

## Duty and Famine: Singer

### I. Recap

Last week we considered Mill's version of Utilitarianism, called *Eudaimonistic Utilitarianism*, characterized by what he calls "the greatest-happiness principle":

**You ought always to act so as to maximize happiness, i.e., the right act is the act that results in the greatest amount of happiness overall.**

The "greatest-happiness principle", however, just states one version of Utilitarianism. Other versions of Utilitarianism emphasize, e.g., pleasure or welfare as opposed to happiness, the utility of rules or principles as opposed to particular actions, etc.

However, there are a number of at least potential problems with Utilitarianism:

- It does not respect ordinary moral principles, e.g., keep your promises, don't lie, respect for human rights.
- It does not respect ordinary moral distinctions, e.g., between harming and failing to help.
- It asks too much of us, e.g., we could always be doing more to increase overall happiness.
- It asks too little of us, e.g., what matters for Utilitarianism is only the actual consequences, but this lets people who are lucky off the hook.

### II. Duty to Prevent Suffering

But Utilitarianism does seem to capture some basic elements of moral thinking, e.g., that one person's welfare is no more important than any other's, and that moral thinking ought to be impartial in how it regards each person's well-being. Drawing on these insights Peter Singer argues that our everyday moral thinking is deeply misguided, and our obligations to those who suffer are much greater than what we might have thought.

Note that Singer is not aiming to defend Utilitarianism itself; although he is sympathetic to Utilitarian considerations, the main principle he relies on requires less than full-blooded Utilitarianism. His point is to show that there are compelling considerations--considerations that he hopes anyone would be willing to endorse--that raise deep challenges to our ordinary moral beliefs; in particular, he's concerned to show that the line we draw between DUTY and CHARITY is misplaced. Here's the argument:

**1. Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are bad.**

**2. PREVENT SUFFERING PRINCIPLE (PSP): 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. (p. 632)**

- This principle doesn't require that we *promote* happiness or whatever else we might take to be good; it simply requires that we *prevent* bad; it also allows that we only have to act if nothing comparably important is at stake.

- For the principle to avoid collapsing into Utilitarianism, we have to introduce the notion of a baseline (otherwise, if things are *bad* simply by being *less than optimal*, then we'd be required to do everything the Utilitarian requires). On the PSP, we're not required to improve the conditions of those who are at least at the baseline (or above), only those who have fallen

below. Premise (1) addresses the issue by saying that wherever one wants to draw the baseline, those who are experiencing famine are below it.

**3. The things we'd have to give up in order to make large contributions of money, time, and/or energy to famine relief, are less important (morally speaking) than life, food, shelter, or medical care.**

**4. So we ought to make large contributions of money, time, and/or energy to famine relief.**

Further notes:

- What we ought to do is not affected by the proximity or distance of those we're aiming to affect. This is not a prediction (what is *likely to* happen), but a normative claim (what *ought to* happen). It may be psychologically difficult to identify with others far away, and so difficult to care about them, but that's compatible with its being a moral requirement that I act with their welfare in mind. One might have had justification for discriminating on geographical grounds when communication or aid was unreliable; but that's no longer the case.
- What we ought to do doesn't depend on whether I alone or millions of us could equally well help out. One might feel less guilty if others are also shirking--but why should this matter morally? Am I less obligated to save the drowning child if others are also watching? If others don't help out, then why am I not responsible to do what will help, if it is in my power? (It might even seem that my responsibility is greater!)

But is the Prevent Suffering Principle plausible? It would seem to require that we make contributions that would reduce ourselves (and dependents?) to the level of marginal utility--i.e., that level at which, by giving more, I'd be worse off than those I'm aiming to help. This clearly contradicts our ordinary judgments, so would require very strong backing--which Singer doesn't try to offer. Instead he suggests a weaker principle that seems extremely plausible--he's hoping it's obvious to everyone--and would also have profound consequences for our moral lives: Here are the revised premises:

**2\*. MODIFIED PREVENT SUFFERING PRINCIPLE (MPSP: weaker/moderate version): If it is our power to prevent something very bad from happening, *without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant*, then we ought, morally, to do it.** (p. 633, 634)

- example: saving a drowning child only at the cost of getting one's clothes muddy.

**3\*. The things we'd have to give up in order to make large contributions of money, time, and/or energy to famine relief, are not morally significant.**

**4 (same as before). So we ought to make large contributions of money, time, and/or energy to famine relief.**

### III. Duty and Charity

The move from the strong to the weak version helps, but it puts added pressure on premise (3\*)--are the sacrifices we'd have to make morally insignificant? We tend to distinguish DUTY from CHARITY--what we give to relief organizations here or abroad is morally optional--we're good to do it, but we don't really have to. But this allows that we can spend our money, time, and energy, on completely frivolous things of no moral worth, and still fulfill our duties, for charitable giving is not strictly required--its a nice thing to do, but one's basic moral obligations don't require it.

What (3\*) suggests is that many of the things we do with our money, time, and energy, are morally insignificant, and this poses a serious moral problem; as the TV ads have been pointing out for decades--only \$17/month will provide a child with food, clothing, and education. It isn't hard to spend that much on cappuccino, or on candy bars, or makeup over a period of a few months. Are these things really morally significant? Are they luxuries, frivolous items we could easily do without? Singer's point is that if we recognized that aid and assistance to relieve suffering is not morally optional, but an obligation, then our lives would look very different. He even suggests that we would only spend money on clothes to keep us warm, food to keep us healthy, shelters that provided adequate warmth and protection from the elements...

Singer acknowledges that these demands are out of line with our ordinary judgments, but thinks it doesn't matter--what matters is what's right not what we ordinarily think. (And others have thought similarly--Aquinas, Jesus?) He acknowledges that there may be all kinds of practical considerations that would lead to one strategy over another in deciding where to give our money, how to invest it, etc., but none of this would justify the lives we now live.

But the question arises--why should we think that our "luxuries" aren't morally significant? If happiness is morally significant, and they bring us happiness, why aren't they morally significant? What if we'd be really unhappy if we couldn't be fashionable, have dessert after meals, live in a comfortable house? What marks the line between the morally significant and the morally insignificant? Singer seems to think that the *only* thing that matters morally is suffering and relief from it--as long as you've reached the baseline for a reasonable life, anything more is morally irrelevant. But this is implausible--(and note--strongly anti-Utilitarian); a life for everyone at the baseline might be a pretty gloomy existence. Is that what we should be aiming for? Singer could respond--look at the alternative: some people suffer and die when they could be helped, while others luxuriate in their riches? Is this a morally acceptable situation?

For further information about world hunger, here are some websites to look at:

The Hunger Site: <http://www.thehungersite.com>

America's Second Harvest: <http://www.secondharvest.org/>

Mercy Corps: <http://www.mercycorps.org/>

World Hunger Program: [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/World\\_Hunger\\_Program/](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/World_Hunger_Program/)

Food First: <http://www.foodfirst.org/>

Hunger Notes (World Hunger Education Service): <http://www.worldhunger.org/>

The Hunger Project: <http://www.thp.org/>

Unicef: <http://www.unicef.org>

International Rescue Committee: <http://www.theirc.org/>

Oxfam: <http://www.oxfam.org/>

CARE: <http://www.care.org/>

The Greater Boston Food Bank: <http://www.gbfb.org/> (Massachusetts)

Project Bread: <http://www.projectbread.org/> (Massachusetts)

## **Hunger in America 2001 Eastern Massachusetts Results**

([http://www.gbfb.org/content/main.cfm?sca\\_id=19&cu\\_id=19](http://www.gbfb.org/content/main.cfm?sca_id=19&cu_id=19))

### **Eastern Massachusetts Overview**

- 4,783,167 people live in The Greater Boston Food Bank's service area, the nine counties of eastern Massachusetts. (2000 US Census)
- 3.98 percent of this population (190,711 individuals) received assistance from The Greater Boston Food Bank's member feeding programs, including food pantries, shelters and soup kitchens. This is approximately equal to the combined populations of Cambridge and Somerville.
- There has been a 13.5 percent increase in the number of individuals seeking assistance from the feeding programs served by The Greater Boston Food Bank since the America's Second Harvest study in 1997.
- The organization is also serving 10.1 percent more eastern Massachusetts households than in 1997.
- The Greater Boston Food Bank agencies serve 58,301 individuals weekly, approximately equivalent to the population of Haverhill or just shy of capacity at Foxboro stadium.
- Nationally, the number seeking hunger relief from America's Second Harvest network of private charities, of which The Greater Boston Food Bank is a member, increased by about 9 percent since 1997.

### **Seniors**

- Since the 1997 study, there has been a more than 50 percent increase in the number of households with one or more senior adults living in eastern Massachusetts seeking assistance from The Greater Boston Food Bank's member feeding programs. This translates into nearly 17,000 households.

### **Children**

- 31.5 percent of households served by The Greater Boston Food Bank agencies have at least one child under 18.
- 29 percent of adult food recipients said that their children were often or sometimes not eating enough because they could not afford an adequate amount of food. This is significantly higher than the national average of 14.9 percent.

### **Hungry Families Forced To Make Choices**

- The hungry in Eastern Massachusetts have had to make choices between eating and other financial obligations:
  - 40.9 percent of those serviced by Greater Boston Food Bank agencies have had to choose between eating and paying their rent or mortgage. This is a 29 percent increase since 1997.
  - 38.4 percent have chosen between food and utilities/heating.
  - 26.4 percent have chosen between food and medical care.

### **There Is No One Face Of Hunger**

- 78 percent of individuals seeking assistance from feeding programs served by The Greater Boston Food Bank have a home.
  - 13 percent of these individuals own their homes.
  - 22.4 percent are homeless. This is a 41.8 percent increase since 1997.
  - 64 percent have graduated from high school.
  - 9 percent hold college degrees.
  - Almost 22 percent are employed. This is a 65 percent increase from 1997.
- The Greater Boston Food Bank's member agencies serve:
  - 54.6 percent white individuals
  - 8.5 percent Spanish, Latino or Hispanic

These statistics indicate the severity of the hunger problem in Massachusetts. Other studies on hunger in the U.S. show that hunger is also a serious nationwide problem. May be published with attribution to The Greater Boston Food Bank and, for national figures, America's Second Harvest.

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