

Ought we prevent preventable evils?

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Abstract

In *Practical Ethics* Peter Singer argues for an ‘obligation to assist’:

First premise: If we can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, we ought to do it.

Second premise: Absolute poverty is bad.

Third premise: There is some absolute poverty we can prevent without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance.

Conclusion: We ought to prevent some absolute poverty.

This paper is dedicated to a criticism of four readings of the first premise and an undesirable link the first premise has with the third. The paper ends by offering an alternative formulation of an ‘obligation to assist,’ which suffers from none of these problems.

Introduction

In *Practical Ethics* Peter Singer argues for an ‘obligation to assist’:

First premise: If we can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, we ought to do it.

Second premise: Absolute poverty is bad.

Third premise: There is some absolute poverty we can prevent without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance.

Conclusion: We ought to prevent some absolute poverty.¹

In what follows, section 1 is dedicated to four readings of Singer’s first premise. 2 addresses his third premise and its link with the first.

¹ (Singer, 1993, 230-231). I take it that the ‘we’ used throughout this argument is only stylistically plural and is intended to have the effect of a variable ranging over moral agents. Thus the first premise might be written, stiltedly: if moral agent x can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, x ought to do it.

Finally, 3 offers an alternative which suffers none of the problems encountered in 1 and 2.

1. First premise

In criticizing Singer's first premise, I make the following assumption:

(A1) Failing to do what one ought to do is bad.

To fail to do what one ought to do is bad — wrong, wicked, immoral, evil, unethical, etc. I take Singer to share this assumption. He concludes his eighth chapter by saying:

it seems safe to advocate that those earning average or above average incomes in affluent societies, unless they have an unusually large number of dependents or other special needs, ought to give a tenth of their income to reducing absolute poverty. By any reasonable ethical standards this is the minimum we ought to do, *and we do wrong if we do less* [my emphasis] (Singer 1993, 246).

Why wrong to do less? Because in doing less we fail to do what we ought to do, and that is bad, wrong.

Also in arguing for an obligation to assist, Singer rests content with the conclusion, 'We *ought* [my emphasis] to prevent some absolute poverty,' when by amending his first premise to read, 'if we can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, our failure to do so is itself bad,' he could easily have gone on to conclude, 'Our failure to prevent some absolute poverty is *bad*,' a move that is entirely unnecessary when one accepts A1.

The first premise can be taken:

(1.1) If (a) we can prevent something bad (b) without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, (d) we ought to do it.

Counterargument 1

Suppose its happening that p is bad and moral agent X can, without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, prevent it from happening that p . By (1.1) X ought to prevent it from happening that p . Suppose further that a second moral agent Y can, without sacrificing

anything of comparable significance, also prevent it from happening that p . Then by (1.1) Y too ought to prevent it from happening that p . Thus X ought to prevent it from happening that p and Y ought to do so as well. As things turn out, X prevents that p from happening and Y does not. Still, Y ought to have prevented that p . Thus Y failed to do what, by (1.1), Y ought to have done. By (A1) Y 's failure is bad. So even though that p does not happen, in failing to prevent it from happening, which by (1.1) is what Y ought to do, Y behaves badly.

We might consider Singer's own case of the child drowning in a shallow pond — with two persons present instead of one.

The path from the library at my university to the humanities lecture theatre passes a shallow ornamental pond. Suppose that on my way to give a lecture I notice that a small child has fallen in 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 and either canceling my lecture or delaying it until I can find something dry to change into; but compared with the avoidable death of a child this is insignificant. (Singer 1993, 229).

X saves the child, Y does not. The child does get saved. Does Y , however, really behave badly in failing to save it, in failing to do what, by (1.1), Y ought to do? No. Thus, I take it to be untrue that Y ought to save the child. Still, that the child would drown *is* a bad thing, and it *is* possible for Y to save the child without sacrificing anything of comparable significance. In cases like this (1.1) yields the consequence that Y ought to save the child and (A1) the consequence that Y 's failure to do so is bad. *Yet nothing bad really happens*. Thus (1.1), I conclude, should be rejected.

Counterargument 2

Suppose Y is a person of unerringly beneficent intent, a person whose aim is always to do what she ought to do. Y might then reason that if X saves the child, Y herself will not. So Y will fail to do what, by (1.1), she ought to do and thus, by (A1), will behave badly. So Y then concludes that to prevent herself and anyone else from behaving badly, she should make it impossible for others to save the child, so for them (1.1a) remains unsatisfied and they incur no obligation to save it, and for her part she should do what (1.1) dictates she ought to do — save the child herself. Thus the child does get saved, the bad event is

averted, and, since no one else *can* save the child, (1.1) will not dictate to anyone else that they have an obligation to do so. Just imagine Y bending every effort to fend off other would-be child-rescuers!

The situation would be different were X (and others) not in the picture. But occasions on which just one person is in position to prevent evil are few and far between, although not, perhaps, as few and far as the kind of case just described.

Suppose its happening that *p* is bad, and X and Y can each prevent that *p* without sacrificing anything of comparable significance. In this new scenario, however, circumstances prevent both from doing so. In the two-bystander-pond case X and Y can wade in together, and each taking an arm, lift out the child — neither of them failing to do what (1.1) says he ought to do. Unfortunately, the child has not fallen into a pond, but has instead climbed out upon a high branch of a tree to save a cat — which by now has fallen to the ground without injury. The child finds itself out on the high limb, too terrified to try to climb down. The child's grip begins to weaken. X can climb up and save it and so can Y, but the limb will not support the combined weights of all three of them. Given the situation and the fact that X saves the child, it follows that Y does not. Once X is out on the limb rescuing the child, Y should not even try. In not saving the child, does Y really fail to do something she ought to do, does she behave badly? No.

Can (1.1) be repaired? Yes. The previous counterexamples can be foiled by a simple amendment:

- (1.2) If (a) we can prevent something bad (b) without sacrificing anything of comparable significance *and if* (c) *no one else will in fact prevent it*, (d) we ought to do so.

One way to stop this *ought* from applying to oneself is by insuring that clause (c) remains unsatisfied. By shouting encouragement one may get other passers by to remove the child from the pond or high branch. Where the child will in fact be saved by some other party, a person is freed from the onus of an *ought* commanding her to save it as well. Our earlier Y, the one of 'unerringly beneficent intent,' saw it was necessary, in order to falsify (1.1a), to make it impossible for others to prevent the bad event. Given the presence of clause (c) in (1.2), however, all that is needed is for Y to assure herself, not that others *will not be able* to prevent it, but that they *will not in fact* do so.

Suppose as usual that its happening that p is bad. Suppose further that *no one* will prevent that p from happening. Then for each person who can prevent that p without sacrificing ..., *no one else* will do so. Clause (c) is thus universally satisfied. By (1.2), *everyone* who can prevent that p from happening, without sacrificing ..., ought to do so.

Suppose, on the other hand, that just one person will prevent that p from happening without sacrificing Then because clause (c) is unsatisfied for all others, (1.2) does not dictate that *anyone else* who can prevent that p without sacrificing ... ought to do so. But the one person who will prevent it from happening that p without sacrificing ..., is indeed, by (1.2), obliged to do so.

Counterargument 3

Consider another case, however, a case that creates further difficulties for both (1.1) and (1.2). Suppose in a park stand two trees, each having a high limb with a terrified child clinging to it, with one lone adult on the ground below. The grips of both children are failing, and the grown-up, Y, below has time to save at most one. As regards (1.1) and (1.2), here is the situation: That child C_1 falls is bad. Ditto for C_2 . Y can prevent C_1 from falling and Y can prevent C_2 from falling, although it is impossible for Y to prevent both from falling. No one but Y, C_1 , and C_2 is there, so no one other than Y *will in fact* prevent the children from falling. Thus, by (1.1) (or (1.2)), if Y can prevent C_1 from falling without sacrificing ..., Y ought to do so; *and* if Y can prevent C_2 from falling without sacrificing ..., Y ought to do so.

Suppose there is nothing of comparable significance that Y would sacrifice were Y to save C_1 and nothing of comparable significance that Y would sacrifice were Y to save C_2 . Since Y cannot save both, one child, say C_2 , falls, although Y does succeed in rescuing C_1 . Consequently, by (1.1) (or (1.2)), Y fails to do something Y ought to do: Y ought to, but does not, save C_2 . By (A1) to fail to do what one ought to do is bad. Thus in failing to save C_2 Y behaves badly; Y does wrong. Yet, while it definitely is bad *that C_2 falls*, there is nothing really bad about Y's behavior in failing to prevent C_2 from falling, given Y's success in saving C_1 and the impossibility of Y's saving C_1 and C_2 ! So *both* (1.1) and (1.2) must be abandoned.

While it is perfectly reasonable to hold that incompatible states of affairs may severally be possible (although not, of course, jointly), it is very odd to hold that there can be incompatible moral obligations

(obligations to bring such incompatible states of affairs about). To accept incompatible moral obligations seems like saying that there are some *oughts* we need not bother attending to because there is nothing bad about failing to accomplish what they say we ought to. Bas van Fraassen (1973) devises a system that lacks the inference — ‘Op’ therefore ‘Pp’ — in which there can be conflicts of obligation, and there may be moral obligations to do what is not morally permitted. For a discussion as to whether there are any such conflicts, see Daniels (1975, 16).

Counterargument 4

That (1.1) and (1.2) give rise to conflicts of obligation generates another problem. Let ‘O’ represent ‘it ought to be the case that’, ‘ \diamond ’ the *can* that *ought* implies, and premises (i), (ii), and (iii) a situation in which obligations conflict. We then have:

(i)	O(A)	hyp.
(ii)	O(B)	hyp.
(iii)	$\sim\diamond(A \wedge B)$	hyp.
(iv)	$(O(A) \wedge \sim\diamond(A \wedge B)) \rightarrow O(\sim B)$	princ. of oblig.
(v)	$O(\sim B)$	(i), (iii), (iv)
(vi)	$O(\sim B) \rightarrow \sim O(B)$	princ. of oblig.
(vii)	$\sim O(B)$	(v), (vi)
(viii)	$O(B) \wedge \sim O(B)$	(ii), (vii)

The derivation of contradiction (viii) depends upon two principles of obligation: (iv) what is incompatible with an obligation is forbidden and (vi) what is forbidden is not obligatory.

Repairs are needed. One such might read:

- (1.3) If (a) we can prevent something bad (b) without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, (e) we ought *to try* (or *to try our best*) to do it.

Now counterargument 2 fails, as do counterarguments 3 and 4. While it remains true that if X saves the child, Y herself will not, it does not follow from (1.3) that Y ought to save the child, but merely that she ought to *try* to do so. So as long as she tries, there is no reason to say she behaves badly.

And so long as a person can try to perform actions that conflict, while Y cannot save both C_1 and C_2 from their failing perches on the limbs, Y can try to save C_1 and Y can at the same time try to save C_2 .

But (1.3) is still flawed. Suppose that p is bad. By (1.3) X ought to try to prevent it from happening that p . Ditto Y. Y knows X to be capable and trustworthy. X says, 'I will prevent it from happening that p .' In consequence Y does not even bother to try to prevent it. Still, by (1.3) Y ought to try. By (A1) Y's failure to try is bad. Yet nothing bad really takes place, since X succeeds in doing what he said he would.

Another counterexample is provided by the two-children-in-the-tree problem. As before, Y can prevent C_1 from falling and Y can prevent C_2 from falling, although Y cannot prevent both of them from falling. Y realizes this. So Y does not try to save both of them, but instead devotes all his efforts to rescuing C_1 and does not even try to save C_2 . But by (1.3) Y ought to try to save C_1 and Y ought to try to save C_2 . Is his not trying to save C_2 bad? No.

A second repair might read:

- (1.4) If (a) we can prevent something bad (b) without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, (f) we have a *prima facie* obligation (a *pf* obligation) to do so.²

As a matter of terminology I reserve 'ought' simpliciter for obligations *sans phrase* (*all things considered*, '*sp* obligations'). Using (1.4) instead of the earlier (1.1) or (1.2) invalidates the objections just set out in counterarguments 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Regarding 3, 1, and 2: While by (A1) to fail to do what one ought to is bad, to fail to satisfy a *pf* obligation need not be bad at all (unless, of course, the *pf* obligation is an *sp* obligation). Substituting (1.4) for (1.1) (or (1.2)), Y turns out to have a *pf* obligation to save C_1 and a *pf* obligation to save C_2 . Y cannot save both. By rescuing C_1 , Y is precluded from rescuing C_2 . But here the obligation Y fails to satisfy is a *pf* obligation; in not satisfying it Y need not fail to do what Y *ought* to do. Only when *pf* obligations are at the same time *sp* obligations does assumption (A1) apply and make failure to satisfy them bad. In the

² I wish to thank Evan Tiffany for alerting me to possibility that (1.1) might make a claim about *prima facie* obligation, rather than obligation *sans phrase*. As regards *pf* obligation, I have, on Evan's suggestion, benefited from reading (Brink 1994).

earlier cases, when the child will be saved by someone else, Y still has a *pf* obligation to save it, but does not behave badly in not satisfying that *pf* obligation.

Against 4: As regards the *reductio* of conflicts of obligation, one of principles (iv) or (vi), or both, fails to hold for *pf* obligations: either (iv) some acts incompatible with *pf* obligations are not *pf* forbidden, or (vi) some *pf* forbidden acts are also *pf* obligatory.

Using (1.4) in lieu of (1.1) (or (1.2)) in Singer's argument circumvents these problems. Unfortunately, the substitution gives rise to its own difficulty: conclusion (f) is not conclusion (d). Now the argument fails to show that we ought to prevent some absolute poverty! The new conclusion, that we have a *pf* obligation to prevent some absolute poverty, does not entail this, and if the first premise of the original argument is amended to (1.4), the argument is not strong enough to support claims that Singer seems to wish to have follow from it:

Nevertheless, the uncontroversial appearance of the principle that we ought to prevent what is bad when we can do so without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance is deceptive. If it were taken seriously and acted upon, our lives and our world would be fundamentally changed. For the principle applies, not just to rare situations in which one can save a child from a pond, but to the everyday situation in which we can assist those living in absolute poverty. (Singer 1993, 230)

Earlier in (1) it was argued that Singer accepts (A1). By (A1), failure to act upon an *sp* obligation is bad. *Oughts* are meant to be acted upon. But *pf* obligations that do not also qualify as *sp* obligations can be taken seriously *without it being appropriate to act upon them*. If the first premise of Singer's argument is meant to be (1.4), the argument does generate a *pf* obligation to prevent some absolute poverty. Yet unless further reason is given — for instance that the *pf* obligation is somehow shown to be an *sp* obligation as well — those whom the argument persuades that they have a *pf* obligation to prevent some absolute poverty are not thereby given reason to think it *bad* or *wrong* when they fail to act to prevent such poverty and in so doing fundamentally to change our lives and world.

2. The third premise

A final way of rescuing (1.1) (or (1.2)) is to prevent them from spawning conflicts of obligation by calling clause (b) into play. Singer explains the need for (b) as follows:

It [(1.1) or (1.2)] will obviously win the assent of consequentialists; but non-consequentialists should accept it too, because the injunction to prevent what is bad applies only *when nothing comparable is at stake* [my emphasis]. Thus the principle cannot lead to the kinds of actions of which non-consequentialists strongly disapprove — serious violations of individual rights, injustice, broken promises, and so on. If non-consequentialists regard any of these as comparable in moral significance to the bad thing that is to be prevented, they will automatically regard the principle as not applying in those cases in which the bad thing can only be prevented by violating rights, doing injustice, breaking promises, or whatever else is at stake. (Singer 1993, 229–230)

Unfortunately for Singer's argument as a whole, clause (b) saves the day by appealing to the falsity of a version of the third premise — the falsity of: there are some cases of two children about to fall out of trees that a lone person below with time enough to save at most one of them can do so without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance.³

But how exactly is the third premise false? By rescuing C_1 instead of C_2 , Y , it can be claimed, *does* sacrifice something of comparable significance, something whose value goes well beyond that of Y 's clean suit and his showing up to start his lecture on time — *Y sacrifices C_2 's life!* After all, Y *can* save C_2 's life, and Y does not. No, Y lets C_2 die. And if Y were to save C_2 , Y would have to sacrifice C_1 's life. Indeed, if C_1 and C_2 are Y 's own twin children, the sacrifice, for Y , must be terrible.

³ For the sake of completeness, there is another possibility in the case just described: not only is it bad that C_1 falls and bad that C_2 falls, it is also bad that C_1 or C_2 falls. Yet given the construction of the case, while Y *can* prevent C_1 or C_2 from falling, Y can do so only by sacrificing something of comparable significance — the life of C_1 or the life of C_2 . So neither (1.1) nor (1.2) generates an obligation for Y to prevent C_1 or C_2 from falling.

My own resources are meagre when measured against a worldful of absolute poverty. I can save family⁴ A from absolute poverty, I can save family B from it, I can save family C, etc., but I cannot save more than one of the world's abjectly poor families. If I choose to rescue family A, I thereupon opt to sacrifice the welfare of families B, C, and all the other families I can, but do not, save. If I choose to rescue family B, I thereupon sacrifice the welfare of families A, C, and all the others. And so on. Whichever family I choose to save, I do so at the expense of the welfare of every other poor family I could have saved instead.⁵

3. An alternative obligation to assist

- (1.5) Of the evil others will not prevent, we ought to prevent as much as we can.
- (2.5) We can prevent some of the evil others will not prevent.
- (3.5) For some evil we ought to prevent *as much as we can*.

To see how (1.5) changes things, assume that others will not prevent some of the evil we can prevent. According to (1.5) and the alternative argument, we ought to prevent as much of this evil as we can and we behave badly if we fail to do so. Consider once again the children high in the trees. Y is the only person around who can save them; no one else will. Y cannot save them both. Assuming that no other evil besides the plight of the children needs be taken into account, Y can satisfy (3.5) in at least two ways. (i) Y can save C_1 or (ii) Y can save C_2 . Here, while Y ought to prevent as much residual evil as he can, it is not the case that Y ought to save C_1 , nor that Y ought to save C_2 . So, unlike (1.1) and (1.2), (1.5) generates no conflict of obligation. There may be many incompatible ways of preventing as much leftover

⁴ The number of people I can rescue depends upon my resources. If they are meagre, I can perhaps rescue at most one; if they are substantial, I can rescue a large group. I talk of families for simplicity's sake.

⁵ It might be suggested that there still remains an obligation here, a disjunctive obligation: to save family A or B or C or ... or N. But in the circumstances this disjunction is satisfied only by making a disjunctive sacrifice: sacrificing the welfare of (B and C and D and ... and N) or (A and C and D and ... and N) or (A and B and D and ... and N) or ... or (A and B and C and ... and (N-1)).

evil as we can, but (1.5) does not give us a moral directive, an *ought* directed toward one of these, rather than another, or yet some third — much less of obliging us to undertake each.

Now, which is more demanding — Singer's notion of obligation to assist, or (1.5) the alternative notion above? The answer here depends upon which of the notions presented earlier is really Singer's: (1.1), (1.2), (1.3), or (1.4).

(1.1) and (1.2) are demanding to the extreme: they give rise to obligations that conflict and hence cannot all be satisfied conjointly. (1.3) is less demanding than (1.5). (1.3) gives rise to false obligations: some false or unnecessary failures to try to do certain things are bad. Finally, (1.4) is less demanding than (1.5): failure to act upon *pf* obligations, unless they are *sp* obligations as well, is not bad, wrong.

Singer's argument challenges the moderately or well-off first-world reader: Are you engaged in preventing some of the world's absolute poverty?, it asks. Absolute poverty is bad, and you do have the means to prevent it. Ergo, you *ought* to prevent it. But as the preceding sections of this paper show, this argument does not establish that we have any such *sp* obligation.

And the alternative argument? It too presents a challenge: For some evil you ought to prevent as much as you can, it concludes. In the ultra-intricate reality first-world readers find themselves, what level of compliance with this directive do they attain? One way to prevent as much of the leftover evil as you might be to prevent a certain portion of the world's absolute poverty. A second might be to prevent some other portion. Yet another might ignore poverty altogether, and concentrate upon tyranny, brutality, slavery, disease, lack of clean air and water, helplessness, ignorance, or perhaps just a bit of poverty together with small dollops of a few other of life's scourges. So, in partial response to the alternative argument's challenge, the fact that people are not engaged in fending off third-world poverty by hefty donations to Oxfam does not in and of itself convict them of failing to do what (1.5) dictates they ought to.

So, does the alternative argument and the *ought* it generates allow the moderately or very wealthy person off the moral hook? Here is what Acting Lieutenant Jim Chee of the Navajo Tribal Police says: 'I grew up knowing it's wrong to have more than you need. It means you're not taking care of your people' (Hillerman 1997, 278). Behind Chee's remark lie two ideas:

- (A) Wealth enhances what one can do, one's ability, to prevent evil.
 (B) Often in doing what one can to prevent evil, one spends portions of one's wealth.

All else being equal, the wealthy can do more to prevent evil than the impoverished. Yet the fact that the well-off tend to retain, if not to augment their wealth signals, although it does not conclusively prove, that they have not been doing what they ought to do — otherwise some of that wealth would have got spent along the way in aid of the doing. This is why Chee calls (unspent) wealth, 'a symbol for selfishness' (Hillerman 1997, 193).

I am in a poor position to judge the degree to which my moderately affluent neighbours are fulfilling the obligation the alternative argument lays upon them. Instead, let the moderately and well-off folk among us ask themselves, 'Of the evil others are not going to prevent, have I prevented as much as I can, or am I just saving up to devote my now, not-so-meagre resources to my own comfort and enjoyment?'

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