

Gullmedalje NM filosofi 2021 Aslak Hellevik, Elvebakken vgs

Topic 2

«Helping is not, as conventionally thought, a charitable act that is praiseworthy to do but not wrong to omit. It is something that everyone ought to do.»

Peter Singer: *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edition (2011) Cambridge University Press, p. 200

The morality of helping others

One of the most pressing ethical issues in our society today is the degree to which we should help people who find themselves in a less fortunate situation than we do. When children die of starvation in Africa while we die of obesity in the West, socialists and many others think we ought to help. Peter Singer also thinks we should help, and goes a step further in his quote, stating that everyone ought to help. However, as Singer points to in the quote, the mainstream view in society is that the people who do help deserve praise, while others are just living “normal” moral lives. Singer challenges this view and proposes that *everyone* ought to help others. This view ties in with the effective altruism movement which Singer supports, who believe that helping others as much as you can is the most moral way to live your life. In this text I am first going to explore whether Singer’s statement is true, and then reflect on the consequences of the statement, if true. I am going to interpret the “help” in the quote on a more societal than personal level in the text, as this is what Singer focuses on in his works.

I. Is Singer right?

An argument for the validity of Singer’s claim could go as follows: First, we assume that all humans are equal, and therefore equal in terms of morality. Hence if a murderer kills someone here in Norway, it bears the same moral value as a murderer killing someone in Syria. Similar moral situations have the same moral weighting, independent of where or with whom it happens. While this position is thought of by many as fundamental to our society, we shall see later that I think it must be challenged if we are to disagree with Singer’s position. With this as a fundamental moral truth, Singer has proposed the following thought-experiment:

Gullmedalje NM filosofi 2021 Aslak Hellevik, Elvebakken vgs

Imagine you walk along a road, with your brand-new white shoes on. You suddenly hear a child's scream, and you see that a small child has fallen into a water pit and is about to drown. The pit is only a few feet deep, so you could easily save the child, though that would ruin your new shoes. What do you do? Do you save the child, and ruin your brand-new shoes, or do you walk on, ignoring the child and letting it drown?

The moral thing to do here seems apparent to most people: of course you save the child. Shoes are just shoes, saving the child from drowning would be easy, and you can just buy new shoes later. However, Singer argues that this situation is one we are in all the time. When you buy a coffee before work, you could instead have sent the money you spent on it to children starving in Africa, saving lives or at least bettering them a lot more than that coffee betters your life. So, it is immoral to buy that coffee, since you are letting the child you could have saved die.

Is there any way to argue that this position is false? Or are we really leaving the child in the pit to die all the time, not wanting to get our shoes wet? I see two main ways to argue that Singer is wrong: Either you do not ought to help the child in the situation in the pit, and it isn't immoral to just walk on, or the assumption I made in the beginning is wrong.

How can we be so sure that it is wrong to leave the child dying in the pit? The easiest way to argue against this would be to take a sceptic moral position based on Hume's is/ought problem. As we seem to have no way to derive an ought from an is, there is no rigorous way to argue that saving the child is the moral thing to do, and so we can never be sure if helping anyone is the right thing to do. A position of extreme moral relativism would have the same effect, questioning morality at its deepest level. However, these positions can be used to render any moral statement in any situation useless, similar to religious arguments of the type "because God" against any scientific argument. These types of arguments should be avoided in philosophical discussions, if we ever want to make progress. Without such

Gullmedalje NM filosofi 2021 Aslak Hellevik, Elvebakken vgs

arguments it becomes hard to argue against saving the child. The high value of human lives is one of the most fundamental moral views we have, present through all human societies. Trading shoes against a human life therefore seem undisputable. Even if your moral values differ radically from this, there is almost guaranteed to be a scenario like the child in the pit one could concoct to support Singer's statement. I therefore think Singer's position holds logically in this regard, and to argue against it one needs to question the assumption I made in the first paragraph.

"All humans are equal, and equal in terms of morality. Similar moral situations have the same moral weighting, independent of where or with whom it happens." To me it seems the best way to argue against Singer's argument is to argue against this assumption. While the modern world might see this assumption as self-evident, most human civilizations have had a different view. For most of humanity, we humans have divided ourselves into different groups, with different rights and moral value. Slaves were worth less than their owners, so there were no moral problems with slaves getting abused and killed. While we like to think such systems don't exist anymore, examples like modern slavery in Asia and the caste system in India proves that the position is in no way universal. While such systems are normal from a historical viewpoint, they are almost always founded on religious or ideological ethical systems many today see as medieval and obviously wrong. With the 20th century's discoveries in sciences such as biology and neuroscience, it seems more and more evident that all humans are built equally. Our brains function the same way, and with our consciousness, qualia, and therefore anything of moral value (morality does not make sense without subjective experience), seemingly coming from our mind, I think the only logical position to take is that the assumption is true. Experiences in consciousness and the moral value that comes from them does not differ whether it is me or you who experiences them, and whether you are in Norway or on the moon.

A final note on the validity of Singer's position is that different ethical systems do not conflict with its validity even though different systems give different moral actions. Even if you are a moral relativist thinking some cultures can be made in a way where saving a child in a pit is

Gullmedalje NM filosofi 2021 Aslak Hellevik, Elvebakken vgs

immoral, the only necessity of Singer's argument is that there be *some* ethical positions held. As long as there is a morality, you ought to help others with whatever your ethical system deems moral, even though it might be entirely different from ours. The exception would be ethical systems where helping others is considered immoral, or some sort of extreme moral relativism which renders morality useless and nonsensical, as already mentioned.

As I think the assumption I made in the first paragraph is true, and that the only way to argue against Singer's argument seems to be through extreme moral relativism or scepticism through the is/ought problem, I find that I agree with Singer's position. Let us now explore the consequences of a morality where the view that everyone ought to help each other is true.

II. Consequences

I would argue that agreeing with Singer's argument brings with it two important moral evaluations of our society, one on the individual level, and one on the societal level:

1. We live in a society where most actions being done are immoral.
2. Our political system is morally abhorrent.

These are very strong claims about our society as morally dysfunctional. As I agree with Singer's argument and make these strong claims based on that, I will now carefully argue why I think they might be true.

1. We live in a society where almost all actions are immoral.

Agreeing with Singer's view that we ought to help others, and agreeing with the assumptions I made earlier, we all find ourselves in the situation with the child in the pit *all* the time.

When we in Norway choose to buy the newest iPhone, we also choose not to save the life of

Gullmedalje NM filosofi 2021 Aslak Hellevik, Elvebakken vgs

the child starving in Syria. When we go about our lives entertaining ourselves, choosing not to sell our cars to save multiple lives in poor villages in Africa, we take immoral actions. As long as we are in a situation where we can help, but we don't, anything else we do can be seen as immoral. These statements all follow from the position of believing Singer's argument to be valid.

The main argument against this would be that most people do not realize that they have a choice to help people instead of buying coffee in the morning, and that they are not really making moral judgements when they do not realize there is a choice to be made. Off course, most people don't know about the philosophical arguments behind helping others, and most people act according to the norms and rules of society, where helping others is "praiseworthy to do but not wrong to omit". However almost everyone knows about charitable organizations like The Red Cross, which is easy to donate to, and almost everyone knows that there are children starving around the world while we eat as much as we want. You do not need to know the philosophy to realize that you could donate money instead of using it on yourself, so I think the claim is true for most actions most of the time.

2. Our political system is morally abhorrent.

This statement becomes self-evident based on the arguments I have presented until now. The political system of a society shapes the playing field where human actions occur. It incentivises certain actions and is essential in how our norms develop over time. A political system allowing most of its citizens' actions to be immoral, is therefore a morally abhorrent system.

On a larger scale our politics also break with Singer's morality of helping others. While countries like Norway do help other countries and people in poor parts of the world, we could have helped a lot more. Coming up with policies helping others more than we do now is very easy: An example could be to quadruple the tax on flying airplanes, giving the profits to feed the starving in Africa. While the tax might make many unable to go on as many

Gullmedalje NM filosofi 2021 Aslak Hellevik, Elvebakken vgs

vacations to Spain as they used to, this is analogous to us needing to get our white new shoes wet to help others. The fact that such simple policies are not being implemented is because the policymakers (and the voters voting them into office) in Norway indirectly value the lives of Norwegians over the lives of poor children in Africa. We like to go to Spain during our summer vacation, and so we go to Spain. Our vacation seems to be worth more to us than the lives of African children, else the policies would be different. Clearly, most states around the world don't fully agree with the assumptions I claimed lie behind Singer's position. The policies are not made from a viewpoint of every human life being equal, because then we would never accept starving children on the streets in Africa, in the same way we would never accept it if there were hundreds of children dying of starvation in the middle of the street of Karl Johan.

III. Conclusion

To finish this essay, I want to reflect on what it is that makes it possible for us to make seemingly extremely immoral choices all the time, without thinking much about it. I think this phenomenon comes down to evolution, and the way humans have evolved as a species. The reason why we see what the moral action to take in the pit scenario is so clearly, while the suffering of millions of children doesn't affect us a bit, is because historically, we didn't need to. Humans are social animals who needed to make social bonds with their family and their tribe, and any energy spent on anyone else was wasted. Because of this we evolved a moral compass which makes it easy for us to evaluate concrete situations with few people involved, such as the pit example. Meanwhile thinking of millions of children requires abstractions in the moral thinking which we are unable to do well, since we never needed to do it well to survive. I think it is our duty as rational creatures to do all we can to break these natural "flaws" or barriers woven into us by evolution, and I think the way to do it is through science and philosophy. In the quote by Peter Singer, he points to one of these barriers, and argues that we must overcome it to live an ethical life. This would require huge changes to our society and the way we live our lives, but as I agree with the viewpoint presented in the quote, I think we ought to make that change.