

Global poverty and the demands of morality

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Global poverty is one of the most pressing issues of our time, yet many ethical theories are reluctant to take positive action towards the poor seriously. I contrast this with the strong demands of Utilitarianism, Peter Singer's Principle of Sacrifice, and of some parts of Christian Ethics. I will demonstrate that, far from being too demanding, this is something that these theories get right, and which all plausible moral theories must emulate.

1. The facts about global poverty

Many of the world's people live in conditions of extreme poverty. They face material conditions that are almost unknown in the rich countries, such as the United States, Australia or Western Europe. While there is poverty in these rich countries, it is of a very different sort. We are familiar with *relative poverty*, where some people have comparatively less than others, which leads to social exclusion, crime, and other problems. This is a serious concern for these countries, but it is important to distinguish it from the topic of this chapter, which is *absolute poverty*. Absolute poverty is not defined in terms of how much worse off one person is compared to another, but by how little they have compared to a standard for being able to afford the basic necessities of life. This chapter is concerned with absolute poverty on a global scale.

To put things into perspective, consider that of the 7 000 million people in the world today:¹

- 2 500 million live on less than \$2 per day
- 1 300 million live on less than \$1.25 per day
- 1 000 million lack clean drinking water
- 800 million go to bed hungry each day
- 100 million children don't get even a basic education
- 800 million adults cannot read or write
- 6 million children will die each year from preventable diseases

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¹ The first two figures are from World Bank (2012), the others are from UN Millenium Project (2006).

It is difficult to really grasp these numbers. For example, how could someone live on just \$1.25 per day? How could they even arrange accommodation for less than \$9 per week, let alone food, clothing, medicines and other essentials?

Firstly, it must be pointed out that it is not because a dollar buys a lot more in poor countries. Each dollar does go much further in poor countries, with a dollar in India buying about 4 times as much as if spent in the US, but this has already been taken into account in the above figures. The actual number of dollars that someone at this threshold has access to would be much lower than \$1.25 per day, but it has the same buying power as \$1.25.

This is not enough money to afford even the lowest standard of accommodation in most towns or cities in rich countries, but in the poorest countries, there is a tier of accommodation below anything available here, and a tier below that. The same is true for many of the other things that they can buy: they are of a standard below anything that the market offers us in rich countries. It is not that *everything* in these people's lives is of an inferior standard, but much of the material basis is.

In addition to this material poverty, the world's poorest people often receive a very low quality of education — much lower than in rich countries — with hundreds of millions of people left unable to read or write. Needless to say, this makes it much more difficult to improve their lot in life.

On top of this, there is a heart-breaking amount of untreated disease. This is an area in which aid has led to tremendous improvements, literally saving millions of lives each year. However, we must continue to build upon these successes as there are still 6 million children dying of preventable diseases each year, to say nothing of the effects of disabling disease or injury.

It is very difficult to really understand such a figure and the on-going emergency it represents. 6 million children per year is more than 16 000 deaths each day. This is equivalent to 40 fully laden Boeing 747s crashing every day. If a single 747 crashed, it would be on the nightly news. Scenes of rescuers looking through the wreckage and doctors treating any survivors would fill our living rooms and it would — rightly — be seen as a moral emergency. Yet the much larger moral emergency of 40 747s worth of children dying each day from easily preventable diseases is left unsung. Even though tomorrow's deaths are not predetermined, even though it is part of a much more interesting and challenging story about who is responsible and how they should be brought to account. It is old news. It is an everyday emergency.

While the numbers presented above show the scale of global poverty, we should take care not to treat it as monolithic. The shape of global poverty is complex. The world can no longer be cleanly separated into a group of rich countries and a group of very poor countries. Over the past fifty years, many of the poor countries have begun to slowly catch up with the rich ones. We now have a spectrum of countries from the wealthiest to the most impoverished; each with their own challenges and needs. This change should give us hope, as it shows that countries really can be pulled out of poverty through a combination of external aid and internal progress.

There are also many countries that have enjoyed significant growth in income, but very unequally distributed. For example, India's average income is now high enough that it officially counts as a Middle Income Country. However, it still has approximately 380 million people living below the \$1.25 poverty line² — a number greater than the entire populations of the US and Canada combined. Thus, almost a third of the world's poorest people live in a country that is not itself classed as poor.

However, we should not let ourselves be blinded by the complexities. What is important for the present discussion is just that there are a great many people living in extreme poverty and significant opportunities to help alleviate some of their suffering or to lift some of them out of poverty entirely.

Let us conclude this sketch of global poverty, by considering the world income distribution. Suppose we lined up everyone in the world in order of income. As before, we would want to adjust this for purchasing power parity to get a true picture of income. There is also a challenge concerning how to account for children, who often have no income. Therefore, we shall divide a household's income evenly between its members. If you lined everyone up in order of income in this manner, you would see the distribution of income in the figure below:³

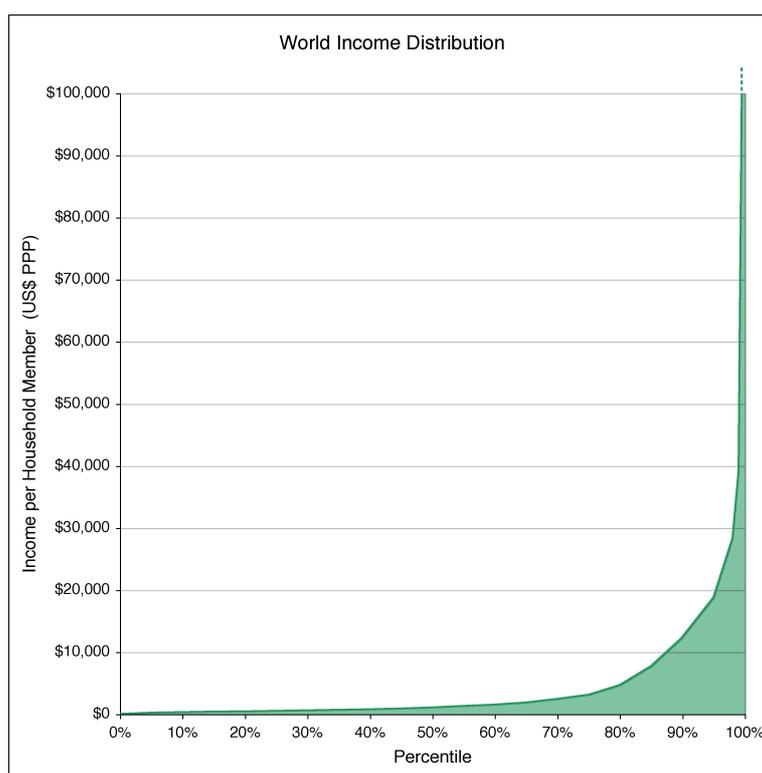


Figure 1: The world income distribution.

² World Bank (2011).

³ The numbers for this chart are from Branko Milanovic (personal correspondence), based on the year 2002, adjusted for inflation up to 2011 and using the new PPP ratings. These are not yet published, but it builds upon his data from "True world income distribution, 1988 and 1993: First calculation based on household surveys alone", *Economic Journal* 112:75, 2002.

A perfectly even distribution would result in a horizontal line on this chart. The actual distribution though, is nothing like this; it is all piled up at the right end of the chart, in the hands of the richest people. Where are you on this chart? Most people in rich countries do not think of themselves as truly rich. They compare themselves to the people their social circles and find that they are a little richer or a little poorer. However, on a world scale, they are often very rich.

For example, a single person in the US who earned \$30 000 per year (after tax) would be in the richest 2% of the world's population, and would earn 25 times as much as the typical person in the world. Even the US Federal minimum wage of \$7.25 (\$14 500 per year) would be enough to leave a single person with no dependents in the richest 10% of the world's population. Moreover, even if you are not in the richest part of the world's population due to having several children, you are likely to become so once they leave home.

This graph is one of the most important summaries of the world today. It shows just how unequal the world is, it explains to us our own positions in this mess, and it shows just how little we need each extra dollar compared to the world's poorest people.

2. Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a moral theory in which the ultimate thing that matters is increasing the balance of happiness over suffering. Though it has earlier roots, it rose to prominence in the work of the Jeremy Bentham⁴ and John Stuart Mill⁵ in the 18th and 19th Centuries.

Utilitarianism is at its heart a very simple theory. Its proponents see this as a great strength, for it is an elegant and clear theory that stresses an obvious and important truth: that happiness is a great good, and suffering a great ill. It can be arrived at via the idea of impartial benevolence: first considering what makes life good for an individual (increasing the balance of happiness over suffering) and then attempting to achieve this goal for all by maximising the sum of all happiness minus the sum of all suffering. It can also be arrived at via a veil of ignorance: imagining that you didn't know which person in society you were and then choosing how to structure society such that it would be best for you if you had an equal chance of being each person.⁶

The simplicity of Utilitarianism has also meant that there is very little room for the details of the theory to encode the prejudices of our own time or place. Indeed, this has allowed Utilitarianism to have considerable reforming power, explaining to its very creators how they could improve their own societies and often convincing them of the need to reform. For example, it led Bentham to advocate strongly for legal

⁴ Notably Bentham (1789).

⁵ Notably Mill (1861).

⁶ Harsanyi (1955).

reform to protect the welfare of animals and for Mill to advocate for equal legal rights for women.

Opponents of Utilitarianism see its simplicity as a fundamental limitation. They claim that morality is more complex than Utilitarianism can accommodate. For example, we intuitively believe that morality has some agent-relative aspects in the form of constraints and options, neither of which are recognised by Utilitarianism. *Side constraints* are where an agent is prohibited from increasing the impartial good, for example by not being allowed to kill one person to save the lives of two others. *Options* are where an agent is allowed to fulfil her own projects to some degree, even when she would increase the impartial good by spending her resources on others. While side constraints will not be very relevant to this chapter, the question of whether we have moral options is central.

Applied to acts, Utilitarianism states:

An act is right *if and only if* it leads to more net happiness than any alternative

Now consider how this would apply to making a donation to an effective charity that helps some of the world's poorest people. For concreteness, consider a charity that provides essential medicines to help save lives from preventable diseases. It is very likely that the expected benefits in terms of happiness and suffering for the recipients will more than outweigh the gains of spending the money on oneself. Since this is all that matters according to Utilitarianism, it will judge that it is right to donate to such a charity and wrong to spend that money on oneself. Indeed, since we are so much richer, we would likely increase the overall balance of happiness over suffering even more if we gave away a great deal of our wealth — perhaps half or more — so this level of sacrifice would also be required of us.

This is in contrast to common sense. Many people's first reaction to the above would be to claim that this is just too demanding an account of morality. Instead, we typically think that donating to such a charity is commendable and good (or *supererogatory*), but think that it is not *required*. It would not be *wrong* to decline to donate, just non-ideal. Common sense thus has three moral categories:

- 1) impermissible
- 2) (merely) permissible
- 3) supererogatory

Giving to charity is typically thought to be in the third of these categories. Utilitarianism, however, does not have such a category. It holds that the act with the morally best consequences is permissible (right) and that all other acts are impermissible (wrong). Thus, some acts that are intuitively supererogatory, such as donating 10% of one's income could turn out to be impermissible according to Utilitarianism if more good would be achieved by donating a higher proportion.

3. Singer's Principle of Sacrifice

In 1972, in the first issue of the new journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, there was an article by a relatively unknown philosopher, Peter Singer. It ignited interest in the ethics of global poverty among moral philosophers, and played a large role in shaping the emerging field of practical ethics. At that time, moral philosophers were largely concerned with theoretical ethics, particularly with abstract questions about what moral terms mean. An article in moral philosophy engaging with a major global event and using philosophical methods to stir people to action was a strikingly different kind of ethics.

The article was called 'Famine, Affluence and Morality'.⁷ It was written in response to the famines in Bengal, and considered the moral case for international aid. Of course, it was (relatively) uncontroversial that helping people living in poverty was a good thing, but Singer's argument went beyond this in two ways. He argued that giving aid was not merely supererogatory, but obligatory, and he did not rely upon a controversial ethical theory like Utilitarianism to do, instead arguing the case from first principles.

Singer based his argument around the following intuitive principle:

The Principle of Sacrifice

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.⁸

He illustrates the effects of this principle with an example:

The Shallow Pond

If 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.⁹

If a person were to abandon the drowning child in such a situation, most people would judge that they acted wrongly. It would not be sufficient excuse that they would get their clothes muddy, even if this meant destroying their new suit. Moreover, our thinking in this case does seem to fit the style of the Principle of Sacrifice: we judge it wrong to leave the child to drown because it is failing to prevent something very bad from happening for the sake of avoiding a comparatively insignificant loss.

⁷ Singer (1972).

⁸ Singer (1972), p. 231.

⁹ Singer (1972), p. 231.

However, the situation with respect to charitable donations is similar. By donating to the most effective aid organisations, we can avoid great suffering for others, or even save lives, for comparatively insignificant costs to ourselves. If the Principle of Sacrifice is valid, then failing to donate is also morally wrong.

The case of global poverty goes further than this, for once we have made a donation we could make another donation. Again, we would face a rather insignificant loss in order to prevent something very bad from happening, so we must do it. As Singer points out, this would continue until we donate so much that the loss to us starts to become very significant compared to the benefit it could produce. This could be because we are made so poor that giving the money is a truly great sacrifice, or because we need a reasonable amount of money in order to be able to function and dress appropriately to be able to continue to get well paid jobs to earn more money to donate. In any event, the Principle of Sacrifice is both very compelling, and yet very demanding — given the facts about poverty, it requires serious changes in how we think about our lives.

Of course, there are several dis-analogies between the case of the Shallow Pond and donating to effective aid organisations. For instance, in latter case we have physical distance, cultural distance, multiple potential saviours, a continuing disaster, and causal messiness. However, it is unclear why any of these features should make a decisive moral difference. Indeed, Peter Unger has investigated each of these differences in his book *Living High and Letting Die*,¹⁰ which was closely inspired by 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality'. By taking these features one at a time, he shows how you can construct a version of The Shallow Pond that has that feature, and yet our judgments do not change. It should also be stressed that the very plausible Principle of Sacrifice does not refer to any of these features, so if we accept it, we must admit that it is wrong to not donate, regardless of putative dis-analogies between the cases.

Singer's paper is remarkable for supporting such a strong claim — at odds with many intuitions and with widespread social practices — via a very short and simple argument from common-sense intuitions on ethics. While Singer is an advocate of Utilitarianism, and his argument may have been inspired by considerations of impartial benevolence, his argument certainly doesn't require commitment to Utilitarianism. His Principle of Sacrifice is a significantly weaker principle and is compatible with many ethical theories.

There are two important ways in which it is weaker. Firstly, it does not require us to provide positively good things for others, merely to prevent bad things from happening. Providing good things for people (say music and the arts) might still be considered supererogatory. Secondly, it only applies when the bad thing that can be prevented is much worse than the sacrifice needed to avoid it. It does not require you to sacrifice a lot in order to give someone else slightly more than that.

¹⁰ Unger (1996).

There are also two key ways in which Singer's argument is similar to the Utilitarian one. Firstly, it does not really distinguish between acts and omissions: it requires us to act to avoid a harm in much the same way that many principles (such as 'Thou shall not kill') restrict us from harming. Secondly, it takes outcomes for others very seriously. It is really bad for people in poor countries when they suffer, this badness can be at least roughly compared with the badness of us having less money, and we find the former to be much worse. We must therefore help these people for their sake.

Perhaps most importantly, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' highlights the scale and immediacy of global poverty as a moral issue. Global poverty is one of the largest moral problems in the world. Perhaps only avoiding major global catastrophes, such as extreme climate change is of a similar scale. For example, consider war. The entire death toll from all acts of war and genocide in the 20th century comes to about 230 million deaths including non-combatants, or 2.3 million per year.¹¹

In contrast, immunization programs have reduced the death toll from vaccine preventable illnesses from about 5 million per year to about 1.4 million per year, saving 3.6 million lives per year,¹² an amount larger than the lives that would be saved by world peace. Moreover, the smallpox eradication campaign has reduced its death toll from 3 million per year to 0, oral rehydration therapy has reduced the death toll of diarrheal illness from 4.6 million per year to 1.6 million per year, and malaria control has reduced the death toll from 3.8 million per year to 1 million per year.¹³ Each of these four gains has been greater than ending war, in terms of lives saved.

Of course, poverty and illness have not ended. With 6 million children dying from preventable illnesses each year, there is still room for more gains on this massive scale, and a moral urgency to do so. Every day we delay is another forty 747s, and this just the deaths, to which we must add all the non-lethal illnesses and many other forms of suffering and disadvantage.

As well as being such a large problem, it is one of the most immediate and omnipresent moral issues. While much has been written on the ethics of new biomedical technologies such as cloning, these often have very little impact on the moral choices in our lives. Even a very practical issue such as abortion directly confronts us only a few times in our lives, if at all. In contrast, every day we earn money that could be used to prevent great suffering and every day we could choose to donate part of these earnings, or part of our savings or capital. As Singer shows, global poverty confronts us with life-or-death situations and does so on a daily basis, making it a central moral issue of our times, and quite possibly *the* central issue.

¹¹ Estimates vary from about 160 million to 240 million, and differ in exactly which deaths they include. This estimate is from Leitenberg (2006), p. 1.

¹² Jha et al. (2004), p. 1204.

¹³ Jha et al. (2004), p. 1204.

4. Christian Ethics

In response to the extremely demanding nature of Singer's views on the ethics of global poverty, many people might be inclined to think that these views are simply too far out of line with ordinary thought to be taken seriously. While Singer argues that common sense leads to his conclusion, if this conclusion is so unintuitive then perhaps something has gone wrong in the argument.

Singer anticipates this reaction and defends his view by pointing to a strong historic parallel between his view and the writings of St Thomas Aquinas back in 1274:

'Whatever a man has in superabundance is owed, of natural right, to the poor for their sustenance. So Ambrosius says, and it is also to be found in the *Decretum Gratiani*: "The bread that you withhold belongs to the hungry; the clothing you shut away, to the naked; and the money you bury in the earth is the redemption and freedom of the penniless."'14

These remarks by Aquinas appeal to a strand of Christian thought that dates back much earlier than the middle ages. Indeed, the ideas are very clearly put by two of the Church Fathers in the 4th Century. St Basil of Caesarea said:

'Is he not called a thief who strips a man of his clothes? And he who will not clothe the naked when he can — is he deserving of a different appellation? The bread that you keep in your possession belongs to the hungry; the cloak in your closet, to the naked; the shoes that you allow to rot, to the barefooted, and your hoarded silver, to the indigent. Hence you have done injustice to as many as you have failed to help.'15

In a very similar vein, St Ambrose said:

'You are not giving to the poor man anything that is yours, but are rather restoring something that is his. For you have appropriated to yourself goods that were intended for the common use of all. The earth is for all, not merely for the rich; yet the number of those who possess merely their own is smaller than the number of those who enjoy more than their proper share. You are but paying a debt, not giving alms.'16

Radical though they sound, these ideas are still current within Christian Ethics. From 1962 to 1965, the Catholic Church held an ecumenical council at the Vatican to address its place in the modern world. The council declared that:

'...men are obliged to come to the relief of the poor, and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods. If a person is in extreme necessity, he has the right to take from the riches of others what he

¹⁴ Aquinas (1274), II-II, Question 66, Article 7.

¹⁵ Basil (372).

¹⁶ Ambrose (395).

himself needs. Since there are so many people in this world afflicted with hunger, this sacred Council urges all, both individuals and governments, to remember the saying of the Fathers: "Feed the man dying of hunger, for if you have not fed him you have killed him."¹⁷

Two years later, Pope Paul VI made it explicit that this doctrine is intended to apply between people in rich and poor countries:

'We must repeat once more that the superfluous wealth of rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations. The rule which up to now held good for the benefit of those nearest to us, must today be applied to all the needy of this world.'¹⁸

These passages detail a Christian view of property that is markedly different from that of modern law. Roughly speaking, it is that the institution of private property is good insofar as it has good effects, such as leading people to take good care of their possessions. However this right of custodianship is not a form of complete ownership — it does not entitle a person to do whatever they like with their property. Instead, it is considered to be wrong to keep wealth from others who need it desperately. Indeed, a person who desperately needs a resource you legally own is considered to have a greater claim of ownership to it than you do, so that if she were to take it, this would not count as theft. In contrast, if you were to prevent her from taking it, *your* act would count as theft.

This aspect of Christian thought shares the same two features that Utilitarianism and the Principle of Sacrifice do. It (very dramatically) refuses to make a distinction between acts and omissions, and it takes the outcomes for other people very seriously.

However, there are also significant differences between the views. Both Utilitarianism and the Principle of Sacrifice direct you to donate *because* it helps relieve the suffering of the poor. Since you can do this at relatively little cost to yourself, it improves the overall balance of happiness over suffering. This is of course exactly what Utilitarianism is about, and it is also the core motivation for the Principle of Sacrifice. The Principle does not always require one to act so as to improve this balance — it is much weaker than that — but when you can improve this balance by making a relatively trivial sacrifice, it is the fact that your act helps another more than it costs you which makes it obligatory.

In contrast, there are at least two other elements at work in Christian Ethics. Firstly, there is an element of justice. Recall St Ambrose's words above, 'You are not giving to the poor man anything that is yours, but are rather restoring something that is his. For you have appropriated to yourself goods that were intended for the common use of all.'

¹⁷ Paul VI (1965), §69.

¹⁸ Paul VI (1967), §49.

Secondly, there is the idea that donating your wealth may improve your life in other ways, even while it makes you materially poorer. For example, that living simply improves one's own character, and that ridding yourself of your worldly possessions is a way to achieve this. On these lines, St Ambrose said 'Sell your gold and buy salvation; sell your jewel and buy the kingdom of God; sell your land and buy eternal life!'¹⁹ Pope Paul VI made similar remarks, though stressing the risks to you of not donating: 'Besides, the rich will be the first to benefit as a result. Otherwise their continued greed will surely call down upon them the judgment of God...'²⁰

5. Demandingness

Let us return to the central objection to the idea that donating a large proportion of your income is obligatory: that it is too demanding.

Interestingly, while this objection is frequently made against the argument from Utilitarianism and from the Principle of Sacrifice,²¹ I have never heard it made against Christian Ethics. It is often seen as *very* demanding, but not as *overly* demanding. Not as so extremely demanding that we have reason to doubt it is true, which is how many people react to Utilitarianism and to the Principle of Sacrifice.

Perhaps this is mostly due to ignorance among moral philosophers regarding how demanding the central views of Christian Ethics are. That is certainly a possibility and must play a part in an explanation, but there may be other reasons too. For example, it might be due to the nature of the demand: people might think that if God demands something, it is not *too* demanding. This does leave open the question about whether God really demands this, but it might be thought reasonable for God to demand this, or that the evidence that God demands it is very strong.

In any event, the fact that people do not typically regard the highly demanding account of charity within Christian Ethics as overly demanding does appear to provide some evidence that such accounts should not be so quickly rejected on grounds of overdemandingness. This is especially true considering that one might accept Utilitarianism on Christian grounds as a clarification of the Golden Rule ('Do unto others as you would have them do unto you') or Jesus's New Commandment ('Love one another').

For the purposes of this chapter, we can distinguish three kinds of overdemandingness objection: (1) that it is psychologically impossible to meet the demands, (2) that it is counterproductive to demand so much, and (3) that the demands are simply implausibly high.

The first of these is a psychological variant of the putative constraint on morality that 'ought implies can': that we can't be obliged to do something if we can't do it, or in

¹⁹ Ambrose (395).

²⁰ Paul VI (1967), §49.

²¹ See, for example, Murphy (1993), Miller (2004).

the present case if we could physically perform the actions, but can't bring ourselves to do so. We can set aside the question of whether this philosophical principle is justified by pointing out that in any event it is empirically misguided. For example, some people certainly do donate very large proportions of their income. Moreover, it need not be that psychologically difficult to do so. One simply needs to read about the preventable suffering until one reaches a moment of moral clarity, and in that moment, to sign standing order with your bank to take out part of your income. At that point, the status quo changes and it would become quite psychologically difficult to tell the bank to cancel your on-going donations. Even better would be to also make a public declaration of your giving to further tie yourself to the mast.

The second variant was that this is such an unrealistic demand that it would backfire and result in people giving even less. This may well be empirically true, but as Singer has argued, it does not affect the truth of his claim. He argued that we have a moral obligation to donate much of our income, but not that telling people this is the best way of raising money for charity. We have a choice of what guidance to offer and some forms of guidance will lead to more good for the poor than others. Perhaps the best public standard in terms of generating action is a more achievable one, such as donating ten percent of one's income. This is perfectly compatible with there being a deep moral obligation to give even more than this.

The third variant was that the level of the demand is unintuitively high, and that morality cannot demand so much of us. However, many widely accepted moral principles demand more than this. For example, it is wrong to kill the innocent. Suppose you are framed for murder in the United States, and are likely to be executed if brought to trial. The only way to escape is to kill the arresting officer, but since he is innocent, it is wrong to do so. Morality thus requires that you allow yourself to be executed in order to meet its demands. This is a *much* higher demand than that of donating much of your income, yet we (rightly) accept it. Similarly, it is wrong to keep slaves, and morality demanded that slave owners free their slaves even if it meant financial ruin. There are many similar cases in which morality demands a very high sacrifice and yet we find it acceptable. Most of these are extreme life-or-death cases, but so is global poverty.

My preferred diagnosis of the intuition behind the overdemandingness objection is that an obligation to donate much of one's income is *factually unintuitive*, but not *morally unintuitive*. By this, I mean that the claim 'we ought to donate much of our income' relies upon both a general moral principle such as the Principle of Sacrifice and also some factual claims about the suffering that could be alleviated through a given donation. When the principle is combined with the facts about our situation, it produces a practical moral demand upon us.

This demand is surprising, but that could just be because the facts are surprising. It is surprising that we live in a world which is so interconnected and so unfair that we could very easily prevent a lot of suffering at a small cost. On this understanding, once we examine the facts, we could then explain why the intuition arose and why it was ultimately misguided.

Suppose we did take the overdemandingness objection at face value and thereby rejected the Principle of Sacrifice. Where would this leave us? I believe that this would actually produce a *more* unintuitive position. Our theory would then be open to an *underdemandingness objection*. If someone rejects the Principle of Sacrifice then they must claim:

Principle of Extreme Liberty

It is sometimes permissible to let others suffer great harms in order to secure incomparably small benefits for yourself.

To avoid the conclusion that we must donate much of our income, one would also have to accept:

Principle of Luxury

It is sometimes permissible to let others die in order to secure additional luxuries for yourself.

These strike me as supremely implausible moral principles. They are far too underdemanding, and yet they follow from the rejection of the Principle of Sacrifice when applied to global poverty.

6. Conclusion

More than a billion people live in extreme poverty. They have insufficient education, die from easily preventable diseases, and suffer from lack of food and clean water. Their plight constitutes an on-going moral emergency — quite possibly the biggest of our time. By donating money to the best organisations fighting the causes or effects of poverty, we can each do a great deal to help, at comparatively little sacrifice.

In times to come, when global poverty is no more, people will look back at our time and they will be dumbfounded by the moral paralysis of those who had the resources to help. Even more shocking will be the fact that so many theories failed to accord global poverty a central place in their accounts of ethics, and indeed saw it as advantageous to not demand very much sacrifice by their adherents. For a moral theory to demand that we make large sacrifices in righting these wrongs is not too demanding, but just demanding enough.

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