isn't the best way to help the distant needy.

- Giving money will discourage governments from providing aid.
- Giving money will just push the problem back a generation.
- Giving money will lead to an unhelpful dependency on foreign aid.
- Giving more of our income will lead to less consumption and a depressed economy.

What are Singer's answers to these objections?