sciendo

studia humana
QUARTERLY JOURNAL

Studia Humana
Volume 9:2 (2020), pp. 135—141
DOI: 10.2478/sh-2020-0022

Peter Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality": Three Libertarian Refutations

J. C. Lester

Independent scholar
London, England

e-mail: jclester@gmail.com

Abstract:
Peter Singer's famous and influential article is criticised in three main ways that can be considered libertarian, although many non-libertarians could also accept them: 1) the relevant moral principle is more plausibly about upholding an implicit contract rather than globalising a moral intuition that had local evolutionary origins; 2) its principle of the immorality of not stopping bad things is paradoxical, as it overlooks the converse aspect that would be the positive morality of not starting bad things and also thereby conceptually eliminates innocence; and 3) free markets – especially international free trade – have been cogently explained to be the real solution to the global "major evils" of "poverty" and "pollution", while "overpopulation" does not exist in free-market frameworks; hence charity is a relatively minor alleviant to the problem of insufficiently free markets. There are also various subsidiary arguments throughout.
Keywords: Peter Singer, libertarianism, effective altruism, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality".

1. Introduction

This essay is a response to the famous and influential article that is Singer 1972 [13] (hereafter S72). It applies (at 2.2) an argument developed on first reading this, and other texts on morals, at university: in short, that moral neutrality must be logically possible.[1] But there are now additional arguments that further undermine S72. Criticisms that have similarities to those here have appeared

in various places. The arguments here appear to be sufficiently different to be worth expounding. However, it would be too digressive to attempt comparisons and contrasts.

2. Moral Obligations

2.1 The First Refutation: the Relevant Principle is Implicitly Contractual

S72 is quoted at appropriate junctures and replies then follow.

"I begin with the assumption that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad" [13, p. 231]. Agreed.

"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" [13, p. 231]. It might be morally good, but there need be no moral obligation. As we shall see, it will usually be supererogatory.

"This principle seems almost as uncontroversial as the last one" [13, p. 231]. In the final analysis, at least, it cannot be philosophically relevant whether a principle is "uncontroversial". Some uncontroversial principles might be mistaken and some controversial principles might be correct. In any case, however, it can hardly be "almost as uncontroversial" that we have, by implication, such a general and huge obligation to prevent any and all bad things from happening around the whole world (even allowing for the caveat "without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance"[2]).

"It requires us only to prevent what is bad, and not to promote what is good" [13, p. 231]. As the implied obligation is immense (to prevent any "lack of food, shelter, and medical care" around the entire world is only a small part of it), the "only" is a limit that will never be reachable (at least, until free-market progress eventually eradicates such bad things) except via the caveat. There is also the problem of whether, or how far, "to prevent what is bad, and not to promote what is good" is a clear or even coherent distinction. Isn't "lack of food" a bad thing and having food a good thing? And to the extent that Augustine is right, a bad thing is never a real presence but only the absence of a good thing; and we cannot all have every good thing.[3] However, the clarity and coherence of this distinction need not be explored here.[4]

"and it requires this of us only when we can do it without sacrificing anything that is, from the moral point of view, comparably important" [13, p. 231]. In other words, apparently, we have to strive to alleviate all of the bad things in the world "only" up to the point where we are in almost as bad a condition ourselves. That is, we "only" have a moral obligation to behave as a virtual saint (no religious meaning is intended). This is clearly interpretable as a type of reductio ad absurdum; although not in the strict logical sense of deriving a contradiction. It thereby naturally suggests that another principle altogether might be the correct one. However, it is sometimes possible to embrace an apparent absurdity and interpret such a, non-contradictory, reductio as a genuine and remarkable insight. And that is what S72 mistakenly does.

S72 then puts the central and famous argument that is still much used and cited today:

> An application of this principle would be as follows: if I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will

> mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing [13, p. 231].

This does indeed apply S72's principle. And it applies it to a very persuasive example of where there seems to be a moral obligation. However, this is entirely misleading. Just because a principle (or theory) fits the circumstances (or data) and seems plausible – or even "uncontroversial" – does not mean that it is the correct principle. For the explanation of a moral obligation here does not need to use that general and, in the modern globally-knowable-and-accessible world, extremely demanding principle. Admittedly, that principle – or possibly one covering dire situations, at least – might well be something like the one that Homo sapiens evolved to have: it would have protected likely relatives or at least valuable allies. And it still fits our existing moral intuitions: we have not lived long enough in market societies for our moral intuitions to have evolved to fit them.[5] However, the real moral obligation is better explained today in terms of, implicit or explicit, local rules and contracts.

In all modern neighbourhoods, whether solely based on private property or with some political institutions, there are rules as to what is permitted and what is obligatory. By occupying or voluntarily entering these neighbourhoods a person implicitly contracts into accepting those rules. Some of those rules will be explicit (probably written somewhere but widely understood as well) and some will be implicit (relying on common-sense standards of acceptable behaviour). Such rules often include an obligation either to help directly or, more likely, to call for assistance – if no one else has already done so – in the event of certain temporary, extreme, emergencies: buildings on fire, serious road accidents, criminal activities in progress, etc. (the rules never include an obligation to assist people in an area of general and sustained emergency, such as a famine or deadly disease; as that would keep people away and result in less assistance). A drowning child would constitute one such temporary, extreme, emergency. Thus, the moral obligation here is more plausibly explained by an implicit local contract and not by S72's global and very general principle. If we experience lesser examples of bad things in the neighbourhood, then it will be both widely understood and morally accepted that there is no obligation to assist. But if S72's principle were the correct one, then people would expect and feel such obligations even for lesser examples. This, then, explains one serious mistake in S72 and is the first libertarian refutation: that is, a refutation using some libertarian-type assumptions and arguments.[6]

2.2 The Second Refutation: the Suggested Principle is Paradoxical

The principle stated and defended in S72 also has implications that allow for another reductio, and one that is at least close to implying a contradiction. To simplify matters, we can ignore the possible problem of a clear distinction between good things and bad things and only speak in terms of bad things.[7] If not stopping bad things that exist when we easily could is inherently immoral (not doing what "we ought, morally, to do"), then – conversely – not starting bad things when we easily could is inherently positively moral (doing what "we ought, morally, to do"). However, there is usually a far greater balance of bad things that we omit to do (and could easily have done) than bad things that we omit to stop (and could easily have stopped): e.g., personally engaging in theft/vandalism/arson/etc. versus stopping other people engaging in these things. Consequently, overall, we omit to start more bad things than we omit to stop bad things. Therefore, by simply

omitting to do either we are either both moral and immoral at the same time or on balance positively extremely moral.[8] It is paradoxical to describe mere inaction as either 'moral and immoral' or 'on balance positively moral'.[9] The paradox is easily avoided if we make something like the following three more-conventional distinctions, which libertarians qua libertarians hold more consistently than most people. To proactively and altruistically stop bad things is positively moral. To proactively inflict bad things is immoral.[10] And to omit to do either is morally neutral. S72 argues for a position that implies a paradox and leaves no conceptual room for the possibility of moral neutrality, otherwise known as 'innocence'. This is the second libertarian refutation.

S72 goes on to say, "If we accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us …" [13, p. 232]. There are common confusions in ethics concerning all of these three entirely different things, "impartiality, universalizability, equality" (and probably "or whatever" too). Any "impartiality" is always contextual. We can only be impartial in the application of the rules or principles towards which we are first partial, or at least somehow obligated. So, in the drowning child (or temporary, extreme, emergency) case, we are contractually obligated to act with "impartiality" in the sense of taking no account of the identity of the child (or of the specific people or nature of any other relevant emergencies). Similarly, "universalizability" is always contextual. An obligation 'universally' covers all the people and situations cited in the relevant principle and not people and situations that are outside it. As for "equality", that only applies here in the sense that all contractual obligations are prima facie equally binding (unless some hierarchy is stated or implied, perhaps). None of these three specified terms necessarily imply considering all of the people in the world. And even if they were to do so, then that would still leave the question, 'With respect to what principle?'[11] Consequently, we can – and even must – "discriminate" in favour of people who are covered by any relevant contractual principle (at least until any contractual obligations have been met).[12]

2.3 The Third Refutation: Free Markets Best Solve Real "Major Evils" Problems

S72 then asserts that "most of the major evils – poverty, overpopulation, pollution – are problems in which everyone is almost equally involved" [13, p. 233]. Global poverty and pollution are, on average, reducing all the time thanks to the economic growth that markets create. With more libertarian-like property rights and thereby greater growth, they would be reducing even faster. It is a myth that there is global "overpopulation". A spontaneously growing global population – based on individual reproductive choices in the specific circumstances – aids economic growth due to the greater division of labour.[13] Popular books – for instance, Simon [12], Lomborg [6], Pinker [9], and Rosling [11] – now more or less explain these things (the highly detailed evidence and arguments cannot be rehearsed here). However, libertarian explanations are also needed to add clarity and cogency; none of those popular books are libertarian. Therefore, to the extent that "everyone is almost equally involved" it is not in terms of proactive culpability but, rather, the unintended beneficial effects of free markets within countries and free trade between the residents of different countries (insofar as politics, or each state, allows this to happen). The solution to real "major evils" is not "effective altruism" – as the movement[14] associated with S72's arguments has become called – but laissez-faire economies (in the sense that protects people and their libertarian property).

If there were to be genuine free trade around the world, then capital would be likely to make its way to employ the cheap labour where it is; and this would soon raise living standards in those areas to approach a new global norm. Anti-free-traders hold that free trade can proactively impose on some of the existing population. But I do not proactively impose on you if I buy imported foreign products. And you proactively impose on me if, via politics, you can prevent me from doing so. The boost to the economy that free trade allows ultimately raises the general living standards of the country, and any wage falls or structural unemployment are temporary. If trade barriers really were liberal and economic, then we should impose them within countries just as much as between any two countries.

Into the foreseeable future there will always be room for charity that can do real good around the world. But, as we have seen, that charity is supererogatory. And charity at most puts the cherry on the cake. The free market – which strictly must include international free trade – creates the ever-growing cake. Those people giving charitable donations to help the worst-off in the world might do better in the long term to spend at least some of their time and money campaigning for more free trade with needy areas. S72 does not recognise that free markets are far and away the best solution to any real "major evils" problems. Therefore, this is the third libertarian refutation. The rest of S72 raises no more issues that this triple refutation needs to address.[15]

References

1. Hayek, F. A. *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
2. Lester, J. C. *Escape from Leviathan: Libertarianism Without Justificationism*, Buckingham: The University of Buckingham Press, [2000] 2012.
3. Lester, J. C. *Arguments for Liberty: a Libertarian Miscellany*, Buckingham: The University of Buckingham Press, [2011] 2016.
4. Lester, J. C. *Explaining Libertarianism: Some Philosophical Arguments*, Buckingham: The University of Buckingham Press, 2014.
5. Levendis, J., R. B. Eckhardt, and W. Block. Evolutionary Psychology, Economic Freedom, Trade and Benevolence, *Review of Economic Perspectives* 19 (2), 2019, pp. 73-94.
6. Lomborg, B. *The Skeptical Environmentalist*: *Measuring the Real State of the World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1998] 2001 [English edition].
7. MacAskill, W. *Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Make a Difference*, New York, N. Y.: Penguin Random House, 2015.
8. Miller, D, W. *Critical Rationalism: A Restatement and Defence*, Chicago and La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1994.
9. Pinker, S. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, New York, N.Y.: Viking, 2018.
10. Popper, K. R. *Conjectures and Refutations*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, [1963] 1978.
11. Rosling, H., O. Rosling, and A. Rosling Rönnlund. *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2018.
12. Simon, J. *The Ultimate Resource II: People, Materials, and Environment*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1981] 1996 (revised).

13. Singer, P. Famine, Affluence, and Morality. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (3), 1972, pp. 229-243.
14. Singer, P. *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015.
15. Whitmore, D. The Overpopulation Myth, The Ludwig von Mises Centre, https://misesuk.org/2020/04/21/the-overpopulation-myth/, 2020.

Notes

1. The argument is also applied, along with others, to abortion and infanticide in another essay.
2. An anonymous review asserts that "Singer's 'comparable moral importance' need not be interpreted the way Singer wants. Someone might hold that a person's own life and well-being have great moral importance. In that case, Singer's principle wouldn't be very demanding." It seems unremarkable to assert that *every* "person's own life and well-being have great moral importance". Hence, this criticism would only appear to be cogent if "great" is interpreted as vastly more "moral importance" for a particular person. It is hard to see how an impartial observer could reach that conclusion.
3. "For what is that which we call evil but the absence of good? In the bodies of animals, disease and wounds mean nothing but the absence of health; for when a cure is effected, that does not mean that the evils which were present – namely, the diseases and wounds – go away from the body and dwell elsewhere: they altogether cease to exist; for the wound or disease is not a substance, but a defect in the fleshly substance, – the flesh itself being a substance, and therefore something good, of which those evils – that is, privations of the good which we call health – are accidents." Augustine of Hippo, *Enchiridion*, Chap. 11.
4. An anonymous review asserts that the "discussion of Augustine's view of evil as privation is off topic." But it is only a short point rather than a "discussion", and some response does seem relevant given S72's emphasis on the importance of the principle being about preventing what is bad and not promoting what is good.
5. As Hayek [1] explains, in the "great society" (or what Adam Smith called the "commercial society") we sometimes have to leave such evolved moral instincts behind. For a more-recent and sophisticated account of this thesis see Levendis, Eckhardt, & Block [5].
6. An anonymous review asserts: "The author is right that implicit rules or contracts in a neighborhood can explain the duty to rescue the drowning child. But he needs to add an argument that we are under a moral obligation not to violate such implicit contracts." However, this appears to fall into the error of justificationism (requiring epistemological support). If such an argument were added, then it would itself have various assumptions that could themselves be held to be in need of similar 'support', ad infinitum. As critical rationalism (see, for instance Popper [10] and Miller [8]) explains, all attempts at support appear to fall to this ad infinitum criticism, or they are implicitly circular, or they ultimately rest on some dogmatic assumption held to be "self-evident" (in effect, "evident" to the "self" propounding the argument). Conjectural explanations are all that we have. And these require potentially refuting criticisms, not demands for 'support'.
7. As an anonymous review helpfully illustrates, it introduces unnecessary complications and confusion to do this in terms that mention both bad and good things.

8. An anonymous review makes the following assertion: “For an argument about net moral balance to work here, we would need reason to think that it is easier not to start a bad thing than to fail to stop a bad thing.” It is true that merely not doing things is, usually, equally easy whatever they are. But S72’s argument is that it is immoral not to prevent a bad thing when this could easily be done. And this appears to imply the converse argument that it is moral not to cause a bad thing when this could easily be done. That it is equally easy to do nothing in both cases is not relevant.

9. An anonymous review asks, “why should we be concerned with someone’s net moral balance, i.e., his overall moral ranking? It is sufficient for Singer’s argument that someone who fails to prevent certain evils has acted immorally.” We should be concerned because S72’s central argument implies a paradox, by parallel reasoning, and a paradox requires a solution (or a sound explanation of why it must be accepted despite the appearance of paradox).

10. And thereby flouts liberty to the extent that it interferes with self-ownership and property as derivable from an abstract theory of interpersonal liberty (see Lester [2], [3], [4]).

11. There is a background assumption in S72 of some sort of utilitarianism. But that is best left in the background and the text’s arguments taken at face value.

12. An anonymous review comments thus: “The author fails to show that impartiality and universalizability are contextual, if this means that these standards could not mandate obligations to all human beings. The fact that all rules separate those covered by the rule from those who aren’t doesn’t entail that there aren’t rules that cover everybody.” This is a misunderstanding. Of course, there can be principles that require impartiality or universalisabilty among “all human beings” (or all persons of whatever species, or all sentient entities, or all plants, or all whatever you like). The point is, there is no such thing as pure impartiality or universalisability. Someone cannot simply be required to behave impartially or universalisably. There has to be a principle that explains the type of behaviour and the domain of entities to which it applies. S72 appears to make the common mistake that impartiality and universalisability as such must necessarily refer to all human beings (at least). This is not even the case, a priori, with moral principles.

13. A good recent article explaining this is Whitmore [15].

14. See, for instance, Singer [14] and MacAskill [7].

15. An anonymous review comments: “The author’s argument that a growing free market economy is the best way to alleviate global poverty is a good one, but he just briefly mentions people who have claimed this and fails to develop the point.” This appears again to be an illegitimate demand for more ‘support’ for the argument. It would, of course, be possible to add much by way of explanation of this point. But that would still not support the basic argument and it would, in any case, be a digression in being largely about economics and empirical matters when this essay is primarily philosophical. However, it would surely have been remiss to have left this issue entirely unaddressed given that it is the practical solution to the real problems that S72 seeks to solve. In fact, economics is probably far more important here than philosophy. Economics is usually more important than philosophy. But only in the sense that sewerage is more important than economics.