

An argument against helping the poor philosophy essay



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Do humans have a moral duty to help the poor. This topic has been discussed for many years by philosophers and has resulted in countless perspectives in which one could take. One such philosopher is Peter Singer, a utilitarian philosopher, who holds that it is immoral to not help the poor and destitute if one is living affluently and has the means to help. Another philosopher who has a well-developed view on this topic is David Schmidtz. Schmidtz argues that there are limits in which one must set before helping those in need. In this essay, I will describe and analyze Peter Singer's argument on said topic and will argue against it using examples from Schmidtz.

Peter Singer is a utilitarian philosopher who states that if one is able to help the poor without sacrificing anything of importance, then they have a moral obligation to do so. In "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", Singer brings forth his most powerful arguments for this clause. Singer uses Bangladesh refugees who are suffering from starvation and other famines as his central example and states, "I shall argue that the way people in relatively affluent countries react to situation like that in Bengal cannot be justified..." (Singer, 230). Singer does not feel as if people, especially those in Western society, are helping in a way that could be deemed acceptable. He argues that richer people ought to do much more than what they are currently doing for the needy. Singer goes on to assert the following:

If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it. By "without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance" I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to

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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.

In this quote, Singer is simply stating that one should help whenever they can, that is, if they have the means to do so and will not have to sacrifice anything that is of equal importance. He believes that one should always help if the outcome does not result in anything that could be juxtaposed to some morally bad happening. One should not be surprised of this view from Singer, for he is a utilitarian and utilitarianism follows that one should always do whatever will result in the most happiness and least amount of suffering. Though lengthy, this quote will also be much necessary when attempting to understand Schmidtz's argument against it. Singer further suggests that one must have a clear understanding of what is deemed duty and charity. Singer suggests, " People do not feel in any way ashamed or guilt about spending money on new clothes or a new car instead of giving it to famine relief" (Singer, 235). Singer is ultimately saying that since giving money is considered a charity, it is not condemned to not give money and that this perspective on the matter is terribly wrong. We must move away from this view if one wants to do the morally right thing and help the poor and starving. Finally, Singer goes on to state that people tend to believe that they do not have the moral obligation to help someone if there are others who can contribute just as much as they can, but choose not to. People fall into the belief that relieving the famished is the government's obligation and that they have no duty to do so. People must move away from all of these perspectives on this matter if they want to engage in the morally right thing

to do: help the poor, which in this example, happens to be the Bangladesh refugees.

David Schmdtz argues against Singer's view of world poverty in "Islands In a Sea of Obligation." In this article, Schmdtz analyzes the same question Singer proposes. More specifically, Schmdtz states, "If we have a duty to rescue in a local emergency, then we must also have a duty to rescue people from chronic famine in foreign countries" (Schmdtz, 1). Before asserting his viewpoint on this question, he further analyzes Singer's perspective.

Schmdtz takes note of how Singer's viewpoint can create debate when taken literally. In his article, Schmdtz states Singer Principle as followed: If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we out, morally, to do it (Schmdtz, 2). He goes on to further state that Singer Principle, or SP has weaker forms and stronger forms. The weaker form lets one say "anything of comparable importance as 'anything significant'" and that its "stronger form requires us to interpret the original phrase literally" (Schmdtz, 2).

When one accepts the stronger form of Singer's Principle, then they are suggesting that one should give so many resources and funds to the poor to the point in which they are almost reduced to a Bengali refugee. Singer states that this is what one should desire; that is one should want to help Bangladesh to the utmost extent possible. IN his own words, "Even if we accepted the principle only in its moderate form, it should be clear that we would have to give enough to ensure that the consumer society, dependent as it is on people spending on trivia rather than giving to famine relief, would slow down and perhaps disappear entirely. There are several reasons why

this would be desirable in itself" (Singer). He suggests that one should naturally move away from spending on unnecessary things when taking the poor and famished into consideration. Schmidtz argues against this by nothing that Singer fails to actually provide information for this view.

In conclusion, Singer states that it is our duty to help the poor to the utmost extent possible, even if that involves almost reducing yourself to the status of the poor that you are attempting to help, for it makes sense that one should be able to sacrifice that much without feeling the negative effects and that once that once that threshold mark is reach - from feeling no negative effects to feeling negative effects - one is not obligated to help anymore and they have fulfilled there moral duty. Schmidtz argues against this by stating that it is not desirable for one to reduce their self to that level and that Singer's stronger clause is too literal for one to take seriously. Indeed, Schmidtz does feel the need to help the poor to some extent, but he also feels that it is not his moral duty to give up all of his resources to the point in which he himself is almost of the status of a refugee. He understands that there must be some people that do not feel obligated to give there all, for if everyone gave as much as they could without feeling the negative consequences, then the famine-ridden, needy group of people will always need help (which ultimately does not solve anything) and that there will be unnecessary wastage of extra resources. Finally, Schmidtz suggest that theories are not meant to be followed in a very strict sense, but more so are maps for people to try and lay a sound foundation on how to live a morally right life. For Schmidtz, perhaps attempting to follow Singer's principle on a

literal level is impossible and in stead should be a framework for how to live morally right.