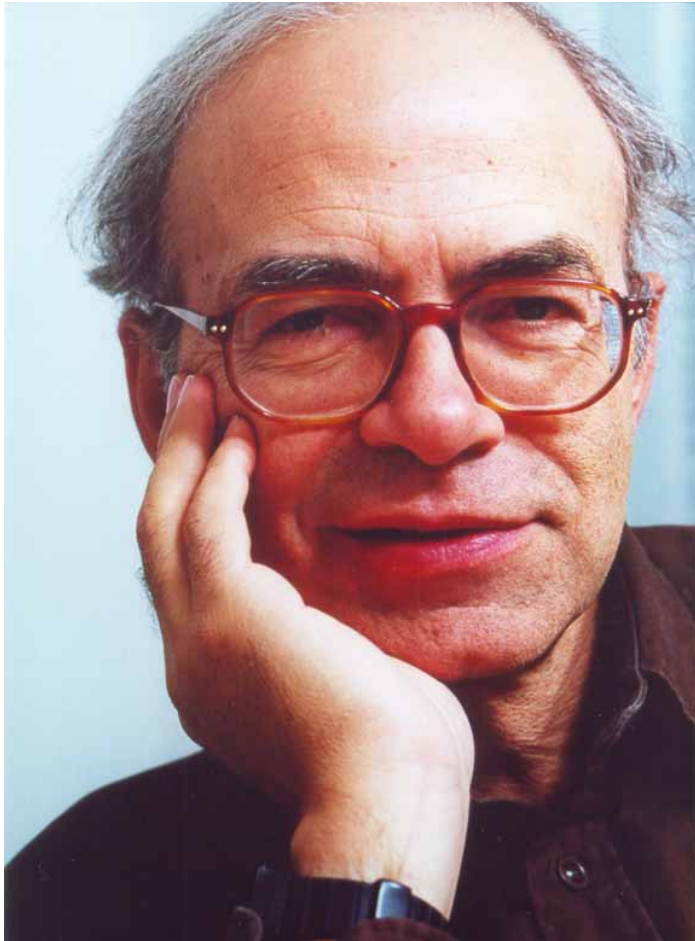


# **Famine, Affluence, and Morality**

Peter Singer



## **“Famine, Affluence, and Morality”**

# **Peter Singer: (1946 - )**

- ◆ Prof. at Princeton and Univ. of Melbourne
- ◆ Author of *Animal Liberation*, 1<sup>st</sup> major work on “animal rights”
- ◆ Applies utilitarian principles to current moral issues
- ◆ Argues that rich societies are morally obligated to help poorer ones.
- ◆ *The Life You Can Save* most recent book

**Utilitarianism:**

# UTILITARIANISM

--a.k.a.--

## *The Greatest Happiness Principle*

*“...actions are right in proportion as they tend to produce happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain....”*

# Utilitarianism: Costs and Benefits

- Utilitarianism seems to have problems accounting for our moral beliefs about “justice” and “individual rights.”
- Yet, it seems to capture at least *some* of our “moral intuitions.”
- And it seems that sometimes consideration of “maximizing overall happiness” may outweigh considerations of justice or individual rights.
  - What if helping others—that I didn’t harm—requires sacrificing *my* happiness? How much do I “owe?”

**Human Tragedy:**

## *“As I write this ...*

- *“... people are dying in [fill in the blank] from lack of food, shelter, and medical care. The suffering and death that are occurring there are not inevitable, not unavoidable in any fatalistic sense of the term. Constant poverty, a [fill in the blank], and a [fill in the blank] have turned [many] million people into destitute refugees; nevertheless, it is not beyond the capacity of richer nations .... to reduce further suffering to very small proportions.”*

# Singer: This is Morally Wrong

- “...*the way* [we typically] *react to* [such] *situations ... cannot be justified...*”
- Singer believes we are (individually, and collectively) ***morally obligated*** to help people who live in poverty. It is not just that doing would be a ‘*good thing*,’ rather, not doing so is ***morally wrong***.



**Strategy:**

# How Singer Reasons

- *“I shall try to argue for the moral position that I take, so that anyone who accepts certain assumptions ... will ... [have to] accept my conclusion.”*
- *“I begin with the assumption that **suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.**”*

**Core Principle:**

# Thought Experiment:

- Suppose “*I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it.*”
- Am I **morally obligated** to help the child?
- Singer says **yes**: “*I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This might mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing.*”

# The ‘Core’ of Singer’s “Core Principle”

- If we can prevent a “bad thing” (pain/suffering) from happening, when, if ever, are we *morally responsible* for doing so?
- Singer believes that in at least *some* cases, we are morally obligated to prevent bad things from happening if we are able to.
  - The “strong” and “moderate” versions of this principle differ only about when we are.

# Singer's "Core Principle"

## "Strong Version":

- *"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."*

## "Moderate Version":

- *"If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything **morally significant**, we ought, morally, to do it."*

# The Difference

## “Strong Version”:

- We are morally obligated to prevent suffering *until* the cost to us is nearly as bad as the suffering we are preventing.
  - This is just strict utilitarianism.

## “Moderate Version”:

- We are morally obligated to prevent suffering *only if* the cost to us is not “morally significant.”
  - This is “watered-down” utilitarianism.

## Core Principle-- Strong Version:

*“If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral worth, we ought, morally, to do it.”*

## • Reasoning for Strong Version:

- This is simply utilitarianism, i.e., that I ought to do whatever would maximize happiness.
- “Strict” utilitarianism says that I ought to do whatever it takes to save the child, until the “cost” to me of doing more would be comparable to the “cost” to the child if I didn’t.



## **Core Principle-- Moderate Version:**

*“If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it.”*

- **Reasoning for Moderate Version:**
  - This is just a direct appeal to our moral intuitions. Not saving the life of the child because we don't want to get our clothes dirty seems obviously wrong.

**Conclusion:**

# We Must Feed the Hungry

- The thought experiment convinces us it would be wrong not to help the child if the cost to us wasn't "morally significant."
  - This means we accept (at least) the Moderate Version of the core principle.
- By this principle, it would be wrong not help feed the hungry if the cost to us isn't "morally significant."
  - Clearly, we can do a lot without sacrificing anything "morally significant."
- So, by our own reasoning, it would be wrong not do more than we do to feed the hungry.

**Objection:**

# My “Fair Share”

- 1) If everyone who could afford to do so gave (let’s suppose) \$100, we could eliminate world hunger.
- 2) I am not more obligated than anyone else to end world hunger.
- 3) So, I am not obligated to give more than \$100 to help eliminate world hunger.

**Response:**

# Apply this reasoning to drowning child

- 1) If someone else saves the child, I am not obligated to offer any help.
- 2) If there are other people present, they could save the child without my help.
- 3) So, if there are other people present, I am not obligated to save the child myself--
  - whether or not those other people actually help.
- Singer thinks we would all reject this.

# My “fair share” isn’t enough:

- It is true that if other people save the child, I don’t need to help.
  - But if others *don’t* help, I am still obligated to save the child myself.
- If everyone gave \$100 to prevent world hunger (just assuming this would be enough), I would not be obligated to give more than \$100.
  - Likewise, if others don’t give their “fair share” to end world hunger, I am obligated to give more.



# My Obligation

- My obligation to the child is to do what it takes (until the cost to me is “morally significant”) to save the child.
  - If others help, I don’t need to do as much.
  - But if others don’t help, I am still obligated (until the cost is significant) to help the child.
- Likewise, I am obligated to (until the cost to me is significant) to feed the hungry, whether or not others do their “fair share.”

**Implications:**

# We are wrong not to do more

- “*The uncontroversial appearance of the [moderate] principle ... is deceptive. ... If it were acted upon, even in its ... [moderate] form, our lives, our society, and our world would be fundamentally changed.*”
  - For example, spending money on things we don't need (booze, cigarettes, fancy clothes, etc.) when others are starving to death *is*, by our own principles (principles we are committed to if we agreed we ought to help the drowning child), *morally wrong*.

# This isn't "Charity"

- “*The outcome of this argument is that our traditional moral categories are upset.*”
  - We normally think of giving money to the poor as “charity,” something that is good if we do, but not morally wrong if we don’t.
    - Over and above the “call of duty.”
  - On Singer’s argument, this is mistaken. We have an *obligation* to help others if we can do so without sacrificing anything morally significant. Failing to do so is *morally wrong*.

**Going Beyond:**

# Animal Liberation

- Singer addresses many other practical moral questions, including how we should treat animals.
- If animals feel pain, then utilitarian calculations about “maximizing happiness” apply to animals.
- Discounting animal suffering *simply because* they are animals is “speciesism.”
- Speciesism—treating animals differently *simply because* of their species—is no more defensible than racism or sexism where we treat others differently *simply because* of their race or gender.

***“Each to count for one and none for more than one.”***

***Jeremy Bentham***

*“In other words, the interests of every being affected by an action [i.e., every being capable of suffering] are to be taken into account and given the same weight as the like interests of any other being.” --Singer*

# Which things do we have moral obligations towards?

*“The question is not,*

*Can they reason?*

*Nor*

*Can they talk?*

*But*

*Can they suffer?”*

-Jeremy Bentham