

## 140: Matters of Life and Death – 23 – Famine Relief (1): Charity

### 1 Preliminaries

Many millions are starving. Many millions more are living in conditions of absolute poverty. What ought we to do? How much is required of us? How much can morality demand?

Many difficult **empirical** issues are involved –

(a) Is much Western aid *counter-productive*, undermining local farming, and tying local economies to the West?

(b) How much aid *really gets through* to those who need it, and isn't siphoned off by corrupt officials?

(c) If we save people today, then will *more* people inevitably starve tomorrow? (E.g. Malthusian arguments on population growth – see #25.)

(d) Is what is required not aid but fundamental *restructuring* of the world economy?

An important part of the task is to sort out the various issues, and to distinguish *matters of principle*. Start with simplifying assumptions – a temporary non-recurring disaster, only financial assistance is required.

Focus on *individual obligation* – what should *I* do? Even if institutional and economic restructuring is needed, this will only happen if we individuals accept that it should, and will pay the price.

### 2 Singer's Argument (in P.Singer *Practical Ethics*, CUP)

Starts with the (now familiar) example of the child drowning in the pond. If I fail to act it isn't murder, but it is just as culpable, and I am just as responsible for the death. In such a case it is *very wrong* not to act.

Singer thinks that the example justifies the following principle –

*If I can avert some evil at no comparable cost to myself, then I ought to do so.*

But the example doesn't justify anything this strong.

Here my act is *necessary* as opposed to merely sufficient to avert evil (I am the only person who *can* save the child). And the cost isn't merely *not comparable* (as it would be if I had to give up a leg or risk my own life) but *trivial* (wet trousers).

The example serves to disguise Singer's Utilitarianism?

*If the cost to myself is less than the benefit I can render, then I ought to act, since this will increase overall benefit.*

This has radical consequences in a world of starving. I ought to give to the point where *I am only marginally better off* (provided that I can preserve my long-term ability to provide such benefits; e.g. my job may require me to wear expensive suits and eat business dinners, but may provide me with much more salary to give away).

Is this conclusion so *obviously false* as to count against Utilitarianism? It is hard to be confident – self-deception is easy!

Utilitarians often try to avoid the conclusion that this much is required of us with arguments from *insecure knowledge* and *insecure causal chains*.

- I should concentrate on the utility of myself and those close to me, because I know our needs better.
- I should concentrate on those close to home because I can be more confident of the effectiveness of local action.

But there is no problem of knowledge of needs with many disasters.

However, question of *likely effectiveness* of aid becomes crucial. Here we should follow the standard

practice when we make choices under uncertainty, to calculate overall expected utility = *value* × *likelihood*.

If the value is very great (lives saved), then the expected benefits of aiding may be far greater than the costs to ourselves, even if the likelihood of effectiveness is low. And in many cases effectiveness *can* be assured – e.g. short-term disasters where it is easy to save lives.

→ Utilitarianism would commit us to doing *a very great deal* in the face of famine, in most cases.

### 3 Contractualism and Charity

Under Contractualism we have a general duty to be generous, and to develop an attachment to the welfare of others.

But this only gives rise to obligations to help *particular* people where I am the only one who *can* help, where *my* help is *necessary* (as in child in pond example).

Otherwise I only need to develop a *preparedness* to help when *situations arise*.

This suggests the comforting view that Charity only requires me to help *sometimes* when disasters are *brought to my notice*.

For my help on any given occasion may be *sufficient* to save life but *isn't necessary*?

**But** this ignores the extent of the problem – 15-30 million starve each year; at least 1 billion in absolute poverty. (World population: 6 billion.)

Given this situation, then *all* of those in rich countries (say 1 billion) need to act?

That I should give on a regular basis is *necessary* to keep someone out of absolute poverty?

It is an empirical question *how much* is necessary – maybe one tenth of income?

Is this too much to ask? It need not undermine the structure of desire. So there is no contractualist argument to rule it out.

Another empirical question – what would thousands of billions of dollars leaving the developed world each year do to the world economy? May lead to collapse, and make matters worse?

But this anyway gives some idea of *how much may be demanded of us* by Charity.

**Better e.g.** – a group of us on the bank, a boat-load of children overturned in the pond. Here it may be necessary that *each* of us should act, although we cannot say *who* dies as a result if I do not.

Surely it would be *very* wrong of me to stand by and not help?

Similar to the diffuse effects of charity. (Money not given will result in deaths, but in the same practically-untraceable way that extra radioactive fall-out will result in more cancers.)

**But** it isn't strictly true that my act is necessary – others *could* give *more* to compensate.

But recall that a charitable disposition is required by *fairness*. I am obliged to *do my bit* in the alleviation of suffering.

**But** I know that others will in fact do less or nothing. Hardly anyone is actually going to give a tenth of salary. And I know that the evidence suggests that many will give nothing.

Am I required to give more if others will in fact give less? This isn't a contract that a rational agent could agree to! It amounts to no contract at all! The contract is just that I should do my fair share; not that I should do whatever is necessary to compensate for the unfairness of others.

But given that others will *not* do their fair share, am *I* still required to? If this were a cooperative activity for mutual benefit, perhaps not. (If you don't do your fair share of the house-cleaning, then I don't have to do mine.)

But suppose that the others on the bank of the pond *aren't* helping the drowning children. Does that mean I don't have to help either? Surely not.