

“Rich and Poor”

Peter Singer

Poverty Data



- 📌 400 million people lack access to proper nutrition
 - 📌 Poor countries (adjusting for population ratios) consume 180 kilos of grain annually.
 - 📌 The U.S. consumes over 900 kilos of grain annually.
 - 📌 In the poorest nations:
 - 📌 Infant mortality rate 8x higher than industrialized world
 - 📌 (U.S. infant mortality rate is highest among industrialized world.)
 - 📌 50% do not receive adequate nutrition
 - 📌 (see more in reading assignment)
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Wealth Data



- 📌 Industrialized, first world countries who signed UN agreements to provide aid to the poorest countries.
 - 📌 Agreement stipulated donating 0.7% of GNP
 - 📌 Most countries fail to meet the agreed obligation
 - 📌 U.S. gives the least at a mere 0.15%!
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Types of Poverty

Absolute poverty


-  "a condition of life so characterized by malnutrition, disease, illiteracy, squalor, high infant mortality, low life expectancy as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency"
-  In other words, one's poverty and life conditions are so bad you would be considered living in poverty in any economic context.

Relative poverty




-  The conditions of poverty outlined in absolute poverty hold only within certain economic contexts.
 -  If placed in a differing economic context, one may not be living in poverty.
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Types of Wealth

Absolute wealth

-  One's economic situation is such that no matter the economic context, one can afford more than the necessities of life.

Relative wealth

-  The capacity to afford more than the basic necessities of life is relative to the economic context in which one resides.
 -  (Think of differences in cost of living standards within the U.S. between differing states; compare the cost of living in Manhattan—the most expensive city in the U.S.—to the cost of living in Atlanta.)
 -  One's SES may change—up or down—if the economic context changes.
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Singer's Moral Argument

- 📌 Greatest Happiness Principle (aka Principle of Utility)
 - 📌 The moral action is that action which either increases overall well-being and/or decreases overall suffering (non-well-being) and violates no one's rights.
- 📌 Principle of Impartiality
 - 📌 The moral interests of each member of the moral community must be weighed equally.
- 📌 It matters not the person's temporal or geographic location.
- 📌 "If it is in our power to prevent anything very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of *comparable moral significance*, we ought to do it."¹
 - 📌 Those in relative and absolute wealth have the means to promote well-being for those in relative or absolute poverty.
 - 📌 Failing to promote well-being for those in absolute or relative poverty is an act of omission.
- 📌 Therefore, those in absolute and relative wealth have a moral obligation (moral requirement) to those in absolute and relative poverty.

¹ This principle is consistent with the theological Good Samaritan Principle.

Caveats

- 📌 Singer is talking about personal moral obligations, not obligations of the State.
- 📌 Killing, in most contexts, is an act of malice.
- 📌 Allowing to die (increase/perpetuate suffering in this context) *when the person could be saved* is an act of indifference.²
- 📌 Buying only what you need:
 - 📌 Say you need a car (after all Birmingham has horrible and unreliable mass transit). Say you can afford upwards of a brand new BMW. What car should you buy?
 - 📌 You should buy the minimal car that will satisfy your actual needs but without sacrificing anything of comparable *moral worth*.
 - 📌 So you should probably buy a reliable Honda Civic (possibly used) assuming that meets your needs for the car.
 - 📌 The difference between the cars, at least in part, should be donated to charity.

² Singer's points on killing and allowing to die such that one is an act of malice and the other is an act of indifference is consistent with theological conceptions of evil. His argument is consistent with religious liberal humanism.

Immoral Purchases

- 📌 Purchases for items and services that are not necessary is morally impermissible as long as there is absolute poverty.
 - 📌 Hiring The Maids to come clean your house each month or a lawn service when one is capable of doing these things oneself is immoral.
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Objections

- 📌 “Taking care of one’s own”
 - 📌 Initially Singer claimed that one’s own relatives and friends deserve no special status over strangers.
 - 📌 Now he adds the Principle of Reciprocity
 - 📌 If one’s friends or family are in danger of falling into relative or absolute poverty, your obligations to them outweigh obligations to strangers.
 - 📌 This is non-controversial as you are now treating like cases alike where one can only assist a limited number of people.
 - 📌 This addition also circumvents other objections such as participating in rewards.
 - 📌 Also satisfies an objection about the meaning of relationships—what “friendship” means, in part, is aiding those in which one is engaged in a reciprocal relationship.
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Objections

 “Libertarian Property Rights”

 See Blackboard

Objections

- 📌 “Population and the Ethics of Triage”
 - 📌 From Garrett Hardin’s “Living on a Life Boat”
 - 📌 Overpopulation is a primary cause of poverty. Aiding the poor will only contribute to further overpopulation. Eventually (slippery slope argument) aiding the poor will bring the wealthy down with them.
 - 📌 Response 1:
 - 📌 Hardin is partially correct. We find a critical period where as people move upwards socioeconomically, birth rates increase. However, once a certain level of economic *stability and wealth* is achieved, birth rates plateau.
 - 📌 At even higher levels of *education* which is positively correlated with SES, birth rates plateau or decrease.
 - 📌 (College professors which have the highest educational levels have the lowest birth rates. Yet college professors, as a group, are nowhere near the top in SES.)
 - 📌 We must be sure to move people through the critical stage.
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Objections

- 📌 “Population and the Ethics of Triage”

- 📌 Response 2:

- 📌 Overpopulation is a world wide problem for every country.

- 📌 Even the U.S. population grows exponentially.

- 📌 We must tackle overpopulation in each and every country.

- 📌 Solving overpopulation by allowing mass famines and disease violates ethical principles.

Objections

- 📌 “Too high a standard”
 - 📌 Version 1: Setting such a standard as he advocates requires moral heroism.
 - 📌 Version 2: Humans are too self-interested to actually act in this way.
 - 📌 Version 3: Setting such a high standard will actually discourage giving.
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Objections

- 📌 “Too high a standard”

- 📌 Version 1: Setting such a high standard as he advocates requires moral heroism.

- 📌 Response 1:

- 📌 It *will* require significant changes in our behavior. Living ethically has never been easy. Socrates said that a main reason why people behave unethically is due to laziness (and ignorance).

- 📌 However, we need not sacrifice anything of equal moral value—we are not required to accept even relative poverty.

Objections

- 📌 “Too high a standard”

- 📌 Version 2: Humans are too self-interested to actually act in this way.

- 📌 Response 2:

- 📌 Studies involving Game Theory, cognitive psychology, and research into happiness demonstrate otherwise.

- 📌 Research into subjective happiness shows that people have a strong desire to “make a difference in the world”.

- 📌 Research in cognitive psychology and Game Theory demonstrates that people have strong preferences for reciprocity and cooperation.³

³ This research disproves claims made by Psychological and Ethical Egoism and Libertarianism. James Woodward has research cognitive psychology and Game Theory demonstrating cooperation as evidence against Libertarianism.

Objections

- “Too high a standard”

- Version 3: Setting such a high standard will actually discourage giving.

- Response 3A:

- This is a prediction about human psychology and behavior. Nothing seems to support such a prediction.

- This version raises a real pragmatic concern. Some donations are smaller than necessary. A reasonable standard, which can vary by person (relative wealth verses absolute wealth—the Walton family which donates nothing), needs to be set.⁴

- Singer estimates that if each person in relative or absolute wealth donated a mere 5% of his/her *expendable* income to an *efficient* charity, absolute poverty could be ended.

- Note this is half of what you are expected to tithe to your church. *If* your church does perform community service work for the poor, 80% of tithes pay for administrative and operating costs of the church not the community service programs. (Missions are not necessarily community service programs aimed at reducing poverty. In fact, the majority of “missions” are aimed at proselytizing, not aiding the poor.)

- Singer donates 30% of his *total annual net* income to charity.

⁴ Recall the New Testament parable of the woman who gave (the equivalent of) a penny to Jesus as that was all she had. Jesus praised her. Singer’s criteria would not demand that of her as she would be in need of aid; she lives in poverty herself. According to Singer, Jesus and the disciples should have refused the offering, and it was immoral of them to accept it. But the main point here is that Singer’s criteria is even less strict than theological standards yet no one raises this objection in the context of theology. Where such high standards are praised in religious contexts, a weaker standard is criticized in a secular context.

Objections

- 📌 “Too high a standard”

- 📌 Version 3: Setting such a high standard will actually discourage giving.

- 📌 Response 3B:

- 📌 Some excellent charities, such as the Children’s Defense Fund, estimate that a \$10 donation will provide a child in the poorest countries with the vaccines children receive in the U.S.

- 📌 Ergo, it is possible to set a reasonable standard.

The End
