

The many values in life

«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 quote from Peter Singer presents some claims that goes against our every-day intuition regarding charity. He is rejecting the general idea that helping others is praiseworthy, and not immoral to omit from, saying that it is something everyone ought to do. In saying this he is implying that helping is a moral duty, a duty so fundamental that it deserves no praise to uphold, but rather blame to withhold. In this text I will discuss whether we are truly *inclined* to help others, and if so, under which circumstances that is the case. I will discuss this inclination by investigating the premises that Singer seems to be dependent upon.

The quote expresses the opinion that would typically be held by an utilitarian which argues for effective altruism. The utilitarian view is the view that actions should be morally judged with the basis of their consequences, where, generally, good consequences are those that increase world happiness and decrease world suffering, and bad consequences are those that lead to the opposite (this may not include all utilitarianists, but it is the version that will be referred to in this text). If you accept these utilitarian premises, then it seems inevitable to turn to effective altruism. Effective altruism argues that, because moral actions are those that increases the most amount of world happiness (from here on, an increase in happiness also includes a decrease in suffering) then we should use our resources so to maximizing the positive impact we have on the world. The consequence of accepting this, is the realization that we are all living deeply immoral lives. When we decide to eat at a fancy restaurant, that very money could be used to help others that really need it, and maybe even save a life. The choosing of eating at a fancy restaurant should, as all actions, be judge by their ability to increase world happiness, which it is doing a bad job at (compared to the alternative use of the money). As Peter Singer is saying, it would be immoral to omit from helping others. However, as already mentioned, the claim relies on the utilitarian premises, and therefore we must start by investigating these very premises in order to figure out if we really are inclined to help others.

The utilitarian view is a form of consequentialism, the view that actions should solely be judged by their consequences, which is the first premise I will discuss. Consequentialism is not a universally acknowledged moral view, in fact most prominent moral systems has argued that actions themselves are either moral or not, regardless of their consequences. Perhaps the most prominent one, has been Christian morality. The aspect I want to highlight here is the intrinsic value that morals are given in Christianity. The most obvious example being the view that homosexuality is a sin. Homosexuality does not lead to any negative consequences in the world, on the contrary, suppressing them leads to suffering. Either way it is a sin, because the moral rule has intrinsic value, it follows a more abstract judgement that transcends the practical impact it has on earth, such as in this case “purity”.

Nietzsche strongly rejected the Christian moral worldview, that morals have universally intrinsic value, but he also rejected the utilitarian view, and really any view that systematically approached

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morality. He argued for an individual model, where each person should create his/her own morals, emphasising that morals aren't universal and doesn't have intrinsic value, and neither does humans. As soon as one rejects that morals have intrinsic value, as Nietzsche does, one is necessarily accepting consequentialism. As much as Nietzsche rejected the idea that good and bad, or happiness should be the basis of judging a given action, since he is arguing for a certain morality with the basis of practical implications he too is arguing for a (broad) form of consequentialism. He argues that it is important to be the "fullest version of oneself" and that one should say yes to life, with all that includes of natural impulses and imperfection, and these aspects which he emphasises, are also consequences. They are hypothetical future scenarios that he wants his view of morality to lead to, which puts it under a broad version of consequentialism. All moral philosophy either falls under the category of consequentialism, or it argues for a transcendent morality, such as the one of Christianity or that of Plato's Forms. However, since the foundation that Christian morals or Plato's Forms (or any other transcendent morality) depend on has proven to be unreliable, it seems that we must turn to consequentialism.

Accepting the premise that consequences are all that matters, there is a question with immense practical relevance that must be addressed, where Nietzsche and the utilitarian differ (immensely) in opinions. What are the consequences which we should strive for? First, I think it is necessary to reject Nietzsche's focus on the individual. In order to judge an action, we must look at its consequences on the world for a complete picture of its consequences. The right consequences could still be Nietzschean, for example to strive for a world where most people are the fullest version of oneself (whatever that means), but it is important to look at the consequence for "most people" instead of the individual, if not, one is focusing on a way too narrow worldview. So what are the consequences that we should strive for, in the world? For the utilitarian the answer is straightforward enough, we should strive for a world with the most possible amount of happiness. However, is happiness really the only aspect of life that is worth increasing? If so, I would like to present a hypothetical scenario that might push one's intuition about the matter. Imagine that, in the future, every human is offered a happiness pill, a pill that makes you immensely happy for the rest of your life, but you must take it in a closed room, all alone, and stay there for the rest of your life. If you accept the utilitarian premise, then it would be logical to consume the pill, but the reluctance to accept it that at least I feel, could indicate that happiness isn't the only aspect of life that is of value.

What about truth or art, for example? When Stephen Hawking was asked if he was afraid to die, he answered something along the lines of that he was anxious to uncover the universe's secrets, and that he hoped to be around for some of that. He didn't answer that he wanted to maximise his own well-being first, or that he could die when suffering occupied a larger amount of his life than happiness. No, he clearly found value in truth alone. This is true for a lot of us, even on a day-to-day basis. For example, we watch sad movies which makes us feel negative emotions, but we are still glad that we watched it at the end, perhaps because it uncovered some (sad) truth about a particular story or society. There is, in other words, clearly value in truth. Art is another example, that really has no clear link to happiness, but that is valued across the globe. A particular painting can overwhelm you with emotions, where happiness doesn't have to be included for the interaction with the art to be meaningful or of value. People doesn't attend art galleries in order to feel happiness, but nonetheless people gain something from interacting with art, showing its undisputed value.

However, Singer isn't repudiating the value of truth or art in the quote, so why is it even relevant? It is relevant due to an implication in the quote, namely the implication that we are obliged to help others. When he says that helping others is something we ought to do, it seems to implicate that he is arguing for a universal rule: that if you have the resources to help others, then you are obliged to.

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Now let's consider a case where a person has the (potential) resources to help others, but where he nevertheless shouldn't be obliged to do so. Imagine a young genius around the age of 20. He is remarkable with numbers and formulas, and his excellence in math and physics is unprecedented. He is considering two career choices, the first being a career in trading on the stock market, where he would inevitably become a multi-millionaire (lets imagine that he *knows* this) and donate all his money to charity. The other options entail a career in quantum physics where he will uncover some of the universe's secrets, such as, for example, laying out an explanation for how the Big Bang could occur. In this scenario, he is not attributing to the same amount of happiness, but nonetheless is his attribution to truth enough to justify his decision. This might seem like a far-fetched scenario, but this particular value decision is not. For example, when an artist contemplates whether he should leave his/her family (and cause suffering) in order to have the serenity and time that is needed in order to create great art.

Still, the aforementioned examples are not generally the case. I do agree with Singer that we should, in a lot of cases, help others. It is the "ought" that I disagree with, the idea that everyone that can, have a moral duty to help others. As exemplified, there are cases where it is not your moral duty, and where other priorities can be justified, and I want to emphasise that truth and art are only two examples of such priorities. However, most of the time, our priorities are not justifiable priorities. Most of the time we priorities a selfish and unjustifiable goal: our own happiness and well-being over others. In this kind of a case, which I believe is the most common case of priority, the resources invested in one's own well-being, such as the costs of a meal at a fancy restaurant, would lead to much more well-being if donated to the right charities. Therefore, in these cases, because we must accept consequentialism and because the priority in both scenarios relies on the same value (happiness) it is immoral to choose a fancy meal.

In conclusion, the utilitarian premise that actions must be judged by its consequences is a coherent one, but what those consequences should be isn't equally clear. It isn't simply happiness - some things can be prioritised over happiness, such as truth or art, but the case is often that we priorities our own happiness over others. Under such circumstances, it is immoral to priorities oneself (unless that increase in happiness could succeed the happiness one could impose on others) and it would not be praiseworthy to priorities others – but simply something we ought to do.