

Handout: Peter Singer – *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*

Framing the Problem

Peter Singer's essay begins with a visceral real-world crisis—the 1971 humanitarian disaster in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), where millions of people suffered due to famine, war, and displacement. Despite public knowledge of the crisis, both individual citizens and governments of affluent nations failed to offer sufficient aid.

- **Problem:** The *moral inaction* of affluent individuals and states in the face of large-scale suffering.
 - **Singer's Claim:** The current moral framework that permits such inaction is deeply flawed; *we are morally obligated to radically revise our ethical assumptions about charity, duty, and global suffering.*
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Singer's Central Argument

Singer's argument hinges on two core premises:

1. **Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.**
This is an uncontroversial starting point that requires no defense for his audience.

2. **Strong Moral 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."

(Later, he introduces a **moderate version**: we should act unless it requires sacrificing something *morally significant*. This moderate version will, he claims, be easier for people to accept even though he accepts the strong version)

Structure of the Argument

I. Expanding the Scope of Moral Obligation (pp. 231–234)

- **Distance is morally irrelevant:**
Helping a child drowning in front of you is no different, morally, from helping a starving child overseas.
- **Number of others capable of helping does not dilute obligation:**
The presence of millions who could help does *not* reduce your personal obligation. Moral responsibility does not diminish in crowds.

Singer challenges the *psychological comfort* of diffusion of responsibility, making vivid analogies to elicit moral intuitions.

II. Implications for Charity and Moral Schemes (pp. 235–237)

- **Current view:** Giving to charity is *supererogatory* (praiseworthy but not obligatory).
- **Singer's view:** Charity, as currently understood, is a misnomer. In the face of preventable suffering, *it is wrong not to help*.

"We ought to give the money away... and it is wrong not to do so" (p. 235).

- This entails the collapse of the standard distinction between *duty* and *charity*.
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III. Objections Considered and Rebutted (pp. 236–238)

1. **"This is too demanding!"**
 - Singer replies: That most people do not act this way is not a valid moral argument.
 - Cites Urmson and Sidgwick: society shapes norms to preserve order, not to fully realize moral ideals.
2. **"Excessive demands will break moral motivation."**

- Possibly true—but this is a psychological barrier, not a moral one.
 - Singer acknowledges the social reality but argues we must *aspire higher*, even if not all comply.
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IV. Practical Objections to Private Giving (pp. 239–241)

- **“Government should handle this.”**
 - Singer rejects this as a reason for personal inaction, unless refusal contributes meaningfully to systemic reform (which it usually does not).
 - **“Famine relief leads to overpopulation.”**
 - Population control is important, but this supports *redirecting aid* to more effective methods, not abandoning help altogether.
 - **“How much must we give?”**
 - Under the **strong principle**, up to *marginal utility*—until giving more causes as much suffering to you as it relieves in others.
 - Even under the **moderate principle**, most affluent people should give far more than they currently do.
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Conclusion and Call to Action (pp. 242–243)

Singer closes with a challenge: *If moral philosophy is to be meaningful, it must compel action.* Philosophers and students alike are morally implicated by the reality of global suffering.

“What is the point of relating philosophy to public affairs if we do not take our conclusions seriously?”
