



## Peter Singer and the Ethics of Famine Relief

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Despite the best efforts of organizations such as the United Nations and Oxfam, the majority of people in the developing world still live in radical poverty, without access to the basic necessities of life that we tend to take for granted (sufficient food, adequate shelter, clean water, and basic health care). The threat of global-warming, furthermore, promises to erode much of the progress that has been made in recent years in eradicating poverty, since climate change will likely affect those in the developing world much more severely than it will the rest of us.

In 1972 Peter Singer, one of the most outspoken utilitarian thinkers in recent times, wrote a provocative article entitled “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” supporting the position that those of us in the developed world have a moral duty to provide significant assistance to those suffering from radical poverty in the developing world. Singer’s position is controversial because he concludes that such assistance necessitates a reduction in our own standard of living, and that this is an acceptable price for eliminating radical poverty.

Singer begins his argument assuming that most people would agree that “suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are bad.” For obvious reasons Singer believes that the truth of this statement is self-evident and that, therefore, there is no need to defend it.

From this premise, Singer goes on to argue that if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing something of “comparable moral significance” we ought to do so. By way of demonstrating the point, he uses a now famous analogy: “If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. That will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant when the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing.” Once again, Singer’s point again seems self-evident: who would argue that in this sort of situation one ought not to render assistance to the drowning child when the cost of doing so is comparatively insignificant?

Singer argues that while proximity may have practical effects on one’s actions, it does not have a moral impact on what we ought to do. Whether someone is suffering right next to us, or on the other side of the planet, we are still obligated to render assistance to him:

The fact that a person is physically near to us, so that we may have personal contact with him, may make it more likely that we shall assist him, but this does not show that we ought to help him rather than another who happens to be further away. If we accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us (or we are far away from him) (“Famine” 232).

The only exception that Singer makes to this principle is if we truly are in a better position to provide assistance to someone near to us than one far away. If this were the case, then we

may have some justification in helping those in our own community rather than those in the developing world. As he points out, however, the efficiency of famine relief organizations today means that our funds can help someone as easily in Somalia as it can someone right down the block from us.

Singer also believes that group inaction is no excuse for individual inaction. Returning to the analogy of the drowning child, Singer argues that, just because others may be standing around doing nothing to save the child, this in no way lessens our responsibility to act. He also refutes the argument that, if everyone gave \$10 to famine relief, there would be enough to feed everyone; therefore I do not need to give any more than this amount. As he correctly observes, most people are not doing their part, so this argument does not apply.

For the sake of clarity, let's look at Singer's basic argument:

P1: Dying from starvation is bad.

P2: If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it.

P3: We can prevent people from starving to death without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance.

C: Therefore, we have an obligation to prevent people from starving to death.

Although the argument seems sound enough, it doesn't address the question of what "comparable moral significance" means. When answering the question of how much we should give, Singer disputes the idea that we would have to give until we reach the point of "marginal utility"—that is, to a level at which we would reduce ourselves and our dependents to the point where we were living at or near the material circumstances of those in the developing world. His principle does not obligate us to go quite that far.

Unfortunately, in "Famine, Affluence and Morality," Singer does not specify exactly how much we would be obligated to sacrifice in order to prevent people from starving to death in the developing world. For the answer to this question we have to look to his most important work, *Practical Ethics*. In this work, Singer argues that the affluence of those of us living in the developed world means that we could probably sacrifice significantly without reducing ourselves to anywhere near the level of poverty. "Just how much we will think ourselves obligated to give," he says, "will depend upon what we consider to be of comparable moral significance to the poverty we could prevent: stylish clothes, expensive dinners, a sophisticated stereo system, overseas holidays, a (second?) car, a larger house, private schools for our children, and so on" (231-232). None of these, he argues, is likely to be of comparable significance to the reduction of absolute poverty.

In the same work Singer attempts to put this question in terms of a percentage of our total income that should be devoted to the eradication of radical poverty. Without attempting to devise a hard and fast rule, he argues that 10 percent would be about right:

Any figure will be arbitrary, but there may be something to be said for a round percentage of one's income, say 10 percent— more than a token donation, yet not so high as to be beyond all but saints ....Some families, of course, will find 10 percent a considerable strain on their finances. Others may be able to give more without difficulty. No figure should be advocated as a rigid minimum or maximum; but it seems safe to advocate that those earning average or above average incomes in affluent societies, unless they have an unusually large number of dependents or other special needs, ought to give a tenth of their income to reducing absolute poverty. By any

reasonable standards this is the minimum we ought to do, and we do wrong if we do less (246).

Although there are those who would argue that Singer's standards are far too high, it should be noted that he himself contributes 20% of his annual income for famine relief.

### **Source**

Peter Singer. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972).

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