

Peter singer's sticky situation essay



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Adam Erickson Singer's Sticky Situation Peter Singer thinks we are too selfish with our money. In "The Singer Solution to World Poverty", he proposes a solution to poverty in other countries. Singer believes that money that might otherwise be used for luxury goods should be donated to charities that help save lives in poorer countries. He believes that this decision increases overall happiness more than the purchase of a luxury good, like new shoes, would.

While Singer's argument raises an important moral point, it leads to a very dangerous moral precedent that could leave the problem worse off than before.

Singer's argument should be taken in a limited scope to help determine right action; otherwise, it becomes a radical doctrine. Singer's claim to end world poverty is based on a more general argument. An initial formulation of Singer's argument might be as follows: Premise 1: Poverty, malnutrition, and death overseas are bad things. Premise 2: If you have the ability to prevent something bad from happening by sacrificing something of a lesser value, it is immoral not to do so.

Premise 3: Donating your excess income to charities overseas helps prevent suffering and bad things from happening, and it does not sacrifice anything as important.

Conclusion: You should donate to charities overseas, or you are doing something immoral. This argument is very attractive in its simplicity. The conclusion certainly follows from the premises, and it is difficult to disagree with any of the premises at face value.

However, upon closer examination I think it is clear that many of us would question Premise 2. Singers example involves a man flipping a switch in order to save a life, while simultaneously ruining a new car. We certainly see the moral decision involved there, and most likely agree that it is more important to save a life than a car.

Singer's argument then lies in extending Premise 2 to situations in which we can indirectly save lives instead of making luxury purchases, which we may start to tentatively agree with. However, if we adopt this premise then there are far more examples of sacrificing something of lesser value to do a moral right. For example: using a free Sunday afternoon to read a book takes a few hours.

Those hours spent reading may make a reader happier, but they could be spent in service of a greater cause. A few hours spent working for a charity that operates in Africa could save a life, depending on how efficient it is.

In keeping more in line with Singer's original thinking, those few hours could be spent in minimum wage employment, and then that excess income could be donated directly to a charity that could save lives and end hunger. The unhappiness caused by one person having to work instead of relax would surely be offset by the suffering prevented when lives are saved.

By Singer's logic, the moral decision here is quite clear. One should spend that time assisting the charity and thereby making the world better off than you might spending that time in leisure.

Extending this argument to a general principle, It seems that this ruination of Singer's argument may claim that is it morally wrong to spend time on not have those basic necessities. In other words, Singer's logic could be used to claim that leisure is a moral wrong, since there are always lives that could be saved and leisure time is certainly something off lesser value that can be sacrificed.

If the denomination of leisure did not expose Premise 2 enough, consider the following objection raised by critics: it certainly must cost more to raise children in America than it costs in Africa.

Having children and raising a family, therefore, takes money hat could be used to save more lives, and is morally wrong. If one already has a family, though, the moral question becomes even worse. Say it costs the same amount of money to raise one American child as it would to save the lives of twenty African children. Although it is certainly a sacrifice, letting one American child die to save twenty African children is sacrificing something of lesser value to prevent something bad, since all lives are equal in Singer's eyes.

Child neglect is an obvious moral wrong in our society, let alone having charity for strangers before our own kin.

It is quite clear that most Americans, myself included, would disagree with Premise 2 as a general rule. The difficulties with Premise 2, besides the unsanitary examples above, culminate in what Garrett Hardin refers to as "Lifeboat ethics". Imagine, for a moment, that you are in a lifeboat. The

lifeboat has a limited capacity, say 60 people, and there are 50 people in it now.

You are not aware of the capacity of the lifeboat. These 50 people in the boat represent rich Americans, or those with the means to donate to overseas charities. Outside of the boat swimming in the water there are some 100 people hoping to get in.

Those are the relatively poor people in need of aid. As those people with means, we must make a decision on what to do. If we operate as Singer believes, we would sacrifice the small chance that the boat will become overcrowded in order to add another person and save a life.

However, if we treat all lives as equal and try to add everyone, eventually the boat will capsize and everyone will receive the equal result of death. In order to be helpful to those swimming in the water, we must maintain our position in the boat. This extends to our wealth and donations.

In order to maintain our position of being able to help those in need, we must in some way maintain our wealth and our lives of living above necessity. Certainly we assist those who are outside of the boat with the extra capacity that we have, but we do so in measure and not to an extreme.

This also raises the question of who to choose to help, which Singer's morality does not help us with. If we subject ourselves to only that which is necessary, we lose our capacity to help those in need in the future. This is why Singer's beliefs cannot help us find a final solution to world poverty when we try to adopt Singer as a general principle.

So how can we salvage Singer's argument? I think it is very important to make a distinction here.

Two ways to interpret Singer are (1) as a general moral principle, or (2) as an application in certain situations. In the section above we have already seen the moral problems with (1). I now make the case for (2). Singer operates from a principle called utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism is consequence based, and believes that all actions should be judged in regards to utility (maximizing happiness and reducing suffering).

In Singer's examples it is clear that utility is maximized, since reverting the loss of life is a greater reduction in suffering than preventing the loss of property. Utility can be maximized in similar examples by following a similar idea. 1 : Some people make purchases that they don't need.

Premise 2: Some people cannot make purchases that they do need. Premise 3: Suffering is caused when needs are not met. Premise 4: It is morally right to reduce suffering. Conclusion: If those who made excess purchases gave the money to those who could not purchase necessities, overall suffering would be reduced and a moral right accomplished.

The above argument should be applied for specific situations to do moral rights in measured capacities. It is situational and not a categorical imperative. This reformulation of the argument avoids the problems of the original, since it cannot be extended to forcing sacrifices beyond its scope. Premise 4 maintains the original utilitarianism behind the idea. Premise 1, 2, and 3 are implicit in Singer's original problem, and they all highlight a simple

example -it is very hard to disagree with the fact that we would often be helping the world more by saving lives in Africa instead of purchasing a new pair of shoes.

However, using that philosophy to force us into lives of bare necessity is where the original argument ran into trouble.

This argument allows for a moral right to be done when it can, but does not place undue weight on those who live beyond necessity. This argument also has another clarification. It is clear that this application of Singer's argument is in the present. It does not make a general principle to be followed for the future. As it stands right now, if money used for a luxury purchase went to a child in need it would help overall utility. There are problems with that situation in the long-term, however.

The consumption of luxury goods is part of what drives our economy and why Americans are well-off in the first place. If Singer's argument applied to income and donation was followed by every American, the size of our consumption and economy would shrink drastically. This would affect our industries that are already in place, people's jobs, and the like, essentially sending us into a recession or depression. Adopting this as a general principle, or a principle for the future as a consistent action again brings us back to the lifeboat problem.

It would force us into an economic collapse and a loss of our privileged wealth.

In order to help others we need to stay in the boat, and adopting Singer's argument to its end does not allow us to do so. I realize that these may be empirical questions instead of philosophical questions, but they rise to importance in "applied ethics" nonetheless. In short, Singer's argument is effective for examples similar to the ones that he details, but does not function well as a general principle. We should make individual decision to help when we can, and we will be doing a moral right. However, if we all were to do so, we would sink right into the water with everyone else.