CHAPTER 16

The Singer Solution to World Poverty

Peter Singer

In 1972 a young Australian philosopher, Peter Singer, published an article called "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" in the first volume of a new journal, Philosophy and Public Affairs. The new journal was part of a movement that changed the field of philosophy. For most of the 20th century, moral philosophers had concentrated on abstract questions of ethical theory; they rarely wrote about practical issues. After 1970, however, "applied ethics" became a lively part of the subject, and Peter Singer became one of its best-known writers.

In "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" Singer argued that it is indefensible for affluent people to spend money on luxuries for themselves while the less fortunate are starving. If we can prevent something bad from happening, he said, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then we ought to do so. But death by starvation is bad; and we can prevent many people from dying of starvation by sacrificing our luxuries, which are not as important. Therefore, we ought to do so.

This simple argument caused quite a stir among moral philosophers. It seems to imply that we in the rich countries are leading immoral lives. Most of us find that hard to believe. The argument seems too demanding; it requires too much of us. Yet it is hard to refute.

In 1999 Singer moved to the United States to become DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton. By this time his widely read books on animal rights and bioethics had caused a great deal of controversy.


In the Brazilian film Central Station, Dora is a retired schoolteacher who makes ends meet by sitting at the station writing letters for illiterate people. Suddenly she has an opportunity to pocket $1,000. All she has to do is persuade a homeless 9-year-old boy to follow her to an address she has been given. (She is told he will be adopted by wealthy foreigners.) She delivers the boy, gets the money, spends some of it on a television set, and settles down to enjoy her new acquisition. Her neighbor spoils the fun, however, by telling her that the boy was too old to be adopted—he will be killed and his organs sold for transplantation. Perhaps Dora knew this all along, but after her neighbor's plain speaking, she spends a troubled night. In the morning Dora resolves to take the boy back.

Suppose Dora had told her neighbor that it is a tough world, other people have nice new TVs too, and if selling the kid is the only way she can get one, well, he was only a street kid. She would then have become, in the eyes of the audience, a monster. She redeems herself only by being prepared to bear considerable risks to save the boy.

At the end of the movie, in cinemas in the affluent nations of the world, people who would have been quick to condemn Dora if she had not rescued the boy go home to places far more comfortable than her apartment. In fact, the average family in the United States spends almost one-third of its income on things that are no more necessary to them than Dora's new TV was to her. Going out to nice restaurants, buying new clothes because the old ones are no longer stylish, vacationing at beach resorts—so much of our income is spent on things not essential to the preservation of our lives and health. Donated to one of a number of charitable agencies, that money could mean the difference between life and death for children in need.

All of which raises a question: In the end, what is the ethical distinction between a Brazilian who sells a homeless child to organ peddlers and an American who already has a TV and upgrades to a better one—knowing that the money could be donated to an organization that would use it to save the lives of kids in need?
Of course, there are several differences between the two situations that could support different moral judgments about them. For one thing, to be able to consign a child to death when he is standing right in front of you takes a chilling kind of heartlessness; it is much easier to ignore an appeal for money to help children you will never meet. Yet for a utilitarian philosopher like myself—that is, one who judges whether acts are right or wrong by their consequences—if the upshot of the American's failure to donate the money is that one more kid dies on the streets of a Brazilian city, then it is, in some sense, just as bad as selling the kid to the organ peddlers. But one doesn't need to embrace my utilitarian ethic to see that, at the very least, there is a troubling incongruity in being so quick to condemn Dora for taking the child to the organ peddlers while, at the same time, not regarding the American consumer's behavior as raising a serious moral issue.

In his 1996 book, Living High and Letting Die, the New York University philosopher Peter Unger presented an ingenious series of imaginary examples designed to probe our intuitions about whether it is wrong to live well without giving substantial amounts of money to help people who are hungry, malnourished, or dying from easily treatable illnesses like diarrheea. Here's my paraphrase of one of these examples:

Bob is close to retirement. He has invested most of his savings in a very rare and valuable old car, a Bugatti, which he has not been able to insure. The Bugatti is his pride and joy. In addition to the pleasure he gets from driving and caring for his car; Bob knows that its rising market value means that he will always be able to sell it and live comfortably after retirement. One day when Bob is out for a drive, he parks the Bugatti near the end of a railway siding and goes for a walk up the track. As he does so, he sees that a runaway train, with no one aboard, is running down the railway track. Looking further down the track, he sees the small figure of a child very likely to be killed by the runaway train. He can't stop the train and the child is too far away to warn of the danger, but he can throw a switch that will divert the train down the siding where his Bugatti is parked. Then nobody will be killed—but the train will destroy his Bugatti. Thinking of his joy in owning the car and the financial security it represents, Bob decides not to throw the switch. The child is killed. For many years to come, Bob enjoys owning his Bugatti and the financial security it represents.

Bob's conduct, most of us will immediately respond, was gravely wrong. Unger agrees. But then he reminds us that we, too, have opportunities to save the lives of children. We can give to organizations like UNICEF or Oxfam America. How much would we have to give one of these organizations to have a high probability of saving the life of a child threatened by easily preventable diseases? (I do not believe that children are more worth saving than adults, but since no one can argue that children have brought their poverty on themselves, focusing on them simplifies the issues.) Unger called up some experts and used the information they provided to offer some plausible estimates that include the cost of raising money, administrative expenses, and the cost of delivering aid where it is most needed. By his calculation, $200 in donations would help transform a sickly 2-year-old into a healthy 6-year-old—offering safe passage through childhood's most dangerous years. To show how practical philosophical argument can be, Unger even tells his readers that they can easily donate funds by using their credit card and calling one of these toll-free numbers: (800) 507-5457 for UNICEF; (800) 853-2887 for Oxfam America.

Now you, too, have the information you need to save a child's life. How should you judge yourself if you don't do it? Think again about Bob and his Bugatti. Unlike Dora, Bob did not have to look into the eyes of the child he was sacrificing for his own material comfort. The child was a complete stranger to him and too far away to relate to in an intimate, personal way. Unlike Dora, too, he did not mislead the child or initiate the chain of events imperiling him. In all these respects, Bob's situation resembles that of people able but unwilling to donate to overseas aid and differs from Dora's situation.

If you still think that it was very wrong of Bob not to throw the switch that would have diverted the train and saved the child's life, then it is hard to see how you could deny that it is also very wrong not to send money to one of the organizations listed above. Unless, that is, there is some morally important difference between the two situations that I have overlooked.

Is it the practical uncertainties about whether aid will really reach the people who need it? Nobody who knows the world of overseas aid can doubt that such uncertainties exist. But Unger's figure of $200 to save a child's life was reached after he had made conservative assumptions about the proportion of the money donated that will actually reach its target.

One genuine difference between Bob and those who can afford to donate to overseas aid organizations but don't is that only Bob can
THE MORE YOU SELL TO THE WORLD, THE LESS YOU HAVE FOR YOURSELF.

The more you sell to the world, the less you have for yourself. This is a lesson that has been taught to us time and time again. The more you sell, the more you have to give away. The more you have to give away, the less you have for yourself. This is a cycle that is difficult to break.

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that would otherwise be lost. While the idea that no one need do more
than his or her fair share is a powerful one, should it prevail if we know
that others are not doing their fair share and that children will die pre-
ventable deaths unless we do more than our fair share? That would be
taking fairness too far.

Thus, this ground for limiting how much we ought to give also
fails. In the world as it is now, I can see no escape from the conclu-
sion that each one of us with wealth surplus to his or her essential
needs should be giving most of it to help people suffering from
poverty so dire as to be life-threatening. That’s right: I’m saying that
you shouldn’t buy that new car, take that cruise, redecorate the
house, or get that pricey new suit. After all, a $1,000 suit could save
five children’s lives.

So how does my philosophy break down in dollars and cents? An
American household with an income of $50,000 spends around $30,000
annually on necessities, according to the Conference Board, a non-
profit economic research organization. Therefore, for a household
bringing in $50,000 a year, donations to help the world’s poor should
be as close as possible to $20,000. The $30,000 required for necessities
holds for higher incomes as well. So a household making $100,000
could write a yearly check for $70,000. Again, the formula is simple:
whatever money you’re spending on luxuries, not necessities, should
be given away.

Now, evolutionary psychologists tell us that human nature just isn’t
sufficiently altruistic to make it plausible that many people will sacrifice
so much for strangers. On the facts of human nature, they might be
right, but they would be wrong to draw a moral conclusion from those
facts. If it is the case that we ought to do things that, predictably, most of
us won’t do, then let’s face that fact head-on. Then, if we value the life of
a child more than going to fancy restaurants, the next time we dine out
we will know that we could have done something better with our money.
If that makes living a morally decent life extremely arduous, well, then
that is the way things are. If we don’t do it, then we should at least know
that we are failing to live a morally-decent life—not because it is good to
wallow in guilt but because knowing where we should be going is the first
step toward heading in that direction.

When Bob first grasped the dilemma that faced him as he stood
by that railway switch, he must have thought how extraordinarily un-
lucky he was to be placed in a situation in which he must choose be-
tween the life of an innocent child and the sacrifice of most of his sav-
ings. But he was not unlucky at all. We are all in that situation.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Peter Singer’s books include Animal Liberation (New York: New York
Review Books, 2nd edition 1990); Practical Ethics (Cambridge: Cam-
bridge University Press, 2nd edition 1993); How Are We to Live? (Anberst, NY: Promethus Books, 1995); Rethinking Life and Death
(New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994); and Writings on an Ethical Life