

Is Peter Singer right?: Comparable Importance Principle

By: Lo Min Choong Julian | 5 March 2023 | Edited: 8 December 2023

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Before I begin, I note the following: Singer's Comparable Importance Principle relies on the following: (1) moral good exists (i.e. ethical truths exist), (2) we should promote moral goodness, (3) we have the power to bring about moral goodness. If one of these is false, then the Principle can be called into question. However, the exploration of these is beyond the assignment's scope.

Counter-example—Suppose in Singer's lake, there are three people: the drowning child, me, and a firefighter. The firefighter and I are equidistant from the child. Both of us are in motion, in the process of getting to the child and saving them. Both of us see each other and conclude that there is someone else there to save the child. Would it really be impermissible for me to stop dead in my tracks and let the firefighter do the saving? Yes, I am compelled to save the child, I still ought to, but I argue I am also permitted to be a bystander. Singer argues that morality compels me to complete my action. But why? This tension arises because the Principle is agent-neutral, temporally neutral, and method-neutral (i.e. the method is trivial as long as goodness is promoted reasonably).

I argue that because of agent-neutrality, I ought to be permitted to simply exist, to be a bystander, when sufficient good is being done. There is only so much good one can do for a specific situation. Abstracting this, there is a sufficient amount of good that can be done, and when it is reached, no more needs to be done.

However, Singer argues that even if we have attained universal sufficient goodness, it remains our obligation to continue doing good. I disagree. Consider a modification to my counter-example—Suppose there are a thousand people around a single lake, with a single

drowning child. All of us are in motion. All of us are equidistant from the child, with the intention to save the child. Surely, some of us are permitted to be bystanders, even though we have the power to save the child. This modification highlights the following questions: Are everyone's moral duties the same? Does everyone have the power to save the child? Is there a division of moral labour that we can follow to fulfil our moral obligations? Is it necessary to do good when a sufficient amount exists?

I admit my conclusion assumes that situations have moral caps: there exists a sufficient amount of goodness that needs to be done in order for situations to be sufficiently resolved. I argue that this is a reasonable assumption, seen from Singer's lake. Thus, I argue that Singer's Comparable Importance Principle does not apply to certain scenarios.

References

- Singer, P. (2017). Famine, Affluence, and Morality. In Cahn, S. M. & Forcehimes, A. (Eds.), *Principles of Moral Philosophy: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Normative Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780190491000.
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