On the Supposed Obligation to Relieve Famine

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I

The supposed obligation to relieve famine is based on a rationally indefensible rampant moralism. Moralism is to morality what scientism is to science. Both aberrations involve the illegitimate inflation of reasonable claims either by exaggerating their importance or by extending them to inappropriate contexts. As monetary inflation weakens the currency, so moralistic and scientistic inflation weaken morality and science. Those who value morality and science will oppose moralism and scientism. If moralism is rampant, it is, according to the unabridged Random House Dictionary, ‘1. violent in action or spirit, raging, furious … 2. growing luxuriantly, as weeds. 3. in full sway; prevailing or unchecked.’

Moralism is rampant. It is very hard to think of an area of life that is free of the exhortation of one or another group of moralizers. We are told what food is right or wrong to eat; how we should treat our pets; what clothing to wear; how we should spend our after-tax income; how precisely we should phrase invitations for sex; what kind of bags we should carry our groceries in; when and where we are permitted to pray or smoke; what jokes we are allowed to tell; who should pick the fruit we buy at the supermarket; how we should invest our money; what chemicals we should use in our gardens; by what method of transportation we should go to work; how we should sort our garbage; what morality requires us to think about cross dressing, sex change operations, teenage sex, and pot smoking; we are forbidden to inquire after the age, marital status, drug use, or alcoholism of job applicants; we are liable to be accused of sexual abuse if we spank our children or hug our neighbour’s; our 19 and 20-year olds are permitted to fight our wars, but they are not permitted to buy a beer; we are not supposed to say that people are crippled, stupid, mentally defective, fat, or ignorant; and we must not use words like ‘mankind,’ ‘statesman,’ or ‘He’ when referring to God.

The aim of this paper is to examine one influential attempt to
make a reasoned case for moralism. It is Peter Singer’s, and it
endeavours to provide a utilitarian justification for the version of
rampant moralism that Singer advocates. Singer has views on many
controversial subjects, but only what he says about famine relief will
be considered here.

II

Singer says that when people are starving it is immoral to have such
things as ‘stylish clothes, expensive dinners, a sophisticated stereo
system, overseas holidays, a (second?) car, a larger house, private
schools for our children, and so on.’ (PE, 232).1 If the ‘so on’ is taken
as broadly as Singer undoubtedly intends, it becomes obvious that a
very large majority of people in affluent societies is immoral. If, for
instance, we put the poverty level in America at 14%,2 then it is a rea-
sonable estimate that about 86% of Americans are guilty of what
Singer regards as immorality. Similar estimates hold in other affluent
societies. Most people above the poverty level, and many below it,
spend money on things that are not necessities. Those to whom this
kind of moral exhortation gives an uneasy conscience may be cowed
into thinking that there is something to Singer’s claim. But not many
of them would think that the immorality they are charged with is ter-
ribly serious. If it is a sin to have more than what is necessary, it is a
venal, not a deadly, sin. In a different moral vocabulary, it is a minor
omission that involves a failure of generosity, not a major commission
of a wrong that causes serious unjustified harm to others.

Singer, however, strongly disagrees. He says that ‘by not giving
more than we do, people in rich countries are allowing those in poor
countries to suffer from absolute poverty [less than basic necessi-
ties], with consequent malnutrition, ill health, and death. This is
not a conclusion that applies only to governments. It applies to each
absolutely affluent [more than basic necessities] individual, for each
of us has the opportunity to do something about the situation; for
instance, to give our time or money to voluntary organizations like
Oxfam … .’ (PE, 222). In saying this, Singer states no more than a

1 Parenthetical references in the text are to the pages of the following
works by Peter Singer: Practical Ethics, (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1993), second edition, referred to as PE, and Writings on
an Ethical Life, (New York: Harper-Collins, 2000), referred to as WEL.
2 13.7 percent of the population are poor by current standards.’ Bruce
Wetterau, Desk Reference on the Federal Budget. (Washington, DC:
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factual possibility: we are allowing absolute poverty and we could spend our time and money to try to alleviate it. The question is whether there is a moral obligation to do so, and, if there is, how strong is this supposed obligation. Singer’s moralism enters with vengeance in his answer. Since ‘allowing someone to die is not intrinsically different from killing someone, it would seem that we are all murderers.’ (PE, 222).

This is not a slip or a momentary exaggeration. Singer really means it. When we stay at home after work and read a book, listen to music, watch TV, or, God forbid, go out to a restaurant, instead of doing volunteer work or writing a check to Oxfam, we are allowing someone to die, and we are murderers. He asks: ‘Is this verdict too harsh?’ He knows that ‘many will reject it as self-evidently absurd.’ (PE, 222). He allows that there are obvious differences between killing and allowing to die, but ‘these differences need not shake our previous conclusion that there is no intrinsic difference between killing and allowing to die. They are extrinsic differences, that is, differences normally but not necessarily associated with the distinction between killing and allowing to die.’ (PE, 224). It should not be overlooked that when Singer attempts to argue for his outrageous claim that we are all murderers, he drops the talk about murder and speaks instead of killing. But the concession he slips in makes the claim only a little less outrageous: we are merely all killers, not murderers, of people who live in absolute poverty.

Singer also makes clear that the obligation to alleviate absolute poverty is very strong. It is not the obligation of charity, which is usually thought to be right to do, but not wrong not to do. The obligation is not just right to do, but also wrong not to do. It is a clear positive duty, and the failure to discharge it is equivalent to killing those whom we could have saved. He says: ‘we ought to give money away, rather than spend it on clothes which we do not need to keep us warm. To do so is not charitable or generous. Nor is it the kind of act which philosophers and theologians have called ‘supererogatory’—an act which it would be good to do but not wrong not to do. On the contrary, we ought to give money away, and it is wrong not to do so.’ (WEL, 110). Singer realizes that the general acceptance of what he says would lead to ‘the revision of our conceptual moral scheme’ and that it would have ‘radical implications,’ (WEL, 111), but given the suffering from absolute poverty, nothing less is called for. This makes obvious that what Singer is saying is that if people do not think about their moral obligations the way he does, then they should change the way they think. It will
perhaps be seen that it is not inappropriate to describe what Singer is doing as rampant moralism.

Describe it as we may, the question remains whether Singer is right. Reason may be on the side even of rampant moralism. Let us, therefore, see what reason Singer gives in support of his outrageous claim that affluent people are killers if they do not alleviate absolute poverty. He begins by saying: ‘Suppose that … I notice that a small child has fallen in [a pond] and is in danger of drowning. Would anyone deny that I ought to wade in and pull the child out? This will mean getting my clothes muddy … but compared to the avoidable death of a child this is insignificant.’ (PE, 229). And he goes on, ‘we have an obligation to help those in absolute poverty that is no less strong than our obligation to rescue a drowning child from a pond.’ (PE, 230).

Those willing to use their critical faculties will notice that most people in absolute poverty are not small children and to think of them as such is a crass paternalistic insult. They will also notice that it makes a great difference who the person is who is in danger of drowning. If it is a contract killer in pursuit of a victim, we are unlikely to acknowledge a strong obligation to pull him out. Furthermore, if there is a lifeguard on duty whose job it is to rescue those in danger of drowning, we should let him do it. And, of course, the equivalent is precisely the job of the governments of the countries in which people in absolute poverty live. Singer’s putative analogy is a rhetorical stratagem that misleads the uncritical and infuriates the critical.

The example, however, is dispensable to Singer’s argument. What he really wants to do is to propose and defend a principle that underlies the example. We shall call it the Prevention-Principle. The Prevention-Principle is: ‘if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it.’ And he claims that ‘This principle seems uncontroversial.’ (PE, 229). But this claim is patently false, as the following considerations show.

First, it obviously makes a great difference who is threatened by the very bad thing. If the very bad thing is defeat in war and it threatens unjust aggressors, or if it is imprisonment for life of justly convicted murderers, then the obligation to prevent it is hardly uncontroversial. Second, it is no less obvious that it is folly to prevent a very bad thing from happening without asking about the consequences of doing so. These consequences concern not those who could prevent it, but those who are prevented from suffering it. The consequences could be even worse than the very bad
thing that is prevented. Death is presumably very bad, but if the consequence of preventing it is to live in great pain attached to a life support system, then an increasingly large number of people (including Singer) would not recognize the obligation to prevent it. Third, it is equally obvious that it affects the supposed obligation why the very bad thing is threatening some people. What if they brought it upon themselves by imprudent risks (such as taken by recreational drug users), or by lack of foresight that reasonable people can be expected to have (such as ignoring the notice to evacuate from the way of a flood or a rapidly spreading fire). Is the obligation to prevent the very bad thing that threatens obvious then? Fourth, it is similarly questionable whether the obligation holds if the people threatened by the very bad thing are proud, independent, and refuse help. Fifth, should it not be asked also how good are the chances of preventing the very bad thing from happening? Is it not more reasonable to prevent merely bad things from happening if the chances of success are good, rather than expend efforts and resources by risking the strong likelihood of failure to prevent very bad things? These considerations render the putatively uncontroversial Prevention-Principle controversial.

The implication is that before it is reasonable to acknowledge the obligation whose violation, according to Singer, makes us killers, we should ask: are we obliged to prevent very bad things regardless of whether they are deserved? regardless of consequences? regardless of whether people have brought it upon themselves? regardless of people’s refusal of help? regardless of the likelihood of success? These questions should not be asked in order to justify doing nothing, but in order to determine whether our obligations would not be better met by concentrating on helping people in our own context where the answers could more easily be found rather than on distant contexts in which our unfamiliarity makes it unlikely that we can find reasonable answers. Singer, in offering his simple-minded argument, fails to consider these complexities. Of course, he could consider them. But then he would have to show that the answers to the difficult questions raised above would favour his case. That, however, he has not even begun to do.

III

Let us go on, however, and ask what makes Singer so confident that the Prevention-Principle is uncontroversial? The answer is that he supposes that the principle is a straightforward implication of
ethics. He thinks that if ethics is rightly understood, then commitment to it commits one to the Prevention-Principle. We need to ask, therefore, what his understanding of ethics is.

According to Singer, ethics is egalitarian. ‘Equality is a basic ethical principle … the principle of equal consideration of interests. The essence of the principle … is that we give equal weight in our moral deliberations to the like interests of all those affected by our actions … an interest is an interest, whoever’s interest it may be.’ (PE, 21). Singer makes clear that the equal consideration of interests may require unequal treatment in circumstances where some people require more resources than others in order to satisfy their interests equally. It is, for instance, in the interests of both healthy and sick people to be able to function normally, but the sick require medical help, while the healthy do not. ‘This,’ says Singer, ‘is in line with the principle of declining marginal utility, a principle well-known to economists, which states that for a given individual, a set amount of something is more useful when people have little of it than when they have a lot.’ (PE, 24). Unequal treatment, however, can be justified only if it ‘is an attempt to produce a more egalitarian result.’ (PE, 24).

There are many serious problems with this ‘basic ethical principle’ that Singer does not consider. First, it commits one to the absurdity of considering equally the interests of terrorists and their hostages, of criminals and their victims, of benefactors and scourges of humanity, and so forth. Second, it does not say how people’s interests are to be determined. The interests cannot be what people believe them to be because, as a result of ignorance, indoctrination, self-deception, and the like, people are often mistaken about their interests. Are the interests, then, what the relevant experts say that they are? This would make it an ethical requirement to treat people in ways they regard as contrary to their interests, which is surely an unacceptable form of paternalism. If Singer nevertheless accepts it, he should provide reasons for it and he should make clear that the ‘basic ethical principle’ commits one to paternalism. Singer, however, does neither. Third, the principle rests on the severely criticized principle of diminishing marginal utility, and the criticisms have not been met.3 The latter, economic, principle assumes that the utility functions of people are commensurable, but they are not. As a result, it is often impossible to say what interests are equal or unequal. Let us put these problems aside, however, and ask the

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more basic question: why should people’s interests be equally considered?

Singer’s answer is that it is the very nature of ethics that requires it. ‘Ethics,’ he says, ‘takes a universal point of view.’ (PE, 11). ‘Ethics requires us to go beyond ‘I’ and ‘you’ to the universal law, the universalizable judgment, the standpoint of the impartial spectator or ideal observer, or whatever we choose to call it.’ (PE, 12). And he goes on, ‘The universal aspect of ethics, I suggest, does provide a persuasive, although not conclusive, reason for taking a broadly utilitarian position.’ (PE, 12). This means that ‘at some level in my moral reasoning I must choose the course of action that has the best consequences, on balance, for all affected’ (PE, 13), where “best consequences” is understood as meaning what, on balance, furthers the interests of those affected.’ (PE, 14). Because ethics is committed to the universal point of view, it must be impartial. Because ethics is impartial, it must consider the interests of everyone equally. Because ethics requires the equal consideration of interests, it must prevent something bad from happening to anyone, anywhere, if it does not involve the sacrifice of something of comparable moral significance.

Every step in this argument is questionable as a result of serious difficulties—difficulties that Singer must be aware of, but does not consider. That ethics need not be committed to the universal point of view is shown by the long tradition of Aristotelian eudaimonism, which has been an influential ethical theory for over 2000 years and by value pluralism that is perhaps the most significant contemporary contribution to ethics. Eudaimonists and pluralists argue that there are many reasonable conceptions of a good life, many reasonable ways of ranking many reasonable values, and they deny that there is a universal point of view from which the one true blueprint for reasonable lives, rankings, and values could be derived. That the universal point of view does not commit one to impartiality is made evident by the fact that particular obligations to one’s family, friends, political and religious ideals, and country often take justifiable precedence over impartial obligations that may be owed to everyone. That impartiality does not require the equal consideration of the interests of all those who are affected by one’s action is obvious if it is remembered that treating the interests of good and evil people with equal consideration cannot be a requirement of ethics; that it is often hard to know what people’s interests are; that treating interests with equal consideration presupposes that interests are commensurable, which they are not; and that treating people with equal consideration would often involve a morally
highly objectionable form of paternalism. Lastly, that the equal consideration of interests does not impose the obligation to prevent something bad from happening to anyone, anywhere is clear if it is borne in mind that it makes a great difference whether people deserve the bad thing that threatens them, whether they have brought it upon themselves, whether the consequences of preventing it are acceptable, and whether expending resources in this way is warranted by practical considerations, such as the likelihood of success. Singer’s dogmatic assertion about the obligations commitment to ethics creates systematically ignores these serious difficulties.

Such force as Singer’s rampant moralism has derives from this failure. He counts on the fact that most affluent people claim to be committed to ethics and will be disturbed by the claim that the implication of their commitment is that they must either donate what they do not need for basic necessities, or recognize that by failing to do so they are letting people in absolute poverty die, which makes them killers. If they cannot fault the argument, they must accept its consequence: they must either radically change the way they live, or accept the guilt and shame of being killers. What they ought to do, of course, is to fault the argument. The difficulties enumerated above show that its faults are many.

IV

Suppose, however, that Singer can dispose of all these difficulties and he is correct in claiming that commitment to ethics requires commitment to the Prevention-Principle. Suppose, further, that when reasonable people understand this and see that ethics requires them to change their lives and society radically, to give up the comforts that make their lives pleasant, then they consider giving up their commitment to ethics. What has Singer to say to such people?

He says that people in that position must make an ‘ultimate choice’ in which their ‘fundamental values come to the fore.’ They are ‘choosing between different possible ways of living: the way of living in which self-interest is paramount, or that in which ethics is paramount, or perhaps some trade-off between the two.’ (WEL, 242). And he goes on: ‘If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that, at least sometimes, where self-interest and ethics clash, we choose self-interest, and this is not just a case of being weak-willed or irrational. We are genuinely unsure what it is rational to do, because when the clash is so fundamental, reason seems to have no way of resolving it.’ (WEL, 243). What about those who choose
self-interest over ethics and its supposed universal point of view? Does this ‘mean that the person who acts only from a narrow perspective—for the sake of self, family, friends, or nation, in ways that cannot be defended even indirectly from an impartial perspective—is necessarily acting irrationally?’ (WEL, 270). The answer is that ‘If to be irrational is to make a mistake, there is no mistake here.’ (WEL, 270). Singer acknowledges that ‘Since reasoning alone proved incapable of fully resolving the clash between self-interest and ethics, it is unlikely that rational argument will persuade every rational person to act ethically.’ (WEL, 271). Having arrived at that view, he should heed the words of John Stuart Mill from whom he has learned so much: ‘An opinion on a point of conduct, not supported by reasons, can only count as one person’s preference; and if the reasons, when given, are a mere appeal to a similar preference felt by other people, it is still only many people liking instead of one.’

Singer’s answer to reasonable people who are considering whether they should radically change their lives is that he cannot offer a rational argument to persuade them to do so. What he offers instead is rampant moralism that tries to achieve by bullying what it cannot achieve by reasoning. If we look beyond Singer’s rhetoric, recognize the complexities he ignores, bear in mind the difficulties that he does not face, we find that he cannot provide a rationally persuasive grounding for his position. And in the name of this simple-minded and rationally unpersuasive position that is riddled with problems, he urges people to radically change their lives and the society in which they live, and calls them killers if they do not.

V

Consider now the following defence of Singer’s position. Perhaps he overstated the case in talking about killing and the obligation to change one’s life and society radically, but surely decent people will recognize that they ought to do something to alleviate the suffering of those who live in absolute poverty. In other words, a suitably revised version of the Prevention-Principle does state a genuine obligation, the suffering of people in absolute poverty is reason enough to try to help them, and affluent people are in the position to do so. There are, however, good reasons to reject even this much weakened position.

Singer presents the Prevention-Principle in isolation from any other ethical principle. But, of course, there are other ethical principles, they also create obligations, and commitment to ethics involves commitment to these other principles and obligations. Here is, then, another ethical principle that reasonable and ethically committed people will accept: people should be held responsible for the easily foreseeable consequences of their voluntary actions. Let us call this the Responsibility-Principle.

It is a simple principle, so there is no need for a great deal of explanation of it. If I decide to do something when nothing forces me, if I understand both the decision and the surrounding circumstances, and if a normally intelligent person could be expected to see that the action is likely to bring about certain specific results, then it is justified to praise or blame, reward or punish, approve or condemn me for the action. The Responsibility-Principle is obviously a basic ethical principle for without it we could not hold people morally or legally accountable. Without the principle the systems of ethics and law, as we presently understand them, would have to be fundamentally revised.

One reason for rejecting even the weakened form of the Prevention-Principle that we have some obligation to alleviate the suffering of people in absolute poverty is that this supposed obligation is obviously affected by the Responsibility-Principle. It surely makes a difference to the obligation whether the people living in absolute poverty are responsible for their own suffering. If their suffering is an easily foreseeable consequence of their immoral or imprudent actions, then it is hard to see why other people would have an obligation to alleviate their plight rather than the plight of others who have not brought their suffering upon themselves. Say that some people live in absolute poverty because they have been impoverished by waging an unjust foreign or civil war (as in Rwanda), or because they have murdered or exiled many of those among them who had the necessary know-how to raise living standards (as in Iraq), or because they are strongly devoted to a religion that teaches resignation and whose practice is incompatible with improving their lot (as many do in India). It would be absurd to deny that such considerations require a further revision of even the weakened version of the Prevention-Principle. It should be revised to say that affluent people have some obligation to alleviate the suffering of those who live in absolute poverty, if the sufferers are not responsible for their own suffering. And it should be remembered that if it turns out that affluent people do not have the obligation to alleviate the suffering of some group of people, it does not mean
that they have no obligation to alleviate the suffering of some other group. The choice is not between honouring the obligation and doing nothing, but between honouring *that* obligation and some other obligation.

Now all this is likely to strike rampant moralizers as evasive pedantry because they believe that people living in absolute poverty are not responsible for their own suffering. But whether this belief is true is a factual question, and we have no lesser authority than Singer for suspecting that the belief is false. He says: ‘the major cause of absolute poverty is overpopulation,’ (PE, 235) and he repeats the point, ‘I accept that the earth cannot support indefinitely a population rising at the present rate … the best means of preventing famine, in the long run, is population control.’ (WEL, 115). If Singer is right, then the question of whether or not people living in absolute poverty are responsible for their own suffering is answered by considering whether or not they are responsible for overpopulation.

Overpopulation is the cumulative result of the combination of individual actions and certain conditions. No individual is responsible for overpopulation. But individuals are responsible for the size of their families. It is an easily foreseeable consequence of their actions that if they increase the size of their families, they will have to divide their resources among more people. If they live in poverty, absolute or other, this will worsen their condition. No reasonable person can fail to see this. If people nevertheless increase the size of their families and end up in or perpetuate their absolute poverty, then they are responsible for their own and their children’s easily foreseeable suffering. Increasing the size of their families is clearly a voluntary action because they could refrain from sexual intercourse, they could enjoy sex without it leading to conception, they could practice such traditional methods of contraception as are available in their context, and they could abort unwanted fetuses. If overpopulation is the major cause of absolute poverty, then it is the imprudent voluntary actions of people living in absolute poverty that is a major contributing factor to their own and their children’s suffering.

Singer takes no notice of this whatsoever. He does say, however, that ‘the best means of preventing famine, in the long run, is population control. It would then follow … that one ought to be doing all one can to promote population control. … Since there are organizations working specifically for population control, one would support them rather than more orthodox methods of preventing famine.’ (WEL, 115). These organizations distribute contraceptive devices
and teach people to use them. The implication of Singer’s view is that affluent people have the obligation to give up their pleasures in order to enable people in absolute poverty to enjoy the pleasures of sex without having to worry about feeding their offspring. And if affluent people fail to do so because they regard it more important to help others in their own context who do not live in absolute poverty and are not responsible for their suffering, or because they want to give their children the best education their money can buy, then they are immoral. This view would be laughable, if it were not presented with the deadly earnestness and bullying that is the hallmark of rampant moralism. We may conclude, then, that given the Responsibility-Principle and the suffering of others who do not live in absolute poverty, but who are not responsible for their own suffering, the obligation is to helping the latter, not the former.

The discharge of this obligation requires ethically committed people to ask and answer the question of why people suffer. The mere fact of suffering is not enough to impose an obligation on anyone because the suffering may be the responsibility of the sufferer. Whether or not it is, can be determined by the application of the Responsibility-Principle. Its application requires making reasonable comparative judgments about the likelihood that the discharge of the obligation in one context rather than another will be effective in alleviating suffering. Singer agrees: ‘we have no obligation to make sacrifices that, to the best of our knowledge, have no prospect of reducing poverty in the long run.’ (PE, 241). We should, therefore, revise the Prevention-Principle once more: affluent people have some obligation to alleviate suffering if the sufferers are not responsible for their suffering, and if it is likely that the aid will reduce their suffering in the long run.

One consequence of the latest version of the Prevention-Principle is that whether the obligation holds depends on being able to make reasonable judgments about the sufferers’ responsibility and about the likelihood that the aid will be effective in the long run. Making such judgments requires considerable knowledge of the context in which the sufferers live, which the vast majority of affluent people cannot be expected to have. They would have to be able to answer such questions as whether the aid is likely to reach its intended recipients, rather than being wasted as a result of inefficient distribution, or being stolen by corrupt officials, or being distributed to favoured groups, or being in a form that the recipients would find unacceptable. They would have to be able to judge whether the aid is going to result in superficial short-term relief that merely prolongs suffering or whether it brings about long-term
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structural changes that would relieve suffering in the long run. If they could not make reasonable judgments of this sort, they would have to accept the judgments of various local politicians and aid workers, and they would have to decide whether these judgments are trustworthy. Since both the politicians and aid workers have a vested interest in attracting aid, there would be a prima facie reason not to take their judgments at face value.

Even if these questions were satisfactorily answered, there would be further questions about the causes of the suffering. Is it the result of a natural disaster, corruption, inefficiency, an unjust political system, religious practices, outdated customs, or the voluntary actions of the sufferers? The likelihood is that several factors have contributed to causing the suffering. Judging the effectiveness of the aid is possible only if these causes and their relative contributions are known. Without such knowledge, the aid may just be wasted, and, as Singer rightly says: ‘Any consequentialist ethics must take probability of outcome into account. A course of action that will certainly produce some benefit is to be preferred to an alternative course that may lead to a slightly larger benefit, but is equally likely to result in no benefit at all.’ (PE, 238). Since it is extremely unlikely that people have the knowledge on which reasonable attempts to take probability into account would have to be based, it is hard to see how the conditions stated by the latest revision of the Prevention-Principle could be met.

It will strengthen this point if we consider two questions that are likely to occur to those who think about Singer’s claim and the reasons against them. One is about the fate of the children born to imprudent parents who live in absolute poverty: is there no obligation to aid these children? The other is about the division of responsibility between the leaders of people who live in absolute poverty and the people themselves: is there no obligation to aid people if their wretched conditions are largely the consequences of the stupidity or immorality of their leaders?

It must be granted, of course, that the children are not responsible for the conditions into which they are born and that the leaders, for example, of China, India, Iraq, and various African countries must bear a major share of the responsibility for the awful conditions that prevail in the domains they rule. Decent people cannot but feel pity for the miserable lives of many millions of people. Acknowledging widespread misery is one thing, however, and accepting the obligation to do something about it—an obligation that would be wrong not to meet—is quite another.

The hard fact is that the aid that may be given will only be
window-dressing that produces, at best, short-term relief and perpetuates the conditions that produce absolute poverty. For the children who are helped will grow into adults who will have children. The temporary improvement of their condition will make the population living in absolute poverty grow faster than it would without aid. And that will make poverty worse in the long run, not better. Nor will the acceptance of the obligation be seen as reasonable if it is born in mind that it will strengthen the rule of the stupid or immoral leaders who are more or less responsible for absolute poverty. It is not easy to behold the pictures of emaciated children that television reports are so eager to inflict on their viewers. The fact remains, nevertheless, that the aid will produce even more emaciated children, unless their leaders are replaced by honest and practical reformers and unless the people who would be the parents of yet unborn miserable children exercise sufficient self-control to avoid having offspring with doomed lives. Given this fact, we must conclude with Singer that ‘we have no obligation to make sacrifices that, to the best of our knowledge, have no prospect of reducing poverty in the long run.’ (PE, 241).

VI

In the light of the foregoing considerations, reasonable and decent people living in affluent circumstances would be well-advised to reject Singer’s rampant moralism. Such people are not murderers, killers, or immoral if they do not donate what they earn beyond the basic necessities to alleviate the suffering of people in absolute poverty. Singer has given no acceptable reason for his claims that affluent people are morally obligated to change radically their lives and society, that ethics requires the equal consideration of the suffering of all people regardless of whether they are responsible for their suffering, and that the mere existence of absolute poverty creates an obligation to alleviate it. What Singer has given is a shoddy argument that plays on the emotions of decent people who regret, as they should, the existence of so much suffering in the world.

It will be asked: is regret enough? Should not people do something? In answer, consider, for instance, an American family of four: two parents and two children. They have an annual income of $100,000, which makes them affluent. Taking various exemptions into account, they are likely to pay about $30,000 in federal and state taxes and in their contributions to Social Security and Medicare. In addition, they have to pay property and school taxes,
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as well as sales tax on various articles they buy. It is not unreasonable to estimate that all in all they pay about $35,000 in various forms of taxes. Approximately 60% of the federal and state budget is spent on welfare programs. (The figure is higher in other affluent countries.) We may say, then, that roughly 60% of their total annual taxes of $35,000, that is $21,000, is spent on welfare programs. So the answer to the question of whether they should not do something is that they are doing something: they are spending about one-fifth of their income, one dollar out of every five, on helping others. This is more than double the tithe Singer regards as the morally acceptable minimum. Of course, they may do more. Generosity, pity, charity, benevolence, and the like may lead them to give more. But as to the supposed obligation to give more—an obligation that it would be immoral not to meet—the case for it has not been made.

5 ‘About 62 percent of the budget ... was allocated to social spending in fiscal 1996. Among the programs funded are Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, various other health programs, education and training, social services, veterans’ programs unemployment insurance, and welfare.’ Wetterau, Desk Reference on the Federal Budget, p. 117.
6 The comments of Steven Bernstein, Thadeusz Metz, Anthony O’Hear, James Otteson, and Neven Petrovic are gratefully acknowledged. It should not be assumed that they accept the argument they have helped to improve.