

## Phil 108, July 7, 2010

### Singer's Argument:

In his 1972 paper, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Peter Singer argues:

1. *Shallow Pond* is wrong
2. The best explanation of 1 is the following principle:  
If we can prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, it would be wrong of us not to do it.
3. This principle implies that *Envelope* is wrong, unless paying the \$100 would leave us worse off than the people we'd be helping.
4. Therefore, *Ethics is Highly Demanding*. I.e., in order to avoid acting seriously wrongly, we must give most of our money to relief agencies.

*Notice:* The point is not simply that it is *good* and *praiseworthy* to send \$100 to UNICEF. That is compatible with its being above and beyond the call of duty. Instead, the point is that it is *wrong* and *blameworthy* not to send \$100 to UNICEF—just as *Shallow Pond* is.

Peter Unger is convinced that Singer's *conclusion* is correct. But Unger wants to improve the *argument* for that conclusion. Unger worries about step 2. Why couldn't the best explanation of 1 be some other principle that does *not* imply that *Envelope* is wrong?

### Unger's strategy:

- *Liberationism:* Our intuitions about particular cases (e.g., that *Envelope* is not wrong) *often do not* accurately reflect our Values. Instead, our intuitions result from distorting psychological factors. ("Liberates" us from our intuitions.)

The alternative:

- *Preservationism:* Our intuitions about particular cases accurately reflect our Values. (Tries to "preserve" our intuitions.)

### An illustration: The Puzzle of the Historical Virginians and Imaginary Australians:

We think that Washington was a "decent person" and that his "total behavior was all right." (Are these the same?) But we don't think this of the imaginary Australians. Why?

- *Idea of Moral Progress:* With regard to certain morally bad forms of behavior, (we have the idea that) humanity has morally progressed beyond its being even the least bit normal for anyone to engage in behavior of those forms.
- We overrate behavior of those forms that took place before the progress was made.

*Further moral:* Perhaps we overrate *our own* behavior in *Envelope*, because *we* haven't progressed yet.

### Vintage Sedan and Envelope:

- *Vintage sedan:* fails to sacrifice \$5,000 to save one leg of an adult, who is responsible for his plight and whose plight results from his own wrongdoing. Intuitively wrong.
- *Envelope:* fails to sacrifice \$100 to save the lives of thirty children, who are not responsible for their plight and have done nothing wrong. Intuitively not wrong.

## Possible differences:

Unger's responses:

- (i) offers new cases that "control" for the possible difference and/or
  - (ii) denies that the possible difference is morally important.
1. *Physical Distance?*
  2. *Social Distance?* It matters only when people are very close to you.
  3. *Directness of information?* It matters only when indirectness casts doubt on the information.
  4. *Experiential impact?* I.e., whether you saw it with your own eyes, etc.
  5. *Other Potential Saviors?* Why should it matter if you know that the others won't help? (Governments just a special case.)
  6. *An Emergency, rather than a Chronic Horror?* I.e., in *VS*, the victim goes from being well off to being badly off *all of a sudden*. But isn't it *worse* not to save the children in *E*, who have been badly off all along?
  7. *Causally focused, rather than causally amorphous aid:* I.e., there is no child such that whether or not you donate determines whether or not that child lives or dies. But what matters is simply how many are saved.
  8. *Epistemically focused, rather than epistemically amorphous aid:* I.e., there is no child such that if you save, you know that you helped save that child in particular.
  9. *Goods and services, rather than money*

In the following cases, Unger (iii) denies that *VS* and *E* even differ in the relevant respect.

10. *The Disastrous Further Future?* Saving these children does not cause overpopulation.
11. *A Single Individual in Need, rather than Many in Need?* But there isn't a single person in need in *VS*. There are still many people in need; they just aren't salient.
12. *A Cleaned Scene, rather than a Continuing Mess?* Similar answer to 11.
13. *Urgency?* I.e., how soon will the bad thing happen? Extra time matters only if it means more chances to be helped. In *E*, it does not mean more chances to be helped.
14. *Saving, rather than helping people to be saved:* In *VS*, you don't save by yourself.

## The real difference: salience

The reason why we think *VS* is wrong, but *E* is not wrong is that in *VS*, the needs are salient=conspicuous=attention-grabbing to the agent, but in *E*, the needs are not.

- Is salience morally important? Unger: No.
- Why, then, does salience influence our intuitions? Stay tuned.

## A provisional conclusion about the demands of morality:

Even if ethics is not highly demanding, if *VS-is-wrong* doesn't imply that ethics is highly demanding, then neither does *E-is-wrong*.

Why? Because *VS-is-wrong* implies that ethics is *more* demanding than *E-is-wrong* implies.

*Objection:* Isn't *VS-is-wrong* *less* demanding, because we encounter such situations less often? Does Unger have an adequate reply?

## Salience

- Unger argues that the reason we intuitively think Sedan is wrong, but Envelope is not wrong is that the needs are *salient* to us in Sedan, but not salient to us in Envelope.
- Salience is not morally important.
- So why does salience affect our intuitions?
- Salience frees us from *futility thinking*.

- (1) Suppose that *all* you knew was that you can help some people who were in great need. Then you would think (correctly) that it would be wrong not to help them.
- (2) *Futility Thinking*: Most of the time, however, you think of the people you can help as belonging to a *hopelessly overwhelming group*—a group such that many of its members will still be in great need no matter what you do. So helping those people seems to you futile. So you think (incorrectly) that it would *not* be wrong not to help them.
- (3) In special cases, however, certain *positive highly subjective factors* prevent us from thinking of people as belonging to a hopelessly overwhelming group. Then helping those people does not seem futile. So you think (once again, correctly) that it would be wrong not to help them.

These *positive highly subjective factors* include:

- a. Salience.
- b. Dramatic Trouble: A bomb will go off unless Jack Bauer...!
- c. Descriptive Segregation: Two *Cal students* have been...

### **Grouping and Segregating:**

*Bank Card*: Leave: Nothing happens. Pick up: One more Cambodian child, picked at random, will have its foot cut off. But \$100 will not be deducted from your account. You pick up. Wrong!

Why is Bank Card wrong, whereas Envelope is not wrong? Puzzling because:

- (i) As far as the “initially promising factors” are concerned, Bank Card is more like Envelope than Sedan. (Exercise: check this.)
- (ii) The children are *not* more salient to you in Bank Card.
- (iii) Consequences of Bank Card are not as bad as those of Envelope.

*Heart Card*: Like Bank Card, except: Instead of *your* not losing \$100, 60 Ethiopian children, made vividly salient to you, will be saved from dying by diarrhea. You pick up. Wrong!

*Lesser Loss Card*: Leave: One more African, chosen at random, will lose a foot and a hand. Pick up: One more Asian, chosen at random, will lose a foot. You pick up. Not wrong!

Why is Lesser Loss Card not wrong, whereas Heart Card is wrong? Puzzling because:

- (i) You save more people from a *worse fate* in Heart Card.
- (ii) The people you save are *more salient* to you in Heart Card.
- (iii) In Heart Card you *know which people* you save (neither epistemically nor causally “amorphous”).

*Explanation*:

- In Lesser Loss Card, you group together the Africans and Asians, because the threat they face has the *same source*: namely, Strangemind and his minions. You’re just making the best of a bad situation. “Revelatory projective grouping.”
- In Heart Card, you do *not* group together the Ethiopians and the Asians, because they face threats with different sources; the Ethiopians’ diarrhea that has nothing to do with Strangemind. “Distorting projective separating.”
- In Bank Card, there is revelatory projective grouping, since you and the Asians face threats with the same source. So it seems wrong not to make the best of a bad situation.
- In Envelope, there is distorting projective separating, because you and the children you would help save do not face threats with the same source.

### **The demands of morality:**

*A Pretty Demanding Dictate:* On pain of living a life that's seriously immoral, a typical well-off person, like you and me, must give away most of her financially valuable assets, and much of her income, directing the funds to lessen efficiently the serious suffering of others.—In fact, not just money, but time, etc.

*Bob's Bugatti:* If he turns the train to his Bugatti, he is left with only \$3,000 to retire on. If he does not, then a child is run over. He allows the train to run over the child. Wrong!

*Ray's Big Request from UNICEF:* If he responds, he is left with only \$30,000 to retire on. If he does not, then thousands of children will die. He does not respond. Not wrong?

*The big questions:*

- Why do our responses differ?
- Do these different responses reflect our real Values?
- If not, which responses do reflect our real Values?

*Weak Principle of Ethical Integrity:* Other things being even nearly equal, if it's all right for you to impose losses on others with the result that there's a significant lessening in the serious losses suffered by others overall, then, if you're to avoid doing what's seriously wrong, you can't fail to impose *much lesser losses* on yourself, nor can you fail to accept such lesser losses, when the result's *a much more significant lessening* of such serious losses overall.

- Weak Principle + It's *not* wrong to turn the trolley onto one stranger in order to save five other strangers implies:
- It *is* wrong for you not to give up most of your money in order to save thousands.

*Reasonable Principle of Ethical Integrity:* Like Weak Principle, but stronger: it demands *equal or lesser* losses on yourself for *equal or greater lessening* of losses suffered by others.

- Reasonable Principle + It's *not* wrong to turn the trolley onto one stranger in order to save five other strangers implies:
- It *is* wrong for you *not* to turn the trolley on yourself!

Question: Why accept either principle of integrity?

- Because you're no different from anyone else?
- But does this imply anything more than that (i) it is not wrong for *someone else* to impose losses on you, and (ii) it is not wrong to impose such losses on *yourself*? Contrast: (iii) it *is* wrong for you *not* to impose such losses on yourself.