

Global Ethics and the Problem with Singer and Unger's Argument for an Extreme Duty to Provide Aid*

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1. Singer and Unger's Argument for an Extreme Duty to Provide Aid

Peter Singer and Peter Unger have argued that you are morally required either to give away most of your wealth to help those who are suffering in lesser-developed countries, or else to do something of comparable moral significance instead.¹ Their main argument is that given the circumstances you always find yourself in, unless you do something of such significance, you are morally no different from a person who refuses to save a drowning child when it is easy, riskless, but merely financially costly to do so. If they are right, then your actions are almost always immoral, because you almost never do anything of such significance.

Singer and Unger's conclusions are hard to accept. However, it is also hard to find anything wrong with their argument. Their argument can be understood as relying on only two controversial premises. The first of these is what we might call the 'ethical premise'; it is the claim that there is no morally relevant difference between two cases, which we can call POND and CHARITY:

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¹ Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*, and Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*.

POND

A person can easily, risklessly, and with great probability of success save a child from drowning; but s/he does not save the child, merely because doing so would require a significant financial sacrifice.

CHARITY

You decide not to give away a significant amount of your wealth, when giving away that wealth would have reduced the number of innocent people who die from easily treatable afflictions.

Then, the second premise is what we might call the ‘empirical premise’; it is the claim that you are always in the CHARITY case. In other words, the claim of this premise is that CHARITY is not just an imaginary scenario that you *could* find yourself in: rather, it describes the situation that you are *actually* in right now as you read this, and that you are always in if you do not give away a significant amount of your wealth.²

Although the ethical premise can seem dubious at first glance because there are so many differences between POND and CHARITY, on reflection it is hard to identify any *morally relevant difference* that would make for a difference in whether you are required to provide aid. And the empirical premise can seem clearly true, especially when one

² Compare the following from Peter Singer: “Expert observers and supervisors, sent out by famine relief organizations or permanently stationed in famine-prone areas, can direct our aid to a refugee in Bengal almost as effectively as we could get it to someone in our own block” (“Famine, Affluence, and Morality”, pg. 232). For two different reasons to doubt the empirical premise, see Angus Deaton, “Response to Effective Altruism”, *Boston Review*, and Mark Budolfson, “The Inefficacy Objection and the Problem with the Expected Consequences Response”, *Philosophical Studies*.

reflects on the opportunities provided by top-ranked effective altruism charities.³ As a result, while philosophers often think that Singer and Unger's radical conclusion is unbelievable, they also tend to think that it is supported by a surprisingly powerful argument that only gains in plausibility upon careful reflection. As a result many philosophers are inclined to see Singer and Unger's arguments as identifying something like a paradox within commonsense morality.

My goal in this paper is to explain exactly where Singer and Unger's argument goes wrong even assuming the main empirical premise is correct, and thereby to remove any appearance of a genuine paradox within commonsense morality, while at the same time explaining why Singer and Unger's argument has this impressive intuitive pull.

2. The Logic of the Argument, Including the Argument for the Ethical Premise

As noted above, the logic of Singer and Unger's argument can be represented as follows:

Obvious Truth: It would be seriously morally wrong not to save the child in POND.

Ethical Premise: There is no morally relevant difference between POND and CHARITY that makes for a difference in what you are required to do.

Empirical Premise: CHARITY is a situation that we always find ourselves in, because it is always possible for each of us to give to effective charities that would then save additional lives that would not otherwise be saved.

Conclusion: Therefore, it is seriously morally wrong for us not to give away most of our wealth to effective charities, or else to do something of comparable ethical significance instead.

³ See for example the top-rated charities at www.givewell.org.

When first presented with this argument, a common reaction is to claim that the *Ethical Premise* is simply false, on the grounds that one or more of the following obvious differences between POND and CHARITY make for a morally relevant difference in what you are required to do:

the extent to which there are other *individuals* who:

D1: are able to offer much more *efficacious* and/or *efficient* aid to those in need

D2: are much closer *physically* to those in need

D3: are much closer *socially* to those in need

D4: have a special responsibility for the *existence* of the need

D5: have a special responsibility for *helping* those in need

the extent to which there are other *institutions* that:

D6: are able to offer much more *efficacious* and/or *efficient* aid to those in need

D7: are much closer *physically* to those in need

D8: are much closer *socially* to those in need

D9: have a special responsibility for the *existence* of the need

D10: have a special responsibility for *helping* those in need

the extent to which this problem is:

D11: a *recurring* problem

D12: caused by background factors that *you can do nothing about*

D13: caused by factors and for which you are *blameless*

(and there are further differences between the cases)

Because there are so many obvious differences between POND and CHARITY, Singer and Unger's argument can initially seem weak to some. However, the power of their argument emerges when these differences are carefully examined, because upon reflection is implausible that any one of them could make for a difference in what you are

required to do. To make this clear, Singer and Unger provide a series of carefully constructed cases derived from the base case POND, where each individual difference is varied in isolation while holding the other factors in POND constant; when we reflect carefully on these cases, we are inclined to agree that none of those differences in isolation makes for a difference in what it is permissible to do – and this is what makes it difficult to resist the *Ethical Premise*, and thus Singer and Unger’s ultimate *Conclusion*.⁴

This suggests that the real power of Singer and Unger’s argument derives from the following argument for the *Ethical Premise*:⁵

Stipulation: Let D1, D2, ... Dn refer to all of the (intuitively individuated) differences between POND and CHARITY.

Clear Upon Reflection: None of D1, D2, ... Dn in isolation can make a difference in what you are required to do.

Ethical Premise: Therefore, there is no morally relevant difference between POND and CHARITY that makes for a difference in what you are required to do.

As just noted, this argument can seem decisive, because the second premise really does seem clear upon reflection.

3. The Problem With the Argument for the Ethical Premise, and Why The Problem Ultimately Leads to a Stable Objection to the Argument within Commonsense

Morality

⁴ For this sort of argument, see Unger, *Living High and Letting Die*, pp. 33-53, and Singer, *The Life You Can Save*, pp. 144-145.

⁵ For example, compare the following passage from Unger’s *Living High and Letting Die*: “In the next section, we’ll start the hard work of investigating the ‘apparently promising’ differences between the puzzle cases. Here, I’ll provide an overview of how it will proceed and where it may lead. ... we’ll note some factors that do differentiate between our puzzle cases. Each time that happens, we’ll ask: Does *this* difference do much to favor a harsh judgment only for [the conduct in a case like POND], and not for [the conduct in a case like CHARITY]?” (Unger, *Living High and Letting Die*, pp. 27-28).

However, upon further reflection, the argument for the ethical premise is invalid, because it commits the fallacy of composition: from the fact that each individual difference lacks a particular property (namely, the property of making a difference in what it is permissible to do), it does not follow that the *conjunction* of those differences lacks that property. To see why that does not follow, suppose that when taken individually each of D1, D2, ... Dn slightly undermines the strength of an obligation to provide aid without defeating that obligation simpliciter; from that supposition, it clearly does not follow that *the large conjunction* of D1 & D2 ... & Dn does not defeat the obligation to provide aid simpliciter; instead, if each factor individually slightly undermines the force of such an obligation, we might well expect that the conjunction of very many such factors could defeat a prima facie obligation to provide aid, and instead make it the case that providing aid is merely supererogatory.

Unger briefly entertains the possibility that such a conjunction of differences could make for a difference in whether you are required to provide aid, but he quickly dismisses the idea on the basis of several ingenious examples that show that, for very many of the differences between POND and CHARITY, even when those differences are conjoined they do not undermine an obligation to provide aid.⁶ These ingenious examples demonstrate convincingly that the individual differences between POND and CHARITY cannot each be thought of merely as additive undermining weights, and more generally that very many of the individual differences between POND and CHARITY do not combine to defeat an obligation to provide aid even when those differences are conjoined.

⁶ Unger, *Living High and Letting Die*, pp. 53-54 and 73-75.

However, because Unger only considers *many* of the differences between POND and CHARITY but not *all* of those differences, his discussion is inconclusive. In what follows I will show that this leads to an important objection to Singer and Unger's arguments, because the differences that Unger ignores seem to be exactly the differences that defeat putative obligations to provide aid, at least according the dictates of commonsense morality.

It is telling that the handful of hypothetical cases that Unger cites in his discussion are all cases in which a relevant need is caused by an earthquake or by some other *non-societal factor*, and are therefore cases in which *no particular society and no particular set of institutions has a special responsibility for the existence or satisfaction of the relevant need.*⁷ They are also all cases in which *no institution is better placed to satisfy the relevant need than the individual person who intuitively has an obligation to provide aid herself.* This is all very different from CHARITY-like cases such as our actual situation with respect to those who are suffering in lesser-developed countries, in which the root cause of the need is arguably generally a societal and/or institutional failure: usually an irrational, incompetent, and corrupt regime, or at least a lack of the sort of rule of law, entitlements, and healthy economy that is necessary to prevent famines and other catastrophic foreseeable side effects of non-liberal society.⁸

⁷ Unger, *Living High and Letting Die*, especially pp. 73-75.

⁸ Some philosophers like Thomas Pogge argue that problems in lesser developed countries are at root caused by the behavior of rich nations and, indirectly, the citizens of rich nations. See Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, 2nd edition. If this is true, then this provides a *different argument* for less demanding conclusions in the direction of Singer and Unger's. One complication is that it is a contentious empirical issue whether international institutions such as the WTO (which are largely designed by rich nations) are harming many of the world's poor. Another complication is whether the primary cause of these harms and the more general problems of poor nations is rich nations. To get a feel for a number of dimensions along which this last question is complex, note that insofar as our aid to poor nations is effective, it also often has the side effect of aiding corrupt dictators, which then makes that aid part of the cause of their remaining in power. (See Angus Deaton, *The Great Escape* for more on this and other

When we consider hypothetical cases in which societal and institutional failures outside our sphere of influence are the root cause of the relevant need, commonsense morality speaks with a stable voice that is contrary to Singer and Unger's conclusions: other things being nearly equal, in such cases the relevant need is *not our problem* in a morally relevant sense, because the relevant problem is both caused by something outside of our moral sphere, and ought to be solved by something outside of that sphere – and this makes it the case that, other things being nearly equal, as individuals we are not required to provide aid ourselves to solve that problem.⁹ More specifically, when otherwise analogous cases differ from POND in ways that fall under the rubric of what might be called *wide societal responsibility* – that is, when there is a society or wide-ranging institutions that have a special responsibility for the *existence* of the need, and have a special responsibility to help *satisfy* that need – that really does undermine the force of a single external individual's putative duty to provide aid if that individual has no such special responsibilities herself, according to commonsense morality. Furthermore, such differences in societal responsibility seem to act as something like a triggering condition for many of the other differences between POND and CHARITY to accumulate genuine undermining weight.

As a result, according to commonsense morality, when an alien society to which you have no special connection has a special responsibility for the existence of a need and a special responsibility to satisfy that need, and when you have no such special

complications, Josh Cohen, "Philosophy, Social Science, Global Poverty" for more on Pogge's claims about causation, and see Christian Barry and Gerhard Overland, "Are Trade Subsidies and Tariffs Killing the Global Poor?" for more on Pogge's claims about harm to the poor.)

⁹ It is consistent with this to think that in such cases individuals are required to favor efficacious policy responses that are not overly costly, for example by voting in favor of them. I remain agnostic here about what policy responses individuals would be required to favor according to commonsense morality.

responsibility yourself, then that sets the stage for genuine undermining of putative obligations of yours to provide such aid. So, when the problem is also caused by societal background factors in the alien society that you are not responsible for and that you cannot do anything about that ensure that the problem will be recurring no matter what you do, and when you are also much less connected to the problem socially and physically and much less able to have as positive of an effect than very many other better placed individuals and institutions, then that broad combination of factors succeeds in making it the case that you do not act in a way that is morally wrong if you do not provide aid yourself.

The underlying moral reasons in play might have a number of more precise structural forms, consistent with the main point here. For example, it could be that small differences regarding many important factors add up in a fairly straightforward way to a significant moral difference. Or it could be that the individual factors don't make a moral difference at all – not even small – unless they are combined in a particular way, and then a difference in moral reasons emerges in a nonlinear way. Many intermediate views are also possible. The current point is that according to commonsense morality the factors identified interact to make a real difference, and the interaction of these specific factors is ignored by both Singer and Unger.

4. Conclusion

This, then, is the diagnosis I offer of the problem with Singer and Unger's arguments for an extreme duty to provide aid. Is there any reason to doubt that this diagnosis is grounded in commonsense?

This diagnosis allows for commonsensical verdicts on all of the cases that Singer and Unger discuss, unlike their own view, which gives counterintuitive verdicts on cases such as CHARITY. Furthermore, adopting this diagnosis also provides a straightforward explanation of our feeling that insofar as a natural disaster or some other kind of 'unforeseeable shock' is the primary cause of a need, we tend to have a stronger duty to provide aid than when a need is caused by wide societal factors that are not our problem – and this feeling, which is deeply rooted in commonsense, is difficult to explain without appealing to the diagnosis offered here. Most importantly, the diagnosis offered here can explain these and other considered judgments in a straightforward way that captures the essence of commonsense morality.

The upshot is that Singer and Unger's argument for an extreme duty to provide aid depends essentially on the invalid argument above for the *Ethical Premise*. Of course, this does not prove that Singer and Unger's conclusions are ultimately mistaken – on the contrary, it would be perfectly consistent to accept all of this and yet argue for radical conclusions on some other basis. The current point is merely that such radical conclusions do not have a sound basis in commonsense, and that upon careful examination Singer and Unger's arguments do not reveal any paradox in commonsense morality.¹⁰

[END]

¹⁰ Of course, it is also plausible and consistent with the arguments here to think that commonsense morality requires *non-extreme* acts of charity.