An Objection to Singer's Argument on Charity

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The goal of this essay is to refute the strong version of the argument Peter Singer offers in his seminal piece, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," which holds that individuals must donate to worthy charities until they reach the point at which donating more would cause them and their dependents as much suffering as it would prevent. After outlining Singer's position, I will counter his argument by highlighting a flaw in the second premise, namely, that following the rule given by the premise would essentially prove impossible in practice. I will then present and object to a counter argument on behalf of Singer. Finally, I will propose a modification to Singer's argument that I believe addresses the concerns outlined in the earlier sections of this paper while leaving his core message largely intact.

Singer's argument stems from the intuitive observation that suffering and death from starvation, illness, and lack of shelter are bad (Singer 751). He continues by claiming that individuals have a moral obligation to prevent bad things from happening if doing so is within their power and would not require that they sacrifice anything of comparable moral value, that is, if doing so would not require that they cause something bad that is of roughly equal moral significance to occur, nor that they prevent something good that is of roughly equal moral significance from occurring, nor that they perform an intrinsically wrong act (751). Importantly, the premise does not take distance into account. In other words, physical separation from suffering does not eliminate the mandate to alleviate it, so long as one still has the capacity to do so (751). Similarly, the obligation stands regardless of whether an individual is the only one in a position to help or whether others are equally capable of providing assistance (751). Singer then points out that, as a matter of fact, it is within the power of many people (including most citizens of affluent nations) to prevent suffering by donating money to charities that help mitigate famine, disease, and other forms of hardship (751). Doing so, Singer claims, would not entail sacrificing anything of comparable moral worth if the money we donate would not be necessary for meeting our basic health requirements (751). The conclusion of the argument therefore proceeds as follows: one ought morally to donate to the point of marginal utility, that is, until donating more would cause oneself and one's dependents as much suffering as it would attenuate (753). My objection to Singer's position is that his second premise – that individuals ought morally to prevent bad things from happening if it is within their power and does not require them to sacrifice anything of comparable moral value – would prove untenable in practice. For instance, one can imagine the case of an emergency room doctor in an understaffed hospital treating patients who could die without her care. The lives of these individuals would have far greater moral worth than her sleep. Yet, she must sleep for some portion of the night to carry out her job effectively. Where should she draw the line, though? Staying up an extra ten minutes would be within the doctor's power and could prevent a patient's

death. That outcome clearly has greater moral value than gaining a little extra rest, which would probably not significantly enhance the doctor's performance the next day. No matter when the doctor chooses to sleep, one could argue that she ought to remain awake for just a little longer, because the very minor amount of sleep she could experience during that time would not make much difference on its own, and its moral value could never compare to that of saving a human life. Similarly, one might ask how much time the doctor should allocate to eating breakfast or getting dressed. Anywhere she draws the line will necessarily be arbitrary, but she must draw a line nonetheless. Suppose that the doctor decides on a healthy amount of time to spend sleeping. Since she is morally justified in sleeping for that period (because she must spend part of her time sleeping to function effectively, and her choice of how long to do so is within the bounds of what could conceivably be permissible), then she is morally justified in spending the first minute of that period sleeping rather than treating another patient, even though it is within her power to treat the patient instead, and the moral value of one patient's life far outweighs the moral value of one minute of sleep. (Of course, she is unlikely to cure a patient in such a short interval, but the key point remains: any amount of time spent sleeping equates to time not spent treating patients, and if there are numerous patients who require immediate assistance, but few doctors in the hospital, then one minute of her time could make a difference). Thus, Singer's premise seems faulty because it appears that in this situation, the doctor is not morally obligated to prevent a bad outcome even though doing so would not require her to sacrifice anything of comparable moral worth.

Since I have revealed a flaw in one of his premises, it is now worth examining whether Singer's conclusion still holds, and, in fact, it does not. As demonstrated above, one cannot realistically be expected to obey the rule given by the second premise in situations that necessitate an arbitrary line between two extremes, each of which would be unacceptable. Deciding on the appropriate amount of money to donate to charity constitutes just such a situation. One should not be morally obliged to starve oneself in order to make a donation any more than one should forgo donating entirely, but choosing a reasonable yet arbitrary quantity to donate requires that individuals refrain from preventing a bad outcome even though doing so would not require sacrificing anything of comparable moral value. For example, if a person settles on a healthy amount of food to buy, then he is justified in spending one of the dollars he allocated for food on a small morsel for himself rather than donating that particular dollar to charity, even though it is within his power to make the donation instead, and the moral value of buying a morsel of food for a person that would not starve without it does not compare to the moral value of donating a dollar to an impoverished refugee for whom it would represent a small fortune. Technically, spending the dollar means the man is not living exactly at the level of marginal utility, since he would be using it to purchase a piece of food that is unnecessary on its own, and yet the purchase is justified nonetheless, because the man must ultimately decide on a reasonable but imperfect amount of food to buy. Therefore, Singer's conclusion that we must donate to the point of marginal utility should not constitute an absolute moral obligation. Some leeway

must be given.

Nonetheless, a critic sympathetic to Singer's views might hold that one should not determine when one has reached the point of marginal utility based on the amount of money one spends on required goods like food and ordinary clothing, but rather based on the amount of money one spends on items like jewelry and lavish garments that do not matter for one's physical survival. When Singer claims that one must donate until one reaches the point of marginal utility, the objector may argue, he does not mean to suggest that individuals must gauge the exact amount of money to spend on essential goods; rather, they must avoid purchasing any items that do not meet their bare, physiological needs. If reaching the point of marginal utility only requires that individuals refrain from these kinds of expenditures, then, even if I have correctly identified a flaw in the second premise of Singer's argument, his conclusion may still hold, since the goal it prescribes is not vague, but instead precisely attainable by avoiding certain types of purchases. However, even when it comes to luxury goods that are not essential for survival, the situation is not as clear-cut as a critic might hope. For instance, while expensive clothing may appear unnecessary at first glance, members of minority groups sometimes require costly outfits to receive equitable treatment in social and professional contexts, as Tressie Cottom points out in her article "Why do the Poor 'Waste' Money on Luxury Goods?" (Cottom). Likewise, a vacation may seem frivolous, but it could prove useful for a surgeon to maintain her mental health (and, therefore, to perform her job effectively). Thus, it seems reasonable not to restrict the criteria for reaching marginal utility to purchasing only biologically necessary goods, yet the precise quantity of these luxury goods that one buys will have to be determined by a reasonable but arbitrary cutoff, such that reaching marginal utility remains a vague goal that one could likely never fully meet in practice.

The objection described above essentially amounts to endorsing a weaker version of Singer's argument that replaces the original second premise with the claim that individuals ought morally to prevent a bad outcome if doing so would not require sacrificing anything of moral significance (as opposed to anything of *comparable* moral significance) (751). Singer believes that this alternate premise would result in the conclusion that one ought morally to donate all of one's disposable income (extra money one can use for unnecessary goods, like superfluous quantities of food or expensive watches) to worthy charities (753). However, the premise and conclusion of this weak argument remain flawed, because, just as it is infeasible to precisely donate to the point of marginal utility (since the concept is vague), so too is it infeasible to precisely give up all of one's disposable income. As illustrated previously, even seemingly unnecessary goods like costly apparel may be required in certain situations, but the specific amount one buys must be decided arbitrarily (within reason). Consequently, one essentially has no choice but to spend a portion of one's disposable income on technically unnecessary purchases, and therefore, it ought to be morally permissible to do so. One cannot take Singer's conclusion literally. Instead, there must be a certain degree of flexibility in the precise amount of money one ought morally to donate.

Where does this objection leave Singer's argument, then? Must one reject it entirely? I argue not. One can know how to follow the mandate given by Singer's second premise fairly easily in most situations (e.g., when deciding whether to save a drowning child or continue eating a sandwich and ignore him, the morally correct choice stands out clearly). Problems arise in situations where one must find the appropriate balance between two mathematical extremes, each of which would be morally unacceptable. To better understand this notion, consider again the logical conclusion of Singer's argument: that we ought to donate until donating more would cause us and our dependents as much harm as it would prevent. Donating all our money would be an unacceptable extreme, since we would then starve to death or be unable to meet our own basic needs. Donating none of our money would likewise constitute an unacceptable extreme since it would mean completely ignoring the suffering of others. We must find a balance between these mathematical extremes (donating zero money and donating all our money). Likewise, the doctor must choose an appropriate amount of sleep, which will fall between the extremes of sleeping for zero hours in the night and sleeping for the entire night. Since, as a practical matter, we cannot know the exact amount of time to sleep or money to donate, we should only be responsible for making a reasonable guess that approximates the correct ratio (so, for instance, choosing 7 hours and choosing 7.5 hours of sleep are likely both morally permissible, since both seem reasonable). Hence, the following modification of Singer's second premise could render it more plausible as a ethical mandate:

(a) Individuals have a moral obligation to prevent bad things from happening if doing so is within their power and would not require that they sacrifice anything of comparable moral value. (b) In cases where following the rule given by (a) necessitates choosing between two extremes, each of which would be unacceptable, we ought morally only to find, to the best of our ability, the appropriate balance between the two extremes. This stipulation will necessitate that there is a morally permissible gray zone in determining such a balance.

Note that modifying the second premise in this way means that the argument still supports Singer's conclusion that most wealthy individuals ought morally to donate far more than they do. Although they need only approximate, to the best of their ability, the correct sum to donate, the amount of money that many give away clearly falls well outside the bounds of any morally permissible "grey zone". Hence, most citizens of wealthy nations ought morally to donate much more than they do.

Works Cited

Cottom, Tressie Mcmillan. "Why Do Poor People 'Waste' Money on Luxury Goods?" *Talking Points Memo*, 1 Nov. 2013, https://talkingpointsmemo.com/cafe/why-do-poor-people-waste-money-on-luxury-goods.

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