

Critique of peter singers ethical theory (topic #2) essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Poverty](#)



Peter Singer is a contemporary ethicist that does not believe that geography should come into play in the modern world when one is executing his or her moral duties. In other words, if your neighbor is in need, Singer thinks that are just as relevant than if someone half a world away. He argues that because we have the technology to be aware of what is happening throughout the world, we have a duty that extends to other's across the world. While it is commendable to those who dedicate their lives and resources to remedy difficult situations abroad, Singer misses the larger picture of societal, community and governmental obligations by placing the ethical burden on individuals. His premise does have some merits, but it is not practical, which is ironic, since one of Singer's works is titled, " Practical Ethics."

Peter Singer's argument can be summed up in the following position he maintains in his work, " The fact that a person is physically near to us, so that we have personal contact with him, may make it more likely that we shall assist him, but this does not show that we ought to help him rather than another who happens to be further away" (Singer, 232). Immediately following stating his position he sets to work rebutting all of the perceived attacks he imagines could be leveled against his position. He believes that distance is no longer an adequate excuse for not helping someone in need. Part of his position rest upon the principle of " global village." He does not believe that his ethical position would have been ben tenable a century ago when travel and communications left everyone in the dark about what was happening elsewhere in the world.

If it seems as though his position makes virtually every person in the world

as leading a significantly immoral life, it is because that is Singer's position. But he argues that just because most of the world is leading an immoral life, does not mean that this is a justification for an individual about individual duties to fellow men. Just because no one else is helping anyone, is not excuse for an individual to withhold assistance if they can provide it " this can make no real difference to our moral obligations" (Singer, 233).

While the world certainly would be an a much more ethical place if everyone in with means helped those without, there are three major problems with Singer's position. His position is impractical, it negates community ethics, and it places moves the moral blame away from those responsible for a societies poverty and places both the blame and obligation on an individual who likely has nothing to do with the state of affairs of an impoverished person in a country far way.

Poverty is a complicated issue, and the dynamics of it are beyond the scope of this essay. In one model of poverty, the poor are poor because those with political and economical power have set up a system in which a select group retains wealth and power. Imagine a country with the 10% using their power to keep the rest of the 90% out of the political and economic system. This 90% is the workforce, and they earn just enough to pay for their rent and food, but not enough to advance or get an advanced education. People from the west could certainly donate money so that the bottom 90% could live in improved living conditions. However, this would create a dependency in which the people of that country were no longer autonomous, because now they rely on donors from the west in order to make their economic ends meet. Under this example, donors from the west would be working against

just social change since it would be covering up the ills caused by greedy, powerful members of that society. It is the government that is denying the people of this country economic freedom, which has the moral obligation to provide better for the people of the society that it governs. It is also the people's prerogative to organized and work together to create a more equitable society.

A second problem with Singer's ethical system is that geographical proximity does matter. It should matter. If a person is being assaulted, it can be argued that it is a bystander's responsibility to intervene. Certainly, there are people being assaulted all over the world, is it an individual's duty to seek them out and protect them also? He gives an example of a baby starving next door. If a person knew this, it would be his duty to do something. "What," Singer asks, "is the difference between this and a baby starving across the world?" I would argue that a great deal is different. And every Western legal system would agree there is a major legal difference, which stems from an ethical difference.

The third issue with Singer's argument is that it paints virtually everyone in the world as immoral. Either Singer is right, and everyone in the world is immoral and not fulfilling his or her duty or there is a flaw in the obligations of his ethical system. If one was going to bet on the issue, it seems a safer bet to wager that the whole human race is not immoral. More likely, there is a flaw in one philosopher's ethical system.

Work Cited:

Singer, Peter. Practical ethics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. Print.

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