

16. Applied Ethics, 1: The Duty of Charity

16.1. The Shallow Pond Argument

Here's a hypothetical that comes from the contemporary philosopher Peter Singer[105]:

Shallow Pond: You're walking to class one day, passing by a shallow, ornamental pond on campus, when you notice that a small child has fallen into the pond. He appears to be drowning. You could wade into the pond and save the child. However, doing so will get your clothes all wet, possibly ruining your nice new suit, and cause you to miss class. Are you obligated to save the child?

Few people have difficulty with this: Obviously, you have to pull the child out of the pond. The inconvenience to you is trivial in comparison with the life of another person.

That was just a hypothetical scenario. Now here is a non-hypothetical scenario. You live in a world where many people are suffering from malnutrition or dying of malaria, tuberculosis, and other preventable diseases, due to extreme poverty. You are much better off than those people and are frequently able to buy for yourself various goods that you don't need. You could give some of your money to charitable organizations that aid the global poor, thereby helping to save some lives. For example, you could donate to UNICEF, GiveWell, or the Against Malaria Foundation. However, this would require giving up some luxuries that you enjoy. All of this is in fact true for almost all readers of this book (unless you're a poor person in the developing world, in which case I don't know how you would even have gotten a hold of this book). Yet most people give nothing to such causes. What is the appropriate moral assessment of this?

This non-hypothetical situation is analogous to the shallow pond in obvious ways. In both cases, you are aware of someone who is in great need. You can do something to alleviate their need, at very low cost to yourself. If you're obligated to help the child in the shallow pond, then, it seems that you are equally obligated to help the global poor by donating to charity.

That is Peter Singer's conclusion. Notice that his conclusion is not merely "It's preferable to give to charity rather than not giving", or "Giving to charity is praiseworthy." Those are pretty obvious claims, which almost everyone already agrees with. His claim is that giving to charity is morally obligatory, not optional. If you're not giving anything, then you're acting like the asshole who walks past the drowning child because he doesn't want to get his clothes wet – which is truly horrible behavior. Also notice that Singer isn't saying that "society" should do something to help the poor (though that might also be true). He is saying that you personally (and me, and each other well-off individual) have an obligation to contribute.

Singer says the Shallow Pond example illustrates the first premise in the following argument:

1. If you can prevent something very bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, then you are obligated to do so.
2. You can prevent some very bad things from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, by donating to poverty relief efforts.
3. Therefore, you are obligated to donate to poverty relief.

How much are you obligated to give? Well, you have to keep giving until the point at which giving more would require sacrificing something of comparable significance (of course this is vague, but it's still of some use as a guideline). Obviously, you shouldn't give so much that you yourself would starve, or go without needed medical care, or something like that (that would be sacrificing something of comparable significance). You also don't want to do things that would prevent you from being able to give in the future. So if, say, your job requires you to dress reasonably presentably, then you don't want to give away so much that you're unable to do that and then you get fired. However, if you're spending money on lots of trivial goods, as most people are, you should stop that and give the money to charity instead – e.g., if you're eating out at restaurants, going to movie theatres, or buying extra shoes when you already have a perfectly good pair. No reasonable person would consider those luxuries to be of comparable significance to another person's life.

Note: Absolute vs. Relative Poverty

People in wealthy nations (including, say, college students) often think of themselves as “poor” despite having adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. This is using a relative notion of poverty: We call ourselves poor when we are poorer than the other people in our society. By contrast, many of those in the developing world (i.e., the world's poorest countries) are **absolutely poor**, meaning that they don't have enough money to meet their basic needs – so they have inadequate nutrition, or they don't have medical care, and they're in danger of dying because of this. Many of the relatively poor (in wealthy nations) are far richer than the world's absolute poor.

16.2. Objections in Defense of Non-Giving

I'm going to assume that we agree about saving the child from the shallow pond. But is that really analogous to donating to charity? Here are some arguments you might give for why we need not donate to poverty relief, even though we would have to save the drowning child.

Objection #1: “I'm not certain that my money will really help the poor. What if the charity organization just keeps the money for itself?”

Reply:

(a) Let me add another detail to the Shallow Pond story. You were about to wade in and pull the child out, but then you noticed that he had stopped moving. You were thus uncertain of whether you would actually save him or whether he was already dead. Since

you didn't want to take the risk of possibly getting your clothes wet for nothing, you decided to just keep on walking. Is this okay?

(b) Obviously, don't donate money to some random web site that some guy just started; donate only to reputable organizations. For example, UNICEF is an extremely famous poverty relief organization started by the U.N. in 1946, with a presence in 192 countries. It's not going to turn out that UNICEF is some giant hoax that's been running for 70 years without anyone noticing. (If you think that, you should consider seeing a shrink, because that is schizophrenic-level paranoia.) There are also charity review organizations, such as GiveWell, which monitor the costeffectiveness of charities. So if you are concerned about ensuring that your donation really does some good, you can go to <https://www.givewell.org> and see the charities that are most efficient.

Objection #2: "There are so many poor people in the developing world that it's impossible to save all of them. My contribution would just be a drop in the bucket."

Reply: Imagine that just as you were about to pull the child out of the Shallow Pond, someone came by and told you that as it turns out, there are actually thousands of ponds, pools, rivers, etc., around the world where children are drowning. Realizing that you can't save all of them, you decide there's no point in saving the one here, so you just continue walking to class and let that kid die. Is this okay?

Objection #3: "There are lots of other people who could help even more easily than me. The millionaires and billionaires should donate their money, instead of me!"

Reply: I have another detail to add about the Shallow Pond. You're just about to wade in to save the child, when you notice that there are several other people standing around the pond doing nothing. Any of them could save the child. Some of them don't even have any class to get to (judging from how they are just lounging about on the lawn), and a few of them are closer to the child than you are. Nevertheless, none of them is in fact doing anything. You try shouting out, "Hey, someone save that child!" but they just ignore you. You say to yourself, "Well, if none of them is saving the child, I refuse to do it either!" Then you just keep walking, leaving the child to die. Is this okay?

Objection #4: "Why bother? People in poor countries have such bad lives that it's hardly worth preserving them."

Reply: You're just about to pull the child out of the pond, but then someone comes by and tells you, "Oh, I know that child. He has a pretty bad life. In fact, he's just visiting from Bangladesh; he's scheduled to go back there next week and return to his life in the slums." Hearing this, you figure there's no point getting your clothes all wet to save him. So you keep walking. Is this okay?

Objection #5: "Saving lives in the Third World is futile or counterproductive. Their problem is that they have too many people. Saving lives there will just cause the population to increase, which will cause more starvation and suffering in the future."

Reply:

(a) Again, just as you were thinking about saving the drowning child, someone comes by and tells you that the kid is going to be sent to Bangladesh next week, if he's still alive. You reflect that there are too many people in Bangladesh as it is, so you decide to just let the kid die instead. Does this sound cool?

(b) Actually, no, there's no evidence that poverty relief efforts cause an increase in population. Quite the opposite (see §16.3).

Objection #6: "This is too demanding. If we accept Singer's argument, we won't just be giving a little bit occasionally. We'll be giving almost everything we have. After I've saved one starving child, there will be another one I could save. And another one. No matter how many I save, there will always be this argument that I could save one more, by giving a little more money – all the way to the point where I have only just enough to meet my own basic needs. There would be no particular point at which I sacrificed anything of comparable significance to another person's life. But the cumulative effect of all the giving would be to pretty much ruin my life. But it's just not reasonable to ask people to make that much of a sacrifice for others. The Shallow Pond story is different, because you only have one child to save."

Comments:

This objection is better than the previous ones. What's right about it: I think the Shallow Pond Argument really is that demanding. Also, it's plausible that this makes it too demanding.

We could try modifying the Shallow Pond story to make it more analogous to the world poverty situation. Let's say the pond, while still shallow, is extremely large. There are thousands of children drowning in that pond, and more fall in every minute. After you pull the first one out, there will be another one to pull out, and another, and so on (it's a different child each time, though). If you spent the rest of your life pulling children out, you'd never finish, because more keep falling in. Are you then obligated to spend every waking moment for the rest of your life – apart from the minimum amount of time needed to sustain your own life – pulling children out of that pond?

I'm going to say not. Now, do you have to pull any of the children out of the pond? Or may you, in this scenario, completely ignore the pond and all its drowning children?

It would be very strange if it was morally okay to completely ignore the pond. If there is only one child in the pond, you have to pull that child out. Presumably, if there are two, then you have to pull both of them out. If there are three, you have to save all three. Presumably, it goes on that way for a while. It would be very strange if, at some point, your obligation suddenly drops to zero, merely because there were more people in need.

In other words, say that if there were exactly n children in the pond, you'd have to pull all of them out. Suppose, in fact, that n is the largest number such that you'd be obligated to try to save all of them. And suppose that you have just in fact come upon a shallow pond, where you see exactly n children drowning. You're about to wade in and start saving all those children. But then, just as you approach the water's edge, you notice one more child

that you hadn't seen before (he was hidden behind another child's hat, you see). It would be very strange if you suddenly concluded that it's now perfectly fine to turn around and walk away, saving none of the children, because of that one added child.

Don't say that you now have to save all $n+1$ children. That can't be, because we stipulated that n is the largest number that you'd have to save. I think what this shows is: If there are any number of children less than or equal to n , then you have to save all of them (that's by stipulation); if you see more than n children in the pond, then you still have to save n of them. It's **supererogatory** (praiseworthy and beyond the call of duty) to save additional children after that.

I don't know the correct value of n . It's a matter for intuitive judgment. It's presumably significantly more than 3, but less than a million.

How does all this apply to donating to charity? Well, Objection 6 does not show that we're not obligated to give to charity at all. Rather, we're obligated to give the largest amount such that, if that amount would completely solve the problem, we'd be obligated to give it.

In practice, that principle is hard to apply, since we don't have very clear intuitions about what that largest amount is. I assume, though, that it would be an amount that feels like a significant sacrifice (hence the saying, "Give till it hurts"), but not an amount that ruins your life.

Note about Utilitarianism

Utilitarians wouldn't agree with what I just said. They don't buy these "too demanding" objections. The utilitarian view would be that you have to give until the point at which giving more would actually cause more harm than good (either because you yourself need that money more than any of the people you could give it to, or because giving more now would somehow prevent you from giving in the future). This would be an enormous amount. If you're a normal person in a prosperous society, it would probably mean giving upwards of 90% of your income away. And it would ruin your life. But that, says the utilitarian, is a small price to pay for all the other lives you would save.

Oh, by the way, you're almost certainly also going to be obligated to *change your career*, from whatever it currently is to some more lucrative one, so that you can donate more to charity. E.g., if you're a philosophy professor, you probably could become a lawyer instead, in which case you'd be able to give a lot more to charity. It doesn't matter if you would hate practicing law; that, again, is a small price to pay for saving more lives.

Peter Singer is well known as a utilitarian. However, when he talks about famine relief, he doesn't advance the utilitarian view (which many people find to be so insanely demanding that it just puts them off from donating anything). He thinks that his argument (§16.1) should work on anyone with *any* reasonable ethical view, including reasonable deontologists. That is, it works to show that we have an obligation to give some significant amount to charity, though it doesn't establish the extreme utilitarian view of our obligations.

16.3. Poverty and Population

Way back around the start of the 19th century, there was an economist named Thomas Malthus. He wrote about the problem of population. His theory was that any society's population would naturally increase exponentially, until they used up their food supply and

other resources. The death rate would then have to increase until the food supply was just enough to sustain the population.

This view is apparently so intuitive that some people today still believe it. Some think that world poverty is caused by “overpopulation”, and that relief efforts lead to more population growth. This leads some to conclude that there is no point in contributing to poverty relief (objection 5, §16.2).

Fortunately, this theory is just factually false. It is true that there is a correlation between fertility (birth rates) and poverty – the countries with high fertility tend to also be poor. This is not, however, because fertility causes poverty. It’s the reverse: Poverty causes people to have more children. When people’s income goes up, they do not generally increase the number of children they have; they decrease it. In fact, the most prosperous nations in the world have birth rates below the death rate and may have a problem with a dwindling population. (But they can prevent population decline via immigration.)

How can this be? When people get more money, they can *afford* to have more children, so why doesn’t their fertility increase? The answer is basically that children take up your time, and, in wealthy nations, people have other things they’d like to do with their time. For one thing, if you have lots of kids, that can interfere with your career; so the better your career prospects are, the greater the deterrent to having kids. You also just have more fun things to do in a wealthy country – sailing your boat, smoking marijuana, playing *Call of Duty XII*, etc. – which children can interfere with. *Most* people are going to still have kids, but some number of well-off people are going to decide it’s not worth it.

One factor that is particularly anti-correlated with fertility is women’s education. When education is more available, women postpone having children and have fewer children – partly because they’re in school during some of their child-bearing years, and partly because after finishing school they have more desirable career options available. So, again, they have other things to do that compete with producing offspring.

In poor nations, on the other hand, people may have more children because they want the children to work during childhood, or they want the children to help support them when they are older. Another key factor is child mortality: In poorer nations, infants and children are more likely to die. Parents don’t know how many of their children will die before reaching adulthood. Therefore, if they want to be reasonably assured of having some children survive to adulthood, they need to have *more* children than would be the case in a society with negligible child mortality.

Taking all this into account, if we can alleviate world poverty, this would actually reduce population growth. We’ll get a smaller population, living at a higher standard of living.

By the way, you can tell that population isn’t the main cause of poverty, because there are plenty of high-population-density countries that are rich, and plenty of low-population-density countries that are poor. It’s not like there’s just some fixed amount of money sitting there, and we have to divide it among us, so we get smaller shares the more people there are. No, the amount of money varies with the population.

In a prosperous nation, when we add new people, those people are generally productive, so the society's productivity grows roughly in proportion to the population. If overpopulation isn't the cause of poverty, what is? Well, that's complicated, and everyone doesn't agree on it. One factor is political: Poor nations often have corrupt governments that rob the people and do a crappy job of protecting them. They may have crappy policies in place that interfere with market activity. These nations also may have general cultural features that depress economic activity, such as a tendency to distrust strangers, which interferes with economic transactions. Those problems are difficult or impossible for us to address directly. However, the poor nations are generally growing economically, and at a faster rate than the wealthy nations, so they're on the way to catching up. We wealthy people can help this process along by providing aid for food, medical care, etc.

16.4. Effective Altruism

After Peter Singer gave his argument for the obligation of charity, some other people started a movement called the “**effective altruism**” movement. Their main idea is that we should not only give a significant amount to charity; we should also make a particularly strong effort to identify the *most effective* charities to give to, and focus our efforts on those charities. This is important because some charities are hundreds or thousands of times more effective than others.

Let's say you see a child drowning in a shallow pond. You could wade in and pull the child out. At the same time, you see another child who is feeling slightly chilly. You could go over and give her a jacket to make her feel warmer. You only have time to do one of these things. Which should you do?

Obviously, save the drowning child. If you instead decide to “save” the cold child, you're being an immoral jerk. That illustrates the intuition that givers are obligated to give to *effective* charities, ones that do a lot of good with the money you give them, as opposed to inefficient charities that do only a small amount of good. For instance, a lot of people, after graduating and then making successful careers, come back and donate money to their university, for stuff like an endowed lecture series (paying to have someone give an academic lecture every year), or an endowed chair position (subsidizing some prestigious professor's salary). Don't do that. That's a total waste of money, when you could instead use the money to save many lives. [106] There are now organizations devoted to evaluating the effectiveness of various charities, including some organizations that you can give to who will re-gift the money to those charities that they find to be most efficient. Here are three important ones:

GiveWell: <https://www.givewell.org>.

These people evaluate cost-effectiveness of different charities oriented toward world poverty. You can go there and see what they think are the best causes. You can also just give money to GiveWell and have them split it among their top-rated charities. GiveWell estimates that the best charities save lives for a cost of about \$3000 per life.

Animal Charity Evaluators: <https://animalcharityevaluators.org>.

Like GiveWell, but for non-human-animal-related charities. In utilitarian terms, you can probably have a far greater impact by focusing on animal charities (animals are worse off and it's easier to reduce their suffering than to reduce human suffering).

Effective Altruism Funds: <https://app.effectivealtruism.org/funds>.

Similar to the previous two, but you can specify how you want to allocate your donation among four different areas of concern that you might have; their experts then evaluate what are the best charities in each of these areas, and they re-gift the money accordingly.

I'm telling you this just in case you were persuaded by the arguments of the previous sections *and* you happen to be among the small minority of humans who are consistently moral. In that case, you'll want to donate your money efficiently.

Remember, the purpose of giving isn't to make a sacrifice (such that as long as you've *sacrificed* enough, your obligation would be satisfied). We're not aiming at suffering. The purpose is to do some good. So direct your gifts to do the most good.

16.5. Government Policy

16.5.1. The Argument for Social Welfare Programs

So far, all of that was about individual ethics – what should you personally do about world poverty (or other problems)? We argued that you have an individual obligation to donate some of your excess money to do some good for others.

Now here's a political question: What should the government do? This is a different question because the government does not earn money in the same way that you and I do. The government, rather, acquires money by forcibly confiscating it from the rest of us. Many people believe that this implies much stricter moral constraints on what the government may legitimately do with "its" money than the moral constraints on what you or I may do with our money.

Here is an example that suggests, nevertheless, that it is appropriate for the government to fund charitable causes:

Pond Bystander: As before, you see a child drowning in a shallow pond. This time, you are unable to save the child yourself, as you are currently confined to a wheelchair. There is another bystander near the pond, who could easily wade in and save the child, yet he is doing nothing. You ask the bystander to save the child, but he objects; he doesn't want to get his clothes all wet, he says. It's clear that you won't be able to persuade him through normal means, as he is an asshole. You happen, however, to have a gun in your possession. You could point the gun at the asshole and order him to save the child, which you reasonably predict will result in his saving the child. Should you thus coerce the bystander to save the child?

In this case, though your use of force is of course regrettable, it seems justified.

Admittedly, you may be treating the bystander as a mere means (contrary to Kantian ethics) as well as violating his right not to be coerced. But it still seems like the thing to do.

That, one might argue, is analogous to the government's situation. The government is aware of many poor people who are in need, who could easily be helped with some money. The citizens are not willing to voluntarily donate enough money to help all these people. So, just like you in the Pond Bystander case, the government resorts to coercing them to help – in this case, coercing them to donate money, which the government uses to help the poor.

16.5.2. The Charity Mugging Example

Now here's a different story:

Charity Mugging: You have a charity that you've created to help the poor. Your charity is doing good work, but you feel you are not getting enough voluntary donations. So one day, you decide to go out and start collecting "donations" by force. You go up to people on the street who look like they have money, and you rob them at gunpoint. You then funnel all this money into your charity. Is this appropriate behavior?

Most people have little trouble judging this to be impermissible. Yet it seems analogous to the government's behavior. The government also collects money from people by force, in order to fund *its* charity programs to help the poor. If it's not okay for you to do it, why would it be okay for the government?

So we have a clash of analogies. Pond Bystander suggests that government social welfare programs are permissible; Charity Mugging suggests that they are not. Which analogy is better? On the face of it, Charity Mugging is a closer analogy (it is more similar to social welfare programs). Charity Mugging, like social welfare programs, involves an ongoing program of coercion, aimed at alleviating chronic poverty. Pond Bystander, by contrast, involves an isolated act of coercion, aimed at resolving an acute emergency, a drowning child. If either of these is a fair analogy to government social welfare programs, it is the Charity Mugging case.

16.5.3. Other Problems with Government Programs

There are other problems facing government social programs in the real world. One of these is that government programs are not in fact aimed at the most needy people (let alone the most needy animals). The neediest people in the world are in the developing world, but governments in the wealthier nations have approximately zero concern for them. The reason for this is that these governments are democratic, and most voters don't care about foreigners. Indeed, many voters hate, or at least are very suspicious of, foreigners. Thus, despite that foreign aid forms a tiny portion of the budget, it's the one thing that Americans can agree on cutting (average voters also absurdly estimate foreign aid to be one of the largest items in the budget, when it is in fact under 1%).

The people helped by government programs in developed nations are generally not absolutely poor; they are merely poor relative to their society. That is, they typically have their basic needs met, but government aims to modestly improve their welfare. A good deal of government aid actually goes to middle- and upper-class people. Of particular note, financial aid for college students is almost entirely a subsidy to the middle class (poor

people rarely attend college, regardless of financial aid opportunities). Social Security is also a regressive redistribution program (that is, it redistributes toward the relatively wealthy), because the wealthier classes tend to both start work later and live longer than the poor; they thus pay into the program for a shorter time and draw from it for a longer time.

The Pond Bystander analogy doesn't really apply to these sorts of programs. In Pond Bystander, you point a gun at the bystander to make him rescue a drowning child. A better analogy would be pointing a gun at the bystander and demanding that he fund the child's college classes. Or pointing a gun at the bystander and demanding that he pay for an old person's retirement program or medical bills.

Another issue is that in our stories, you only ever *threaten* people with violence. Government, however, cannot merely threaten. Some people will always disobey (for example, tax evaders), and the government will then have to actually *carry out* its threats, for example, to imprison those people; otherwise, it will soon become known that the law is unenforced, and disobedience will be rampant. Now, it may well be that you are justified in threatening people in situations in which you wouldn't be justified in carrying out the threat. In Pond Bystander, it's plausible that you may threaten to shoot the bystander, to get him to save the child. But if he still refuses to save the child, you may not actually shoot him.

Finally, arguments like the Pond Bystander argument *assume* that government social programs actually help, rather than making things worse. There isn't a general agreement on whether that's true; some argue that government anti-poverty efforts are ineffective or counter-productive. One reason for this is that decades of such poverty programs in the U.S. do not seem to have resulted in a reduction in the poverty rate. This could be because these programs lure people into dependence on the state, and because they make it easier in the short run for people to do things that are self-destructive in the long-run (e.g., having out-of-wedlock births, or being unemployed). [107]

It's not *clear* whether these things are true – there is reasonable dispute in social science about whether social programs in the developed world help or not. (By contrast, there is little dispute about the fact that some charities really help the poor in the developed world, e.g., by stopping them from getting malaria.) This makes it harder to justify forcing everyone to contribute to these programs.

16.6. Conclusion

The case for government aid to the poor is shaky, especially the type of programs actually supported by actual governments. However, the case for an individual obligation to give to charity is very strong. If you saw some children drowning in a pond, whom you could easily save at small cost to yourself, surely you would and should save them. The fact that the children in the developing world are physically *farther away*, and that you aren't *seeing* them with your own eyes, is morally irrelevant. Those factors affect your ability to emotionally appreciate their plight, but they do not affect how important the needs of the global poor in fact are. So, just as you would save the drowning children, you should also

save some of the global poor. (Or donate to other causes that are equally or more important.)

In donating to charity, you should choose charities that will do the most good for the money; there are organizations such as GiveWell, Animal Charity Evaluators, and Effective Altruism Funds to help you do this.

Thus far, I've mostly talked as if the best cause to donate to is relief of world poverty, though I have mentioned animal-related charities in passing. In fact, animal-related charities are probably much more cost-effective than human-oriented charities. However, it is even more difficult to get most people to care about other species than it is to get them to care about people in other countries. We'll talk about that in more detail in the next chapter.