

Can Objections to Singer's 'Famine Relief Argument' be Morally Justified?

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JOSIE PARK, OCT 11 2013

Peter Singer's 'Famine Relief Argument,' (FRA) presents a 'stark moral challenge' (Jamieson 1999: 2) to our traditional notions of charitable giving. Singer begins from clear assumptions to argue the profound conclusion that 'we ought to give money away and it is wrong not to do so' (Singer 1972: 235). This essay seeks to establish if we must accept this conclusion by evaluating whether objections to the FRA can be morally justified. 'There may be fundamental moral disagreements among us that would preclude a single theory systematising everybody's views' (Sneed 1977: 104).

For the purpose of brevity, considerations will be given to two forms of objection: consequentialist arguments, which accept the need for change but dispute Singer's recommendation; and objections based on conflicts between the FRA and our intuitions. It is important to note that there are many more objections than those present here, which further essays could evaluate using this framework. This essay argues that whilst we may agree with these objections, they do not provide sufficient moral justification to reject the FRA. Therefore, 'affluence is immoral in a world where there is starvation' (Cullity 1994: 99).

In *Famine, Affluence and Morality* (1972), Singer uses an analogy of our obligation to save a drowning child in order to argue that if it is within our power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought to do so (Singer 1972: 231). For, even if we ruined our clothes in the process, 'would anyone deny that [we] ought to wade in and pull the child out?' (Singer 1993: 229). He then applies this conclusion to our duty to prevent suffering, from either famine or absolute poverty, concluding that, 'there is some absolute poverty we can prevent without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance [therefore] we ought to prevent some absolute poverty' (Singer 1993: 232).

He presents two versions of this premise; the strong version, as above, argues we ought to prevent suffering without sacrificing anything of *comparable* moral significance (Singer 1972: 241, 1977: 37, 1993: 231), whereas the weak version argues we ought to do so, as long as we do not sacrifice 'something morally important' (Singer 1972: 241). For the purposes of this essay, we shall understand objections as applying to both versions in order to evaluate if they can be morally justified.

Singer identifies 'perhaps the most serious objection' (Singer 1993: 235) to his argument as the objection that alleviating poverty today may lead to greater suffering in the future. He uses Garrett Hardin's metaphor comparing the situation to a lifeboat; where a rescue attempt may result in everyone going in (Singer 1993: 238). 'By reducing the death rate without altering the birth rate, it will result in larger populations and ensure a larger scale collapse at a later date, when the world's productive capacities are exhausted' (Nagel 1977: 60). The evidence suggests that this is not the case (Unger 1996: 37). However, hypothetically, even if this were an accurate reflection of our current situation, it would not entail a morally justifiable objection to the FRA. Rather, it would still be possible to prevent suffering by allocating resources to prevent population growth. Therefore, if we can prevent population growth without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought morally to do so.

A second objection to the FRA is the claim that governments should be doing more to alleviate poverty (Singer 1972:

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239). Whilst this is arguably true, Singer's argument still holds. The fact that the government is not doing enough, or, even if people, similarly placed to ourselves, are not doing enough, does not have any relevance for our moral duties (Unger 1996: 40). As Singer argues:

Unless there were a definite probability that, by refusing to give, one would be helping to bring about massive government assistance, people who refuse to make voluntary contributions are refusing to prevent a certain amount of suffering, without being able to point to any tangible beneficial consequences of their refusal. So, the onus of showing how their refusal will bring about government action, is on those who refuse to give (Singer 1972: 239).

Nagel similarly presents a consequentialist argument to reject Singer's conclusions; he argues the system itself, which produces such outcomes, is illegitimate (Nagel 1977: 56, 59). He rejects 'charity as a solution with its implied refusal to challenge the legitimacy of the system of property under which the donors of charity hold title to their possessions' (Nagel 1977: 57).

However, Singer's rebuttal of the government objection could also be applied in this instance. Unless not giving privately were to challenge this system, we would still be refusing to alleviate suffering without any moral benefits of doing so. Furthermore, it is plausible to argue that giving privately would be more effective in changing this system, and persuading governments to do more, than not giving. Therefore, this does not provide a moral justification to reject Singer's argument.

Objections have been made against the FRA, as it conflicts with our intuitions in a number of ways. For example, 'it may be said that, since morality must be rooted in our intuitive responses, this rationalist morality fails because it does not have enough intuitive appeal' (Glover 1988: 286). However, this essay will evaluate a number of such objections in order to argue they are not 'adequate for justifying a moral theory' (Kagan 1991: 10). Singer favoured utilitarianism over 'intuitionism' (Phillips 1998: 57), as he understood our common intuitions could be a poor judge of moral positions (Arneson 1999: 105, Singer 1993: 625).

We can find significant conflicts between our ordinary intuitions and the FRA where Singer states that 'allowing someone to die is not intrinsically different from killing someone' (Singer 1993: 222). For Singer, we are equally as responsible for harm we have failed to prevent, as the harm we cause (Kamm 1996: 162). This is crucial in order to accept his premise that, if it is within our power to prevent suffering, it is wrong not to do so. In contrast, our intuitions reflect the acts and omissions doctrine: failure to perform an act is understood as less bad than performing an act with the same outcome (Glover 1977: 92). If this doctrine is correct, we could argue it is not immoral to not prevent harm, and reject the conclusions of the FRA. However, the difficulty in drawing the line between acts and omissions highlights the inadequacy of this approach in working out our moral principles (Glover 1977: 95). Despite our intuitions, in reality 'the arguments against killing are equally good arguments in favour of saving lives' (Glover 1977: 116). Therefore, the acts and omissions doctrine does not provide a morally justified objection to the FRA.

Furthermore, the FRA denies any moral significance for distance (Kamm 1999: 162), however our intuitions reflect that distance is important. 'The intuition here is that remote suffering is not "our problem," it does not come within the core of our moral responsibilities' (McGinn 1999: 134). For example, the accident of a neighbour may be considered a 'significant misfortune', whereas the same accident in a distant country merely a 'statistic' (Gorovitz 1977: 132). The question is whether we can morally justify this intuition. If we accept any principle of impartiality, universality, equality or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away' (Singer 1972: 232). Therefore, it is difficult to find any rational justification that moral obligations should diminish with distance (Gruen 1999: 134, Singer 1977: 42, Unger 1996: 33).

A further objection to this impartiality is made by the argument that we have special obligations to those socially and emotionally closer to us, such as our family. Our intuitive 'responses also vary with the extent to which we ourselves are already emotionally involved with those affected' (Glover 1977: 289). Therefore, some have stated that to accept preferential treatment entails rejecting the FRA (McGinn 1999: 159). However, it can be argued this requirement for special obligations is compatible with the FRA (Kagan 1991: 8, 9). For instance, 'according to the two-level view, in the long run it may be more conducive to the greater good to allow for and even promote the partial relations that

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parents have with their children, and thus the critical level of morality will judge it morally acceptable to provide special opportunities to one's own children' (Gruen 1999: 140). Compliance with the FRA does not require us to sacrifice these relationships, rather we ought to prevent suffering only after our special obligations have been fulfilled (Singer 1993: 244). Therefore, this argument is insufficient justification to reject the FRA.

The discussion so far would suggest that these objections fail to provide moral justifications to refute the FRA. Of course, different objections may yield different results. However, this evaluation has highlighted that there are numerous conflicts between the FRA and our common intuition. Arguably, this could suggest grounds for rejecting the FRA in terms of plausibility instead of morality. 'It represents one of the replies we are actually inclined to make when pressed to justify our failure to provide aid' (Kagan 1991: 231). It is reasonable to argue that Singer thought the strong version of his principle was morally 'correct' (Singer 1972, 241), however the weak was required due to the 'over-demandingness objection' (Murphy 1993: 272). 'Setting a lower standard might actually result in more aid being given... it would mean that in order to do the maximum to reduce absolute poverty, we should advocate a standard lower' (Singer 1993: 245). This would be an interesting topic for further investigation. In conclusion, the failure of these objections shows that morally we should be seeking to attain this ideal. 'It is clear that we can all give much more than we do give, and we can therefore all come closer to the impartial standard' (Singer 1993: 243).

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