

Rejecting Peter Singer's Views on Obligations to Aid Distant Needy Strangers: Three Positions. Notes for Philosophy 162

1. *Self-referential altruism.* On this view, your moral obligation to help a person varies directly with the degree of closeness of your social relationship or social connections to that person. (This position splits into different versions depending on how one understands the idea of being socially related or socially connected.) So roughly, one owes most to oneself, since each person is most closely and intimately related to herself. One owes less, but still a lot, to close family relations and friends, less still to members of one's community and perhaps fellow members of one's craft or profession, less than that to members of one's extended clan or national political community, and so on. One has greater obligations to people to whom one is casually acquainted, has some slight social relationship, than to people to whom one is not casually connected. Among humans, one owes least of all to distant strangers, with whom one has no social relations at all, even casual ones. One perhaps owes more to distant human strangers than to any persons there might be who are nonhuman extraterrestrials.

2. *A Lockean conception of individual rights.* Distinguish what one morally ought to do from what each of us owes to other people as a matter of moral right. (If I have a big ice cream cone and my little brother has none, it would be not very nice of me not to share with my brother, but if the ice cream cone belongs to me, I have the right to use it as I choose, and it would be wrong to take it from me or coerce me into sharing.) Rights are enforceable claims. A right can be understood in terms of the duties it imposes on other persons, so for example, your right not to be bashed corresponds to the duty your right imposes on me, and on everybody else, not to bash you.) Roughly, on the Lockean view, one has the moral right to live as one chooses and act as one chooses with whatever one legitimately owns, provided that one does not harm other people in specified ways (force, fraud, theft, violence or threat of violence, imposition of physical damage on the person or property of another) that would violate their moral rights. One's right to live and act as one chooses imposes on other people duties not to interfere in certain specified ways. One certainly legitimately owns one's own body. Beyond that, Lockean views vary as they variously elaborate views as to how one legitimately acquires ownership of parts of the earth. Left-wing Lockeans embrace private self-ownership but hold that each person whenever she is born has equal rights to the unimproved earth; right-wing Lockeans believe that unowned chunks of earth can become privately owned on a first-come-first served or finders-keepers basis.

3. *Garrett Cullity's view.* Cullity's argument against what he calls the Severe Demand is tricky. One key move starts with the thought that in order to comply with the Severe Demand, one must live an altruistically focused life—a life in which “a guiding aim of mine is to constrict my pursuit of my own fulfillment as much as I bearably can, for the purpose of benefiting others.” People in fact lead non-altruistically-focused lives. But is it a good reason to help others, that one will thereby help them lead the rich fulfillments of non-altruistically-focused lives? Cullity says, surely yes. But according to him, if the Severe Demand is correct, one ought not to help people to further their interests in the fulfillments contained in non-altruistically-focused lives, because these are interests that it is morally wrong for them to pursue. “If a gangster's gun jams, I ought not to help him fix it.” In just the same way, if someone is seeking to satisfy her interests in the fulfillments contained in a non-altruistically-focused life, one ought not to help her satisfy these interests. But then, Cullity concludes, either we must reject the Severe Demand or give up the idea that it is a good (perhaps the main) reason to help others, that one will thereby help them in gaining the fulfillments contained in non-altruistically focused lives.” The latter option is absurd, so we must give up the Severe Demand. (He characterizes the Severe Demand on page 3 of his essay. Having argued against the severe Demand, he goes on to propose his own view as to what we owe to distant needy strangers.)

Responses to Cullity.

1. One might deny that it is wrong to help someone advance interests it is wrong for her to have, if the alternative would be helping someone advance interests that are more wrong. Suppose there are three people, Rich, Poor, and Poorer. Rich could spend money on himself, or give it to Poor. Poor could spend it on himself, or give it to Poorer. In anyone's hands, the money would do good, but least good if Rich spends it on himself and most good if Poorer spends it on himself. (Assume Rich cannot directly hand money to Poorer.) If Rich gives money to Poor, Poor could spend it on himself or pass it along to Poorer, but it is known that poor would spend it on himself. So if Rich gives to Poor, he would be helping Poor fulfill interests it is wrong for him to fulfill, but less bad than it would be for Rich to use the money to advance his own interests. In this situation one might hold that it is morally required for Rich to give to poor and thereby help Poor fulfill interests it is wrong for her to pursue (when that would be less wrong than it would be for Rich to spend on himself). Parallel case: Suppose for some reason that my choices are to give my gun to a gangster or keep it myself. If I keep it, I will give in to temptation and shoot three innocent people. The only way I can avoid committing three murders is handing the gun to the gangster, who will use it to shoot two innocent people. If I give the gangster the gun, I am helping him fulfill interests it is wrong for him to pursue, but less wrong than it would be for me to fulfill my interests in murdering three persons. In this situation one might hold that one is morally required to give the gun to the gangster.

2. Cullity suggests, but perhaps does not assert, that the interests people satisfy in living a non-altruistically-focused life are great sources of well-being, and disposing oneself to comply with the Severe Demand would be to dispose oneself to be a killjoy. If we all did this, human well-being would be reduced not increased. Is there a problem here for Singer, or for the act-utilitarian? Just look at the act-utilitarian position.

Suppose some goods involve commitment. One has a commitment only if one is disposed to put a lot of resources into what one is committed to, more than impartial utilitarian calculation would tell one to do. But commitments are enormous sources of well-being. Being committed to friendships, loves, and personal projects immensely enriches anyone's life. What does the utilitarian say about this?

If being committed to friendship is a great source of well-being, it may well be that the act of forming a friendship and acts of sustaining friendship are utility-maximizing—the best acts one could do. Having formed friendship, one is then disposed sometimes to favor one's friend over what impartial calculation would recommend. Having the disposition itself is a source of utility; it makes the friend feel good, for example. Of course, if one is so disposed, one may sometimes do acts that favor the friend but which are wrong from an impartial utilitarian standpoint. Those acts are wrong, but still, forming and sustaining friendship can be right. Same goes for any other commitment. If they are really great sources of human well-being, arguably the utilitarian will support forming and sustaining commitments. (The morally right act according to utilitarianism is the one that, of the alternatives, would produce most utility, not the one that induces one to perform the greatest number of right acts over the course of one's life.) Of course, utilitarianism may sometimes require one to betray one's friend for the sake of distant needy strangers, but then presumably the distant needy strangers are enabled themselves to form commitments, friendships for example, and live better. Utilitarianism may be a stringent and demanding doctrine but it does not ignore sources of utility and does not counsel being a killjoy (unless being a killjoy, eg a disciplinarian athletic coach, helps players gain fulfillments that are overall greater than the small joys the coach kills for the sake of the greater ones).

