

Phil 108, August 28, 2012

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.

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 to the 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? We will see Unger's answer next time.

A provisional conclusion about the demands of morality:

Does it follow from *E*-is-wrong that ethics is highly demanding? Unger put this question off for later. For the time being, he points out that, if ethics is not highly demanding, it doesn't follow that, while *VS* is wrong, *E* is not. For, he argues,

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

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

Review Questions:

1. How, in Unger's view, might the Idea of Moral Progress apply to our behavior in Envelope?
2. Consider the alleged "Other Potential Saviors" difference between Sedan and Envelope. How might one respond by offering a new case that "controlled" for this alleged difference? How might one respond by arguing that people are confused in thinking that this difference is morally important?
3. What is Unger's basic argument for the conditional claim that:
If the judgment that *VS* is wrong doesn't imply that ethics is highly demanding, then neither does the judgment that *E* is wrong?