

140: Matters of Life and Death – 25 – Famine (3): Life-boat Ethics

1 Judgment day (Pascal in Singer 1986.)

The first two-thirds of Pascal's paper depend upon rejecting the active/passive, and/or justice/charity, distinction. (Failing the save is the same thing as murder.) And Pascal's utilitarianism is quite explicit.

But Pascal also develops **claims of fact** –

(a) differential population growth – in the 1st world: $\times 2$ every 90 years (now zero or negative growth in many European countries); in the 3rd world: $\times 2$ every 40 years.

World population is now over 6 billion. (It was 3.6 billion in 1970.)

(b) finite world resources – all oil will be exhausted by 2060; all forests by 2020.

And Pascal also develops an argument against famine relief that looks like it might challenge even the arguments from justice explored in #24.

2 Objection to the argument from justice – life-boat ethics

I claimed that Justice, as well as Charity, may require us to do *much* for those in the 3rd world.

But – there is no obligation to return something unjustly possessed if doing so would actually make matters *worse* for the recipients?

E.g. returning stolen gunpowder to a burning house; returning stolen food contaminated with typhoid; returning a stolen keg of beer to an alcoholic.

Many claim that help for the starving in 3rd world now, just means that *more* people will suffer and starve in the future. (Pascal.)

Like a lifeboat that is already full, surrounded by drowning people in the water. To attempt a rescue will make the boat sink, and *even more will drown*.

(A Malthusian argument – famine is a necessary check on population growth.)

But what if we *stole* the life-boat from those in the water?

Then we have *no right* to its use, and no right to insist that if some are to drown, it should be them rather than us? Justice may oblige us to give up our place in the lifeboat.

⇒ The *lifeboat-earth argument* can work *only* on the assumption that the most we owe to those in the 3rd world are obligations of Charity, not of Justice?

3 Four challenges to the life-boat ethics argument

The argument is that we shouldn't aid the starving of the world, because (given limited resources and rates of population growth) saving some now will only ensure that more starve later.

Herewith three challenges to the premises of the argument, and a final challenge to its validity.

(This last will lead into very difficult and murky issues to do with population-policy, discussed at length by Parfit *Reasons and Persons* part IV and his 'Overpopulation' in Singer ed., 1986).

Challenge 1

But population growth in the 3rd world isn't the main cause of famine.

Rather, *we* eat too much, encourage cash-crops in the 3rd world, help obstruct land-reform, set up damaging trade agreements etc. And the (smaller) population growth in the 1st world uses up world *resources* much faster (a consumption ratio of 7:1, say).

If we are *more responsible* for future disaster, why should it be those presently in the 3rd world who starve to minimize that disaster?

Better e.g. – a slowly sinking luxury liner surrounded by drowning people in the water, where they are in the water in the first place because we (accidentally, perhaps) sank their own boat.

We could save them, and save them for longer, if *we* ate less, had less luxuries, etc.?

Challenge 2

It isn't true that giving aid will encourage those in the 3rd world not to control their own populations. There is much evidence that increased wealth and health-care, once it reaches a certain acceptable level, leads to a significant decrease in the birth-rate.

Parents have many children when child mortality rates are high; and very poor parents have many children to help family income as they grow up, and as insurance for their old age.

In addition, increased economic independence for women, and increased education, lead to a decrease in the birth-rate.

Challenge 3

We face *certainty* of very great evil if we *don't* aid the starving; we *know* that many millions will die.

But if we *do* give aid, there is only an uncertain *risk* of greater evils in the future.

It is notoriously difficult to predict the future, to pre-empt future discoveries and inventions, etc.

Better e.g. – a life-boat surrounded by drowning people; we *could* carry them all, but this would exceed the safety-margins of the boat; *if* there were to be a storm then all would drown.

Challenge 4

This considers the argument in its own terms, setting aside the above objections.

Consider Pascal's example of an island with 1000 inhabitants, 2% of whom starve each year, keeping the population stable.

Then in the 80 years 2003-2083, 1600 will die of starvation if we do *not* give aid.

But if we *do* give aid, and continue to give aid, to save the starving, then in the year 2083 the population will be 4000. (Recall, population in the 3rd world doubles every 40 years.)

If we are then forced to withdraw aid because of dwindled resources, or economic collapse in the 1st world, then *3000 will starve*.

⇒ Better not to give aid at all, so that fewer will starve in the long run?

But – most of those who die in the year 2083 *would not have existed at all otherwise!*

Suppose average life expectancy is 60 years, and that the average age of starvation is 30. Then calculate life-years lost.

(a) If we don't give aid, 1600 starve age 30, 48,000 life-years lost overall.

(b) If we do give aid, then 3000 starve in 2083 age 30, 90,000 life-years lost.

But those 3000 have by then had 30 years of worthwhile life that they would not have had otherwise (because they wouldn't have existed otherwise) – so there is also, on this option, *90,000 life-years gained*.

Surely it isn't true to say, in general, that if someone starves to death at 30, then it would have been better if they had never existed!

E.g. the couple who are deciding whether to conceive a child, where any child of theirs will die of an hereditary disease aged 30 (having lived 30 years of normal life first).

Is it *wrong* of them to give birth to such a child?

Surely the child itself wouldn't complain. Bad as it is to die at 30, it is surely better than never having existed at all!

Overall conclusion: the background facts of population increase and dwindling resources *don't* mean that we shouldn't be trying to save people from starving now.