CrossMark

PETER SINGER'S STRENUOUS MORALITY

Clement Dore

Peter Singer has pointed out that many people in the United States are affluent enough to be able to give much more to overseas aid than in fact we do give; and Singer maintains that we are morally blameworthy in that respect. In what follows, I will undertake to show that the latter claim is mistaken. I will call by the letter 'A' a person who donates money to an overseas aid-organization and by the letter 'B' a disillusioned overseas aid-worker who has been in direct contact with some starving children.

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Because the aid-organization has given money to B with the end in view of enabling B to rescue some starving children, B has a *contractual* obligation to use that money for that purpose (after having subtracted his salary). But if B has only a *contractual* obligation, not a *moral* obligation, to come to the aid of starving children, then A doesn't have a moral obligation to donate money for that purpose. (And since A doesn't have a *contractual* obligation, he is under no constraint whatever to donate money with the end in view of preventing the starvation of hungry children.) In

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what follows, I will in effect be discussing the question of whether B has the contemplated moral obligation.

A: After reading Peter Singer's book, *The Life You Can Save*, I have decided to donate 10 per cent of my annual income to the charity which you used to work for, B. I realize that that amount by itself will do very little to diminish the vast amount of malnutrition from which the kind of children, whom you personally encounter in the course of your work, suffer. But when my donation is combined with the money that other donors give, it will, I hope, make a significant difference.

B: Even after every overseas aid-organization does all that it can to prevent starvation in non-industrialized countries, there will still be many millions of starving children which those organizations will be unable to benefit, as the world population increases, and, with it, a corresponding number of starving children. Can you tell me which of those children I ought to have tried to benefit and which I should have passed over?

A: The answer is obvious. You should have benefited every child you were able to benefit.

B: Which children were those?

A: I painlessly could have afforded to enable you to rescue roughly 300 children. It is those children I wanted you to benefit, and whatever other children different aid-organizations would have enabled you to rescue.

B: But there are many groups, each one of which can be characterized as containing 300 children. You said in effect that you wanted me to benefit all of the children in just one of those groups. But since you didn't tell me which group that is, I concluded that I had no moral obligation to rescue any children at all. And I'm certain that my reasoning was sound.

A: You are being perverse, B. Suppose that you encounter three people, all of whom are in danger of drowning;

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and, though you know that you are not able to rescue all three of those people, you know as well that you can save one of them. Are you prepared to claim that you would not be morally obliged to save even one of those drowning people because you couldn't save all three of them? Let me elaborate. Suppose that you did *not* have a good reason for saving the person whom you saved. Suppose that your choice to save that person would be purely arbitrary. It surely doesn't follow that it is false that you ought to make that choice. And, by the same token, the fact that your choice to benefit just one group of starving children, rather than the members of the other groups, would be arbitrary doesn't entail that you weren't morally obliged to make that choice.

B: Notice, A, that it is not only the choice to benefit the children whom I did in fact benefit which was purely arbitrary, but my selection of the part of the world to which I would have to travel in order to be of assistance would be arbitrary as well. Moreover, there really was very little point in my temporarily saving children who would have died unless I continued to assist them. But I could have let them become permanently dependent on me only if people like you donated an amount of money which considerably exceeds an amount which you could easily give.

A: Since I couldn't easily afford to give you enough money to come to the *prolonged* assistance of the children whom you attempted to benefit, you should have used that money to rescue the much smaller number of children whom you and I could afford to keep alive over time.

B: I suspect that you and people like you could not have easily afforded my prolonged support even of far fewer children than the ones I did in fact temporarily rescue. But, in any case, since you agree that my choice of which children to benefit was purely arbitrary, you ought

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to agree as well that I was not morally obliged to rescue *any* of those children.

A: Let me remind you that even though your choice to save just one of three drowning people, rather than either of the other two, would also be arbitrary, it doesn't follow that you would have no obligation to rescue *anyone* under the contemplated circumstances.

B: The drowning case differs from the real world case of starving children in that, though you could physically *point* to the drowning person you wanted me to save, and/or provide me with an individuating description of that person, you can do neither with respect to the millions of children who are starving in pre-industrial parts of the world.

A: The fact that I can't give you precise instructions as to which part of the non-industrialized world I want you to visit, and which starving children I want you to feed, doesn't entail that I can't give you *any* instructions. Suppose that I ask you to go to a city which is different from the one which we now occupy. You would know perfectly well what I meant, even though I didn't identify a city which I was asking you to visit.

B: Let me say again, then, A, that the drowning case which you have invited me to consider is too dissimilar from the state of affairs, which consists of their being millions of starving children in the world, for it to be a helpful analogy. The drowning case involves only *three* people. But there are, unfortunately, many *millions* of starving children in the pre-industrialized world. You would have employed a much better analogy if you had invited me to consider a case in which there are not just *three* drowning people but many millions of them. Would I really, under those circumstances, be morally obliged to rescue the tiny percentage of that number which it would be in my power to rescue, even though my selection of the group which I will rescue would be entirely arbitrary – even

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though I would have no *reason* for saving just *that* group of 300 people rather than any other such group?

A: Why should the numbers count?

B: Because it is very doubtful that I am *able* to choose to rescue a *tiny fraction* of the total number of starving children in the world. If you ask me arbitrarily to point to one of three straws of the same colour, shape and size, you have made a request which I can easily honour. But if you ask me arbitrarily to point to just one straw in a group of many millions of resembling straws, it would not be at all surprising if I found myself unable to choose to honour your request. And what I'm not *able* to do, I am not *morally obliged* to do.

A: There are people like me who have chosen to give aid-workers the resources with which to benefit some starving children. Moreover, you yourself have in the past been able to do what people like me have wanted you to do. Your power of choice regarding the rescue of children wasn't paralysed then, even though your choices were arbitrary.

B: But I have just recently come to recognize, by reflection on the matter, how arbitrary my choice of the starving children whom I in fact aided really was. And that recent recognition has rendered me powerless to make that choice in present time. Your choice to donate money to overseas aid-organizations (which give money to people like me) is much less arbitrary. You choose to donate only an amount which will not significantly decrease your affluence. And you choose to give money only to one or two charities, not to millions of them. But it remains true that people like me, who are supposed to use your money to benefit starving children, must make choices that are so arbitrary that they can render us powerless to make them.

A: *Your* will has become paralysed. But that's not true of people who still work in the field.

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B: I think that they would retire if they thought as carefully about the matter as I have.

A: I disagree. So it looks as if we have reached a stalemate.

B: Well, I have another reservation, A. Let me repeat that when I chose to benefit the tiny percentage of the millions of starving children in the world whom I was able to benefit, I had no good reason for selecting just *those* children rather than any other group of starving children who inhabit the earth. Now, since I had no good reason for choosing just the *former* children rather than any given group of children of comparable size – since there was no morally relevant difference between the group I in fact chose to save and the many groups of comparable size – I was not *morally obliged* to benefit the children in *any one* of those groups.

A: I deny that there was no morally relevant difference between the group of children whom you benefited and the groups whom you failed to benefit. The children you benefited were children you were *able* to benefit (perhaps easily able) and the children you failed to benefit were not.

B: Let's imagine that it was within my power to benefit just one of ten groups of 300 children. It would have been impossible for me to benefit (easily or not) the 300 children I in fact benefited *if* I had arbitrarily chosen to save any other group of 300 children. The difference between the former children and the latter is just the fact that I arbitrarily chose to save the former children, rather than the latter. And that is not a *morally relevant* difference.

A: Well, then, let me say that the morally relevant difference between the two groups is that the former group contains members towards whom you fulfilled a moral obligation, while the latter group doesn't contain such members.

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B: But, once again, A, if I really did have a moral obligation to save the members of the one group, but not of the other, there must have been some *reason* for this. And, since there is no such reason, it is false that I was morally obliged to rescue just the members of the former group – the individuals whom in fact I did rescue. It follows that that group cannot be marked off from the other one by saying that it contained children with respect to whom I fulfilled a moral obligation, while the other group did not. If I was morally obliged to rescue *any* starving children, then I was no *more* morally obliged to rescue the members of the one group than I was morally obliged to rescue the members of the other group.

A: A parody of your argument can be based on the case of the three drowning people: 'Since you can save only one of them, you can't be morally obliged to save the other two. But since there would be no reason why you should save the person whom you do in fact save, rather than the other two, there is no morally relevant difference between any one of these three people. Hence, since you are not morally obliged to save two out of three of them, you are not morally obliged to save any one of them.' Since the conclusion of this argument is obviously false, the argument must be unsound. And yet it is exactly like *your* argument.

B: I'm afraid that you're mistaken, A. I agree that there is no morally relevant difference between the three drowning people you have asked me to consider. But that's because I would have a *prima facie* obligation with respect to each one of those people to save him or her – a *prima facie* obligation which would be overridden by my making the effort to save just one of them – an effort that I am morally obliged to make, as you rightly point out.

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A: Why doesn't the same hold true for the starving children we've been discussing? If it does, then your having a *prima facie* obligation with respect to each one of those children, to rescue him or her, is perfectly compatible with my giving you the resources which will enable you to rescue some of them, even though, as in the drowning case, you can't rescue all of those children, and your choice of which children you *will* rescue will be purely arbitrary.

B: The two cases are not alike in the way you imagine them to be. You say in effect that, regarding each starving child in a pre-industrialized country, you and I have a *prima facie* obligation to rescue him or her. (In your view, I have a *prima facie* obligation to give him or her food, and you have a *prima facie* obligation to pay for it.) But since there are many millions of starving children, and since our ability to aid them is limited, these *prima facie* obligations are such that it would be impossible for us painlessly to honour more than a very small percentage of them. And I submit that the concept of a *prima facie* obligation is such that there can be no such thing as a *prima facie* obligation which it is almost impossible not to override. Thus, I have a *prima facie* obligation to keep my promises and to tell the truth. And that entails that, though there are circumstances in which I would be morally justified in breaking a promise or in telling a deliberate falsehood, such circumstances are rare. And if each starving child were such that I had a *prima facie* obligation to save him or her from starvation, when that was an easy thing to do, then, since I can rescue only a tiny fraction of all the starving children there are in pre-industrialized countries, and since my power being limited, my saving the children I in fact save would override my *prima facie* obligation to save any of the millions of other starving children, the contemplated *prima facie* obligation would have to be overridden on millions of occasions. And, once again, there can be no such thing

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as a *prima facie* obligation which is subject to being almost *always* overridden. I could not, for example, have a *prima facie* obligation to help elderly people cross the street if the world were such that my attempting to do so would almost (but not quite) always have our near death as a consequence. Anyone who asserts that there is a *prima facie* obligation which hardly ever becomes a full-fledged obligation is badly conceptually confused. It is false, then, that each starving child is an individual whom I have a *prima facie* obligation to save. And, indeed, *no* starving child fits that description. But I can be morally obliged to do something only if I am (at least) *prima facie* obliged to do it. It follows that no starving child is an individual whom I am morally obliged to rescue.

Clement Dore is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus, Vanderbilt University. fdore@unc.edu

Reference

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