

# The duty versus charity



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In *The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle* and *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*, Peter Singer argued that people in affluent countries have the duty to help people in need in countries suffering from famine and other disasters. Perhaps the strongest argument that he gives for this claim relies on the claim that donation to developing countries is good to do and wrong not to do. Since moral responsibility includes anything that is good to do and wrong not to do, making such donation is moral duty for people in rich nations. In this paper, I will support that this argument stands because donation to developing countries is good to do and wrong not to do.

In “*The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle*” (1997), Peter Singer proposed a situation of a drowning child. In a divarication that the drowning child in a shallow pond would die, or one would have made his clothes dirty, and missed his first class if rescued the kids. Peter Singer questioned that if it is our duty to save the child, no matter how far the child is, and is there anyone else nearby.

Peter Singer supposed to show the similarity between the drowning child case and the donations to the developing countries. We could all help the people in less fortunate countries to escape from death, at a little cost to ourselves. Even if our donation could not be used effectively to help those needy people, at least we could still support them.

He also introduced the “*expanding circle*” (1997) theorem, originated from WH Lecky, to link the duty of being a global citizen. The theorem stated that human concern begins with the individual and family, and then includes a class, a nation, a coalition of nations, all humanity and also the animal world

in ascending order (1997). Hence, by the theorem, we all have global responsibility as being one of the human beings. With the rapid development of transportation and communication nowadays, it has become our current responsibility to help out the refugees.

In today's free-marketing society, how could people achieve global ethic? There is a chance. Many people are psychologically empty, found their lives meaningless at the present day. Ethics did solve the problem. By Peter Singer, "An ethical life is one in which we identify ourselves with other, larger, goals, thereby giving meaning to our lives" (2007). In other words, live ethically could make our lives meaningful. To have ethical life, we have to free ourselves from prevalent success and self-interest. It does not mean that their relationships are not opposed. "It just changes our sense of priorities" (Singer, 2007), put something moral significant before anything. In this case, helping the needy people is the ethical action. If everyone could do this, our world would be different from now.

In "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (1972), Peter Singer revealed that regarding the donation to developing countries as charity is morally wrong. And he suggested the present distinction between duty and charity should be redrawn, based on his argument "if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything else morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it" (Singer, 1972). However, this modification of moral concept induces some potential objections.

The first objection is that it would be driven to extreme if really revising the moral scheme. The prevalent definition of duty is something must be done,

while charity is something good to do but not wrong not to do. Anything that is “social existence tolerable” with respect to certain society (Singer, 1972) is morally correct, and regarded as duty. In other words, something that is beneficial to people outside the society is seen as charity, since the present moral judgment is society-oriented. Nevertheless, Peter Singer disagreed with this argument. “What duty and charity are?” this question is greatly influenced by the surroundings. Instead, he thought moral actions should be beyond the benefits of one’s own society, and duty should also include things that are good but not wrong to do. To achieve his goal, a suitable basic moral code could be set for common human beings.

The next objection is against utilitarianism, that it is impossible for us to work all the day to raise the amount of happiness. However, for the present situation in the world, we should work to prevent as much suffering as we can without sacrificing something morally significant. And this just opposes our common moral standards, but not the position of Peter Singer. The reason for people nowadays disagreeing Peter Singer’s argument is because of self-interest. It makes us unwilling to admit the fact that we have to do everything that we ought to do.

In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (1972), Peter Singer has also asserted that “if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything else morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it”. This assertion implied that “our traditional moral categories are upset”. It is because our traditional concept makes donation to refugees an act of charity, while Peter Singer thought that we should regard it as duty. Nowadays, we would praise people who contribute money,

but not blame someone for not donating properties to non-profitable organizations. If we followed Peter Singer's conclusion, the thought of putting self-interest above donation is morally wrong, as it would not be sacrificing anything morally significant. We should not consider donation as an act that is good to do, but not wrong not to do, rather than duty. Hence, he believed that it is the traditional moral conception which makes us falling into the trap, considering donation belongs to charitable action.

In both passages, Peter Singer persuaded us that people in affluent countries have the duty to help people in need in countries suffering from famine and other disasters. I do agree with his conclusion, because I believe this is good to do and wrong not to do. But I want to justify some of his argumentation. His premises and conclusion are as follows:

(P1) Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.

(P2) 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.

(P3) Donation to needy people is not morally significant.

(C) We ought to, morally, prevent people in need from suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, by means of donation.

The first premise is not a polemical one. It is obvious that suffering and death are not good at all.

The point I want to discuss is the second premise. Although I agree with the premise, I am not quite convinced with the analogy between the drowning child case and donations to the developing countries, proposed by Peter Singer. It is because in story of drowning child, wading in and pulling the child out is not the best short-term method. Why we cannot just be a bit clever, using a net to catch the child? This would not make our clothes wet and muddy. Obviously, there are some other short-term methods to save the child. According to utilitarianism, we have to choose actions that could maximize utility, which means the net amount of happiness (Goodin, 1976). Hence, these other measures are better in terms of utility. Nonetheless, donation is our only short-term means to help people in need. I believe it is why some of us may still find that the analogy was weird, as the two cases are not similar at all.

To continue our discussion, I would still use the drowning child as the example, since the aims of both cases are the same – rescuing people. I am in the same ways as Peter Singer that neither distance nor number of participants does matter on our moral choice to help needy people nowadays. Nowadays, the rapid developments of communication and transportation technology do solve the problem of distance. People who are still considering geographical factor as a barrier is indeed discriminating needy people far away.

The “ number of participants” problem is actually a psychological issue. It does nothing on the moral duty. If everyone asked “ why don’t he/she donate first?” and shirked one’s responsibility, there would have been nobody doing first step and those needy people could just wait to die. This

reflects that people are not aware of their moral responsibility, and the consequence is horrible as a result of social unrest.

I believe that the third premise, “ Donation to needy people is not morally significant”, is the most controversial one. “ Money is not important, but without it you could not do anything”, this is the global motto at the contemporary age. Capitalism promotes the importance of self-interest, making people believe that consumption of material goods is the living purpose. A lot of people do regard money as one of essential things, ignoring the ethical values. Yet moral importance is beyond our own self-interest. We should believe that giving away money is not scarifying something morally significant, and make donation to those needy people in countries suffering from disasters.

But, I want to raise one question: Is that donation is the only most effective way to help people in need in countries suffering from disasters? Although making donation is the most direct and fast means to help them, I believe that assistance with development is the most effective way. As we could not assist needy people forever, the best long-term way for them to escape from poverty is to achieving autarky. All we could do is educating them the proper agricultural techniques and helping them to develop localized infrastructure, together with direct donation. I believe this combination is the best.

For people who accept the premises, they should also agree with the conclusion drawn. We may agree that the affluent countries have the duty to help people in need in countries suffering from famine and other disasters. I

take Peter Singer's point that it belongs to our moral responsibility, and is good to do and wrong not to do.

Although we accept the conclusion, some people might still want to shirk their responsibility to the government and the rich people. In fact, the question is defined as should we, who act as individuals, help the needy people. Besides, the amount of donation from our government is independent of that we made. Hence, it is not under our consideration. For the concern of wealthy people, there are actually many rich people giving away their money to help ill-fated citizens in developing countries. For instance, the Giving Pledge (2012) set up by "Giving What We Can" is a promise by them to contribute part of their property to charitable work. There is no excuse for us not to make donation to the unfortunate nations.

Others may have consideration of the effectiveness of those non-profitable organizations. It is undoubted that some of these organizations were not effectiveness in helping needy people, misusing the donation. For example, after SiChuan earthquake, the donated school from Hong Kong government was replaced by a government building. But as time passes, this situation has been improved a lot now. There are some organizations provide track records of the donated money and materials, increasing the transparency. This raises the effectiveness of these non-governmental organizations, and hence its reputation.

Even though the conclusion drawn by Peter Singer is correct, somebody may think that the priority of solving population explosion should be higher than that of starvation in developing countries. They believe that by stopping



donation to these countries, the global population could be controlled. This is an extremely dangerous idea. Although the problem of population explosion is serious now, we could not risk their lives to solve this problem. The appropriate means of controlling population growth is through sex education, teaching them the useful contraception. But not scarifying their lives.

In conclusion, I have argued that donation to developing countries is good to do and wrong not to do even if the problem of population explosion exists, and hence that the strongest of Singer's arguments for making donation to developing is moral duty for people in rich nations stands.