Talk about ‘Giving Till It Hurts!’

What should we do about the world hunger problem? Some, such as Robert Nozick, might say that, since I have a right to private property, provided I have not acquired it through force or fraud, I am entitled to my wealth and need not give anything to starving nations (481c1). Others, like Peter Singer, think that we owe it to these nations to help them out, to maximize the overall happiness in the world, as long as we do not sacrifice something of comparable moral significance (479c2-480c1). In this paper, I will explain and examine Peter Singer’s argument, and will attempt to show that Singer’s argument is a plausible one, by replying to two objections against his view.

Singer is a utilitarian, so he thinks that we should do whatever maximizes happiness for the affected population (Yount, Lecture 1). In the case of world hunger, the affluent nations and the poorest, starving nations are affected. So, from a utilitarian standpoint, we need to look at people in affluent nations, such as the United States, Great Britain, and France, as well as nations such as Chad and Nigeria. Singer, in his article “Rich and Poor” in Morality and Moral Controversies, argues that the pain caused to the people in affluent nations is not as great as the pleasure it would cause in the people in starving nations, so we, as members of an affluent nation, have an obligation to give them aid (479c2-480c1).

In order to argue in favor of his point, Singer makes two assumptions: (1) That absolute poverty, with its hunger and malnutrition, lack of shelter, illiteracy, disease, high infant mortality and low life expectancy, is a bad thing (480c1). And (2) It is within the power of the affluent to
reduce absolute poverty, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance (480c1).
Before continuing, it is necessary to understand what Singer understands by “absolute poverty”
and “comparable moral significance.” Singer defines absolute poverty as, “Income level
insufficient to provide adequate nutrition” (estimated at 800 million people in 1979) (478c1).
‘Comparable moral significance’ can be explained as follows: The word “comparable” is getting
at the idea that you need to weigh different rights and duties and see which is more important; in
this case, the right to property needs to be weighed against the right to life. Singer thinks the
right to life is more important than the right to property (480c1). He gives an example of
someone’s weighing getting their pants (i.e., their property) wet v. saving a drowning child in a
small wading pond, and says the child’s right to life outweighs the property right of the helper
(479c2). Using this reasoning, Singer thinks analogously that the affluent are only justified in
having a right to own not much more than the basic necessities of life, when compared to what
suffering and pain could be prevented were the affluent to give aid to starving nations instead
(480c1). For example, in this passage, Singer argues that giving is not a matter of charity, but an
obligation we all have:

… we have an obligation to help those in absolute poverty which is no less strong than
our obligation to rescue a drowning child from a pond. Not to help would be wrong,
whether or not it is intrinsically equivalent to killing. Helping is not, as conventionally
thought, a charitable act which it is praiseworthy to do, but not wrong to omit; it is
something that everyone ought to do. (480c1)

So Singer does not see a difference between the child drowning example and the current
suffering of people from starvation, and it is, contrary to Nozick’s view, not merely charity to
help these people, but an obligation to minimize suffering and maximize happiness of everyone
involved.

Now, you might be asking, “When do we stop giving?” Is Singer saying that I have to
give away all my money? To clarify, Singer states that we should give until we reach the point
of marginal utility, which is the point at which you can still help others without ruining yourself, and he does grant that performing this obligation necessitates a massive lifestyle change for an affluent person (480c2). He also adds that how much we need to give depends on our view of comparable moral significance (480c1). However, he asks, how can one justify buying a new CD when that money could be given to some organization that would provide food or medicine to someone who really needs it? (480c1) The sacrifice made would be worth it if everyone were happy.

I think Singer makes a very plausible argument in favor of world hunger donation, because a strong argument can be made that, at the very least, not helping someone when doing so will save another person’s life, and will not be costly to the donor, is morally wrong. Singer of course takes that argument and extends it to include one’s giving until one is weighing comparable expenses, and though that is controversial, it is quite compelling as a moral argument. But Singer also allows each of us to decide what comparably morally significance is, which will allow for variation in donations, another plus for his view.

Everyone obviously does not agree with Singer’s view. Singer’s opponents might object that we affluent people have a right to our property, and that donating to world hunger is a gift, not an obligation. Ayn Rand has said, “No man can have a right to impose an unchosen obligation or unrewarded duty on another . . . There can be no such thing as the right to enslave.” (Rand, 234c1) This view is also echoed by Robert Nozick. So these poor nations would be in effect enslaving us to work for them and provide them with food.

Singer could reply to this objection, however, by arguing that property rights are not more important or basic than the right to life. If you can save someone with one dollar, or 1 minute of your time, then you owe that money or time to that person. If you were starving, and
knew that someone made a decision not to help you, after deciding instead to go to a movie that they really didn’t want or need to see, while you starved to death, how would that make you feel?

So property rights, at least when compared to the right to life, should be overridden. Also, to respond to Ayn Rand, Singer might reply by arguing that a person with a right to life in fact imposes an unchosen obligation on others’ behalf, whether or not they like it. If this is correct, then a person can have a right to impose an unrewarded duty upon another.

Opponents of Singer’s argument might also object that Singer does not take account of proximity in making his argument. That is, Singer is arguing that closeness to others should make no difference to our obligations. The common conception (perhaps not shared by Singer) is that family comes first, then one’s community, then one’s country, then other countries, and finally non-human animals. What goes along with this conception is the idea that we have the largest obligation to our families, then to our community, etc., so by the time we get to “other countries,” we may already be tied up with our obligations and be unable to give any more to anyone else. But Singer seems to argue that we have to give to other countries even if our families or communities need our assistance as well.

Singer might reply that depending on what help your family needs, as long as your family has enough to eat and a roof over its head, it is not comparable to the help and pleasure you could provide by giving to world hunger relief. (Also, as stated above, what is comparably morally significant is up to the individual, as Singer states on 480c1.) Moreover, if one had any resources left over after aiding one’s family and community, one would still be obligated to give whatever was left to world hunger, so an argument that we should necessarily give nothing has not been established.
In conclusion, I have examined Singer’s argument in favor of donating to world hunger, and tried to show that he makes a good argument for his position. In order to do that, I considered two objections against his view, and arguably gave some plausible responses on his behalf. Though Singer’s position demands a lot from affluent nations, we cannot deny our moral responsibility to help out people whose lives depend on receiving aid. World hunger is an important issue, and much more work is needed in order to discover what the best way of relieving it is. For example, I have not shown that Locke’s view is definitely incorrect, though I have tried to answer an objection that he may have made. Whether or not Locke is correct is another issue for another day.

(End of Paper)

Comments about this “good” paper, and things to notice:

1. Do NOT type “(End of Paper)” at the end of your paper. I typed that to signify where the paper ends and where my comments about the paper start. In short, “Do what I say, and not what I do.”
2. Notice that I have a title. Make it witty if you can – it lightens my grading load when I get to chuckle now and then, as I make my way through 50 papers on the same topic! The funnier the better. I will usually announce what I think are the funniest titles in class.
3. Notice that I have an introductory paragraph that sets up the issue and says what I plan on doing (and what I actually do) in the paper.
4. There are few (if any) grammatical or spelling errors. You will be graded on these mistakes. If you have a problem with either grammar or spelling, or both, make sure you let someone else read it (I am an option) as a draft, and then correct the mistakes.
5. I have good (or at least very plausible) arguments for each position, and I have been fair to each side. I have not made the opposite position appear to be ridiculous, embarrassing, or untenable. I have not attacked the person – e.g., “You cheap people who do not want to give to others should be ashamed of yourselves!” This is a fallacy, and therefore a bad way to argue.
6. I have presented a consistent thesis and argument – I did not say that Singer was wrong in one place and that Singer was right in another, for example.
7. I have cited the text, anywhere where I said, “Singer says that . . .” or “Singer argues that . . .” where that quote is in the text and I can prove that he really said it. Notice that in the replies to the objections, I merely said, “Singer MIGHT reply that . . .” instead of, “Singer replies that . . .” If Singer would have made those arguments, then I would have needed to cite the page. Notice too that I italicized the title of the book from which I’m quoting (underlining the title of a book, dialogue, etc. is acceptable as well). Lastly, notice that I indented and single-spaced my longer quote from Singer. The rule of thumb here is that if your quote is anything over 4 double-spaced lines, you should single-space and indent. (I once received a paper that quoted a passage that was longer than one page, double-spaced. Not cool! You can do better.)

8. The student information on the first page is helpful. The section number is handy because sometimes it’s fun for me to grade all of the papers of the same topic at once, across all of my sections, and especially for the first paper, it helps identify what class of mine you’re taking.

9. It’s the proper length – at least 4 pages and no more than 6 pages.

10. It has page numbers (at least in the version I wrote for Word 2000), which are helpful, and is double-spaced, using a size 12 font (your browser default may be set at anywhere from 8 to 16 or more, but this was originally written in 12). Also, there are one inch margins to allow for me to write in the margins.

11. Note that this paper is a deluxe version of an argumentative paper. That is, it has a paragraph where I argue in favor of the philosopher (and you’ll be able to argue against the philosopher as well) – this will be required for all the papers. The deluxe part is that I have raised and responded to TWO objections here, which you will be required to do in your LAST paper of the semester. See your specific paper topics for how many objections, if any, are required. Note also that sometimes the paper topic itself has objections right in it that you are told to either reply to, or you can argue that the philosopher cannot defend them. Sometimes that kind of topic will STILL state that you need to raise and respond to an objection to your view.

12. I have a concluding paragraph, where I do not say something like, “So I’ve shown that Nozick and Rand are full of it and couldn’t be more wrong, and that Singer is definitely right.”

13. This is what I would consider to be an “A” paper for an introductory class (or a 200 level course for that matter). But I do not want you to use my exact wording and substitute in your own words to make your paper. This paper gives you an idea of what an argumentative paper should be like, the kind of thing I’m looking for, and the paper’s proper formatting and elements. But it is not a template, and should not be used that way. For example, if you’re supposed to assess an argument for the existence of God, you’ll want to go through that argument premise by premise and then object to that argument, either arguing that it is a good argument or a bad one. But if you were just supposed to argue about how a passage contributed to a philosopher’s work, for instance, then you would not necessarily need to present objections, but you would need to go more into detail about what the philosopher is saying and how the passage contributes to his/her work.