

## **Blackboard Notes on Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”**

Imagine that you were converted to utilitarianism today and resolved to live according to utilitarian morality? What changes, if any, would you make?

To fix ideas, let’s consider act utilitarianism. This says: One morally ought always to do an act, of those available for choice, that would bring about no less total utility than would any other act one might have done instead.

Consider voting day. I could vote, or spend the time doing other things. I could become well informed on the issues and think hard about which candidates to support. Doing these things is part of the conventional idea of a good citizen. It is far from obvious that according to act utilitarianism, I morally ought to spend time and energy becoming well informed and deliberating hard and then go to the polls and vote according to my hard-won judgments. Why not? Well, what good would that do? I am one voter in elections in which many people vote. The chances my vote could be decisive—make the difference between a candidate’s winning or losing-- are so miniscule as to be virtually nil. So rather than spend twenty hours becoming well-informed and twenty minutes voting, I could do more good in other ways—helping a neighbor to weed her garden, say, or just watching old horror movies for fun. (Of course, if it somehow turned out that I would have been decisive, had I voted, than I would have acted wrongly by not voting, but as mentioned, the chances of that occurrence are for all practical purposes nil.)

According to act utilitarianism, what I should do depends on what the actual consequences would be of doing one or another act (or omission), compared to the alternative things I might have done instead.

On its face, act utilitarianism seems to require that I often behave against my own interests. This would be so whenever I could bring about more total good by foregoing the doing of the act that in the circumstances would do me most good.

Act utilitarianism appears to be controversial in its implications regarding moral constraints and moral options. Conventional moral rules and going conceptions of people’s rights are thought morally to constrain my choice—rule out many actions otherwise eligible for choice. Conventional morality constrains me not to break my promises, tell lies, steal, commit assaults, or generally violate other people’s rights. Act utilitarianism tells me I should obey constraints or ignore them, depending on which will in my particular circumstances do the most good.

Conventional morality also allows wide freedom of innocent action. Provided I don’t violate moral rules or people’s rights, I am morally free to do anything else—any of many innocent actions that don’t harm others in certain ways that are wrong according to conventional morality. Act utilitarianism disagrees. Acts that conventional morality regards as OK, like lying on the beach on a weekend morning, act utilitarianism may well deem morally wrong, because instead of lying on the beach there are alternative actions I could have taken instead that would have brought about more good.

**John Stuart Mill downplays** the opposition between conventional common-sense morality and utilitarianism. He writes, “The multiplication of happiness is, according to the utilitarian ethics, the object of virtue: the occasions on which any person (except one in a thousand) has it in his power to do this on an extended scale—in other words, to be a public benefactor—are but exceptional; and on these occasions alone is he called on to consider public utility; in every other case, private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to”

(*Utilitarianism*, p. 19). In other words, most of us most of the time can follow utilitarian principles reasonably well, provided we don't violate the basic rights of others, by just considering our own interest and the interests of those few people near and dear to us, and acting for their benefit.

It's an empirical question, what the utilitarian principle requires a person to do in any given circumstances. What one should do according to utilitarianism depends on the facts. Mill's hunch is that utilitarianism does not conflict much if at all in its practical determinations of what conduct is right from conventional common-sense morality.

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**In "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Peter Singer stresses the possible revisionary implications of accepting utilitarianism as a guide to conduct. He does not actually espouse utilitarianism in this essay, rather a cousin of utilitarianism.**

He observes, in the world today, there are many people suffering a lot, leading miserable lives, on the margin, prone to calamity whenever natural disasters or wars or other cataclysmic events strike. Many millions of people live on an income equivalent to one dollar a day or less. What, if anything, does morality say one should do about this?

Singer proposes two principles—a stronger one he favors, a weaker one he offers as a fallback.

**The Strong Singer 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."**

The Weak Singer Principle: "If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it."

**Consider the Strong Singer Principle. He explains that "by without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance" I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent."**

The relation of this principle to act utilitarianism is as follows: Singer's principle amounts to asserting act utilitarianism except for (1) setting aside the demand to violate moral constraints when doing so would promote more good overall and (2) limiting itself to requiring that one prevent the most bad that one can and not requiring that one positively bring about good if nothing bad is preventable by one's actions. Singer is affirming, One ought morally always to do whatever would prevent the greatest amount of bad from occurring, unless one could only prevent this bad by doing something that is wrong in itself. So Singer is not saying that if one can prevent people from starving, but only by stealing or lying, one ought to do so (if stealing and lying are wrong in itself). He does not actually go so far as to affirm any moral constraints as actually correct and binding, he just sets the issue of doing evil that good may come of it to the side.

Even with these two qualifications in place, Singer's Strong Principle as he interprets it has radical implications regarding how affluent people who are living well ought to conduct their lives. Suppose my family income is \$200,000 per year and, moved by the plight of distant needy strangers I have read about, I give ten dollars to a global disaster relief agency such as Oxfam or Doctors without Borders. Now I propose to go to the movies. But wait, I could instead donate another ten dollars to Oxfam. And another, And another. The choice problem reiterates, and

each time I find the money I could spend on myself would instead do more good if channeled to distant needy strangers, until I get down to a monthly income such that my next dollar, spent on myself, would do more good than I could do by way of preventing bads by donating to poverty and famine relief. Roughly I would be reducing my monthly income to the level of the global poor. In effect, in a world in which large bad things happen frequently and I can significantly mitigate or block their bad effects, I morally must spend my life doing that.

Example: Suppose I am walking by a pond in the woods. I'm alone. I see a small child drowning in shallow water. I could save the child easily and without risk to myself. I will suffer the slight inconvenience of getting my pants muddy, that's all. Singer says one morally must pull the drowning child from the shallow pond to prevent the drowning. (The Weak Singer Principle also implies I morally must save the child in this example.) Suppose we agree. Is there a morally significant difference between the drowning child case and the decision problem I face, when I could spend money on myself or instead donate resources to famine relief? Singer: No. So if you agree that you morally must save the child in the drowning-in-the-pond example, you ought to extend the judgment, and agree with Singer that you ought to do all you can to relieve human misery around the globe, up to the point at which the dollar kept for yourself would do more good than the dollar contributed to distant needy strangers.

Singer comments that the upshot of his argument is that the traditional, conventional way of drawing the line between moral duty and charity cannot be drawn, or anyway cannot be drawn in anything like the way we usually understand it. On the usual conception, one is morally bound not to harm others in certain ways, that is a strict duty. But helping others is morally optional. If you do help others, even just a bit, you are going above and beyond the call of duty, and are to be commended for being charitable—doing good you were not duty-bound to do. On Singer's Strong Principle, this way of characterizing the relationship between duty and charity is turned upside down.

Singer then raises some possible objections and replies to them.

Objection 1. The child in the example is close by and the global poor one might aid are far away, spatially distant. Also, the child will drown right now if you do not help, but in many cases, giving to relief agencies will only prevent deaths in the future.

**Singer's reply:** Mere distance in time and distance in space are in and of themselves irrelevant to the determination of what one ought to do. It's no less wrong to kill an innocent nonthreatening person if one shoots a bullet a short way or a long way in order to hit the victim.

Objection 2. In the drowning child example, you are the only one who could help. In the case of disaster relief, you are one of many people, perhaps millions, any of whom could help.

**Singer's reply:** It does not matter morally to the question, what you ought to do, how many people could help the situation. Suppose 10,000 people are on the beach, and see a child drowning in shallow water. Any of the 10,000 could help. If no one helps, all do wrong by failing to prevent the evil of the child's death by drowning. That others could have helped does not lessen your responsibility. Of course, if another person actually moves forward to save the child, the obligations of the others lapse.

Objection 3: Suppose a famine threatens, and the following holds: If everyone who could help gave ten dollars to famine relief efforts, there would be enough resources to save all who are menaced by famine; there is no reason why I should give more than anyone else in circumstances exactly similar to those I face. Conclusion: therefore, I have no obligation to give more than ten dollars to the famine relief efforts.

**Singer's reply:** The reasoning is faulty. The argument would be sound if the conclusion were stated hypothetically: If everyone in circumstances exactly similar to those I face gave ten dollars, I would have no obligation to give more than ten dollars. But what it would be right for me to do in nonfactual, hypothetical or imaginary circumstances does not determine what it is right for me to do in actual circumstances.

Objection 4. Suppose there is a drowning child on the beach, and 10,000 people could help. According to your argument, each of the 10,000 is bound to help, but if all did try to help, the result would be mass confusion and trampling of people underfoot by would-be crowds of helpers.

**Singer's reply:** This could not happen if people were actually behaving correctly according to my principle. Once one person is observed going to the rescue, that changes the circumstances in which others decide what to do. The others are in relevantly different circumstances than the first person who acted, and they are not bound to try to help at that point (which would be counterproductive).

Objection 5. The argument's conclusion is drastically at odds with our current moral beliefs so cannot be right.

**Singer's reply:** Why assume our current moral beliefs are all correct? I have asserted a principle, and tried to show what conduct is required by the principle. If the principle is acceptable, and the reasoning from the principle is sound, the conclusion, even if at odds with current opinions, stands.

Objection 6. The imperatives of duty, strict moral requirements, only concern what is strictly necessary for people to live together peaceably in society and sustain mutually beneficial cooperation.

**Singer's reply:** Morality requires us to look beyond the interests of the people in any one particular society. Morality requires impartial consideration of those who might be affected by our choices.

Objection 7. "We need to have a basic moral code which is not too far beyond the capacities of the ordinary man, for otherwise there will be a general breakdown of compliance with the moral code." The morality that Singer is proposing is far beyond the capacities of the ordinary person, so should not be accepted and established in society.

**Singer's reply:** "The issue here is: Where should we draw the line between conduct that is required and conduct that is good although not required, so as to get the best possible result?" This looks to be a hard empirical issue, and it is far from obvious that the answer is that moral requirements should be minimal. Anyway, these types of considerations don't apply to the first-person question: what ought I to do. What would happen if one or another moral code were enforced against other people is clearly not relevant to the question, what makes most sense for me to do.

Further comment: Why private charity rather than government aid?

**Singer's reply.** One should do whatever works. The issue always is, what would be the consequences of my doing one thing rather than alternatives, doing nothing at all being one alternative.

Further comment: Do charity relief projects really do good in the long run?

**Singer's reply:** Again, one should do what is maximally efficacious. For example, if contributing to birth control efforts aimed at reducing population growth would do more to relieve misery over the long run than contributing in other ways, one should do the former.

### SOME COMMENTS AND CRITICISM.

1. One might think that given the enormous size of the problems afflicting people in impoverished lands, anything one might do would be just a drop in the bucket, so would not really make a difference, just as in the voting case. But this line of thought is based on illusion. The donation case and the voting case are different in structure. If I would spend \$100 most effectively on myself by going out to dinner and gaining a certain amount of pleasure, whereas if I contributed to a relief agency, what would happen is that \$60 or \$70 would get eaten up in administrative cost and waste and the rest results in a few extra people getting mosquito netting they would not otherwise have and two people not contracting malaria who otherwise would have done so, then unquestionably my dollars would be doing more good in the latter use. In this calculation it is irrelevant that say a million people each year will die from preventable malaria whatever I do.
2. One might have worries that aid freely bestowed tends to induce dependence and inhibit self-help. J. S. Mill comments somewhere in his writings that generally speaking, the consequences of getting aid are good, but the consequences of coming to rely on the prospect of getting aid are bad. But this consideration would seem to affect the issue, what form of aid-giving is best, rather than the question, should one give. If a baby child who would otherwise die from malaria lives to become an adult because aid provides her parents with mosquito netting, it is hard to see how saving her life is rotting her character. Someone who is starving, and listless, and then gets food from aid, will likely have more energy to undertake action to improve his own life, than would be the case if relief aid were withheld from him. The empirical issues here are complex and delicate, no doubt.
3. Consider this objection to Singer's argument (due to **Garrett Cullity**). If I give aid say to a poor person in Bolivia, saving her life, the good I will do consists in part in enabling her to carry on normal life activities—taking care of her children, improving her living quarters, going dancing with friends, etc. This person will not be acting according to the Singer Strong Principle. (She could do more good by contributing to even poorer persons in Bolivia, but she won't do that.) But this means that according to the Strong Singer Principle, those ordinary life activities carried out by her are morally wrong. But how can it be morally right for me to enable people to do morally wrong actions? If a gangster is shooting innocent people, and his gun jams, I ought not to help him unjam his gun. If in fact it is morally good for me, in many situations, to contribute to life-saving efforts, and the good I do includes enabling people to carry out normal life activities, then those activities (violating the Strong Singer Principle), can't be morally wrong. But by the same token, my carrying on some ordinary life activities (violating the Strong Singer Principle) can't be wrong either. What's sauce for the goose has to be sauce for the gander.-----What is Singer's best line of response?
4. The main intuitive consideration Singer offers to support his position is that we will agree that we must save the child in the drowning in the pond example, and that the principle that best explains why we must do so is the Strong Singer Principle, which has the radical implications for our conduct that he outlines. So one question would be, whether we really should agree we must save the child in the example, and if so, whether some non-Singer Principle better explains why we must do so.