

## Phil 2, February 10, 2011

### Singer's Argument: Our ordinary behavior is very wrong

1. *Singer's Weaker Principle*: "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of *moral significance*, then we ought, morally, to do it."
2. Hunger, disease, and other sources of suffering, disability, and death are very bad.
3. We spend money on luxuries that are not of "moral significance."
4. By donating this money to relief agencies, like Oxfam or Doctors Without Borders, we could prevent these bad things from happening.
5. Therefore, we ought, morally, to donate the money that we spend on these luxuries to relief agencies.

We ordinarily view such donations as acts of *charity*. We do something *good* if we make these donations, but we do not do anything wrong if we don't. According to Singer's conclusion, however, these donations are our *duty*. We do something *wrong* if we don't donate.

### Can we defend our ordinary behavior?

*Can we reject Singer's weaker principle?*

*Rescue Case*:

"[I]f I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing."

*Can we claim that donating to relief agencies differs from the Rescue Case?*

1. "In the Rescue Case, I'm *close* to the child who needs help. I can see it, and hear its cries. But the people who will be helped by Oxfam are far away."
2. "In the Rescue Case, I'm the only person who can help. But there are lots of other people who can donate to Oxfam."

### Can we avoid Singer's stronger principle?

*Singer's Stronger 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."

If we accept Singer's Stronger Principle, then:

"we ought to give until we reach the level of marginal utility—that is, the level at which, by giving more, I would cause as much suffering to myself... as I would relieve by my gift. This would mean, of course, that one would reduce oneself to very near the material circumstances of a Bengali refugee."

In fact, Singer believes that we *should* accept the Stronger Principle. We cannot justify accepting *only* the Weaker Principle.

*What is Singer's argument for this?*

Is it obvious that the Rescue Case supports the Stronger Principle rather than the Weaker Principle?

Perhaps Singer's argument is more abstract:

1. To be moral is to recognize that *everyone matters just as much as everyone else*.
2. If you accept *only* the Weaker Principle, aren't you saying, in effect, that *you matter more* than other people?

### **Challenges to Consequentialism: Does it ask us to do too much?**

This line of thought leads us to:

*Consequentialism*: We are morally required to do what would produce the best outcome.

- When you ask "Which outcome would be *best*?" instead of "Which outcome would be best *for me*?" you look at things from an "impersonal standpoint." You bracket, or ignore, *which person* you are.
- From this standpoint, it is plausible that the best outcome is the outcome that we produce if we follow Singer's Stronger Principle.
- We are led to this conclusion whether or not we accept Hedonism or Eudaimonism; or Aggregation, Average, Difference Principle, or Leximin.
- What leads us to this conclusion is Consequentialism: deciding solely on the basis of what is *best*, rather than on the basis of what is best *for me*.

In fact, Singer's Stronger Principle is, roughly, Consequentialism with two qualifications.

*First Qualification*: we are morally required only to *prevent bad* outcomes, not to *produce good* outcomes.

*Second Qualification*: we are not morally required, *if* we would have to sacrifice something of comparable moral importance, where the sacrifice *need not* be part of the *outcome* that we would produce

Singer's *Weaker Principle* incorporates a:

*Third Qualification*: we are not morally required, if we have to sacrifice something of moral significance, even if it is of *less* moral significance than the bad thing we would be preventing.

Which of the following should we accept? Can we accept *some* of them without accepting *all* of them?

- A. The claim that we are morally required to rescue the child, even if we have to sacrifice some modest luxuries.
- B. Singer's Weaker Principle
- C. The claim that we are morally required to forgo all modest luxuries and donate the money to Oxfam.
- D. The claim that, morally speaking, we do not matter more than anyone else.
- E. Singer's Stronger Principle
- F. Consequentialism

### **Consequentialism:**

Utilitarianism and Singer's Stronger Principle (or so I speculated) are based on:

*Consequentialism*: We are morally required to produce the best outcome.

When we ask: “Which outcome is best?” rather than “Why outcome is best *for me*?” we ignore which person we are. We evaluate the outcomes as though we were mere spectators—like the President contemplating the outcome in which the meteor hits the fisherman and the outcome in which the meteor hits L.A.—even if *we are* the fisherman, or Angelinos.

But is Consequentialism true?

**Problems with Consequentialism: Does it ask us to sacrifice too much?**

*Construction Case*: saving someone from harm by suffering a comparable harm

*Permissive Consequentialism*: We are morally required to produce the best outcome, except when we would have to sacrifice too much.\*

**Problems with Consequentialism: Does it tell us to harm others?**

*Transplant Case*: harming the one to save the three from *natural* harm.

- Isn't this wrong?

Does Permissive Consequentialism solve the problem?

- No: It seems that we are not even *permitted* to harm the one to save the three from harm.

Does it solve the problem if *killings* make the outcome worse?

- First, is this plausible? Is it a worse outcome if one person is killed but three are saved from dying from natural causes? *Fire case*: Should we really save the one trapped in a fire set by an arsonist, rather than save three trapped in a fire caused by lightning?
- Second, a new case:

*Railway Case*: harming the one to save the three from being harmed *by other people*.

- Now by killing one person, you can prevent three other killings.

This is paradoxical:

- If killing is bad, then why shouldn't we be required, or at least permitted, to kill to prevent more killings?
- The only difference (besides the numbers involved) is who *I* kill, who is harmed *through my agency*.
- Why should it matter whether someone is harmed through my agency or another person's?
- Why should the *single victim care* whether he is killed through *my* agency? Isn't his complaint simply that he will be killed by someone? And can't each of the three victims make the same complaint: that he will be killed by someone?

**Problems with Consequentialism: Does it tell us to be disloyal to our loved ones?**

I do more for my daughter than for any stranger's daughter. But if I did the same for each, then the outcome would be better.

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\* Slightly more precise: We are morally required either to produce the best outcome, or to produce any other outcome (if there is any) in which the ratio of the extent to which the outcome is better for us to the extent to which the outcome is worse is greater than some constant.

- Am I *permitted* to do more for my daughter?
- Am I *required* to do more for my daughter? Would I be acting wrongly if I did the same for each?

A consequentialist response: “Actually, the outcome will be better if you do more for your daughter. You know her needs better, she’ll be hurt if you reject her, etc.”

- Is this always true?
- Should I even *think* this way? Do I really *love* my child if I think this way?

### Why is Consequentialism attractive?

“Morality requires us *to treat* people equally”

=? to produce the best outcome

=? to treat people the same unless there is some good reason for treating them differently.

- Why can’t the fact that Colette is my daughter be a good reason for treating her differently?

“Morality requires us *to recognize* that everyone is equally important”

=? to produce the best outcome

=? to believe that everyone is equally important

- When I treat Colette specially, must I believe that she is *more important* than other people? Or simply that she is *my daughter*?
- If I believed that she was more important than other people, then I would believe that *you* ought to treat her specially too. But *this* isn’t what I believe. Instead, I believe you ought to treat *your* loved ones specially.

“Morality *requires* us *to do as much good* as we can”

- Is this obvious?

“Morality *permits* us *to do as much good* as we can”

- This seems much harder to deny.
- At least in the *Railway Case*—of harming the one to save the three from being harmed by someone else—it is hard to explain why we should *not* be *permitted* to do as much good as we can.

### Review Questions:

1. Would rejecting (i) hedonism or (ii) aggregation for some alternative help us to explain why it is wrong to fail to rescue the child in Shallow Pond, but not wrong to fail to donate to relief agencies?
2. “In the Rescue Case, I’m *close* to the child who needs help. I can see it, and hear its cries. But the people who will be helped by Oxfam are far away.” How would Singer reply?
3. “In the Rescue Case, I’m the only person who can help. But there are lots of other people who can donate to Oxfam.” How would Singer reply?