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Michael Vincent

Obligations of the Rich Toward the Poor: A Comparison of Two Approaches

ABSTRACT

Peter Singer has famously claimed that those with wealth in excess of their basic needs have a moral *obligation* to give much of it to the poor. John Arthur has responded to this by arguing for a less demanding moral code, prioritising the maintenance of existing social relations. While both writers raise important issues regarding the nature of moral obligation, neither gives a complete and satisfactory summary of the obligations the rich have toward the poor.

BIOGRAPHY

Michael Vincent is currently beginning the third year of his Arts Degree at the University of Queensland, majoring in Philosophy and Political Science.

THE OBLIGATIONS OF THE RICH

Peter Singer has argued, in his article "Famine, Affluence, and Morality,"[i] that the affluent have an obligation to make extensive sacrifices for the good of the desperately poor. Indeed, he claims that the scale of suffering in many parts of the world is so great that anyone who is not struggling to meet they or their family's basic needs should be working full-time to alleviate it.[ii] In response, John Arthur has advanced a moderate view,[iii] more in line with currently-accepted standards of behaviour, that recognises an individual's entitlement to resources as a counting against any moral requirement to give them away. While both of these writers raise some important issues, they each make a number of problematic assertions that undermine the conclusions they reach.

The core of Singer's argument is the contention that '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.'[iv] This he refers to as the 'duty of benevolence' principle.[v] Though he believes that this principle should be relatively uncontroversial, he offers a "weaker" version for those not convinced; that we should at least be prepared to sacrifice everything that is not 'of moral significance.'[vi] Our proximity to a person needing assistance is of no moral relevance at all, for Singer, '[i]f we accept any principle of impartiality, universalisability, [or] equality.'[vii] It is also irrelevant that others are in the same position as us and choose to do nothing, which neither reduces the amount that we are obliged to do, nor absolves us of guilt if we opt for inactivity.[viii] An important implication of this principle is, therefore, that the traditional distinction drawn between duty and charity must be drastically altered.[ix]

Arthur's critique of this position is founded in his concept of a social moral code. This is 'a system of principles, rules and other standards designed to guide people's conduct.'[x] It encourages and discourages certain acts, and is necessary in order for society to function.[xi] Disagreements about what morality requires, according to Arthur, stem largely from disagreements about the purposes of morality.[xii] In his view, the ideal purpose for a code will be to 'effectively promote the collective wellbeing.'[xiii] This, he believes, is what most contemporary codes aim to do; it is the kind of code which will win the greatest support; and it is a "natural" code for us to follow.[xiv] Another vital consideration is that the code must be practical if it is to function, and it must 'employ realistic, accurate assumptions about human beings.'[xv]

Arthur takes issue with Singer's suggested ethic for ignoring individual entitlements. If people are entitled to the resources under their control, he claims, then any moral obligation they have to give these resources away is reduced.[xvi] Entitlement takes two main forms. We are "naturally" entitled to some things, such as our body parts, and it can therefore be said that we have a "right" to them.[xvii] We may also be said to "deserve" something, if our past actions warrant our having it.[xviii] An example of this second kind would be an entitlement to the product of one's own labour, which is deserved on account of the past effort involved in producing it. These are both accepted moral principles today, and Arthur argues that, for practical reasons, they are also important components of an ideal social moral code. As self-interest and regard for loved ones is natural to humans, the ideal social moral code must allow individuals to consider their own welfare before that of others. A code that did not allow this would not attract support, and would therefore be ineffective. Desert is additionally an important feature of an ideal social moral code, as people will have no incentive to work if they are not guaranteed a return.[xix] Without rights and desert, many people will ignore the moral code, leading them into conflict with those who do conform.[xx] Arthur settles on a moral code including some duty to assist others as the ideal. Under this system, 'we should require people to help strangers when there is no *substantial* cost to themselves, that is, when what they are sacrificing would not mean *significant* reduction in their own or their family's welfare.'[xxi] This is, he claims, a stronger demand than that of Singer's "weak" principle, as virtually any sacrifice can be considered "morally significant" in some sense.

Much of Arthur's case for the necessity of entitlement in an ideal social moral code is based on observations of human nature in contemporary societies. This approach seems questionable. Singer notes that 'What it is possible for a man to do and what he is likely to do are both, I think, very greatly influenced by what those around him are doing and expecting him to do.'[xxii] Arthur's claim that the ideal social moral code will 'most effectively promote the collective well-being' might also be questioned. His arguments for this—that such a code is natural, effective in our experience, and will be widely supported—are all arguments to an ideal code from the nature and origin of moral codes, that is, to an "ought" from an "is." The promotion of 'the collective well-being' is also a concept that could be interpreted in a vast number of ways, including, perhaps, as the maximisation of individual liberty, cultural achievement, or even observance of the duty of benevolence. In any of these cases, a very different conclusion would be reach from that which Arthur settles on. However, even if Arthur's beliefs about human nature are well-founded, it is still debatable to what extent his views on the necessity of entitlement invalidate Singer's claims. Arthur asserts that 'any action is right if and only if it

conforms with an ideal moral code for our society.'[xxiii] This statement is not justified, and is problematic in that it is exactly the kind of view which Singer is arguing against. By "right" actions, Arthur clearly means a minimum standard of conduct necessary for a person to be acting morally. Singer, however, is advocating an extension of the category of "right" actions beyond those required simply to keep societies functioning. He makes a clear distinction between 'what we should require from others' (a social moral code) and 'what we ourselves ought do' (what morality demands of the individual),[xxiv] and in moving the boundary between duty and charity, his intention is to extend the realm of right actions from the former to include the latter. Arthur does not attempt to engage with this aspect of Singer's argument, and so his paper cannot provide a direct refutation of Singer's position. It does, however, raise some difficulties for this position that need to be addressed. Arthur highlights the necessity of a social moral code which is practical and can gain wide acceptance. The demands of such a code may not be the only factors taken into account when determining right actions, but they will certainly influence many such judgements, and they may come into conflict with moral principles such as those that Singer advocates.

Taking the demands of a social moral code into consideration will be particularly important if it can be shown that the duty of benevolence principle does not carry the moral weight that Singer suggests it does. This principle may not be as uncontroversial as Singer hopes—its strong version placing extreme demands on everyone with time or resources at their disposal. Singer illustrates the application of this principle with the example of a drowning child. If it is possible for us to save a child from drowning by wading into a pond and retrieving them, then we ought to do so. We will have saved a life and risked nothing more than getting our clothes dirty. This story is used to demonstrate the aptness of Singer's principle; however, it is an illustration of the principle's weak version only. To get one's clothes muddy is hardly to sacrifice something 'of comparable moral importance' to another person's life. The strong principle would demand that we sacrifice everything short of our own life to save the child. This may mean our complete and permanent incapacitation or the dearest personal loss. While many may still affirm that such sacrifice would be not only "good," but obligatory in order to act rightly, the strong principle now appears much more controversial than Singer suggests. It seems, in fact, that the strong principle entails a never-ending succession of moral obligations. Singer stresses throughout his article the singularity of the 'extreme evil' that is the level of avoidable suffering in the world caused by poverty and hunger. However, if the strong principle were to be applied generally, as he appears to think that it should be, it would have profound consequences for our understanding of what it means to live morally. He claims that 'to give greater weight to our own interests and purposes simply because they are our own … seems to me contrary to the idea, now widely shared by moral philosophers, that some element of impartiality or universalisability is inherent in the very notion of a moral judgment.'[xxv] By this reasoning, then, it appears that to act in a way that is not 'good' but simply morally requisite involves the prevention of bad occurrences whenever it is possible to do so without causing comparable damage. Yet to ask that people only consider their own interests insofar as is necessary to maintain their ability to give is surely too great a demand. The strong principle then does indeed appear too strong.

The arguments of both writers suffer in that they view the poor as passive (potential) beneficiaries of aid rather than as agents who inhabit the same moral universe as the affluent. Arthur correctly points out that the duty of benevolence principle may provide a case for behaviour other than the selfless giving that Singer wishes to encourage. As it is common for people to rationalise self-interested behaviour, he claims that the principle would promote theft and other crimes in the absence of moral rules governing entitlement.[xxvi] A person who was short on money might reason that in stealing from a neighbour they were preventing their own (or their children's) hunger without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance. This may not be a critical objection to Singer's arguments—he qualifies that an unacceptable sacrifice would be to do 'something that is wrong in itself,'[xxvii] however, it does highlight a bias in his approach. Singer's paper is clearly written for the affluent from a perspective of affluence. This may explain why the moral rules required to keep a society functioning are largely neglected in his analysis: it is assumed that most people engaging with the paper already have (justly acquired) resources in excess of their needs. Arthur's arguments evince a similar bias at some points. In arguing for entitlement as a necessary part of a practical social moral code, Arthur stresses that a code which requires people to give away large amounts of their wealth could not gain widespread support among the rich. He does not, however, examine the reverse situation: that the poor may not feel obliged to recognise the entitlements guaranteed by a social moral code if such a code does not assure them of a material well being comparable to that of the rich.

CONCLUSION

Arthur is unable to conclusively refute the main claims of Singer's paper, failing to demonstrate that "right" actions are solely the purview of a social moral code. However, in stressing the need for a practical social moral

code, he challenges the dominance of the duty of benevolence principle in determining right actions. This principle, particularly Singer's "strong" version of it, is also questionable in that it is justified largely by appeal to the reader's intuitions, and appears much more contentious once its full implications become apparent. As such, while both articles make some important points about inequality and the nature of moral obligation, neither alone is able to provide a complete assessment of the duties the affluent have to the poor.

REFERENCES

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[ii] Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 618.
[iii] John Arthur, "Famine Relief and the Ideal Moral Code," in *Ethics in Practice: an Anthology*, ed. Hugh LaFollette, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 623-32.
[iv] Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 614.
[v] Singer, postscript to "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 622.
[vi] Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 614.
[vii] *Ibid*, 615.
[viii] *Ibid,* 615–6.
[ix] *Ibid*, 616.
[x] Arthur, "Famine Relief and the Ideal Moral Code," 626.
[xi] *Ibid*, 627–8.
[xii] *Ibid*, 627.
[xiii] *Ibid*, 628.
[xiv] *Ibid*. Whether such a code is natural to us because it is "biologically programmed" or learned from others is, he claims, debated.
[xv] *Ibid*, 629.
[xvi] *Ibid,* 625.
[xvii] *Ibid*.
[xviii] *Ibid*, 626.
[xix] *Ibid*, 630.
[xx] *Ibid*, 629–31.
[xxi] *Ibid,* 631.
[xxii] Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 617, emphasis his.
[xxiii] Arthur, "Famine Relief and the Ideal Moral Code," 627.
[xxiv] Singer "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 617.
[xxv] Singer, postscript to "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 622.
[xxvi] Arthur, "Famine Relief and the Ideal Moral Code," 629.
[xxvii] Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 614.