International Dialogue

Volume 8 Article 15

11-2018

# Famine, Affluence and Morality

Owen G. Mordaunt

*ID: International Dialogue, A Multidisciplinary Journal of World Affairs 8 2018*

# Review

## *Famine, Affluence and Morality*

Peter Singer. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 120pp.

Owen G. Mordaunt*

The foreword of this text is significant because Bill and Melinda Gates, co-chairs of The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, make reference to the fact that in more than forty years the world has seen much improvement in curbing poverty. Less than half the world's population lives in poverty and the proportion of children who die before the age of five has dropped even more. By 1990, it was around 10%, and now it is closer to 5%, even though 5% is still too many when you consider 6.3 million child deaths per year. Most of the deaths, however, are caused by curable diseases, such as diarrhea, pneumonia, and malaria. The fact that child deaths have decreased shows that aid does work and foreign aid does have positive results. The Gates point out that philosopher Peter Singer believes that we can work together to prevent bad things, such as the death of children, from happening. The good thing is that more and more people becoming aware of the importance of this and are taking action. The Gates commend Singer for being ahead of his time when he first published the article "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" in 1972.

According to Singer's preface, this article, which is now published in book format with two others, was written during a crucial time when there was a refugee crisis in East Pakistan. Nine million people fled to India and lived in refugee camps where they struggled to survive. This situation has stimulated Singer to argue that people in affluent nations

*__Owen G. Mordaunt__ is a professor of English at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

should be doing much more to help people in poorer parts of the world. When first published, "Famine, Affluence and Morality" soon became a staple of university courses in ethics because its strong ethical implications were a part of the argument that appeared to be sound. But the article is also not without any objections and counter-arguments. The subject of the article is concerned with the moral obligations relevant to saving a child's life. This includes physical distance from where we live, the cost involved in saving one child and the cost-effectiveness of charities involved in this process. Further, this is pertinent to our own survival and the evolutionary explanation of our own intuitive judgement. Singer's intuitions were centered on a humanitarian crisis that involved millions of people. The focus is on decreasing extreme poverty and the more than six million premature deaths that take place each year. Progress has been made, and according to Singer, poverty is being reduced, diseases are being combatted, and more and more children are going to school.

In 1971, millions of people were dying from lack of food, shelter and medical care in East Bengal as a result of chronic poverty, a cyclone, and a civil war. Singer's discussion reveals he is passionate about helping those in need. He is concerned that richer nations have not been able to provide enough assistance to reduce further suffering. What puzzled him is why human beings are not trying to prevent this suffering. As a graduate student at Oxford, Singer and his wife were donating 10% of their salary to Oxfam, and then he became a vegetarian in order to understand how animals are treated before they are turned into meat. Singer argues that people in general, as well as governments, have not given much aid to help refugees survive, even for a few days. Britain has given more than most countries but has given more money to supersonic transport, which is valued 30% more than 9 million refugees. Australia has also provided aid but only 1/12% of what they give to the Sydney Opera House. According to The World Bank, refugees need 464 million pounds for one year. India would need to choose between helping refugees by diverting funds from her own development program. Sadly, malnutrition is not only typical of Bengali refugees, but malnutrition is a crisis in other parts of the world such as sub-Sahara Africa.

Singer is concerned about the moral implications of poverty and disease and how affluent countries react or whether they are just taking everything for granted. He does not claim to be morally neutral: to him, suffering and death are bad. We can promote some moral good by preventing something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of

moral significance. Preventing a child from drowning in a shallow pond would mean getting one's clothes muddy but would be insignificant since the child's death would be a very bad thing. This morality does not discriminate in terms of proximity and distance: I may never know any Bengali thousands of miles away, but there is no moral difference than if I was helping a neighbor's child. Thus, principles of impartiality, universality and equity, according to Singer, do not discriminate against somebody who is far away. The notion of the world as a "global village" has made an important difference to our morality, even if we do not recognize it. Experts can get aid to Bengal as effectively as we can get it to someone in our neighborhood or block. Everybody should be aware of the evils of poverty, overpopulation, pollution, etc., and should be involved in their solutions. Numbers do make a difference, so if more people are involved, more funds are available to help those in need. Singer suggests that people who are able should give more, and this will help prevent more suffering. But very few people give substantial amounts. However, sacrifice should not involve giving all you have, resulting in suffering for you and your dependents. He argues that everyone who is able should give toward the cause and this will help end the suffering in Bengal, etc. If we can prevent something very bad from happening without sacrificing anything else morally significant, we ought, ethically, to do it.

Another point of interest Singer brings up is the distinction between duty and charity in our society. While the charitable person is praised, the person who does not give is not condemned. People are not ashamed of spending money on themselves and on luxuries, instead of giving to famine relief. For example, when we buy clothes in order to look nice, we are not meeting any important need. But this is not wrong. However, we ought to give money away, and it is not wrong to do so. Moral attitudes are shaped by the needs of society, but we need to look beyond the interests of our immediate society, something the author considers feasible. So, from a moral point of view, the starvation of millions of people outside our society needs to be taken into consideration as a moral responsibility. But where do we draw the line between conduct that is required and conduct that is good, although not required, so as to get the best possible results? From the writer's perspective, we should be working full time to relieve great suffering that is the result of famine and other disasters. Is giving the government's responsibility or our responsibility? Connected to all this is population control. What, for example, happens to the children of the Bengali immigrants because of population explosion? The conclusion drawn is that, in the long run, population control would prevent famine.

Another point raised is about how much we should be giving away to prevent famine. Giving too much so that you and your dependents are at a disadvantage is not desirable. The author recommends a more moderate principle in giving rather than a strong version. Giving too much of the GNP would slow down the economy. Even though not ideal, Western societies generally consider 1% of the GNP an acceptable level of foreign aid.

This issue of human suffering and population growth is of concern to philosophers. It has been argued that philosophers have no business in public affairs since public issues depend on the assessment of facts. However, philosophers and their students need to be involved in public affairs having to do with human suffering and population. With their attitudes intact, philosophers, too, should sacrifice some of the benefits of the consumer and find satisfaction in the way of life in which theory and practice are at least coming together.

The next major section in the text is titled "The Singer Solution to World Poverty." Reference is made to the Brazilian movie *Central Station* and comparison is made to the fact that the average American family spends almost one-third of its income on non-essentials. If money is donated to charitable agencies, it could make a difference in the lot of children in need. As a utilitarian philosopher, who like others views the actions of people as right and wrong, the author sees condemning Dora in the movie as incongruous since American consumers are not doing much to help prevent hunger, malnutrition and death by contributing to relevant charities, such as UNICEF and Oxfam, in order to save lives. The philosopher Peter Unger recommends giving a conservative amount of $200 to such charities in order to save a child's life, rather than owning priceless vintage cars, for example. But what about taking a friend to a favorite restaurant when the money could be used to save the life of a child. This is an issue of morality and boils down to each person in an affluent nation giving his/her share to save lives. The implication is that the amount contributed is a moral issue and is contingent on what one is willing to sacrifice.

"What Should a Billionaire Give—and What Should You" is the title of the third part of this book. Reference is made to Bill Gates spending more time with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the largest charitable foundation in the world. In addition, gratitude is given to Warren Buffet for his decision to give away most of his $44 billion fortune, including a gift of $31 billion to the Gates Foundation. But Singer suggests that giving should not be limited to these extremely large amounts of money from billionaires.

The question posed is: What is human life worth? The value of human life is incalculable. When Gates became aware of the rotavirus as a disease killing half a million of children each year, etc., he was horrified and came to the conclusion that all lives are worth saving. This belief is also mentioned on the Bill and Melinda Gates Web site. Singer feels we are still far from falling in line with this belief, even though, in reality, more than a billion people live in affluence and a billion of other people struggle to to survive. The question that arises is why do philanthropists give? What are their motives? Does it do any good? A few extremely wealthy individuals make such decisions. How do our judgements reflect our own way of living? Does this challenge us to be involved according to our own means? The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued that we act according to our own egocentric interests. Followers of Kant think an act has moral worth only if it is done as a duty. It does not seem that Gates and Buffet expect a reward in heaven. In contrasting the West with struggling nations, Buffett notes that success is possible only if we live under favorable circumstances. Even Herbert Simon, the Nobel Prize-winning economist and social scientist, estimated that at least 90% of what people earn is due to social capital.

What people do with the money they earn is up to them, according to Singer. He cites the illustration (in the article already referenced, which he wrote ten years ago) about a person walking by a shallow pond and seeing a small child in the pond and in danger of drowning. We generally agree that with minimum inconvenience we can save the child from drowning. We may, for example, ruin a pair of new shoes, but this is not a good reason for allowing a child to drown. In like manner, if the cost of a new pair of shoes can contribute to the health program of a developing country and can possibly save the life of a child, we should feel obligated to do it. The need to help the poor may even be stronger than this example implies. Philosopher Thomas Pogge of Columbia University has argued that some of our wealth we get at the expense of the poor—for example, getting resources from any government irregardless of how it came into power. International corporations dealing with corrupt dictators at the expense of their people is morally wrong; but the raw materials, for example, are a benefit to the industrial nations. International globalization, although it has helped lift many poor people out of poverty, has not benefited 10% poorest of the world's population. For various reasons these poor people have no resources that rich nations want.

Singer speculates as to whether foreign aid should be the responsibility of two or three philanthropists, or whether this should be the responsibility of the state or

government. The amount of foreign aid provided by the American government is about 22 cents for every $100 the nation earns and is half of that of the UK. Unfortunately, the largest recipient of American aid is Iraq, followed by Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Barely a nickel in every $100 goes to the world's poor. Private international philanthropic support improves the picture of what America gives, but countries like Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherland give three or four times more in foreign aid in proportion to the size of their economies—with a larger percentage going to the poorest nations. Private donors are able to go directly into the field and work at the grass-roots with local villages, whereas governments have to deal with corrupt or wasteful aid receiving governments. The rich should give, but how much? Gates has given more than his Microsft co-founder Paul Allen. Zell Kravinsky has given almost all of his real estate assets to health-related charities and even donated one of his kidneys to a complete stranger. But he and the others feel that their children should not be left without anything. Philosophers Liam Murphy of New York University and Kwame Anthony Appiah of Princeton argue that we all should give our fair share to ease global poverty. They suggest calculating how much it would cost to end poverty and give the people concerned a decent life, and then divide the amount among the affluent. That would give each one of us a certain amount to donate and this way we would have fulfilled our responsibility to the poor. The superrich would of course give more, and other rich nations should share the burden of reducing global poverty. From Singer's point of view, "If we are obliged to do more than our fair share of eliminating global poverty, the burden will not be great" (82). But several factors come into play in trying to solve this global problem. What about those who really do not contribute anything or are not interested in rescuing "the drowning child"? Should these people be criticized? What is the role of the rich and those who aren't? Perhaps the superrich can give more and the merely comfortable give less. However, other rich nations should also share in relieving global poverty, but the U.S. still should give more because of its economic wealth.

Singer concludes by pointing out that for thirty years he has been reading, writing and teaching about the ethical issue of poverty, in juxtaposition to great abundance on the planet. Over the last 30 years, statistics show that the rich have become richer. And measured against what we are able to accomplish, what he considers "Millennium Development Goals," we have fallen far too short, but we have no excuses. Our goal should be to make sure that a large proportion of people on the globe are not be living in poverty

and not having enough to eat. Ethically, no one should live in such "degrading conditions." Singer feels strongly that "That is a worthy goal, and it is well within our reach" (86).

*Famine, Affluence and Morality*, by a world renowned philosopher, is a must read, particularly for students and scholars of philosophy, sociology, and politics interested in world affairs, poverty and social justice.