

SINGER AND THE NEEDY

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Intro Philosophy

1. Two people

A: comfortable lifestyle, two children, suburban three-BR house, gives \$500 per year to charity.

B: doesn't want to get clothes muddy, doesn't rescue a drowning child.

2. Duty versus charity

Duty: actions that are required (it would be wrong not to do them)

Charity: actions that are morally admirable, but not required

Most people think that giving away an extremely high percentage of our incomes would be charity, but Singer thinks it's our duty.

3. Singer's argument

1. If a person could prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, they are morally required to do it
2. By giving away 50% of their income, person *A* could prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance
3. Therefore, Person *A* is morally required to give away 50% of their income

A similar argument could be repeated for many other people in countries like the USA.

4. Proximity

Premise 1 ignores whether the bad thing to be prevented is proximate—whether in space or in terms of relationships.

5. “If everyone did it...”

A: “I’m not the only one who can help the needy. And in fact, I already donate more than most—\$500 per year. If everyone else gave \$500 per year, that would be enough to save the needy people.”

Other cases of “if everyone did it reasoning”:

- “If everyone were willing to save the child, I wouldn’t need to”
- “If everyone cut across the grass, the grass would die”
- “If everyone decided not to vote, democracy would disintegrate”

6. How much must we donate?

Strong principle If a person could prevent something *bad* from happening without sacrificing anything of *comparable moral importance*, they are morally required to do it. (Requires us to give until we’re at subsistence levels.)

Weak principle If a person could prevent something *very bad* without sacrificing anything *morally significant*, they are morally required to do it. (Requires us to give less, but still much more than most of us do now.)

7. How much does morality demand?

- Donating one of my eyes to help someone with no eyes?
- Sacrificing my life, or my child’s, to save five children?