

## Singer on 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality'

Common objections and replies

by Rich Cameron<sup>1</sup>

Singer's argument in 'Famine, Affluence' is controversial. Many people are ill-inclined (at least at first) to accept his rather strong conclusions. He argues that the absolutely affluent are as blameworthy for not giving up to the point where their giving would generate (at least) *significant* morally relevant costs in their lives (i.e., costing them things like *educational* opportunities or *health care* rather than trivialities like yet another CD in their already large collection, yet another pair of shoes, yet another forgettable first run movie, etc.). In fact, we are as blameworthy as a person who simply walks past an infant drowning in a shallow pond — or so Singer argues.

Our culture provides us with quite a large number of 'ready responses' to this line of argument, and this handout compiles the most common of the common responses, and gives (what comes to mind much less easily in our culture) Singer-type responses to each of them. If you are going to address Singer's argument in a deep way — and that is the goal in a philosophy course — you're going to have to *go beyond* the common arguments given the replies that are readily available to them. Your responsibility is to evaluate Singer's argument by confronting it with the criticisms. Then, you must evaluate the criticisms by confronting them with the Singer-style replies. And then (this is really where your creative work comes in), you must evaluate the replies in light of (your own and the class's) further critical scrutiny.

*Be aware:* people frequently fall back into offering exactly the kinds of criticisms discussed below *even after they've read the responses, and even when they agree, when pressed, that the Singer-style response to their criticism is a good one.* This is a sign of how intently all of us *hope* that Singer is wrong (since his argument has such radical implications for our conceptions of ourselves). But this hope also reveals an (understandable) bias we all have in favor of thinking the best of ourselves even in light of strong contrary evidence. But this hope does not (in itself) constitute a good response to Singer's argument. If we're going to respond to him in a serious way and defend our currently lives, we need to work hard both against our natural biases to dismiss Singer's argument too quickly *and then* against the argument itself in order to see where his argument *really* goes wrong (if it does). The easy responses, at least in their common formulations, generally don't do the trick, tempting and comforting as we may find them.

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That being said, however, be aware that these objections and replies are not to be taken as the final word on the philosophical issue. They are, rather, to be taken in the way that *all philosophical arguments are to be taken.* The replies offered by Singer's defenders are only as good as they appear to be after sustained, honest, public and unbiased scrutiny. Perhaps the replies don't stand up to criticism. Your job as a philosopher in a philosophy classroom is to subject them to that scrutiny.

Below I give a brief review of Singer's argument followed by sections devoted to common objections and replies.

### 1 Synopsis of the argument

Singer's argument assumes an understanding of the following distinction between absolute and relative senses of 'poor' and 'affluent'.

**Relative poverty** is the condition of being poor relative to one's neighbors.

**Relative affluence** is the condition of being affluent relative to one's neighbors.

**Absolute poverty** describes a life lived in conditions that are unacceptable by any standards. Thus, a former president of the World Bank, Robert McNamara, set the following standards: absolute poverty is "a condition of life so characterized by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality and low life expectancy as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency." {Quoted in \ Singer, 1993 #2617, 219-20.}

**Absolute affluence** describes a condition of life where life's basic necessities are met, and then some. We might say that those who are affluent in absolute terms are "affluent by any reasonable definition of human needs. This means that they have more income than they need to provide themselves adequately with all the basic necessities of life. After buying (either directly or through their taxes) food, shelter, clothing, basic health services, and education, the absolutely affluent are still able to spend money on luxuries. The absolutely affluent choose their food for the pleasures of the palate, not to stop hunger; they buy new clothes to look good, not to keep warm; they move house to be in a better neighborhood or have a playroom for the children, not to keep out of the rain; and after all this there is still money to spend on stereo systems, video-cameras, and overseas holidays." {Singer, 1993 #2617, 221}

Against this background, then, Singer argues that most of us in the developed world (i.e., the affluent in the *absolute* sense) have surprisingly strong moral obligations to give aid to the absolutely poor in developing countries. We have these obligations as people who are affluent in the absolute sense even though we (most of us anyway) aren't affluent in the relative sense. Here's his argument.

1. Assume that "suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad".
2. Absolute poverty is a significant problem. Thus, many do suffer and die from lack of food, shelter, and medical care.
3. Apply one of the following moral principles.

**The strong 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."

**The weak principle:** "if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it."

4. It is in our power to do something about the problem of absolute poverty without sacrificing anything of comparable or significant importance.
5. We ought to give time/money address the problem of absolute poverty to the point where we are sacrificing something of moral importance comparable to or significant in light of the problem's seriousness.

The first two premises of the argument are relatively uncontroversial. **Premise 1** relies on your honest and sincere moral judgment (what I'll be calling a check with your 'moral data'). Singer simply assumes that most people will agree with the judgment that it is regrettable that people suffer and die as a result of absolute poverty.

**Premise 2** is a relatively uncontroversial empirical claim. As a sad matter of fact you were born into a world where hundreds of millions of people live in absolute poverty as defined above. That should qualify the issue as a significant problem.

Real controversy with the argument starts with premises 3 and 4. **Premise 3** states the moral principle(s) on which Singer rests his case for our obligations to the absolutely poor. These premises may seem controversial, but Singer backs them up with a supporting argument. He offers an argument from analogy, which I will call 'POND', whose conclusion is that you accept at least one of these principles.

### POND

Suppose you are walking to class past a pond and see a small child obviously drowning in the middle of it. You are able bodied, the pond is shallow. If you are worried that the child may present a danger to you — don't. The child is very small, it poses no threat to your safety. If you worry that you might slip, fall, and die in the pond yourself — again, don't. Simply suppose the bottom is like a wading pool, very easy to walk across. Still, although the rescue poses no threats to your health or safety, saving the child will muddy your pants and (say) make you late for a class.

This situation is used to assess your 'moral data'. Thinking honestly about your own beliefs, how would you answer the following series of stronger and stronger questions?

**Question 1:** morally, should you save the child in POND?

**Question 2:** does morality *require* you to save the child?

**Question 3:** would you be *morally criticizable* if you didn't save the child?

**Question 4:** would you consider it *morally monstrous* (very seriously wrong) not to save the child in POND?

Singer supposes in his article that you will answer many or all of these questions affirmatively. And his explanation for why you believe that you *should, are required to, would be morally criticizable if you failed to, or would be monstrous if you didn't* save the child in POND is that you accept at least one of his moral principles. The reason it is so clear to you in POND that morality (strongly) requires you to save the child is that you see clearly and unambiguously in POND that

1. Something bad is happening. And,
2. you can do something about it without *comparable* or even *morally significant* sacrifice.

And for these reasons you see clearly that you should (are required to, would be morally criticizable if you failed to, or would be monstrous if you didn't) save the child. That is Singer's defense of premise 3 of his argument.

Premise 4 is another empirical claim, but this may be somewhat controversial. In claiming that we (the absolutely affluent) can do something about the problem of absolute poverty Singer is relying on the assumptions (a) that there are aid organizations working toward solutions to the problem of absolute poverty to whom you may donate money and/or time and (b) that these aid programs to which you may contribute are reasonably effective in addressing the problems. The first assumption (that there are aid organizations) is uncontroversially true. The controversy with this premise starts with the second assumption — that the aid organizations are reasonably effective.

I now turn to common objections to Singer's argument.

### 2 Direct responses to the empirical presuppositions in Singer's argument: can we really do anything to solve the problem of absolute poverty?

There is a legitimate empirical question about whether we can do anything about the problem of absolute poverty. Extreme poverty has been with us for ages — why think we can do anything to get rid of it now? Isn't it just an inevitable (if regrettable) part of life that we need to learn to live with? Further, people sometimes think that giving aid only increases the problem by adding to overpopulation and economic dependency with the inevitable result of greater suffering in the future as a direct result of our (misguided) aid now.

I take different versions of this objection in turn before adding a more general comment concerning the thought that we can't do anything about absolute poverty.

#### 2.1 The inevitability objection: Absolute poverty always has been and always will be with us, nothing any of us can do will change that

People often react to Singer's argument by appealing to the long history of human misery. Humans have lived in intense squalor for (literally) millennia, for so long that absolute poverty has come to look like a permanent part of the world environment. If this problem is and always has been with us isn't it futile for me to throw my money at the problem? Surely morality doesn't require me to chase

windmills – if my giving won't help solve the problem surely I am not obligated to do it.

**Comment:** The moral principle here (morality doesn't require you to do what you *cannot* in fact do) appears unobjectionable. If this objection fails, then, it will fail because it is empirically false that your giving will not do anything about the fact of absolute poverty.

**Reply 1:** There are at least two lines of response open to Singer at this point. The first reply grants that absolute poverty will always be with us but notes that it doesn't follow from this fact that it will always plague the particular individuals and families currently in desperate straits. Your giving may not solve the (whole) problem of absolute poverty, but you can definitely make a difference in individual peoples' lives – the difference in their lives between misery and health or life and death in fact. This same point can be seen by looking again at POND.

Just as in POND your saving the child won't ensure that no children will drown in ponds in the future, so in giving aid you can't prevent the fact that people will continue to die from absolute poverty through your individual giving. Still, this fact doesn't suggest that you may refrain from saving the child in POND, does it? And if it doesn't then you have no license to refrain from giving to aid those whom your aid *can* help in significant ways, even if poverty (and drownings) will always be with us.

**Reply 2:** The second reply rejects the empirical claim that since absolute poverty has always been with us it always will be with us. The world situation has changed *dramatically* in the last 150 years (roughly since the industrial revolution, coinciding with radical advances in medicine). These changes make it seem eminently plausible that *if* we used currently technological, economic, and medical resources wisely we could do what previous generations of humans could not do – *we (our generation or the next) could solve the problem of absolute poverty.*

Aid organizations and serious programs of international aid have only existed for 50 years or so, so pointing out that we haven't solved the problems yet hardly shows that we can't do it if we try. Further, by now aid organizations have learned a lot about what does and doesn't work. It seems that the main obstacle to ridding the world of absolute poverty *isn't* any longer that the problem is too big to solve – we have the methods and resources to solve it. Nor is the problem that we don't know how to do it – we have fairly wide experiential knowledge of what does and doesn't work at this point. The problem, at this stage, is that individual people and governments lack the will solve the problem by devoting adequate resources to programs that could end it.

Singer argues that you are personally obligated by your own moral beliefs to give substantially to the eradication of this evil. Your aid, in concert with that of others, could solve the problem. Your aid *even in the absence* of a concerted effort by others will help individual families. Your aid can make a difference, then, even if your aid cannot solve the problem single-handedly.

## 2.2 Aid will only lead to economic dependence, POND won't

It is often thought that aid comes in the form of 'handouts' that are economically 'dead-end'. The idea is that "If you give a person a fish, she eats for a day; teach a person to fish and she eats for a lifetime." But aid doesn't 'teach people to fish', it 'gives them fish', and so we shouldn't support it.

**Reply:** The presupposition about aid here is false. Most aid organizations (except those devoted exclusively to disaster relief) are *all about* 'teaching people to fish'. Aid organizations study ways of fostering sustainable self-sufficiency in the developing world and seek to put the ideas that have been tested and *work* into action.

For instance, experience has taught aid organizations that one of the most economically efficient and successful ways of generating self-sufficiency in the developing world is through literacy programs for native women. Teach women to read and you empower the people who traditionally have the greatest influence over family life. Educating mothers leads to greater knowledge of preventive health issues, contraception, and ways of generating economic opportunity. Moreover, it is incredibly cheap to teach people to read: teach a few and they can be paid to teach others (or may do so on their own). Such programs have had *wide* success.

**Reply 2:** Some aid does simply 'give a person a fish' rather than teaching them to fish. Such aid is usually given in the context of human tragedies such as earthquakes, floods, famines, etc. When people are on the brink of starvation and death and we can keep them alive by 'giving them a fish', shouldn't we? Granted that this isn't all that aid ought to be about, but (a) it isn't all that aid programs are about, and (b) isn't it *part of* what aid organizations *should* be about?

## 2.3 Aid will only lead to greater overpopulation problems, POND won't

It is often thought that giving aid to the developing world hinders the natural mechanism for controlling the human population. Everyone probably knows in some vague way that the world is overpopulated and that the population is only growing right now. If we save the lives of the desperately poor aren't we just exacerbating a problem that is just as serious as absolute poverty itself? We are helping to create a world whose human population is unsustainably large, where more people will *inevitably* die miserably later (because of famine as a result of overpopulation) than will die if we do nothing now. Sadly, doing nothing may seem like our best (most humane) option.

**Reply:** There is little serious reason to suppose that doing nothing is the most humane option. The kind of thinking that says 'save them and they'll only breed and overpopulate' is seductive but oversimplified — the world isn't that black and white. The problem with this line of argument is that it ignores the fact that successful aid programs institute policies which both address the problem of absolute poverty, encourage economic self-sufficiency, *and* at the same time contribute to solving problems of overpopulation rather than exacerbating them.

The key to understanding this response is to acquaint yourself with basic facts about factors contributing to high birth rates in the developing world. Simplifying, birth rates tend to be high because (a) parents lack economic security for their old age and because (b) women lack power in the family to resist having children. Aid programs tend to address both of these causes of high-birthrates by (b) empowering women through education (literacy and vocational training) and (a) developing the basis for types of economies that can provide social security without large unduly large families. Where such programs have had a chance to work, they tend to succeed in decreasing absolute poverty *and at the same time bringing rates of population growth down rather than up.*

The point here is that acquainting yourself with the empirical facts about how aid is distributed in the developing world and how the kinds of aid that are given actually effect things like birth rates will almost certainly alleviate worries along these lines.

#### 2.4 Cases of mis-spent or mis-guided aid

In this context people will often appeal to cases where aid has been spent (apparently) frivolously, or where it has ended up enriching despotic dictators instead of the poor, or where it has exacerbated an endemic problem in a region rather than solving it. And there are a depressing number (by this time in history) of such cases critics can point toward. These are given as reasons not to give to aid. Opponents of giving aid can present a pretty bleak picture concerning how your money is being spent when you give to aid programs, and it looks mighty implausible to suppose we have strong obligations to give to aid of such a nature.

**Comment:** There is a grain of truth to the argument. First, it is important to admit that there have been real cases where aid money has been mis-spent. Where it has gone to support dictators. Where it has lead to unforeseen problems rather than towards the solution of problems. Second, it is also important to recognize the plausibility of the claim that morality does not require to you give to lost causes or counterproductive efforts. If you are reasonably sure that your only means of addressing a problem are ineffectual and misguided then surely morality doesn't not require you to follow those ineffectual and/or counterproductive methods in the face of the fact that they are ineffectual and/or counterproductive. This objection thus relies on a grain of truth both empirically (concerning actual cases of aid that have gone wrong) and morally (concerning the fact that morality doesn't require us to give to lost or counterproductive causes).

**Reply:** That being said however, the objection is overstated. Objectors present a terribly one-sided view of aid programs when they concentrate only on failures. Yes, failures have occurred and will probably occur in the future. But successes occur too, and with far greater regularity than you would think from the loud voices of detractors. Aid programs can demonstrate many cases of real improvements in economic conditions, educational status, preventative and emergency health, infrastructure, child mortality, etc. In short, to focus only on the failures presents a one sided and biased view of our situation as we contemplate giving aid.

In more detail, it is important to recognize that aid programs are fairly new, historically speaking. Concerted modern efforts at foreign aid have only been around for 50 or 60 years. Some things that were tried early on didn't work. Some were counterproductive. Some aid fell into the wrong hands. But aid programs have learned, and learned a lot, from their history. They monitor their failures as well as their successes. Good ones study what works and what doesn't. And they try to duplicate successes and avoid strategies that fail. Not surprisingly, aid organizations are getting more effective all the time because of these efforts.

If you don't believe these things please visit the websites of various aid organizations like OXFAM or UNICEF and browse through their position papers and the studies they put out analyzing their own efforts. Keep an open mind and read some of them. Read stories about some of their successes, and how organizations are trying to duplicate those successes in new places. Read about their awareness of problems concerning wars, dictators, and ways in which they recognize that money can be diverted from its intended use. Read how the organizations fight back and try to avoid these things.

**Final comment:** Our desire not to see ourselves as failing morally by not giving up to Singer's standards gives *all of us* a significant bias towards believing that aid programs are failures rather than successful at what they try to do. If the critics are right and its all counterproductive then we're not, after all, the moral monsters Singer's argument suggests we are. And that would come as a great relief to our conceptions of ourselves as good people. But as with any bias, this one may distort our picture of reality and make it harder for us to recognize or give credit to aid programs that really do work. Be aware of the temptation towards bias here. Then make an honest attempt at an even handed assessment of aid organizations in light of information from varied sources.

#### 2.5 Isn't this communism, and isn't communism (a) bad and (b) a failed economic system?

But isn't Singer's argument communist? And don't we all know by know that communism just plain doesn't work? We're good capitalists, capitalism only works if people have rights to their own money, and Singer has no right to take mine.

**Reply:** The short answer this objection is that it is misguided. The basic mistake is that communism is a *political system*. Singer's argument is an *ethical* argument. Politics deals with what kinds of political structures are appropriate for groups of people. Ethics, on the other hand, deals with individuals' (not groups' or governments') moral obligations. Singer offers an *ethical* argument which claims that you have an obligation to give to the poor *no matter what kind of political system you live under*. And so his argument is *entirely neutral* about politics.

If this doesn't seem clear to you, reflect on the fact that it just plain *doesn't matter* what kind of political system is in play in the POND case – no matter whether POND is in a capitalist or communist country, you *still* recognize an obligation to

save the child. This shows that debates about the acceptability or unacceptability of communism/capitalism are irrelevant for purposes of the obligations Singer's argument uncovers.

Capitalism is an economic (not a political) system. Let's grant that it's the best – no, let's grant that it's the best and *only* economic game in town. Fine. Singer still says you (the capitalist) have the obligations you recognize in the POND case. He *isn't* arguing, after all, that the KGB ought to raid your bank account, take money, give it to the Politburo and to wait to see how they, in their infinite wisdom, distribute it. He's arguing that you have an obligation to give to well known and reputable aid organizations in capitalist countries, and that you recognize this obligation *of your own free will* without anyone imposing *anything* on you from the outside and without mentioning or implying *anything* about the economic system in which you live or ought to support.

## 2.6 But isn't the free market the best and most efficient way to end poverty around the world?

The idea here is that the capitalist, free market, system is the best in the world. And according to capitalism, the best and most efficient way to achieve the highest levels of well being for everyone is — and this seems somewhat paradoxical at first sight — for each individual person to pursue their own narrow self interest. If everyone exchanges their goods and labor according to pure self-interest, un-alloyed with soft hearted liberal and altruistic thoughts about helping others, then everyone will be as well off as they can be, and this improvement of living conditions will come about more quickly and efficiently through these means than through any other. Adam Smith's so-called 'invisible hand' will direct the individually selfish actions of the market so as to produce (as if by magic) the best possible distribution of well-being overall.

If this is true, then it would seem that we would be interfering with the efficiency and beauty of the best solution to the problem of absolute poverty when we give to aid organizations. It may *seem* to the economically uninformed, that is, that the most efficient and morally obligatory way to help the absolute poor is to give aid to 'charities' and aid organizations generally, but in fact such measures are counterproductive. They will only *slow* the rate at which the world's poor would rise out of absolute poverty had we only kept on doing the self-interested thing and buying our 21<sup>st</sup> pair of jeans, the 18<sup>th</sup> pair of shoes, and our 167<sup>th</sup> CD for our music collection. Oddly enough, we're doing the most we can for the poor when we work with the sole motivation of improving *our own* lives (rather than towards improving the lives of *others*) and spend – lavishly even – on ourselves and our families. The BMW for me is a much better investment in saving the child in absolute poverty than giving her a vaccination for the measles, which may kill her this year.

Such, anyway, seems to be the message of a certain brand of contemporary economic orthodoxy. How can Singer's defenders respond to this line of thought?

**Reply:** Well, first we should accept that the free market is indeed incredibly efficient at improving certain aspects of well being, and most people today have no doubt that market economies are one part of the solution to the problem of absolute poverty.

That being said, however, there is a bit of ideologically driven blindness in the idea that the market is *by itself* the solution to all our problems. Free markets are *great* – let me repeat so you don't take this to be some sort of communist/socialist response – they're a *great* way of efficiently providing commodities to people. *Commodities* – things like cars and trucks, pens, pencils, and medium sized dry goods generally. The problem with the objection is *not* that market economies don't supply *these things* well and efficiently. The problem is that not everything is (or ought to be conceived as) a commodity in the relevant sense. And that is the fatal flaw with this objection.

It will take a little while to lay the groundwork for making this reply plausible, however. Here is a brief attempt.

### The relevant background

Ask yourself some relatively simple questions about markets. Do you think, for instance:

**First case:** that you should have only as much protection from rape as you can afford? That the rich, who can afford bodyguards, should be protected but that those of us who aren't Britney Spears and cannot afford bodyguards should just take the hard knocks we get, up to and including physical assault and rape?

This example (and ones like it that can be generated quite easily) reveals something about a common element of peoples' moral data. Most peoples' moral data tells them that it *cannot* be true that literally *everything* – including police protection from crime – should be provided through free and open markets. Not only isn't the free market approach to providing protection from rape (and crime generally) *most efficient* in getting us what we want from police protection, it doesn't get us what we want *at all* (unless we happen to be phenomenally rich). If we want police protection for everyone, then putting protection on the free market won't help us to get it – in fact it will prevent us from achieving our goal.

So, ethically speaking, people seem to believe that it would be wrong to *commodify* police protection, to treat it as if it were a commodity best traded on open and free markets like cars and trucks where you get what (and only what) you pay for. Putting it another way, we seem to recognize that *justice* requires that some things (like protection from crime, recourse afterwards, and other examples I'll provide below) ought to be provided regardless whether a person can afford it. Perhaps it is permissible or even desirable to allow the wealthy to pay for *extra* protection, but everyone (we seem to think) ought to have *very good protection*.

(Notice, by the way, that even the most ideologically committed libertarians accept this point. They believe that it is just (i.e., ethical) that there be at the least a 'night

watchman' state. **So it is relatively uncontroversial**, once we get past the overstatement of the objection stated above, *that some goods are such that justice entails they shouldn't be provided through free markets but should be available to people regardless of what they can pay.*)

Once we see this much, more examples of things we probably think shouldn't be left to the market to provide are quite easy to supply: Do you think

**Second case:** that children should have only the access to food and health care that they can afford? Thus, that if their parents cannot afford to feed them properly that they should be left to grow up malnourished, with all that that entails? (It entails, for starters, that their brains and immune systems will not develop properly, making them highly susceptible to dying from diseases like measles that don't generally kill a properly nourished child. And even if they survive childhood, they will have decreased mental functioning as a result of their childhood deprivation, and given this stunted development no opportunity even remotely equal to that of someone like you to succeed or get ahead in life later.)

Again, I anticipate that most peoples' moral data will tell them that such a situation would be unjust. Whatever the sins of the parents, it would be unethical (wouldn't it?) to leave it entirely up to the market (and so up to who can pay) to determine which children get food to eat or medical care to protect them from debilitating and possibly fatal childhood diseases.

Just as we should provide police protection from external threats to everyone regardless of what they can pay, it is seemingly the case that we ought to provide health and medical protection to all (or at least to all *children*) regardless of what they (or more properly speaking their parents) can afford to pay. Again, a free market for basic necessities like *police protection* or *basic nutritional and health protection for children* is not merely inefficient in getting us what justice requires – it will not provide it at all.

If one of the things we want out of life is to live in a morally decent world, free markets alone, unsupplemented by other means, won't give us what we want.

One last example. Do you think

**Third case:** that people should get only as much education as they can afford? That is, that children born to the poor should get only as much education as their parents can afford to buy for them – that is, none? (As you consider how to answer this question, consider that given the way the world works these days no one who cannot read and do basic math stands a chance of getting ahead in the world. So if children only get the education their parents can afford, then the children of the very poor will, as a matter of course, be unskilled, largely unemployable, and therefore – through no fault of their own – doomed to great poverty themselves.)

Is it just that children should be punished for the 'sins of their parents'? Our culture is fairly hard hearted about the poor these days, so perhaps you believe that parents of poor children *deserve* poverty because they've slacked and passed up the

opportunities for advancement society has afforded them.<sup>2</sup> Still, the *children* of such parents haven't slacked, and surely justice dictates that *they* should have a chance to succeed *even if* their parents deserve their fate. Doesn't it? Again, do you believe that kids should be punished for what their parents have (allegedly) done?

Most peoples' moral data, I think, tells them 'no'. If this is right, then, most people accept that, again, as with police protection and basic health needs, *education* isn't something that it would be just to leave to the free market to provide. If we did leave it to the market, it is obvious that we would create a permanent underclass – a group of people (the children of the poor) for whom there would be *no reasonable opportunity to succeed in life, and certainly no opportunity even remotely equal to those born to middle and upper class parents to succeed*. And this would be radically unfair – isn't this the land of opportunity?<sup>3</sup> So once again, not only does the free market not distribute goods of this kind *efficiently*, it does not distribute them properly *at all*.

Again, if your moral data says what I think it does, then what you are doing here is recognizing that you do not think it is proper for *everything* to be left to the market to provide. Some things – police and judicial protection, basic health needs, and now education – people deserve *even if they cannot afford*.

Given the prevalence of the ideology I'm speaking of here, however, it is probably essential to note that *these pieces of moral data I've just been eliciting are not, let me repeat not, of a piece with communism*. (See the next objection for more details if you're currently suspicious of this claim. Or. . .) If you don't believe me, read Marx. Heck, if you don't believe me, read Adam Smith. Capitalism is an economic system that comes in *lots* of varieties, and is capable of existing with fewer or more things left out of the market without devolving into communism, a radically different kind of political and economic system in which all the means of production are communally owned and operated. The kinds of things we've discussed above can be provided in *regulated* markets that are private, and even ones that are aimed at generating profits.

Indeed, capitalism flourished in America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century generating some of the highest standards of living in the world while leaving *lots of things* off of the free market. After all, think about it: you had a free, publicly provided education. We provide Social Security benefits, and Medicare. The military draft isn't left to the market – indeed we think it wrong when the rich or well connected *buy* or *connive*

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<sup>2</sup> This assumption that the poor have been given equal or even reasonable opportunity to succeed is empirically suspect, and I don't want to give the impression that I support it here. I simply want to bypass this complex empirical issue and focus on the clear case – the children.

<sup>3</sup> Actually, if you've been watching the news you'll know that the USA is the second most economically stratified country in the developed world these days, second only to Britain. In every other developed country in the world a person born to poor parents stands a better chance of getting out of poverty than such a person would have in the USA.

their way out of serving their country. We have public police officers, not merely private security forces. And so on. Capitalism, no, *thriving American style* capitalism, is compatible with many limitations on which commodities are on the market.

### **Bringing it all together**

Whew. So how does this relate to giving aid? The objection held that the most efficient way of solving the problem of world poverty would be to let the market take care of the problem of absolute poverty – it would be the most efficient and just way of responding. Which, luckily for us, yields the happy result that pursuing our self interested capitalist desires for things like our twenty seventh pair of pants or shoes or whatever would – contrary to common sense expectations – be the best, most efficient, and most ethical way of helping those in absolute poverty. In particular, better, more efficient, and more ethical than giving money to an aid organization which would, say feed or educate or provide health care or job training for a desperately poor person and her family.

The response for which we laid the groundwork above is, in a nutshell, that commonsense is right and the popular (overstated) ideology wrong. We recognize that even if lots of things should be left to the market to provide, not everything should. *It would be unjust to leave basic necessities such as health care and nutritional needs to the market to provide*, so that children of poor parents would simply have to die, be malnourished, or suffer lifelong chronic illnesses simply because their parents were poor and couldn't provide those things for them.<sup>4</sup>

And since Singer's AID argument dealt with obligations to provide basic necessities for life (e.g., basic nutritional and health needs, sanitation, and education) to those living in conditions of life below any reasonable standard of human decency, the 'capitalist's gambit' in avoiding an obligation to provide aid seems not to work. *Even if* we ought to have utterly free markets for widgets, pencils, pants, shoes, cars, etc. we shouldn't leave police protection, basic health, education, and nutrition for children up to what the buyer can afford – our moral data seems to require that all (or at least all children) get a basic minimum *regardless* of what their parents can afford. Given that *many* children around the world get *much, much* less than this minimum that our moral data requires, it looks like we have (because of Singer's argument) a requirement to give. While we should leave the distribution of BMWs in the developing world up to the free market that doesn't mean it would be ethical to leave basic health, sanitation, education, etc. to the whims of the market.

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<sup>4</sup> Sometimes justice demands not being patient and waiting for things to right themselves on their own. Martin Luther King Jr. develops a related argument (albeit much more eloquent) for the same conclusion in his 'Letter from the Birmingham Jail.' I highly recommend it.

### **3 Direct responses to the moral argument: potentially relevant differences between the pond and aid**

Direct philosophical responses to Singer's argument attempt to find disanalogies between his POND case and the case of giving aid. Singer employs the POND example to motivate his claim that you accept at least one of his moral principles. If, however, the POND case is different than the case of giving aid and different *in ways that are relevant to evaluating what our moral obligations are* in the aid case, then Singer's main argument will fail.

It is crucially important as we evaluate the POND case to keep in mind that not just any difference between POND and aid will do to refute Singer's argument. The cases are different – this is why the cases are analogous rather than being identical. Any analogy between *X* and *Y* will involve differences between *X* and *Y*.

The question to ask about Singer's analogy is whether there are any differences between the POND and aid cases that are relevant to evaluating our moral responsibilities in the aid case. If there is some difference such that it makes clear why we think that we have a strong obligation to aid in the POND case but shows that we would not have the corresponding obligations in the aid case, then we will have a strong objection to Singer's argument.

#### **3.1 Distance objections:**

One class of differences between POND and aid have to do with *physical* and/or *emotional distance*.

##### **3.1.1 Physical distance**

In POND the child you are obligated to save is physically close to you. In the paradigmatic aid case the people whom you are aiding are a long ways away (generally thousands of miles). It may be held that physical distance makes the difference: *it* explains why we are obligated in the one case (POND) but not the other (aid).

**Reply:** Singer replies that physical distance is morally irrelevant. In the contemporary world you are close to those who suffer in the only morally relevant senses: first, you know about them, and second it is stunningly easy for you to aid them given modern technologies. Many aid organizations are already set up and ready to deliver your aid money to those who need it with great efficiency, quickness, and intelligence. That you are physically far away doesn't seem to affect anything that *matters*: you know about the situation of desperate need in both cases and in both cases you can easily provide life-saving aid. Why would physical distance matter? Well, maybe for the following reason. . .

##### **3.1.2 Because of distance, instinct is at play in pond but not aid**

The idea here is that we have ingrained instincts to help when we see tragedy *first hand*, but we don't have such instincts in the aid case. So, presumably, we *feel*

*compelled by our instincts* to act in the pond case, but not in the aid case. And (for the objection to Singer to work) this needs to mean that since we lack the instinctual drive to help in the aid case it is morally OK not to help in the aid case.

**Reply:** Let's suppose that it is true that we have an instinctual tendency only to care about things that happen near to us and not about things that happen far away. This doesn't seem genuinely to effect our obligations even if it is true for the following reason. Our 'instincts' or 'inborn tendencies' may sometimes lead us to do the right thing (e.g., parents may have an instinctual desire to care for their children). But instinct may also lead us to do wrong. For example, some scientists have claimed that human males have an evolutionarily inherited tendency to rape or to be aggressive. But surely the fact that nature gave men such an instinct (if it did in fact do so) would not mean that it is morally OK for males to act on their tendencies to rape or be aggressive. It would just mean that males have an obligation to consciously work against this unfortunate part of their evolutionary heritage. And it is clearly possible for men to do this, many many do it after all.

Just as clearly *even if* nature has given us a tendency not to react to distant suffering but only to suffering that is close to home, don't we have every moral reason in the world to work against this instinct and no reason not to? Pure physical distance, after all, has already been argued to be irrelevant to our moral obligations. If indeed our instincts don't come into play with those far away from us, then God or nature simply will have constructed us in ways that make it relatively more challenging for us to do what we think is morally required. Still, who said it was just going to be easy to lead a moral life?

**Reply 2:** Further, it seems that the only plausible sense in which 'instinct' or 'human nature' is at play in POND but not in aid cases is that it is psychologically very hard for us to ignore the suffering in POND but it is psychologically very easy to ignore the suffering surrounding absolute poverty half-way around the world. But why should the fact that we find absolute poverty *easy to ignore* give us the permission to go ahead and ignore it? Slave owners found it 'natural' (quite psychologically easy) to ignore the suffering of slaves; does that mean it was OK for them to do so? Surely not. Germans during WWII found it quite easy to ignore the plight of Jews, homosexuals and gypsies (who were, by the way, all quite physically close to them) during the holocaust. But surely the fact that it was psychologically easy to avert their eyes from the problem didn't make it *morally permissible* for them to do this. So even if it were psychologically quite easy for us to ignore the plight of the absolutely poor in the developing world this wouldn't give us any reason to think that it would be morally *OK* to ignore the problem, would it?

### **3.1.3 Psychological distance: We'd have nightmares if we didn't act in pond, but not in aid**

It may be held that the people you are aiding in the aid case are not merely physically distant from you but *psychologically distant from you* in the sense that it is hard for you to *care* about their fate whereas it is not hard for you to care about the fate of the

child drowning in front of your eyes. You may not care about the fates of others half-way around the world for reasons other than racism or nationalism: it may simply be difficult to generate a feeling of human connection to the suffering. The psychological vivacity of the child's situation in POND would lead to nightmares; clearly (though) the majority of affluent people the developing world find themselves much more psychologically distant from the plight of others in the developing world – no nightmares.

**Reply:** Defenders of Singer's argument may accept that this is psychologically difficult, but they reject that this ultimately changes your obligations. After all, typically when people distracted – however briefly – from their daily routine and asked to think about the fate of people in absolute poverty *almost no one* fails to feel overpowering sympathy for the fate of people condemned to live and die in such conditions.

The point is: far from being hard to care about the fate of those in absolute poverty half a world away it is *incredibly easy* to generate deep emotional responses to the suffering. It doesn't require gruesome pictures or horrifying personal stories. Statistics are usually sufficient. Its being so easy to generate care and sympathy seems to explain why so many people turn the channel whenever TV stations cover particularly graphic events. (Which also explains why TV stations don't tend to cover even the most graphic events – why do something they *know* is going to hurt their ratings and bottom line, after all? Give viewers what they want, and the clearly don't want famineTV.)

But this shows that each of us is, in general, quite capable of caring about the fate of distant others. The thing that is hard isn't caring, it is *paying attention* to the plight of those in absolute poverty. We have lots of mechanisms (personal and institutional) in place that help keep us distracted from the fate of those who suffer in absolute poverty – we've erected an entire consumer, entertainment, and work culture and one of the things this culture does very very well is distract us from precisely these issues.

But surely this doesn't make it *right* or even *OK* to ignore the issue. It is easy to ignore it. We know that. It is hard to think about it, we know that — even thinking about it is hard precisely because we *do* care when made to think about it. Why think that morality is so easy on us that if it is *easy* to ignore our obligations then it is *OK* to ignore them? Wouldn't this be too easy? Again, if morality really were this easy on us wouldn't follow that slave owners had no moral obligation to end slavery? They certainly found the plight of slaves easy to ignore. But surely that's wrong. So a thing's being easy to ignore doesn't make it morally OK to ignore it.

Isn't it more plausible that we simply have a moral obligation not to look the other way? That we are morally obliged to be morally alive and attuned to the situation of the world in which we live? What does your moral data say?



### 3.2 Bad consequences of aid not found in pond?

Other allegedly relevant differences between POND and aid surround the claim that our actions in POND are relatively separable from any bad consequences that may follow whereas (or so it is argued) the aid case carries bad consequences with it. This is why, this objection holds, we are justified in refraining from aid in the aid but not the POND case.

#### 3.2.1 Giving to aid is like giving a handout to a bum on the street-corner, but pond isn't

People often draw an analogy between a rather harsh description of 'bums' on the street begging for handouts (when they could be applying for jobs, which are readily available to them)<sup>5</sup> and the aid case. In each case we are giving to people who really ought to be 'pulling themselves up by their bootstraps'. In each case we are aiding people who do not deserve our aid. Often the recipients of our aid are thought to be responsible for their own situation, and this helps to explain why we should not be expected to help them out.

**Comment:** Contemporary society is pretty hard-hearted about 'bums'. We're pretty well indoctrinated with libertarian and free market ideology according to which people don't deserve our help unless or until they pull themselves up out of the gutter by their own bootstraps if that's all they've got.

**Reply 1:** We might wonder, however, whether this hard-heartedness itself is appropriate. Are we really so different than the 'bums' on the street? Did most well off Americans need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, or did they tend to have things (educational opportunities, job opportunities, loving families, support for character development, etc.) given them early on that, perhaps, others in less fortunate current situations didn't have? As a pure matter of luck (to whom, where, and when we were born) some of us have had a heck of a lot of help and support in attaining the level of comfort and success we've achieved, help and support that others (through nothing but their bad luck in being born to the wrong people, at the wrong times, and in the wrong places) simply haven't had access to. Is it morally appropriate for the lucky to take the hard stance towards the unlucky so common in our culture? Just something to get you thinking.

**Reply 2:** Regardless of whether this hard-heartedness is appropriate with regard to 'bums', there isn't much of an analogy at all between the typical person in absolute poverty in a developing country and homeless person on the streets in the US.

In the case of absolute poverty most are born into it. Most of the homeless are not born homeless. In the case of absolute poverty, most have no access to productive jobs, homeless shelters, job training, education, or even emergency medicine — it is because these resources are entirely lacking in much of the world that people like

<sup>5</sup> Or so it is claimed.

Singer suggest you consider giving aid, so that others can have access to these things. Not so for the homeless in this country — they may plausibly be thought to have the access already. Further, even if you think that the *adults* in other countries are (despite the last two disanalogies) relevantly similar to 'bums', what about children living (and dying) in absolute poverty? Surely the children haven't done anything to deserve their plight and *they* deserve your aid, don't they? Without your aid many will die rather miserably before they are tall enough to reach their bootstraps and start pulling up. So there seem to be *real* and *morally important* differences between aid cases and cases concerning 'bums' on the street, differences that would point to your having an obligation to help with the problem of absolute poverty *even if* you don't think it is appropriate to help 'bums'.

One problem with the objection, then, may focus on whether we should really be as hard hearted as the political ideology currently in vogue would have us be about the homeless — about 'bums'. The second response is that there doesn't seem to be much of an analogy between the two cases. If you're going to make the analogy you'd better be ready to defend it from some pretty plausible objections like the ones listed in the last paragraph.

#### 3.2.2 The economy would collapse if we all gave to aid, but pond has no such consequences

Again, people often shrink from Singer's strong conclusions because they fear that the economy would collapse if people started living up to their moral obligations *en masse*. The idea is that in our economy — which is largely driven by consumer's spending ever-increasing portions<sup>6</sup> of their income on trivialities for themselves — if people actually started giving the economy would collapse. We'd all be out of work. Right now only some of the world's population sufferings the evils of absolute poverty. Start giving and we'll *all* be in that situation. Surely we aren't obligated to bring everyone down to the level of absolute poverty. And so surely we aren't obligated to give.

**Reply:** The worry seems baseless for at least two reasons. First, it is implausible to think either (a) that everyone in the US is suddenly going to start giving what they ought to give according to Singer's argument or (b) that you're doing so will *on its*

<sup>6</sup> For example, take this handy product. "TV with a 5-inch black-and-white screen and retractable antenna. AM/FM weather band radio; lantern; fluorescent lamp; flashlight; siren. Clock; thermometer; compass; and audible mosquito repellent." Who could live without one?



own lead to economic collapse. The only way economic collapse would result would be if everyone changed their ways dramatically *at the same time* and *without warning*. But it is *completely* implausible to suppose that this is going to happen — be realistic. So you don't need to worry that *your* giving what (after serious reflection on Singer's argument) you think you ought to give is going to lead to the dire economic consequences envisioned in the objection. So this gives you no reason not to give.

**Reply 2:** Suppose, however, that over time more people did start doing what Singer suggests, what then? Well, the same people who generally offer this argument are the people who like to tell us (in other contexts) how glorious market economies (like ours) are. One of the chief glories of market economies — they tell us in other contexts — is their *resiliency to change*. And people who run this line are right: market economies are incredibly flexible. And this is one of their chief attractions over alternatives.

But this means that IF people really did (?!?) start living up to the suggested moral obligations then the economy wouldn't likely crash, it would adapt to new conditions. People would find new ways of making money by providing services needed in the new situation that weren't needed when everyone was spending on trivialities for themselves. Industries would change, but so what? That's life in a market economy. So *even if* people did give up to what Singer thinks you can see we ought to it would still be unlikely that the dire consequences envisioned in the objection would result. Thinking that it would envision the economy as more static and resistant to change than it actually is. (That you have a hard time *imagining* such a dramatically different economy doesn't show this point to be false. Read around in progressive economics literature and you'll get all kinds of concrete ideas about what market economies with different sorts of emphases might look like.)

### **3.3 I can't be certain my aid money will help but I can be certain the kid in POND will live**

It is often thought that the uncertainty of the good result in the aid case produces a disanalogy between POND and aid. The idea seems to be that I am only obligated to do (or try and do) something if I can be certain of success.

**Reply 1:** The first point to make here is that there is little actual uncertainty that your aid will do genuine good. If you donate money to OXFAM and tell them to spend the money entirely on oral re-hydration salts for children with diarrhea then your money will be going towards 'medicine' that costs only \$3 for a lifetime supply for a child. Still, not every child who gets the salts would have died of dehydration as a result of their diarrhea even without your aid. So you can be pretty dang certain that you *won't* save 33 lives for every \$100 you donate. But just as certainly you be confident that you will save a life for every \$100 or so you donate. Statistically there is no plausible reason to believe that your aid won't save many many lives over a lifetime of giving if you give consistently and give at the level to which Singer thinks you are obligated.

For other types of programs you can be just as certain that your donations are leading to results, although the results won't always be as easy to quantify as they were in the last case. If you support literacy programs for women in the developing world, you can be quite sure that at least half of your money will go towards programs that make significant progress improving the lives, health, economic conditions and birthrates of significant populations. This is so because these programs *often* (although not always, of course, some end up failing for one reason or another) work. And you can monitor the results of the programs to which you give by staying informed about how your aid is being used, which programs are working, and which are not. You can pull out and find another, better one if you come to believe that your aid program isn't as effective as you used to think it was.

You will only feel 'uncertainty' about the good your aid is doing if you choose to remain empirically ignorant of the work being done with your money. But why remain ignorant? The information is out there, so get it. And if that is too troublesome, rely on others who have done the research. But don't use the excuse that you can't be 'certain' that your aid won't help when the reason you aren't 'certain' (i.e., pretty darn sure) it will help is that you don't know how aid programs work or how effective they are. Educate yourself if you're really concerned about this.

**Reply 2:** But suppose you think this is too much work, getting informed about how effective aid programs really are and all. Even so I think Singer has a response available to him. The response involves calling into question the moral principle behind the objection. The objection suggests that we only have moral obligations when we can be certain that our actions will lead to success. But is this true? Try applying it back in an appropriately revised version of POND.

After all, why suppose you are certain that you can save the drowning infant in POND? Isn't it clearly true that the infant *may* breathe down water before you reach the center of the pond and save her? And that this might lead to her death despite your efforts and despite the fact that you dirtied your pants? Given, then, that you can't be *certain* that the child won't drown, does that mean that you are off the hook and aren't obligated to try to save the child?

I imagine most people will respond that in this case uncertainty doesn't lead to their being off the hook. But then it doesn't seem that we need certainty of success in order to have strong obligations to *try*, and *try hard*. And so we need to give to aid *even if* we aren't certain it will help. (Although I think it is worth repeating that worries about our level of certainty in aid cases are often overblown. We can be pretty darn sure we can do some real good.)

### **3.4 His argument isn't strong enough for his conclusion**

You may worry that Singer's argument hasn't established his strong conclusion. He claims that we need to give up until the point where we are either giving up things that are *morally significant* in light of or *comparable to* absolute poverty. But the

POND case only involves minor inconveniences – getting pants dirty (perhaps even ruined), and a little time out of a busy day. Why does he think he can go from there (minor inconvenience) to *there* (major changes in how we lead our lives)?

**Reply:** This objection raises a good point. It isn't obvious on the surface why Singer jumps to the strong conclusions that we need to give as much as he thinks we do. But a little thought makes it fairly clear what he probably had in mind in thinking that POND did establish this strong conclusion.

To make it explicit, consider some variants on POND:

**Shallow pond and bicycle:** same as POND, but if you save the kid your bike will get stolen. Must you save the kid?

**Shallow pond and car:** same as POND, but if you save the kid your car will get stolen. Must you save the kid?

**Shallow pond and home:** same as POND, but if you save the kid your house will burn down (you know that no one, including your pets, is inside). Must you save the kid?

What does your moral data tell you? Not uncommonly (Singer is presupposing) peoples' data will tell them that in minor variants on POND they must sacrifice *a lot* before it is morally OK not to aid. In particular, the telling thing about these kinds of cases is that they seem to reveal that *our moral data generally tells us that the importance of material goods and money pales in comparison to the importance of human lives*. When there is a conflict between saving lives and keeping material goods, material goods *almost always* lose.

This (I think) is why Singer thinks you will be obligated quite strongly just by your actions in the simple POND case. The principle that is guiding your action in POND isn't "give to prevent bad things from happening so long as the sacrifices are trivial", and if you need convincing that that isn't the operative principle reflection on the variants on the case, above, should help convince you at least of what Singer was trying to get at. Whether you're convinced will depend on your moral data in variants on POND like those.

### 3.5 Differences concerning the number of people who could help in pond and aid

In POND I'm the only person there who can help, but in the aid case millions of other absolutely affluent people could be helping (but aren't). Further, many people who are (in comparison to me) relatively affluent could do much more good for the absolutely poor than I can — and at less cost to themselves it would cost me to do less! So — it may be objected — either (a) I am only obligated to contribute my fair share of the total aid needed *if* everyone else were giving or (b) I don't need to give at all until other affluent people start pulling their own weight. Let's take these in turn, starting with (b).

### 3.5.1 I don't need to give until others start

**Reply:** Why think that this is true? Try altering the POND case a little so that it will illustrate what I mean. Suppose you're walking past a shallow pond with 100 bystanders watching an infant drown. Are you morally obligated to save the infant despite the fact that no one else is doing it? Surely the answer here is yes. But then it is simply irrelevant to whether you are obligated to act that others could act but aren't. You still need to. Urge them to help if you want, but don't suppose that you aren't obligated to act by their (morally reprehensible?) inaction.

If all that holds true in POND then it ought to hold true in aid cases as well. Granted that others are standing idly by and doing nothing (or at least not nearly enough to get the job done). Still, this doesn't mean that you shouldn't do the right thing.

It may make it psychologically easy not to do the thing morality requires, however. People do in fact seem to take comfort in the fact that at least they're not doing anything that the people around them aren't doing. But this is really cold comfort if Singer's argument is right — if Singer is right then the people we're no worse than are falling *drastically* far short of living up to their obligations. We wouldn't take comfort in this reflection in POND (with 100 spectators), why should we take comfort in it in the aid case? Again, is morality so easy on us that we are excused from aiding as we should just because our situation makes it psychologically easy for us not to aid?

### 3.5.2 I only need to give what I would (in fairness) have to give if everyone who could contributed to solving the problem, which is a lot less than Singer suggests

**Reply:** Again, why think that this is true. And again, alter the POND case to reflect the suggestion. Suppose you're walking past a shallow pond with 100 bystanders watching and doing nothing as 100 babies drown. 'Your share' of the problem is one baby, so you go out and save one baby. Still, when you get back to shore only two other people have helped and there are 97 drowning babies in the pond.

Are you obligated to help more, or will morality allow you to go about your daily business now that you've done your fair share? Surely morality requires you to save as many as you can (given your level of fitness and the time available before the infants drown) regardless of what others are doing. But then bring this point back to the aid case.

You know as an empirical matter of fact that others *aren't* doing their share when it comes to ending absolute poverty. Your obligations are generated by the problem as it exists in the real world. In the real world part of the problem is that the amount of aid given is insufficient to address the problem. This means that your actual obligations are stronger than the obligations you would have in a different situation (a different world, really) where everyone were helping as they should. Again, this just seems to reflect that the world you were born into isn't (morally) what you may wish it was – it is harder to lead a moral life in our world than it would be in other,

already more moral, worlds. This is unfortunate but something we appear to be stuck with.

### 3.5.3 I can solve the problem in pond, but I can't single-handedly solve the problem of absolute poverty

It is clear that in POND as it was originally set up we can solve the problem — the infant is drowning. But it is just as clear that in the case of absolute poverty which afflicts one quarter of the world's population the average American's economic resources are insufficient to address the problem. Does this difference between the two cases mean that we are obligated in the POND case but not in the aid case?

**Reply:** It seems not. There is a fallacy involved in thinking that since we can't solve the whole problem (involving millions of people dying every year) we don't need to do *anything*. The fallacy involves failing to notice that by giving \$100 a month you really can save *one real live honest to gosh life pretty much every month*. Saving that life isn't insignificant *even if* it isn't saving all the lives that are at stake — it certainly isn't insignificant to *that child*.

Again, let's modify the POND case to illustrate this point. Suppose you are walking past that dreadful pond again and there are 10,000 babies drowning in it and you know that they will all be dead in 10 minutes if sufficient help doesn't arrive. You know, further, that you can't save them all in ten minutes. Does that mean you aren't obligated to save as many as you can with a genuine effort? Does the fact that many will die even with your best efforts mean that you haven't done a good thing in saving the 10, 20, or 100 babies you could save?

It is fallacious to suppose that just because you aren't solving *the entire problem* you aren't doing anything that is good or that nothing is required of you. The fallacy involves allowing the remaining problem to overshadow the real good you can do.

### 4 Indirect responses to Singer's argument

Direct responses to the empirical facts relied on by Singer's argument attempt to show that since we can't do anything about the problem of absolute poverty anyway we cannot be obligated to do anything about it. Direct responses to Singer's defense of his moral principles attempt to show that there are morally relevant differences between the POND and aid cases such that we can see why we are obligated to help in POND but not in aid. In addition to these two types of strategies for offering direct responses to Singer's arguments, a number of other more amorphous objections typically arise. I handle this miscellaneous set of objections below.

#### 4.1 Social Darwinism

**Objection:** We shouldn't give to aid for the absolute poor because poverty (especially absolute poverty) is just a sign that the people in it are 'weak and sick', as Darwin might say, and are fit to be culled from the human flock. Harsh as it sounds, the laws of evolution dictate that the strong survive and the weak, well, they die off when the going gets tough. If we give to aid we'll be interfering with this natural

process, diluting the 'strength' inherent in the evolutionary success of the human race thus far, and thus harm ourselves and our descendants in the long run.

**Reply:** The short reply here is simply that Social Darwinism is as discredited a scientific theory as any theory has ever been. (*Social Darwinism*, not the theory of evolution itself, mind you.) One way of seeing why the theory has so widely rejected is to reflect on the fact that:

1. Many of the absolute poor probably would have done better in school and life than you (or, if you can't believe that, your classmates). Some of us are downright lazy, others aren't very bright, and it is a near certainty that many who live in absolute poverty would make more of the opportunities we've been given than we have in our complacency.
2. Many of us in the affluent West would do a heck of a lot worse born into or placed into absolute poverty than the absolute poor have.

Simple reflection on these facts should establish that there is simply no truth to the claim that the poor are dying off because they are 'less fit' than 'we' are. Think of adoption across cultures. The facts simply do not bear the social Darwinist's claims out, and so we ought to reject the theory. Serious scientists gave it up long ago.

#### 4.2 Singer's argument isn't realistic

Many people object that Singer's claim that the absolutely affluent have obligations to aid that are so strong that morality requires them to change their life such that they no longer spend money on trivialities (the 14<sup>th</sup> pair of jeans, the 104<sup>th</sup> CD, the latest/greatest home improvement rage, etc.) but instead must give until the point that they are losing something of (a) comparable (i.e., until their giving risks putting them into absolute poverty) or (b) at least morally significant worth (i.e., their giving realistically jeopardizes something of significant value to human life like their family's security, education, health, or shelter) is unrealistic. You can't expect people *actually* to do this, after all. They just *won't*.

**Reply:** Singer presumably knows that most people won't do this. Still, the point is exaggerated. Some people *do* do it. And some have done so precisely because Singer's argument convinced them that their own moral beliefs obligate them to do so. And if that has made even a few hundred lives better, and saved a few kids, isn't that a good thing?

But we should surely grant that most people in fact will not live up to what are (by their own lights) their moral obligations even in the face of Singer's argument. Still, he has a response to this fear that his argument isn't realistic.

The response is that his argument isn't intended to be about what people *will* do. He isn't *predicting* how people will act. Nor is he trying to describe people's actual actions. His argument is about what people *should* do according to their own moral data. His claim is not that people *will* do it, it is that they're own moral data indicates that they *ought to be* doing it. Pointing out that the argument isn't *realistic*

doesn't effect his case in the least since he isn't doing psychology or sociology (what are people likely to do?), he is don't ethics (what *should* people do?).

But then what is the use of talking about it if people aren't going to act on his argument? Well, he might plausibly think that more people will come closer to doing what their moral data suggests if they stop and think about the argument than if they continue (as most Westerners now do) to essentially ignore the plight of the absolutely poor. People often do, after all, attempt to live lives that are *morally good* by their own light. Some good may result from getting people to focus on their moral obligations in this regard *even if* it isn't realistic to suppose that everyone will suddenly live up to what they see as their own moral obligations. Isn't this reason enough to talk about the issue and attempt to get others to think seriously about it?

#### 4.3 We (in the US) already give a ton, we can't be expected to do more, really

People sometimes resist personal giving either because they think that the US government already gives enormous quantities of money to the desperately needy or that individual Americans already have the problem well in hand given their own personal (rather than governmental) giving.

Thus, surveys indicate that the American public thinks that currently the US gives about 15% of GDP to foreign aid. But the public also thinks that that amount is *too much*, we're too generous. It would be more appropriate, survey's indicate, if we gave only 10% of GNP.

Given that we give too much already, I have no obligation to add to the surfeit of giving.

**Reply:** Common conceptions about how generous the US government and individual citizens in the US are are *drastically* out of whack with reality. For whatever reason our common-sense estimate of how much we give as a country *and* as individuals in absolute terms as well as how much we give relative to the rest of the world paints a rosy picture that cannot stand up to reality.

In fact the US ranks towards the bottom among developed countries in terms of the per capita amount of money (from governmental and private sources combined) it gives in the form of aid to the least developed countries in the world.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The table comes from the web site for the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development. See <http://www.oecd.org> for current statistics.

The Total Net Flow of Financial Resources from DAC Countries to Developing Countries and Multilateral Organisations

Net disbursements at current prices and exchange rates

Rank	Country	\$ million			Per cent of GNP			x US
		1983-84	1988-89	1999	1983-84 average	1988-89	1999	
		average			average			
1	Spain	155	510	29 029	0.10	0.14	4.90	9.1
2	Belgium	2 141	1 623	5 528	2.69	1.06	2.21	4.1
3	Portugal	10	119	2 337	0.05	0.28	2.17	4
4	Netherlands	2 113	2 567	7 985	1.65	1.14	2.02	3.7
5	Norway	670	904	2 060	1.27	1.03	1.37	2.5
6	Sweden	1 285	2 341	2 892	1.41	1.28	1.24	2.3
7	Switzerland	3 311	1 629	3 226	3.35	0.86	1.17	2.2
8	Denmark	851	816	1 992	1.59	0.80	1.16	2.1
9	Canada	2 694	2 849	6 984	0.84	0.57	1.13	2.1
10	Italy	2 716	5 419	11 337	0.66	0.64	0.97	1.8
11	Germany	6 757	11 979	20 181	1.06	0.99	0.96	1.8
12	Austria	93	227	1 963	0.14	0.18	0.96	1.8
13	Luxembourg	6	21	124	0.13	0.23	0.69	1.3
14	United Kingdom	5 467	6 879	10 017	1.24	0.83	0.69	1.3
15	Finland	245	857	875	0.50	0.81	0.69	1.3
16	France	8 151	5 337	9 125	1.62	0.56	0.64	1.2
17	United States	25 811	16 944	50 138	0.74	0.34	0.54	1
18	Japan	9 831	20 457	20 794	0.81	0.71	0.47	0.9
19	Australia	1 233	2 565	1 749	0.76	1.01	0.46	0.8
20	New Zealand	102	136	163	0.47	0.35	0.33	0.6
21	Ireland	46	81	251	0.28	0.28	0.32	0.6
22	Greece	..	..	195	..	..	0.16	0.3

As you can see, the United States gives, on average, somewhere between .3 and .7 percent of GNP in Aid to the least developed countries in the world. Nine countries, none of which have economies that did even close to as well as the US economy between 1983 and 1999 gave over twice as much, on average, as the US gave in aid to least developed countries.

We have *far* more money than these countries have to give (Spain?!?), but we give at half or less of the rate they do. The US gives substantially more than this in foreign aid, but the rest of the aid (by *far* the largest portion) goes to already developed countries and their governments rather than to people or places where absolute poverty is a problem. Again, just as most of US foreign aid goes to already developed countries, most US aid comes in forms (such as military aid) that do not address the pressing concerns of the world's poorest people.

If we take into account the survey's about how much Americans think we *should* be giving in aid to the underdeveloped world, then we are falling drastically short of our own conception of what is right *even before we reflect on Singer's argument*. People think we should be giving 10%, we're giving far far less than that, we fall far short of 1%. The UN and other organizations urge the governments in the developed world to try to get their giving all the way up to 2%, but that urging consistently falls on deaf ears in American administrations, Republican or Democrat. If we take Singer's argument into account, the comparison between how much we think we should give and how much we do give only looks worse.

The conclusion appears to be that the reality of our generosity (both as a nation and as individuals) falls far short of both our self-conception and of our views about what is morally fitting.

#### 4.4 Moral monsters vs. decent people

**Objection:** Look, if Singer's argument is right, then we're all moral monsters. We're all the morally on par with a person who walks by a shallow pond, sees a drowning infant in it, and walks away because he doesn't want to dirty his pants. But that's ridiculous. Americans (and the absolutely affluent generally) are nice people. We're decent. We're kind to one another. We do lend a helping hand when we can. Any argument that would claim we're monsters is absurd on its face. I'm much more sure that we're not monsters than I am that Singer's argument has any merit.

**Comments:** This is a legitimate concern. One of the odd phenomena associated with coming to think more deeply about moral obligations is that occasionally and with some issues you'll come to believe that the actions of your culture, the actions you and your compatriots were socialized to accept and be comfortable with, are wrong. Sometimes that those socialized actions and practices are *deeply* wrong. This happened with racism, it happened with sexism, it happens in lots and lots of contexts.

Making the transition to seeing common practices as wrong creates 'cognitive dissonance' in the person doing the moral reflection. Commonly either they themselves or their reasoning come to seem *crazy* to themselves. It comes to seem to the person that they and those around them are monstrous. But, at the same time, that conclusion seems both unpalatable and absurd. It is unpalatable for obvious reasons – the world may have come to look like an evil, ugly place. It seems absurd,

because we *know* that the people around us are decent and loving. They (we!) *aren't* monsters. Any argument that suggests we are *must* have gone wrong somewhere.<sup>8</sup>

As I said, this line of thought is understandable, and quite powerful. But (**and can begin our reply**) believing that it undermines Singer's argument given thus far rests on some common mistakes about the ethical evaluation of peoples' characters.

**First reply:** Notice first that the objection I've just described is 'too strong'. (Philosophers call an argument '*too strong*' when it would lead to conclusions we don't accept when applied in other, parallel, cases. If we reject its conclusions in other cases, then something must be wrong with it, even if we can't figure out what it is. I think we can identify the culprit in this case, and I'll try to do so in the second reply, below.) It is too strong because it would seem to license the conclusion that – if you were raised as a white person in the slave holding South – there was nothing wrong with continuing the practice of slavery. After all, the people around you whom the arguments against slavery would suggest are moral monsters were (often anyway) decent, caring people (toward other white people anyway). But the arguments against slavery suggest that they were monstrous for doing truly horrific things. So (you might have concluded, but incorrectly – right?) that there must be something wrong with the arguments against slavery, and that you and the people you (rightly) regard as decent and honorable and kind could continue acting just as you were before you heard the arguments against slavery (that is, you can continue owning slaves with a clear conscience).

Now, I take it that you think that something has gone wrong in this case. Slavery should have ended – it's a good thing that it did, its ending involved *moral progress* even if it didn't make the world a morally perfect place. And the people involved in the practices *were* doing things that were monstrously wrong – they were participating in an evil, evil system. So we have a puzzle on our hands. How can we reconcile all this with the fact that the people who were doing these monstrous things were decent, loving folks? And how can we understand (in our contemporary case) why the people who are failing to contribute nearly as much as they should to the prevention of a monstrous evil (absolute poverty) are not themselves monsters but (generally) decent and loving people?

**Second reply:** The second reply offers a solution to this puzzle. One way of answering the questions I just asked is to distinguish between *subjective* and *objective* rationality.

*A person's behavior is **subjectively rational*** if, given the things she knows or believes, her behavior seems rational to her – it seems from her perspective to be supported by good reasons.

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<sup>8</sup> Literature has produced some good descriptions of this feeling. See in particular J.M. Coetzee's contribution to Coetzee, J.M., and Amy Gutmann, eds. 2001. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

A person's behavior is **objectively rational** if, regardless of what that person knows or believes, the behavior *really is* rational – it really can be supported by good reasons.

The distinction helps us understand what's going on in this objection and the example above as follows. When we think that the slave-holders (or our contemporaries who don't contribute nearly enough to ending absolute poverty) are decent loving people, we're recognizing that their behaviors are *subjectively rational*. Given what they know and believe their behavior appears to them to be good. And so given that they recognize, from the perspective of what they believe, no reason for them to act otherwise than they are, they continue to act as they have been socialized to act.

But this leads them to do things that *you* have come to believe are *objectively irrational*, things that cannot (in fact) be supported by good reasons. I take it as uncontroversial that you have come to believe that while we can comprehend why the slaveholders seemed to be such decent folk (because of their subjective rationality), you also see how these decent folk could be led (by their socialization and failure to think more deeply about their obligations) to do things that were utterly monstrous. Objectively, their actions were monstrous even though from their (objectively incorrect or limited, however you want to describe it) perspective it seemed to them to be OK.

The same story can be told about why you continue to believe that the people around you are decent people and not moral monsters even after you have come to believe that they (and you) aren't giving nearly as much as you're obligated to give. Thinking that you (before hearing the arguments) and others (who still haven't heard them, or if they have heard them reflected on them as deeply and closely as you now have) are in fact decent, loving, and even sometimes admirable people is explained by your recognizing that *from the perspective of their own beliefs, which are largely the result of socialization, it seems to them as if they are doing nothing wrong*. But you have come to believe (at least you have if you don't think any of the other objections to these arguments work) that their beliefs are in fact false, that our culture has socialized us in ways that lead us (in large numbers) to do things that are, in fact, wrong. If you accept that none of the other objections against Singer's arguments stand up to scrutiny, then you have come to believe that you and your contemporaries are wrong to think of your actions as blameless, just like the slaveholders were wrong to think that their actions were blameless.

**Closing question:** Now, how should we morally evaluate the character of a person whom we come to believe is (a) acting in ways that are subjectively rational – seem rational to her from her perspective, but which (b) we have come to believe are objectively irrational – are objectively such that they *cannot* be justified by good reasons? What should we think about such a person, how harsh (or gentle) should we be in evaluating their characters and lives?

Well, plausibly we ought to be gentle, if firm. We all recognize, after all, that socialization is a pervasive and powerful force in shaping how people live. It was, after all, a powerful and continuing force in shaping *our* lives. It is *hard* to come to recognize that practices into which you were socialized are wrong. Even harder to come to recognize them as disastrously wrong. And so it is not surprising that more people don't come to see this. And so it would seem overly harsh to accuse people generally of being monsters.

But still, this isn't a reason to be complacent about letting people go on with what you have come to believe are objectively indefensible practices. Once you recognize that slavery is wrong, don't you have a moral obligation to work for its abolition even in the face of the fact that your neighbors (socialized as they are to think slavery is OK) will think you are a misguided subversive crank? It would be morally cowardly and inadequate to come to recognize slavery as wrong but continue to live as before among slave holders, enjoying the benefits white people enjoyed from the practice of slavery without doing anything to convince others that it was wrong, to end the practice, or to sever your ties to it. Wouldn't it?

And despite the obvious fact that slavery and famine relief are different cases, the two are parallel in all the ways that matter here. If you think Singer's argument about the obligations of the affluent is good (can't be defeated by any of the other objections) then this is essentially the attitude you should take to your contemporaries, who will (in overwhelming numbers) continue not to give up the what you think they themselves would recognize their obligations to be if they would only stop and think more carefully.

They aren't monsters, but their actions are monstrous, and you wouldn't be doing enough (would you?) from the perspective of what *you* have come to believe is right and wrong if you simply continued living among them without making a peep, without doing anything either to work toward solving the problem of absolute poverty or saying anything that would encourage others to recognize those same obligations.

That, anyway, is one way of articulating how someone who is convinced by Singer's argument concerning the obligations of the affluent can nevertheless recognize that the people around them are not moral monsters but, generally, good people. Good people who need, however, to make large changes in their current behavior.

#### **4.5 We should pay attention to problems in our country first**

People often object to Singer's argument that his argument doesn't show that we should give to aid towards the eradication of absolute poverty. All it shows, people may point out, is that we have obligations to do something (a lot, really) about the plight of the desperately needy. But we have desperately needy people closer to home – shouldn't we help them first before jumping in and trying to solve far-flung problems?

**Reply 1:** Singer — along with most moral traditions — rejects this assumption. (The Christian tradition certainly rejects the assumption: think of the good Samaritan. Your neighbor isn't the person who lives next to you but is literally *anyone* who needs your aid.)

Further, supposing that *we* (people in our group, our race, our country) deserve aid first before *they* do is likely to involve drawing what are (from a moral perspective) merely arbitrary distinctions between people who really ought to make an equal claim on our attention. What makes *us* (those close to you) so special that they deserve your aid more than *them*?<sup>9</sup>

**Reply 2:** More sympathetically, the objection may be motivated not out of a morally questionable favoritism towards *us* rather than *them* but by the idea that our aid will actually accomplish more given close to home than it would given in far flung places.

This idea has some plausibility, but probably not enough to substantially change your obligations to give to aid. Some kinds of aid toward others seem like they can only be given effectively close at hand. For instance, children need love and attention in order to grow into emotionally healthy adults – love and attention are not things you can provide people in far flung places.

Still, other things you can (given current technology) provide just as effectively to people close by and people half-way around the world. When it comes to *access to medicine, education, shelter, and adequate nutrition* you can provide all these things just as effectively to people halfway around the world (through giving to aid organizations ready to distribute these kinds of aid) as you can to your own family or neighbors. There is no barrier at all to effectively providing at least *these* kinds of aid.

In fact, the kinds of aid that it seems like we *do* need to be close to people to effectively provide turn out to be largely non-economic: I can't love at a distance, I can't provide individualized attention at a distance, I can't be a friend to people I've never met, etc. But the kinds of aid that we *can* effectively give from a distance are largely economic: food, medicine, shelter, basic human needs. Given that we can effectively give these economic kinds of aid at a distance and given that it is precisely these forms of aid that Singer's argument is addressing, shouldn't we be doing it?

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<sup>9</sup> Members of your own family and close friends may constitute a special case where it may be morally OK to be partial, but the general point made in the text isn't harmed by this fact. For an argument to this effect, see Rachels {, 1989 #2341}. The argument in the next reply owes a debt to Rachels' piece.

#### 4.6 Aren't there more serious problems that I should be giving to?

People may suppose that Singer's argument doesn't establish *precisely* the conclusion he wants. The POND case just shows that we have *strong* obligations to work *hard* towards the solution of extremely serious world problems. It doesn't establish (does it?) that absolute poverty is the most serious of world problems. Sure it is a serious problem, but aren't there other problems we should solve first?

**Comment:** There is a core of truth to this objection. Singer seems to address the problem of absolute poverty in the developing world because it appears to be (a) such a clear case of (b) a really *really* bad situation which (c) we could do something about if we tried. This makes the case of absolute poverty a good case study for looking at how our current actions stand up to moral scrutiny.

Still, Singer does not try to argue that absolute poverty is the only problem in the world that is (b) really really bad or (c) about which we could do something if we tried. (The case's being *clear* seems irrelevant to this point – cases that are hard to see may be just as serious and solvable.) So there is something really correct about this objection.

**Reply 1:** Nevertheless, ask yourself seriously: what does the objection really show with regard to the core of Singer's argument, the claim that we aren't (by a long shot) living up to our moral obligations as we ourselves see them to be? Do you really think Singer cares so much that you think absolute poverty is the most serious issue in the world, or do you think he cares and intends his argument to get you to see that you – by your own lights – have extremely strong obligations to work towards the eradication of the world's most serious and solvable problems *whatever those problems turn out to be*?

Suppose you come, after serious reflection, to think that there exists some other problem which is (i) at least as bad as absolute poverty and (ii) just as solvable. If that were right then Singer's POND argument would simply show that you have moral very strong moral obligations to work towards the solution of *that* problem. Or, perhaps: *that* problem *and* the problem of absolute poverty in the developing world (you can after all give some money to more than one type of aid, just as you can volunteer your time for more than one organization). Pointing out that there are more problems in the world than absolute poverty doesn't even touch (does it?) the issue of whether we are doing (even close to) as much towards solving these problems as our own morality requires.

Ask yourself as you consider this objection: am I raising the objection as an excuse to continue my current habits of not giving in a substantive way towards the solution of *any* of the world's most pressing problems. Or am I really offering this objection out of a sincere and deeply felt moral concern for the seriousness of some other problem? (If you don't have a *specific* 'other problem' already in mind, it's probably the first thing, right?)



If it is the first thing (i.e., I'm looking for an excuse) then you have no serious objection, you're just trying to avoid the issue. If it is the second then your objection against the specifics of Singer's arguments may (or may not) work, but it won't touch the heart of his conclusion, the point that you are obliged to do a lot more than you are probably currently doing towards the solution of that other problem (perhaps in concert with efforts to solve absolute poverty on a world scale).

**Reply 2:** But given all that, note that the objection really does have a high hurdle to overcome. This problem kills (literally) millions of people every year, and is implicated in the continuance of other endemic problems. Further, the problem strikes at the world's most vulnerable people, people who have never had a plausible opportunity to lead decent human lives. People whose entire lives (and the lives of their families) are spent in conditions "beneath any reasonable definition of human decency" {to quote Robert McNamara from the World Bank in \ Singer, 1993 #2617, 219-20 again}. Which is just to say that the case Singer looks at is an incredibly serious problem that we can (in fact) do a lot to eradicate comparatively cheaply.

So just from an empirical perspective it is going to be hard to find a social problem that is both as serious and as eradicable as this one. Just to pick a commonly mentioned example: think of cancer. Cancer is a serious problem, but it is predominantly (demographically) a problem that strikes the world's richest peoples at the end of already rich and fulfilling lives. Why prioritize aid to solve problems that pose an end of life concern for the affluent over giving aid to address the fact that one quarter of the world's population lives in conditions below any reasonable standard of human decency? Isn't there a basic issue of fairness that needs seriously addressing here: 1/4 of the world's population never gets a chance to lead a decent human life – shouldn't aid to them be considered more pressing than cancer research, even if cancer research is indeed a good thing?

Any case that some other problem is more pressing, then, is going to be hard to make in light of the nature of absolute poverty. Take seriously the issues that make absolute poverty in the developing world such plausible focus of aid as you offer this objection. Do the problems you have in mind *really* mean we should not give a high priority and give substantively toward the solution to the problem of absolute poverty *even if* you should also give to this other problem?

#### 4.7 I have a right to my money, its mine, I earned it

It is often objected that Singer's argument is somehow illegitimate because it ignores our personal *rights*. Surely we have a right to the money we earn, and it would be wrong for another person or institution to wrongly take that money from me. Surely I can keep what is rightfully mine if I want to.

**Comment:** As with many of these objections, there is surely a grain of truth to the idea behind it. The only question will be whether that grain of truth really (all things considered) effects the outcome of Singer's argument. The grain of truth in the objection is that we surely have a right to money justly earned. Further, it would be

improper for such money to be taken from us unjustly. Still, how do these facts really effect the outcome of Singer's argument: that we have strong moral obligations to give to the world's poorest peoples?

**Reply:** The main reply to this type of argument notes that rights constitute a fairly narrow sub-domain of our ethical thinking. Putting this in less abstract terms, we should consider the fact that we have rights to do many things that, morally speaking, we probably should not do. Thus,

1. Whites have a right to join the KKK.
2. We have a right to be rude
3. We have a right to tell racist jokes
4. Spouses have a right to commit adultery, etc.

In each of these cases, despite having the right to do a thing X, we should not do X. Morally speaking, in each case, we ought not exercise the right that we do indeed have.

What these kinds of cases bring to light is that our rights can often be over-ridden by other moral obligations. Rights are not the beginning and ending of morality; they are only a small (if important) part of morality. Even if it is *true* that you have a right to join the KKK this does not mean that you ought (morally) exercise that right or even that morality would declare it *permissible* for you to do so. Probably morality requires that *not* do it, morality seems to require that you *not* exercise your right in this case.

Thus, with regard to Singer's argument for famine relief he can say: 'I agree. You do have a right to your money. However, it does not follow from this that you are not obligated (by your own lights) to voluntarily refuse to exercise this right by giving substantial amounts to others. Morality may require you not to exercise some of your rights, and this is just one of those cases where it happens to do that – POND shows that it does. In POND, after all, your having property rights (e.g., to your pants) didn't stand in the way of your obligations. No one has a right to tell you that you need to dirty your pants or make yourself late to class after all. Still, your own moral data seemed to require you to do these things, didn't it? The aid case is directly parallel: no one has a right to tell you to do it, but no one is trying to tell you to do it. Your own moral data is what is telling you that you ought to do it, so you ought not exercise your right to your money/pants insofar as the POND argument works.'

It may be worth mentioning in this regard that the law in this country recognizes this priority of moral obligations over property rights in lots and lots of cases. To pick a paradigm case: if a ship is at sea and a storm comes up that ship may legally dock *on private property without permission* if that the private property is the only safe harbor for the ship. This legal allowance recognizes that the moral imperative to save the lives of the people on the endangered ship simply over-rides the private property rights of the dock owner. Law requires the dock owner *not* to exercise her right to keep people off her land (and dock) out of recognition of the pressing need

of others. But in the POND and foreign aid cases lives are just as much at stake as in the storm case. Thus, from this other perspective and again it seems that we ought to allow our rights to surplus money to be overridden by the desperate life needs of others.

#### **4.8 Singer can't take the money from me; I shouldn't be forced to give my money**

Each of these objections rests on a simple (and quite uncharitable) misunderstanding of Singer's argument.

Singer isn't trying to take your money. Nor is he forcing anyone to do anything. Nothing in his argument suggests otherwise, and it is unfair and unkind to suppose that he would want to do any such thing.

He is appealing to your moral data – your moral beliefs (as they display themselves in the POND case) show that you yourself believe that you ought to be giving substantive aid to the absolutely poor in other countries. Singer isn't forcing *anything* on you, he is appealing to you and *your* beliefs. If you think he is wrong about our moral obligations then explain *why* you think he is wrong. But don't misrepresent him as doing something that he is clearly not doing. **He is not** coercing you into giving money, he is not taking or stealing money, he is not advocating communism, and he is not tyrannically forcing anyone to give.

**He is** asking you to think – whether or not you decide to act afterwards is left entirely to you.

#### **4.9 Singer is just guilt-tripping us**

I'm honestly not sure what this objection comes down to. If you pay attention to his argument and consider it seriously you may, I suppose, find yourself feeling guilty for failing to live up to your moral obligations as you come to see them upon reflection. This much I understand. But why blame Singer for this or think that his intent is simply to send you on a 'guilt-trip'?

In fact his intent seems perfectly clear: to get you (a) to think seriously about what you think your moral obligations are and (b) to urge you to act on what you yourself come to see those obligations to be. If you feel guilty about your actions (or lack of action) after engaging in this ethical reflection that isn't Singer's fault, it is the fault (presumably) of your not living up to what you yourself see your obligations to be.

I met Singer once, and as best I could tell from that encounter he had no interest in my or anyone else's feeling guilty. If you do feel guilty, however, perhaps you ought to stop blaming Singer and start making a serious effort to change the way you live so that it comes, eventually, more in line with what you believe is right.

#### **5 Other objections?**

I'm always interested in hearing other objections to Singer's argument articulated. If you feel that you've got one that isn't adequately or charitably surveyed above please

let me know what it is. Alternately, if you feel that one of the "replies" I have given as another obvious "come back," again, I welcome hearing it. The point of doing moral philosophy is to take this process of criticism and response seriously, and it cannot be done (or at least not done well) if the issues aren't being aired thoroughly.