World Hunger and the Moral Requirements of Self-Sacrifice

By

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Introduction

In his seminal work "Famine, Affluence and Morality",[1] Peter Singer endorses a controversial position concerning the moral requirements of self-sacrifice in famine relief cases. He holds that there are circumstances in which morality *requires* affluent individuals to reduce themselves to the level of marginal utility, and thus to live in poverty, to prevent the suffering or death of those who are starving or malnourished.

In this paper, I defend Singer's position. In the first section, I discuss the well-known principle that Singer relies on to support his view. That principle requires us to prevent something bad from happening if it is in our power to do so "without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance".[2]

In the second section, I defend this principle as it applies to "rescue" cases in which a single actor is required to prevent the death or extreme suffering of an innocent victim. In the final section, I address concerns that such rescue cases are not sufficiently analogous to cases involving aid to the hungry.

Singer's Principle

In "Famine, Affluence and Morality", Peter Singer endorses the following principle:

> (SP) If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then we ought, morally, to do it.[3]

By "without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance" in (SP), Singer means "without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent".[4]

Singer thinks that under (SP) (assuming the conditions of the principle are otherwise satisfied) affluent individuals are required to reduce themselves to the level of marginal utility to prevent suffering or death due to lack of food, shelter or medical care, for at that level nothing of *comparable* moral significance has been sacrificed. In such cases, then, affluent individuals are required to give until they reach the point at which, if they give more, they will cause as much suffering to themselves as would be prevented by further contribution.[5] Call this *Singer's interpretation* of the moral requirements of (SP).

(Hereafter, reference to (SP) is to this principle on Singer's interpretation of it.)

Singer applies versions of (SP) to the well-known drowning child case. In that example, a child is drowning in a shallow pool and it is possible to simply wade in and pull the child out. The actor might get his clothes muddy, but if that is his only sacrifice, most of us would agree that he is morally required to save the child.[6] However, this example that Singer relies on involves an insignificant sacrifice which is a far cry from having to contribute so extensively to famine relief efforts that one reaches the level of marginal utility. Such a view is contrary to many people's moral intuitions and requires a justification.

A Defense of (SP)

In this section I will defend (SP), as this principle applies to rescue cases. In the next section, I will turn to the issue of whether these are sufficiently analogous to world hunger cases.

Singer makes little effort to provide a theoretical basis for (SP). In "Rich and Poor", he states that this principle "will obviously win the assent of consequentialists"[7] and that

> non-consequentialists should accept it too, because the injunction to prevent what is bad applies only when nothing comparably significant is at stake. Thus the principle cannot lead to the kinds of actions of which non-consequentialists strongly disapprove--serious violations of individual rights, injustice, broken promises, and so on.[8]

I think that Singer's remarks about nonconsequentialism are, for the most part, correct. However, not all consequentialists will accept (SP), at least, not on Singer's interpretation of the extent of self-sacrifice required under this principle. Even a consequentialist who does not endorse ethical egoism may hold that the pursuit of personal projects and commitments is a dominant feature of an individual's well being.[9] Consequentialists who adopt this view may well claim against Singer that we are not morally required to make significant sacrifices with respect to legitimate self-regarding commitments and projects which are highly significant to us. In view of such concerns, is (SP) defensible?

Certainly, theoretical justifications can be found to support the extensive self-sacrifice required under (SP). Indeed, both consequentialists and nonconsequentialists could muster support for this principle. Thus a utilitarian could argue that (assuming the conditions of (SP) are otherwise met) an affluent individual is morally required to aid the needy until she reaches the level of marginal utility. For if the agent stops short of that point and thereby fails to prevent some bad thing from happening, when she has the power to do so, she has not performed those actions which, on balance, best promote human welfare or happiness. Moreover, the fact that the interests sacrificed have special value to the agent because they are *her* interests does not excuse her from making the required sacrifices. As David O. Brink has claimed, morality requires an *impartial* concern among different people's welfare such that an

agent's interests cannot be given special value because they are *her* interests (the impartiality principle).[10] Accordingly, a utilitarian justification can be given for (SP).

Many nonconsequentialists also accept the impartiality principle and recognize duties to sacrifice one's own welfare to prevent great harm to others.[11] These nonconsequentialists could argue that failing to make the required sacrifices under (SP) in famine relief cases is immoral because the affluent actor unjustly or unfairly causes (or fails to prevent) harm to the victim. That is to say, (assuming the conditions of (SP) are otherwise met) the actor has a duty to reduce herself to the level of marginal utility to aid the victims in such cases, because if she stops short of that point, she is *unfairly* preferring her own interests over more significant interests of the victim, contrary to the impartiality that morality requires.

While the self-sacrifice required under (SP) might be justified under a number of theories, many will remain unconvinced. To make (SP) more intuitively plausible, we should consider examples of situations analogous to famine relief cases which require extensive self-sacrifice on the part of the actor (unlike Singer's drowning child example). Such examples are not hard to find. If a young child is left outside my door, I may be morally obligated to assist the child or to find someone else who can. Certainly, I may be obligated to do so if it requires only minimal effort on my part, but I may be also required to assist the child even if I must expend considerable effort in doing so. If I am spending the winter in an isolated mountain cabin, I may

be morally obligated to care for the child unassisted for months (which may become years), even though it means that I must sacrifice the pursuit of legitimate self-regarding aims, such as writing a book, etc.[12] And if the child is starving and I have very little food left, I may be required to continue giving the child the food she needs to survive until I reach the level of marginal utility. Or if the child needs costly medical care to avoid a prolonged and dreadful illness and such care becomes available, I may be morally required to deplete my life savings and live in poverty so that she can receive medical treatment. I may also be required to make such sacrifices to care for more than one abandoned child. These results are intuitively reasonable, and they show the extent of self-sacrifice that is sometimes required to prevent harm to innocent strangers.

However, there are other cases which may seem inconsistent with (SP). To many it is absurd to think that I am morally required to sacrifice a lung even to prevent a child from suffering through a prolonged, painful illness. Yet according to (SP), such a sacrifice is apparently required because losing a lung does not seem to be a sacrifice of comparable moral significance in such a case.

Notice, however, that in this last example the *objective* significance of the actor's and victim's interests is at issue, that is, the significance of those interests when considered *impartially*. There is a genuine question as to whether the sacrifice on the part of the actor is (or should be deemed to be) a sacrifice of comparable moral significance given the

considerable physical impairment resulting from the loss of a lung. So I see no reason why Singer's notion of "comparable moral importance" cannot be formulated to accommodate such cases based solely on the *objective* significance of the interests in question, thereby avoiding violation of the impartiality principle.

I believe that the foregoing is a persuasive case for (SP) as it applies to rescue cases. But we need to consider the following two objections to this principle.

1. The Autonomy Objection

According to this objection, (SP) impermissibly interferes with personal autonomy. It may be claimed, for instance, that the requirements of morality represent a kind of compromise position. On the one hand, we should promote (or at least not frustrate) the interests of others in many situations, but when the sacrifice becomes too great, morality should permit us to prefer our own interests over the interests of others. We have only one life to live and extreme altruism would require us to sacrifice our most important interests to assist others.[13] Such sacrifices are not always rational, and since morality does not require us to do what is not rational, morality does not require that we make the significant sacrifices demanded under (SP).

The following responses show, at least, that this objection is not decisive. First, rationality may *never* permit me to promote my own interests over more significant interests of another when my interests are not of comparable moral

significance to the other's. While my interests may be more important *to me* than the interests of others, it does not follow that my interests are *objectively* more important than the interests of *everyone* else. My interest in writing a book having little moral benefit may be more important *to me* than your interest in staying alive is *to me*, but it does not follow that I am rationally justified in promoting my interest over yours. Indeed, given the *objective* differences between these two interests, such a conclusion is unacceptably arbitrary and thus itself contrary to rationality.[14]

Second, there is little reason for thinking that morality represents the type of compromise described by the objector. Morality *does* require us to make extreme sacrifices that interfere with our personal autonomy. Losing my life is an extreme sacrifice, but I may be required to make it if the only way to avoid the sacrifice is to force another to donate one of her two kidneys needed for my survival.[15] The self-sacrifice required under (SP) is not as significant as this one.

Third, the burdensomeness of the self-sacrifice required under (SP) may well be exaggerated by the objector. There are many rewards for dedicating oneself to ethical pursuits. Moreover, many of the things we do for friends and relatives can be onerous and may have relatively little moral benefit, yet we find them fulfilling even though in some cases they may have little moral benefit. If we are able to make such sacrifices for those we care for, then surely we can, at least, partially realign our interests so that we find fulfillment in providing

genuinely significant moral benefits to strangers in dire need. I conclude that the autonomy objection is not determinative.

2. The Limits of Moral Exertion

On this objection (SP) does not state a moral obligation or duty because the sacrifices required under it are so onerous that they cannot be morally *required*. As human beings we are so constituted that sacrificing our most important interests is extraordinarily difficult for most of us.[16] Individuals who are otherwise morally capable may not have the ability to make such sacrifices: the moral exertion required is simply too great. Thus, it is claimed, since most of us cannot make the required sacrifices under (SP), this principle does not state a moral obligation.

Certainly, those who *cannot* (in the relevant sense) make such sacrifices are not morally required to do so. But there are some individuals who can and do make them. So it is likely that the problem is not whether individuals *can* comply with (SP) but whether they *will* do so. And it does not follow from the fact that people generally will not perform a morally required act that they have no obligation to do so.

We should also note that extraordinary effort and self-sacrifice are required in other contexts to satisfy moral *obligations* to prevent harm to others, sometimes because so few are willing to recognize or perform their moral duty. Doubtless, individuals who did not own slaves and who were not otherwise responsible for this practice had a moral duty to make extraordinary sacrifices to oppose slavery. Slavery is

abhorrent, but so too is suffering and death due to starvation and malnourishment. Significant self-sacrifice is required in both cases to prevent harm to others.

This completes our defense of (SP) as it applies to rescue cases. I now turn to situations involving aid to the needy.

Aiding the Hungry

It may seem that the above rescue cases differ significantly from world hunger cases in at least two respects. First, the contribution a single individual makes to aid the hungry will not necessarily have the dramatic effect of saving a life. Indeed, any food purchased with my contribution may be spread so thinly among a large number of individuals that its effects on the hunger and health of any one person will be imperceptible (the imperceptibility problem).[17] Thus, contrary to Singer's claims, my contribution to relief agencies may not avert a significant threat to people's lives and indeed may not prevent any bad thing of significance from happening.[18]

Second, in the rescue cases, the actor is not entitled to rely on cooperation from others to save the victim. But in world hunger cases there are generally many who have a moral duty to contribute. Accordingly, an individual's moral duty in such cases may be limited to giving a fair share, and this amount may be relatively small in view of the large number of eligible donors. But if so, then it seems that Singer is wrong in thinking that we must make significant sacrifices to assist those who are starving or malnourished (the social cooperation issue).

1. The Imperceptibility Problem

As Garrett Cullity has shown, the imperceptibility problem does not establish that the self-sacrifice required in rescue cases differs significantly from that required in world hunger cases. Details aside, Cullity argues that if I have a moral duty to contribute enough to save the life of one person under an inefficient distribution system in which my money is designated to one individual, then surely my duty does not cease under the more efficient distribution system that is actually used. Indeed, Cullity shows, failing to make my contribution is as wrong as failing to save one life. Further, Cullity argues, my moral duty does not cease where the contribution is not for emergency relief but rather is used to prevent future harm through programs concerned with decreasing crop failures and improving medical care and education.[19] I refer the reader to Cullity's arguments.

2. The Social Cooperation Issue

Some have thought that an individual donor is not required to give more than her fair share to aid the needy. A fair share could be calculated on the ideal assumption that every eligible donor will do her fair share, or it could be calculated on the realistic assumption that not every eligible donor will do her share.[20]

Limiting our moral duty to contributing a fair share on the ideal assumption has absurd consequences. According to this view, no one would be required to contribute an additional penny over her fair share to cover for others who "drop the ball", even if it means that the sum resulting just from the extra penny per

contributor would itself save a hundred lives. Further, there are analogous cases in which one is required to do more than a fair share on the ideal assumption to prevent harm. For example, I may be required to care for the abandoned child all winter or longer without assistance, if necessary, even though there are others who have a moral duty to assist me but unjustifiably refuse to do so.

Nor is it clear that our duty to aid the hungry is limited to giving a fair share on the realistic assumption. Indeed, it is difficult to know how we are to understand that conception of a fair share. We cannot simply divide fairly the total amount needed among those who are willing to give *something*, for some of these individuals may not be willing to give the full amount of their fair share. We might then have the same situation as the one imagined above in which an extra penny per contributor would save one hundred lives. Of course, if each person who is willing to contribute contributes a fair share and if the sum of these amounts covers the present need, then no one has a duty to contribute more to cover that need. But this does not show that we are never morally required to give *more* than a fair share on the realistic assumption. Absent an account of what a fair share is on that assumption, Singer's claim that numbers do not make a difference under (SP) seems correct, meaning that (SP) does not distinguish "between cases in which I am the only person who could possibly do anything and cases in which I am just one among millions in the same position".[21]

Conclusion

I conclude that (SP) is defensible as applied to rescue cases. I also conclude that the imperceptibility problem does not establish any significant differences between the self-sacrifice required in rescue cases and that required in world hunger cases. Nor can it be said that in the world hunger cases, unlike the rescue cases, our duty is limited to giving some version of a fair share.[22]

Notes

[1]Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality", repr. in *World Hunger and Morality*, ed. William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette, 2d ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 26-38.

[2]Singer, "Famine", 28.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid., 35-36, CP. I use the abbreviation "CP" in these notes to indicate that I am closely paraphrasing the cited source and that I am using some language contained therein.

[6]Singer, "Famine", 28. In "Famine, Affluence and Morality," Singer applies a "moderate" version of (SP) to the drowning child example. This version states that "if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it" (28). In "Rich and Poor," Singer applies another version of (SP) to a variant of the drowning child case in which the

actor must cancel or delay a lecture until he can find dry clothes. This version of (SP) states that "if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it". (See Singer, "Rich and Poor", repr. in *Social and Personal Ethics*, ed. William H. Shaw, 3rd ed. [Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999], 464-72 at 466.)

[7]Singer, "Rich and Poor", 466.

[8]Ibid. The principle Singer is commenting on in this quotation is the version of (SP) from "Rich and Poor" quoted in note 6. The differences between it and (SP) are not relevant to the discussion that follows.

[9]See David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 276, CP.

[10]Ibid., 236, 277-78, CP. The designation "impartiality principle" is mine.

[11]Ibid., 278, CP.

[12]The example is based on one given by John Arthur for another purpose. See Arthur, *The Unfinished Constitution*: *Philosophy and Constitutional Practice* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1989), 199.

[13]John Arthur relies on a similar argument. See his "Rights and the Duty to Bring Aid", repr. in Aiken and LaFollette, *World Hunger*, 39-50 at 44.

[14]See James Rachels' discussion of why ethical egoism is unacceptably arbitrary in his *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Boston Burr Ridge, Ill.: McGraw-Hill College, 1999), 93-95.

[15]This example is based on one of Heidi Malm's. See Malm, "Good Samaritan Laws and the Concept of Personal Sovereignty", (Typescript, University of Arizona, 1983).

[16]Compare James Rachels' characterization of psychological egoism in *Elements*, 70.

[17]See Garrett Cullity, "The Life-Saving Analogy", in Aiken and LaFollette, *World Hunger*, 51-69, 53-54, CP.

[18]See Cullity, "The Life-Saving Analogy", 53.

[19]Cullity, "The Life-Saving Analogy", 54-58. The statement of Cullity's argument in this paragraph closely paraphrases and relies on language used in Robert N. Van Wyk's excellent summary of the argument in "Further Reflections on World Hunger and Positive Duties", section (I)(D)(4)(a) (paper presented at the 2000 Conference of the American Section of the International Association for Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy).

[20]Henry Shue, "Solidarity among Strangers and the Right to Food", in Aiken and LaFollette, *World Hunger*, 113-32, 129, CP.

[21]Singer, "Famine", 28.

[22]I presented a previous version of this work as a colloquium paper at the 2001 Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association. I wish to thank my commentator, Professor Diane Jeske, and audience members for their helpful comments.