

"famine, affluence and morality", article by peter singer essay sample

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In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” Peter Singer argues that affluent individuals, in fact, almost all of us are living deeply immoral lives by not contributing to the relief and prevention of famine. The causes of famine are various and include human wrongdoing, but this doesn’t matter, according to Singer. What matters is that each of us can minimize the effects of the famines that are now occurring and can take steps to prevent those that might occur. As we go about our daily business, living our comfortable lives, millions of people, including hundreds of thousands of children throughout the world, are suffering and dying.

Singer believes, however, that it is a moral obligation to relieve famine. He says, “At the individual level, people have, with very few exceptions, not responded to the situation in any significant way. Generally speaking, people have not given large sums to relief funds; they have not written to their parliamentary representatives demanding increased government assistance; they have not demonstrated the streets, held symbolic fasts, or done anything else directed toward providing the refugees with the means to satisfy their essential needs” (789). Singer thinks that we, as a society, have done little to help those in need and could actually contribute more.

Singer’s argument is motivated by the single principle, “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” (790).

Singer is not saying merely that it would be a good or charitable thing to

relieve famine, although, of course, he believes that it would be a good thing. He is going beyond that. He is saying that it is obligatory and morality requires it. It is wrong not to contribute to famine relief. Singer rejects the distinction between the obligatory and the supererogatory, and he is claiming that there is no line between justice and charity. He writes, " The traditional distinction between duty and charity cannot be drawn, or at least, not in the place we normally draw it. Giving money to the Bengal Relief Fund is regarded as an act of charity in our society..." (792). This suggests that famine relief belongs on the justice side of the line rather than, as most people think, on the charity side. He is trying to change our thinking and behavior toward victims of famine.

Singer gives an example, " If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing" (790). This case shows that all of us will have an intuition and desire to save a child, which means that we all accept Singer's principle.

Singer also gives two objections. In the first one, Singer says that his principle takes " no account of proximity or distance". He argues that it is irrelevant because a person's distance from us is itself irrelevant to whether we ought to help him if we can. Situation with the drowning child in a pond is similar to the situation that famine stricken children are in. In the second one, instead of wading into water to save them, you can send the money or other resources to famine-relief organizations. Singer also writes that if we

changed the Pond Case so that there were twenty people passing by, each of them would still be morally obligated to save the child, regardless of what the others did. And the same is for people starving in Bengal.

Another objection one might raise is vagueness. Singer says we should help as long as our helping does not sacrifice " anything morally significant". But what actually counts as " morally significant"? One person might think that saving his clothes from getting muddy is morally significant, while other might think that being on time, for example, for a job interview (and not saving a child) is morally significant.

I think that Singer makes us all think what kind of lives we are living, and re-evaluate our priorities in lives ad well.