

Phil 2, September 12, 2007

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."

Will any of our objections to Hedonism help here?

Will any of our objections to Aggregation help here?

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