

The Absence of Individual Integrity: A Utilitarian Failure

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Abstract—In the 1972 essay *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*, Peter Singer's famine relief argument establishes a moral obligation in humanitarian aid. Adhering to the principles of utilitarianism, Singer only supports actions that minimize human suffering. The famine relief argument presents a stark moral challenge to the traditional distinction between duty and charity. The following essay seeks to analyze and examine Singer's claims. Through a thought experiment, I will demonstrate how minimizing suffering is not the most significant priority to moral agents. The concept of a project and individual integrity undermine the foundation of the famine relief argument.

Index Terms—Humanitarian aid, utilitarianism, moral agents, the famine relief.

I. INTRODUCTION

One morning, walking past a shallow pond, you see a child drowning in the water. He was struggling desperately for help. The water in the pond was very cold and the wind was blowing around him. Now and then he emerges, now and then he sinks, and you see him losing his strength and his figure, his hands and his head being covered by the water. How would you respond? Would you watch the child's body sink? Would you watch him lose his breath? Would you watch the wind and the pool drown a life that just now seemed alive?

Natural human instincts indicate that the life of a child is much more significant than the risk you would take on. Any moral person would wade in and pull the child out. You would feel an invisible force pressing for action. You will feel an invisible force forcing you to take action, you will feel the blood pumping through your body, you will feel that you should be desperate to save that life and not let it pass you by. What a moral man can imagine at this moment in his mind is not to see a living being die in this way.

II. PART ONE

In *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*, Australian philosopher Peter Singer introduced the thought experiment above. Singer is convinced that the intuition in saving the drowning child reflects a fundamental moral doctrine. Building on top of a utilitarian framework, he declares that "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" (231).

Utility has a plural nature: it is both positive and normative, and it is normative not only for every individual, but normative also for the collectivity. This plurality generates tensions. The effort to reconcile these tensions explains the diversity of utilitarian doctrines as well as their evolution, both within classical utilitarian theories and contemporary theories, and even the development from hedonist utilitarianism to preference utilitarianism [1].

Bernard Williams's integrity objection against utilitarianism has made a very influential contribution to the view that utilitarianism is so demanding that it cannot be a serious option. Utilitarian's, on the other hand, have generally denied that a suitably sophisticated version of utilitarianism is incompatible with agents' integrity [2].

Individuals have a duty to minimize suffering. For example: In the above situation, an adult in a shallow pool can save a life without sacrificing too much of his own interests such as life, health, etc., then we should do it. Another example is our blood donation campaign. If a healthy person gives 400cc of blood every year, it will not affect health but may save a life, then we should do it.

He presents two versions of this premise; the strong version, as above, argues we ought to prevent suffering without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance (Singer 1972: 241, 1977: 37, 1993: 231), whereas the weak version argues we ought to do so, as long as we do not sacrifice 'something morally important' (Singer 1972: 241). For the purposes of this essay, we shall understand objections as applying to both versions in order to evaluate if they can be morally justified [3].

Recent publications by Pogge (Global ethics: seminal essays. St. Paul: Paragon House 2008) and by Singer (The life you can save: acting now to end world poverty. New York: Random House 2009) have resuscitated a debate over the justifiability of famine relief between Singer and ecologist Garrett Hardin in the 1970s. Yet that debate concluded with a general recognition that (a) general considerations of development ethics presented more compelling ethical problems than famine relief; and (b) some form of development would be essential to avoiding the problems of growth noted by Hardin. Better than renewing the debate, we should recognize two points [4].

Expanding on the principle, Singer establishes the famine relief argument. He argues for a moral obligation to end suffering worldwide through donations to humanitarian organizations. Similar to rescuing the drowning child, we have the responsibility to save millions of lives struggling to survive under famine, poverty, and war. The duty to charity dictates that all moral agents prioritize relief fundings over any non-essential spending. Buying new clothes or going on vacations are never of equal moral significance to eradicating malaria or providing basic medical care. The responsibility in donation only ends at the level where, "by giving more, I

would cause as much suffering to myself or my dependents as I would relieve by my gift” (Singer, 241) [5]. The distinction between duty and charity no longer exists. We must be willing to sacrifice for the greater good.

Singer is threatening our traditional ethical framework. Although numerous philosophers reject the famine relief argument, most criticisms fall short of providing sufficient evidence and justification. In 1977, American philosopher Thomas Nagel argued that Singer failed to confront the social and economic hierarchy that produced extreme inequality and extensive human suffering. The reliance on a charity solution demonstrates a refusal “to challenge the legitimacy of the system of property under which the donors of charity hold title to their possessions” (Nagel, 57) [6]. However, the presence of unsolved structural challenges is not relevant in determining our moral obligations. The famine relief argument holds on regardless of the legitimacy of the political framework that charity organizations exist under. “People who refuse to make voluntary contributions are refusing to prevent a certain amount of suffering without being able to point to any tangible beneficial consequences of their refusal” (Singer, 239).

III. PART TWO

In the following passage, I aim to present a different perspective. Through a scenario, I will demonstrate how the utilitarian foundation behind Singer’s argument dismisses individual integrity and undermines the basis of human prosperity. Singer ignores the challenge in adhering to the duty of self-sacrifice and deprives moral agents of the freedom to pursue a coherent individual life.

In a critique of utilitarianism, English philosopher Bernard Williams established the following scenario: A scientist named George is unemployed. He is offered a position at a government laboratory to develop biological weapons. George was torn that it would be against his ethics to accept such a job offer; However, if he refuses, the whole family will suffer because they have no income. Since jobs are scarce and George is struggling to provide for the family, no one would have a problem with him working on biological warfare. However, George is a principled humanitarian opposed to using scientific research for war. If he takes the offer, George would slow the developmental process indefinitely. Other scientists, on the contrary, would take the position to advance the experiments further.

According to Singer, George would have to accept the offer. If George were to not take the job, he would be accountable for the suffering caused by the progress in biological warfare. The utilitarian doctrine of negative responsibility dictates that “if I know that if I do X, a will eventuate, and if I refrain from doing X, b will, and that b is worse than a, then I am responsible for b if I refrain voluntarily from doing X ” (Williams, 90) [7]. George is responsible for the consequences of his action and the consequences of others’ actions he fails to prevent. Despite the government being the sole advocate and cause of biological warfare, George is obligated to minimize any suffering.

However, Singer’s solution fails to recognize and respect George’s sacrifice. George would feel ashamed and guilty for

what he had done against his morals. He may have visions of biological warfare constantly in his mind, his spirit may be broken, and he may suffer physical and mental illness as a result. People will face great psychological pressure if they live in an environment that violates their morality for a long time. George would think about what his relatives, friends and family would think about this. He would think that everyone around him would see him in a bad light and think that he was doing something immoral. In this case, he may be extremely depressed, cautious every day, cannot hold up his head in front of others, and even loathe himself, loathe his life.

Without any consideration of individual principles or values, utilitarianism requires moral agents to act on decisions that maximize utility. George’s psychological suffering would be seen as irrational and self-indulgent. Any hesitancy or uncertainty in accepting the government offer would reflect George’s reluctance to perform a moral duty. Singer, ignoring George’s ethical view regarding biological weapons, never understands why George is grieving over a decision that promotes the greater good. Having to derive an impartial judgment through a consequentialist view alone, Singer leaves no space for individual integrity.

In this case, George’s morality is distorted, and Singer sacrifices George’s personal interests to realize the requirements of utilitarianism. Examples of this are common: in 19th-century factories, workers were expected to work long hours, even if some factory owners paid them, at the personal expense of the workers. Not all workers are willing to sacrifice personal rest time for pay, and many factory owners don’t even pay a premium. This is now common even in modern society. The enterprise forces employees to work overtime for a long time in a bullying and overwhelming manner. Although the opinions of employees may be solicited on the surface, in fact, they cannot comply with their own wishes due to the pressure of the surrounding environment, and their personal rights and interests are seriously damaged.

IV. PART THREE

Utilitarianism demands the sacrifice of moral principles and private commitments over the general welfare. While allowing moral agents to pursue individual goals and ambitions in theory, Singer only promotes the ideas and decisions that maximize utility. We would no longer be in control of our lives: All actions must be dedicated to the sole cause of minimizing suffering. Utilitarian agents lost unique individual and moral identities. By alienating “one from one’s moral feelings” and “one from one’s actions,” utilitarianism destroys individual integrity (Williams, 86).

For example, when people in a collective have different opinions, sometimes the collective leader will make decisions according to the principle of “minority obeying the majority”. In this way, it seems that the interests of the majority are satisfied, but the interests of the minority are sacrificed, and they lose their unique personal identity. People who lose their unique personal identities may lose control of their lives, such as when the government takes over land to build roads, or when families move out of their homes, even with appropriate compensation. People have lost the right to

personal choice, the integrity of the individual and the family has been destroyed, and the moral feelings of the individual have been destroyed.

V. PART FOUR

Fulfilling Singer's demanding obligation is antithetical to the value of life. As rational beings, we exist not to serve a common cause. Unlike bees and ants living in a colony, no human must be forced to sacrifice for the greater good. On the contrary, we live with the freedom to pursue happiness and meaning in life. Moral agents must be entitled to projects: The commitment to a purpose, a cause, or a career over an entire life. In contrast to any other action or desire, dedication to a project provides life with an overarching theme, allowing individuals to prosper. Through individual autonomy, we develop faith, moral frameworks, and interpretations of the world that cultivates and protects individual integrity.

Those who have adopted rights based positions differ considerably with respect to what rights people have. In the political sphere, Rawls gives pride of place to those rights associated with the principles of justice which he defends, including the welfare rights associated with the difference principle. Nozick rejects welfare rights entirely, basing his view on the Lockean Rights to private property which are presumably derivable from a more basic libertarian right not to be coercively interfered with. Dworkin's view is that all of our political rights are derivable from a fundamental right to equal concern and respect. There is little agreement with respect to foundations either. Rawls argues for a form of social contract theory; Nozick suggests that our having rights is linked to the notion of the meaningfulness of life. Dworkin says little beyond noting that talk of natural rights need not rest on dubious metaphysical or ontological assumptions.[8]

We live together on this earth, where everyone is born to share every right equally and should not be forced to sacrifice their own interests. Notice the key word "forced" here. Compulsion is sometimes instructed to do so, sometimes you have no choice, we should not create a situation where others have no choice, sometimes peer pressure because most people do what others do. Minority interests also need to be protected. As a minority, they should have the consciousness of self-protection, rather than giving up their own rights.

Keeping individual integrity is a higher moral obligation than minimizing suffering. Therefore, in order to determine George's response in the thought experiment, we must abandon Singer's moral obligation. The most important variable in the decision-making process is George's integrity: The identity of being a dedicated chemist with high ethical standards devoting an entire career to the betterment of humanity. Examining George's commitments, I believe that George owns a valid justification to reject Singer's demand. George must turn down the government offer to pursue the project of advancing scientific knowledge and preserve the integrity of being a scientist. Outside of utilitarianism, George's action would be admirable. We would respect George for maintaining integrity and self-conscience despite facing immense pressure.

VI. CONCLUSION

If the counterarguments I raised were successful, George would demonstrate that defending individual integrity is a greater priority than complying with Singer's moral obligation. Now, I would have to return to the famine relief argument and present a similar counter position. In famine, relief, and morality, Singer posed the argument by asking: Would donation to aid agencies increase the general utility? However, the real question that determines whether a moral obligation exists is: Would contributions to relief be a significant barrier to your commitments and violate your integrity? The answer is YES. Since following Singer's principle "requires reducing ourselves to the level of marginal utility," most agents would no longer have the means of committing to a project (Singer, 241). Having to donate all material possessions and work full-time for relief is a heavy burden that would compromise individual integrity. Unlike what Singer implies, refusing to donate is not immoral or nihilistic. A Moral agent is entitled to living a coherent life and pursue individual dreams without having to sacrifice for the greater good. I believe that Singer is justified in pursuing humanitarian relief and devoting a life to the benefit of humanity (as his own project). However, Singer holds no power to impose the same standards on everyone.

Returning to Singer's thought experiment in the beginning, I would save the child in the shallow pond. I accept the moral responsibility ascribed to the drowning child. We have to prevent the suffering of the child and contribute to general utility. However, I refuse to accept the version of utilitarianism in the famine relief argument. Singer's comparison between the drowning child and famine relief is inaccurate. The intuition in saving the child would not prove that we have a moral obligation to contribute to charities. While famine, war, and deaths are constant in the human experience, the drowning child is an anomalous event with no tendency to repeat. Unlike having to devote an entire life to humanitarian relief, saving a single child would not compromise our integrity and commitments. Although Singer's vision represents a high moral aspiration, the moral principle is predicated on a false analogy and overgeneralization. In similar predicaments, the principle that dictates moral obligation must prioritize individual commitment and individual integrity over the responsibility to minimize suffering.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sungchun Yuen conducted the research; analyzed the data; wrote the paper all by himself.

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