

Ethics and society: Utilitarianism Philosophy 150: Handout 3

SINGER'S UTILITARIAN ARGUMENT FOR FAMINE RELIEF

1. Singer's argument for famine relief

- (1) Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.
- (2) 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.
- (3) Therefore, if it is in our power to prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.

- This principle "takes ... no account of proximity or distance."
- This principle "makes no distinction between cases in which I am the only person who could possibly do anything and cases in which I am just one among millions in the same position."

- (4) It is in our power to prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.
- (5) Therefore, we ought, morally, to prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care.

2. Singer's argument entails that our traditional moral categories are wrong and stand in need of revision. We think of giving to famine-relief funds as something that's **SUPEREROGATORY**, that is, as something that it would be *nice* to do but that we are by no means *obligated* to do. However, if Singer's argument is sound, then we *are* morally obliged to give to famine-relief funds.

- We noted in *objection* to utilitarianism that it fails to distinguish between acts that it is our duty to perform and acts that are above and beyond the call of duty. But Singer, whose arguments for famine relief are based on utilitarianism, thinks that this is *not* a valid objection to utilitarianism. Instead, he thinks that we should revise our moral categories, and perhaps work toward revising our moral sensibilities, to reflect the fact that *there is no distinction (at least in certain cases) between dutiful acts and supererogatory acts.*

OBJECTIONS, COUNTER-ARGUMENTS AND REPLIES

3. The *first objection* to Singer's argument

The kind of revision required by Singer's argument will make it difficult to know exactly what we are morally required to do and will hence "bring about a general breakdown of moral behavior."

Singer's reply: It is unlikely that the revision will cause a general breakdown of moral behavior.

4. The *second objection* to Singer's argument

Singer's argument requires us "to be preventing as much suffering as we can without sacrificing something else of comparable moral importance."

Singer's reply: This is a good thing, not a bad thing.

5. The *first counter-argument*

It is the government's responsibility to provide for famine relief, and giving to privately organized famine-relief agencies will only encourage the government to shirk its responsibility.

Singer's response: It seems unlikely that the government will shirk its responsibilities simply because people give to privately organized famine-relief agencies.

6. The *second counter-argument*

Relieving famine simply postpones starvation. For, since population growth is out of control, we soon won't be able to supply food for all of those who will need it. There will soon be too many people to feed even if we try to provide food for those who need it now.

Singer's reply: This is *not* an argument *against* famine relief. Rather, it's an argument *for* a particular *kind* of famine relief, namely, population control, helping to reduce the growth of the population so that the food that we have will be enough to feed everyone.

7. Problems with Singer's argument?

Re: premise (2)—How are we to determine whether A and B are of comparable moral importance?