

Singer For Famine Relief

Every day, more than **25 THOUSAND children die** of easily preventable causes: They die by starving to death, or dying of thirst, or from starvation-related illnesses.

Philosopher Peter Singer points out that the governments of first world countries spend BILLIONS of dollars each year on non-necessities, but spend very little on alleviating the world's poverty. Similarly, individual PEOPLE spend thousands of dollars each year on luxuries but fail to contribute to feeding the poor. We buy ipads, and ipods, and giant flat-screen tv's, and expensive cars, expensive clothing, expensive meals... all while people in the third world starve to death.



In this lecture, we will ask this question: **Is it morally permissible to ignore famine?**

Peter Singer believes that it is NOT morally permissible to ignore famine. This, he argues, is morally wrong. In the real world, you will often be presented with arguments for various views and conclusions. You will need to be able to apply the knowledge that you have gained in this course in order to assess whether or not these arguments are successful. In this lecture, we will look at two arguments that Singer gives in favor of donating to famine relief.

Argument #1: Singer presents the following argument in favor of famine relief:

1. If we can prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then we are morally obligated to do so.
2. Death caused by famine is something bad that happens that we CAN prevent without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance (namely, by donating to famine relief).
3. Therefore, we are morally obligated to donate to famine relief.

Validity: Is this argument valid? First, let's reduce it to symbolic form:

1. $P \supset M$
2. P
3. Therefore, M

Does this form of argument look familiar? It should. It is a valid argument form called "**modus ponens**" (or, "**affirming the antecedent**"). So, **this argument is valid**.

[Note: If you prefer to work with categorical syllogisms, remember that conditionals of the form "If X, then Y" can be converted to a categorical statement of the form "All X are Y." In that case, the argument above is equivalent to the following categorical syllogism:

1. All **cases of being able to prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance** are **cases where one is morally obligated to do so (i.e., prevent it)**.
2. All **cases of death caused by famine** are **cases of being able to prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance** (namely, by donating to famine relief).
3. Therefore, all **cases of death caused by famine** are **cases where one is morally obligated to prevent it** (namely, by donating to famine relief).

The form of this argument is as follows:

1. All **M** are **P**.
2. All **S** are **M**.
3. All **S** are **P**.

This is an AAA-1 categorical syllogism and is therefore valid.]

Now, remember that, for an argument to be successful, it needs to be both valid AND sound. A sound argument is a valid argument that has **true premises**. Since we have already determined that the argument is valid, we should now ask: Are the premises true? Let's look at them one at a time:

Premise 2: Premise 2 seems uncontroversial enough. We CAN prevent death due to starvation without much cost to ourselves. Singer points out that for a mere **\$200**, we can save a life. \$200 is enough to bring a child that would have died of starvation, dehydration, or related illness from birth to the age of 5. But, the first 5 years are the most dangerous years. Once the child reaches the age of 5, they are basically in the clear, since children in famine-stricken regions who are 5 years old then have a 90% chance of reaching adulthood without further assistance. In other words, for \$200, one

can save the life of a child who would have died and give that child a 90% chance of living to adulthood. So, Singer argues, premise 2 is clearly true.

Premise 1: Is premise 1 true? Premise 1 may not be as obvious. IS it the case that, if we can prevent something very bad without sacrificing something comparable, we are morally obligated to do so?

Some philosophers have argued that the claim made by Singer in premise 1 is too strict. For instance, consider two cases:

- A stranger needs a kidney. You could save their life by donating one of your two kidneys.
- Imagine that you have worked hard for several years, and now have a savings of \$10,000. Assume that, if you were to give up your entire savings, your life would not be jeopardized. However, times would be rough, and you would have to continue working very hard to make ends meet. You could save the lives of 50 children by giving it all to famine relief.

Most people think that we are NOT morally obligated to give up our extra kidneys to those who need them; and we are NOT morally obligated to give away our entire savings account to feed the impoverished.

But, notice: If you give up a kidney, you could save a life. But, a kidney is NOT morally comparable to a life. Therefore, Singer's premise 1 would demand that we ARE morally obligated to give up a kidney.

Similarly, if you give up your life savings, you will not die. But, then, your life savings is NOT morally comparable to 50 lives. Therefore, Singer's premise 1 would also demand that we ARE morally obligated to give up our life savings to help those in need.

Argument #2: To better motivate his conclusion, Singer gives ANOTHER argument for famine relief. He begins with a story:

- Shallow Pond: You are walking to work. Every day, you pass a shallow pond, deep enough so that a child could not touch the bottom. Today, there is a child drowning in that pond. You look around. No one else is around. You can easily see that, if you do not jump in to save him, the child will die. Unfortunately, you are wearing a brand new \$200 outfit. The child begins to go under, and you realize he has mere SECONDS to live—so you do not have time to take these clothes off before jumping in to the muddy pond, and your clothes will be ruined. Not wanting to ruin your brand new, expensive clothes, you continue on to work.

After you turn away to continue on your walk, you hear the child gurgling behind you as he finally sinks beneath the surface and dies.

Now ask: Is failing to save the drowning child **morally wrong**? Most would agree that you are a moral monster for letting the child drown in this case. Note, however, what this means: Most think that you ought to sacrifice your \$200 clothing in order to save the child. This seems to support the principle stated in premise one, that if we can prevent something very bad from happening without sacrificing something of comparable moral significance, then we ought to do so. Since a pair of pants is not of comparable importance to the life of a child, you ought to sacrifice them in order to prevent the death of the child.

But, there is also a separate, second argument here. Whereas the first argument appealed to a plausible principle about harm, the second argument draws an analogy between an action that is uncontroversially wrong (not saving the drowning child) and an action whose moral status is more controversial (failing to donate to famine relief):

1. Not saving the child in the Shallow Pond case is seriously morally wrong.
2. But, ignoring children who are dying due to starvation is **morally analogous** to not saving the drowning child.
3. Therefore, ignoring children who are dying due to starvation is also seriously morally wrong.

This is called an **argument by analogy**. In unit 2, we learned that arguments by analogy are **inductive** arguments. (Argument #1, on the other hand, was a **deductive** argument)

The argument states that, if failing to save the drowning child and failing to save the starving child are really morally analogous, then it seems that we must draw the same moral conclusion about these two actions. Namely, since not saving the drowning child is obviously wrong, it seems that not donating to famine relief is ALSO wrong. Therefore, we ought to donate to famine relief.

If the analogy is a strong one, then the **argument by analogy** is **valid**. But, recall that in unit 2 we learned that sometimes, arguments by analogy commit the informal fallacy of drawing a **weak analogy**. So, the best way to attack Singer's second argument is to show that the shallow pond case and the famine case ARE NOT MORALLY ANALOGOUS. Let's look at several objections which attack this analogy.

Objections to the Analogy: Most people think it is morally PERMISSIBLE to not donate to famine relief, but morally WRONG to not save the drowning child in the Shallow Pond. For those who think there IS a moral difference between these two cases, we will

need to provide some reason for WHY the two cases differ, morally. Let's look at some potential moral differences between the two cases:

1. Proximity: You are very **close** to the child in Shallow Pond, but the people that are starving and diseased are **really far away**. This is a huge difference between the 2 cases.

Reply: Think about what this suggestion means: It is basically saying that, if you ignore someone's death who is NEARBY, it is wrong. But, if you ignore someone's death who is FAR AWAY, this is totally permissible. But, why would that be true? How does the distance of someone justify disregarding the fact that you could save their life?

If I stab someone to death from one foot away, is this somehow LESS WRONG than if I shoot someone from 100 yards? And even LESS wrong than if I send a missile to blow them up a thousand miles away? No. It seems that murder is murder, no matter how great the distance between you and your victim. So, if distance makes no difference to the wrongness of KILLING, why should it make any difference to the wrongness of LETTING DIE?

Or, consider another scenario: Imagine that you are watching the feed from a security camera which is sending you images from the other side of the world onto a tv monitor. On the monitor, you see a child drowning in a pool. Imagine further that you can press a button that will save him (maybe it drains the pool). It seems that you would STILL be a moral monster for not pushing the button. So, proximity is not morally relevant.

2. Certainty: In Shallow Pond, you are **certain** that you can save the child, but regarding famine relief, we are **uncertain** if our money will ever get to the people in need if we send it to an organization. This is an important moral difference between the 2 cases.

Reply: The estimate that Singer gives (\$200) is very conservative, and actually factors in the fact that a portion of your money is used by the charity organizations themselves, or the possibility that the food or vaccines are stolen by criminals, etc. In any case, you can do the research and find out which organizations ARE known for being successful and efficient. Start here:

<http://www.charitynavigator.org>

Furthermore, Singer SUGGESTS two reliable charities: **Oxfam** and **Unicef**. In my classes, we typically donate to another reliable charity as a class exercise: **CARE**.

Simply put, we do NOT have to be uncertain about where our money goes. If we do the research and send to a reliable charity, we can be sure that our money is doing good.

But, even if we WERE uncertain, would it make a moral difference? Imagine that you are at the Shallow Pond again, and you think that there is only a 50% chance that jumping in to save the child will succeed (you might get there too late to save him). Does this make it morally permissible to ignore the drowning child? No, of course not. You would still be a moral monster if you decided not to jump in and at least TRY to save the child, **even if you think there is only a 50/50 chance that your efforts will do any good.** So, uncertainty is not morally relevant.

3. Group Responsibility: In Shallow Pond, **you are the ONLY one** that can save the child, but **there are LOTS of other people** besides you who can also help the starving children. This is an important moral difference between the 2 cases.

Reply: Think for a second about what this claim means: If you are the ONLY one who can save someone's life, it is wrong to ignore them. But, if there are LOTS of people who can help to save someone's life, it is morally permissible for EVERYONE to ignore them. But, that is absurd.

Imagine that, as you pass the Shallow Pond, there are 100 other people picnicking and hanging out around the pond. You see the child drowning, but no one is doing anything about it. No one jumps in to save him. Would this fact make it ok for you to ALSO do nothing? No. It seems that those people are ALL moral monsters, and that YOU TOO would be a moral monster, just as bad as them if you do not jump in to save the child.

In short, the fact that other people are doing bad things does not make it ok for YOU to do bad things too. So, the presence of others is not morally relevant.

Conclusion: We have successfully refuted 3 suggestions that Singer's analogy between the Shallow Pond case and famine relief is a weak one. Can you think of any other differences between the two cases? Do these differences make a MORAL difference? If there AREN'T any morally relevant differences between the two cases, then the analogy is a **strong analogy**, and Singer's argument #2 is therefore valid.

Final Conclusion: In this lesson, we have looked at 2 arguments in favor of the conclusion that we are morally obligated to donate in order to save the lives of starving children.

The first was a **valid, deductive** argument, of the form "**modus ponens**" (or, "**affirming the antecedent**"). Since the argument was valid, we looked at a couple of objections to the premises and questioned whether or not the argument was sound. Premise 1 of that argument may, in fact, be far too strict.

The second was a (probably?) **valid, inductive** argument, of the form "**argument by analogy**". Sometimes, arguments by analogy draw WEAK analogies (and so commit the informal fallacy of "**weak analogy**"), so we looked for some reasons for why the analogy might be a weak one. However, none of the 3 reasons we came up with seemed to be very good ones. In the absence of a good reason for why we might conclude that the analogy between not saving a drowning child and not saving a starving child is not a good analogy, we may in fact be forced to conclude that Singer's argument is both valid AND sound. In that case, it would turn out that we ARE (if we have the money and are able to) morally obligated to send money to charities that help starving children.

Indeed, a large number of philosophers have concluded that Singer's argument is valid and sound, and have responded by donating significant portions of their paychecks to charity. So, you see, Logic can have a significant impact on the world! Now that you have some sense of the power that Logic can have, go out into the world, and use that power wisely.