

# Famine, Affluence, and Morality

Peter Singer

# + Peter Singer



# + The Death of Wang Yue





# Global Issues

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## Today, around 21,000 children died around the world

Some **21,000 children die every day** around the world.

That is equivalent to:

- **1 child dying every 4 seconds**
- **14 children dying every minute**
- **A 2011 Libya conflict-scale death toll every day**
- **A 2010 Haiti earthquake occurring every 10 days**
- **A 2004 Asian Tsunami occurring every 11 days**
- **An Iraq-scale death toll every 19–46 days**
- **Just under 7.6 million children dying every year**
- **Some 92 million children dying between 2000 and 2010**

The silent killers are poverty, hunger, easily preventable diseases and illnesses, and other related causes. Despite the scale of this daily/ongoing catastrophe, it rarely manages to achieve, much less sustain, prime-time, headline coverage.

# + World Poverty

- Nearly 1/2 of the world's population live on less than \$2.50 a day.
- More than 1.3 billion people live in *extreme* poverty — less than \$1.25 a day.
- More than 750 million people lack adequate access to clean drinking water.
- Diarrhea caused by inadequate drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene kills an estimated 842,000 people every year, or 2,300 people per day.
  - Preventable diseases kill 2 million children a year who cannot afford treatment.
  - Over 1 million people die from malaria per year. Treating it costs about \$5 per child.
- Oxfam estimates that it would take \$60 billion annually to end extreme global poverty--that's less than 1/4 the income of the top 100 billionaires.
- If every person gave 10% of their income, we'd have \$7 TRILLION to give.



# + Out of sight, out of mind

- **Does it really matter** that we are not walking past these children in the street?



# + To TV or not to TV?

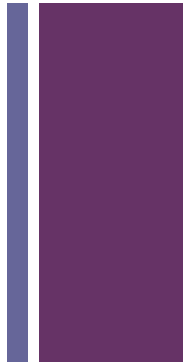


# + The Vintage Car





# + The Shallow Pond



If you are walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, you ought to wade in and pull the child out.

- **Cost to you:** buy new clothes.
- **Benefit:** save a life.

# + Singer's Claims



- The way relatively affluent people react to poverty, suffering, and death cannot be justified.
- The predominant Western moral conceptual scheme needs to be revised.

# + The Principle of Self-Sacrifice

## **The stronger version**

- If it's in our power to prevent something bad from happening, *without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance*, we ought, morally, to do it.

## **The weaker version:**

- *...without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant...*

# + Singer's Argument

1. Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.
2. If it's in our power to prevent something bad from happening, **without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance**, we ought, morally, to do it.
3. It **is** in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.
4. Therefore, we ought to prevent suffering and death.

# + Two radical implications

1. The traditional distinction between **duty** vs. **charity** cannot be drawn, at least not where we normally draw it.

For example, the PSS entails that **there is something morally wrong with not giving relief money to aid organizations** when doing so would not cause oneself much suffering; thus, rather than praising those who do provide aid we should instead **condemn those who fail to give**.

2. We ought, morally, to be **working full-time** to increase the balance of happiness over misery.



# + Why should I give when others choose not to?

1. If everyone gives \$20, that will suffice to end world poverty.
2. So, each person should give \$20.
3. There is no reason why I should give more than others should.
4. Thus, I have no obligation to give more than \$20.

Call this “The Unfairness Argument.”

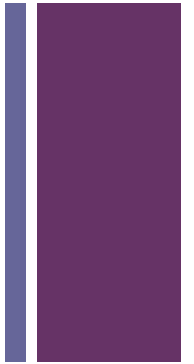
# + Fifty children are drowning

- You walk past a pond in which **fifty children are drowning**.
- Around the pond are **fifty adult bystanders**, none of whom seem willing to aid in the rescue of these children.
- **We have a moral obligation to rescue each of these children** (and it is wrong for us not to do so) because it is within our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.



# + Two additional implications

- **Takes no account of proximity or distance.** It makes no difference whether the person I ought to help is a neighbor or a stranger I will never meet.
- It makes **no difference whether I am the only person capable of aiding others**, or one among millions.

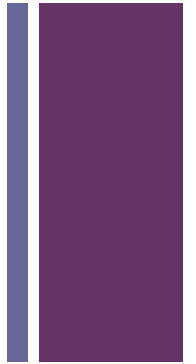




Replies to Singer...

# + Objection 1: Too Demanding

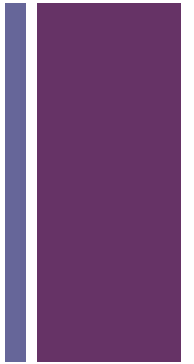
- To demand this much far exceeds the capacities of ordinary people.
- By demanding too much, there will be no compliance.
- So, we should demand less but still achievable goals.





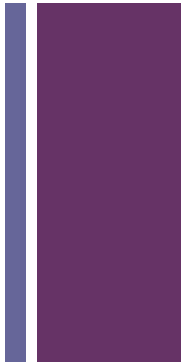
# + Singer's replies

- Where to draw the line between what's required and what moral policy will bring about the best results is a **difficult empirical question**.
  
- But...
  1. Not an excuse for not trying at all.
  2. We can adopt Singer's weaker principle.
  3. Perhaps it only *seems* demanding to us now.
  4. Can be fulfilling (unlike consumerism?).



# + Objection 2: Who's Responsibility?

- I'm not responsible for placing the children in the pond.
- I'm not responsible for the inaction of others.
- Am I responsible for their deaths if I fail to save them?
- Our moral lives should not be dictated by external circumstances for which we aren't responsible.



# + Objection 3: Uncertainty about the future

- Certain pursuits have beneficial consequences that may not be intended or could not be foreseen.
  - E.g. Bill Gates?
- By working full time to help others, we could miss out on possibly unique contributions to human knowledge and any consequent betterment of human welfare.

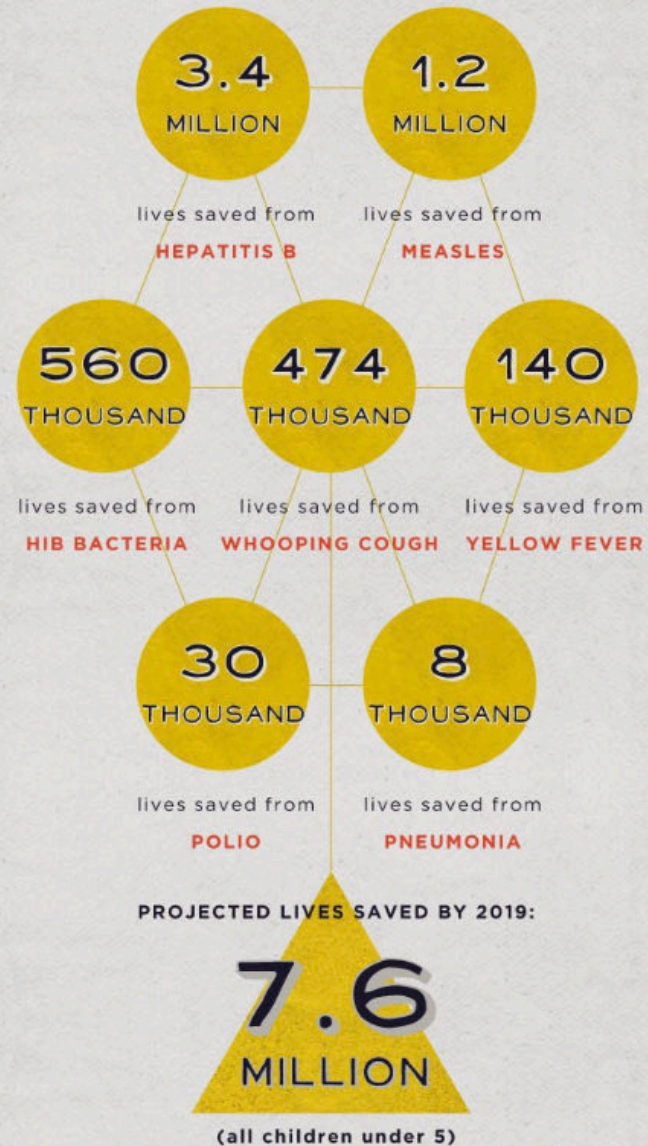




# Billionaire philanthropy saves millions of lives

(On Twitter last night.)

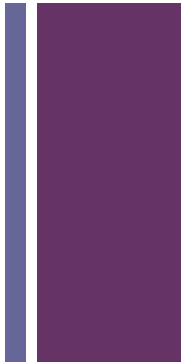
Bill Gates has saved **5,812,000 LIVES**  
by bringing vaccines and improved healthcare  
to children internationally.





# Norman Borlaug

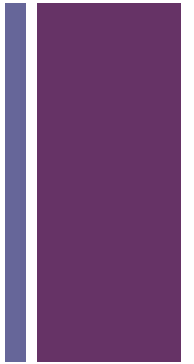
The man who fed the world





# + Reply to uncertainty objection

- This doesn't imply that people are morally permitted to **pursue whatever interests** they have.
- Some interests have **practically zero probability** of social benefit (e.g. buying stylish clothes).
- Uncertainty doesn't imply that you are morally permitted not to contribute to famine relief.



# + The Individual's Point of View

- From an individual's point of view the wait is too long.
- We'd be giving up our lives, projects, interests.

## **Moral Autonomy**

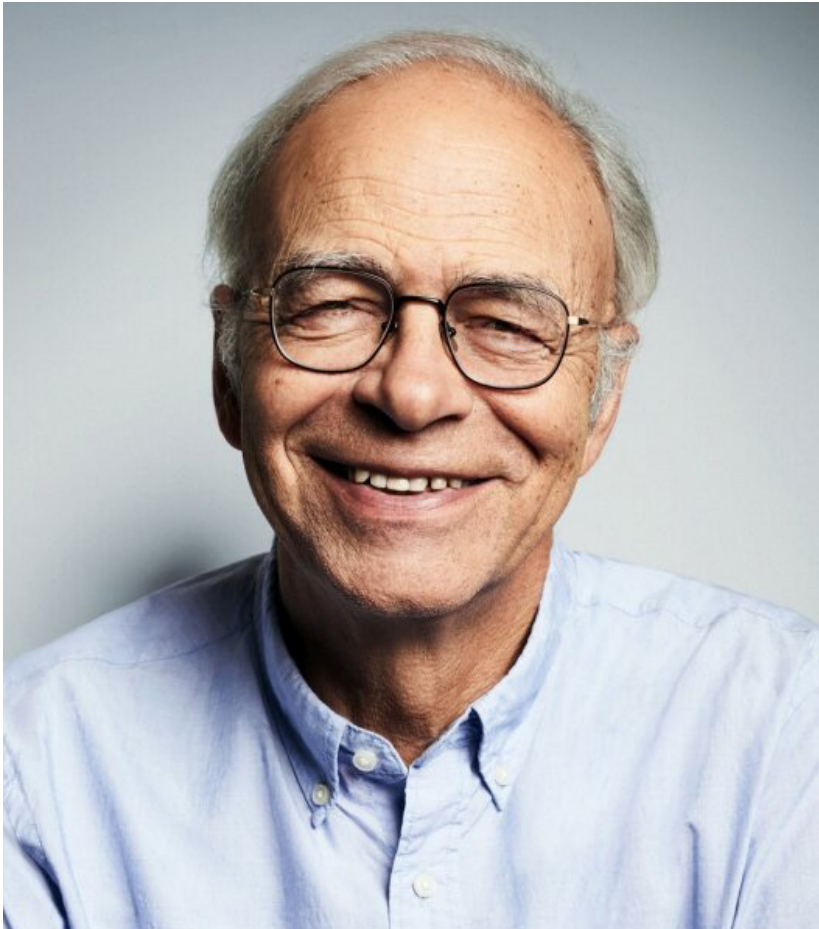
- Are people morally free to live their own lives and pursue their own interests, at least up to a point?

# + “It’s my money and I earned it.”



- But people can earn large amounts of money only when they live under favorable circumstances.
- If Bill Gates lived in a poverty-stricken area, he wouldn't be rich.

# + Summary



- According to common-sense morality, it is an act of **charity** to donate most of your money to help the poor.
- But Singer says we are **morally required** to do so.
- The traditional distinction between duty vs. charity is mistaken.
- We ought to be **working full-time** to increase the balance of happiness over misery.