

# A response to peter singer



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In "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Peter Singer discusses that people are dying in Bengal from a lack of food, shelter, and medical care. Singer discusses in detail how poverty and war have created a large number of refugees that require millions just to keep them alive. Singer claims that countries and nations like Australia and Britain have given a considerable amount of assistance, but what has been given is not nearly enough. Singer believes that we have an obligation to prevent misfortunes such as, starvation or poverty, from occurring so long as it doesn't require us to sacrifice something equally as important. To reiterate, Singer's main argument is, "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" (Singer, p. 231). Singer responds that starvation in Bengal could be greatly reduced if everyone decided to pitch in.

Singer opens his article with his example of a drowning child. To summarize, the scenario involves a person walking by a child who is drowning. Singer questions whether to go in after the child and get our clothes muddy, or to allow the child to drown. The vast majority of people would agree that one would have an obligation to save the drowning child. This can be related to Singer's main argument, as one would have the power to prevent the child from drowning and getting ourselves dirty is not sacrificing anything equally significant. Singer also brings to light that whether there were other bystanders around while the child was drowning, even if they weren't helping to save the child, one would still be morally obligated to save the child. Singer's counter-argument is that we are more likely to help those that are close (the drowning child) than help those that are far away (starving

refugees in Bengal). Singer's response is that distance is irrelevant in what we should morally do. Singer's example is simple and purposeful, and it leads us into the rest of his article.

Peter Singer discusses a sense of equality, and how if we accept equality as part of our morality, then we cannot say that someone far away is not in need based on proximity and distance alone. After all, someone suffering in Bengal versus someone suffering in California should be viewed the same, right? Singer feels there are human fallacies with regards to the way we think. In his eyes, we are less likely to give to those that are far away regardless of how badly they need it. According to Singer, we need to evaluate how we help others that are far away. However, we need to be morally obligated to our families and our own country (our own poor, starving, homeless, etc), and it makes perfect sense that we will help those that are close in proximity. If we spent all of our extra money on those that live far away and forgot about those in need in our own country, how is that living up to Singer's main argument of "...without sacrificing anything more significant?" Singer responds by stating that donating is not a charity, but a duty. It is our duty to assist those in need.

Singer provides a second counter-argument against the drowning child and the Bengal refugees. In the example of the drowning child, there is only one person to help but in the example of the refugees, there are millions upon millions to provide help. Singer responds to this by writing that regardless of whether you are the only one, or there are millions, it doesn't lessen your obligation to help.

A third counter-argument presented by Singer regards famine. If everyone who could help, and still live within their means, gave a fixed amount of money in an attempt to prevent the famine – then that is all we'd be obligated to give. People who could only afford a fixed amount would donate the fixed amount while people who could afford much more than the fixed amount would still only be morally obligated to donate the fixed amount. Singer's response is that this is a skewed way of reasoning, because people who can afford more should give more while people who can afford a little only give a little.

Singer's concept of marginal utility, as written by Singer (1972) himself is "... the level at which, by giving more, I would cause as much suffering to myself or my dependents as I would relieve by my gift." (p. 241). Singer continues to say, " This would mean, of course, that one would reduce oneself to very near the material circumstances of a Bengali refugee." (p. 241). This relates to Singers main argument because the amount of help that is needed in Bengal and other countries is so great that it is highly unlikely that amount of assistance will ever be provided.

In his article, Singer states " The traditional distinction between duty and charity cannot be drawn, or at least, not in the place we normally draw it." (p. 235) Singers concept of duty is what we are morally obligated to do, and his concept of charity is giving money to a charitable cause but because of how charity is viewed – there is nothing wrong with not giving. His concepts later change in his article when he discusses that his argument cannot support people in developed nations living an affluent lifestyle should enjoy giving money to those in need.

If I was able to reach out to Singer and respond to his article, I would tell him that people are not morally required to do as much as he is asking of us. If we did exactly as Singer wanted, and that would be to quit our jobs and work full time to put an end to poverty and starvation, where would that leave us? Everybody involved in this full time effort would drop everything they were doing in order to meet the goal of ending starvation. Critical breakthroughs in science and technology would cease to exist because we'd all be pitching in towards the goal. If there was an instance of choosing to do donate to the relief of starvation, which would probably yield excellent results, and choosing to do something that you wanted, which might yield good results, Singer would object and state that choosing to donate to the relief of starvation is our moral duty.

Of course, there is no definitive way of knowing whether donating to the relief of doing something that we really wanted would be more or less beneficial than the other. Instead of donating, I might want to research and experiment more into a cure for HIV, while someone else may want to learn a second language or learn advanced physics. The point is that we don't know what everyone's exact interests are, and therefore, we can't say whether it would be beneficial to donate over doing something we wanted to do. I would end my response to Peter Singer with an open-ended, yet thought provoking question: With regards to your moral duties, how much are you giving to charity and what have you done to prevent bad things from occurring, Mr. Singer?

In conclusion, Singer is correct in his article. Humans should do more than we do to help those in need, regardless of their proximity or distance.

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However, I think Singer is overly exaggerated in his views and humans should not do as much as he expects us to do. It simply doesn't work.