Singer's Utilitarian Account of Cosmopolitan Obligations: A Critical Evaluation

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Abstract
One of the fundamental academic impacts of the ongoing phenomenon of globalization is the expansion of intellectual/moral horizon which has culminated in what some scholars describe as the rise of global consciousness. This, consequently, had led to the reemergence and the strengthening of the cosmopolitan movement whose basic assumption is that all human beings share essential features that unite, or should unite, them in a community that transcends national borders, and warrant their designation as "citizens of the world." From this core, cosmopolitan discourses examine the issues of community, identity, political institutions, justice, obligation etc. Our concern in this paper is to critically interrogate Peter Singer's utilitarian-based conception of cosmopolitan obligations. Singer's thesis, simply put, is that from the perspective of utilitarian and cosmopolitan considerations, the affluent owe a moral obligation to provide aid to the masses of the poor irrespective of whether they are compatriots or foreigners. Here we examine the validity of Singer's argument, highlight, its strength and weakness, and then proceed to demonstrate how singer's argument can be reconstructed to establish the proposition that the affluent owe the poor a duty of aid.

Keywords: Cosmopolitan, Utilitarian, Charity, Development

Introduction

That the world we live in today is characterized by injustice is clearly indicated by the huge disparity of wealth that is found between and across nations. Stupendous wealth occupies a single global space with abject poverty. While some suffer a surfeit of material provisions

others are afflicted by acute deprivation. It is for this reason that some have argued that the current distribution of wealth in the world is patently unjust (Singer, 2002; Pogge 2008). Statistics on global poverty demonstrates the injustice of the present global wealth distribution in clear, unmistakable terms. The latest figures from the World Bank declare that 1.1 billion people — 15.7% of humanity — live below the $2-a-day poverty line Meanwhile the Canadian government provides farmers with $3 per day for cattle food. Thus cattle in Canada are better fed than Millions of people in the developing world (see www.wikipedia.org).

One of the major thinkers who have been grappling with the injustice of the massive differential in the distribution of the world's wealth from a cosmopolitan perspective is Peter Singer. In the last three decades Singer (1972, 1983, and 2002) has consistently emphasized the obligation of the affluent to alleviate poverty around the world.

In what follows, this paper will attempt an *expose* of Singer's specific arguments for the cosmopolitan responsibility of the rich to the poor, evaluate the weaknesses and the strengths of Singer's argument and finally provide an outline of a more persuasive argument to demonstrate that the affluent owe the poor a duty of aid. Before we proceed to the issues enumerated above we would attempt to clarify some of the concepts fundamental to this discourse.

Conceptual Issues

The term "Cosmopolitanism," which is derived from the Greek word "Kosmopolites"(literally, citizen of the world), is as shorthand for quite an array of important views on moral and socio-political philosophy (Kliengeld, ud.) The central assumption shared by all cosmopolitan doctrines is that "all humans regardless of their political affiliation, do (or at least can) belong to a single community, and that this community should be cultivated" (Ibid: 1). As Ribeiro (ud) puts it, "Cosmopolitanism epitomizes the need for social agents to conceive of a political and cultural entity larger than their homeland, that will encompass all human beings on a global scale." In contrast to nationalists who tend to define the boundaries of community as one that is territorially bounded and co-extensive with the communities of co-

nationals, cosmopolitanism defines community in a more expansive manner, extending the boundaries of community to encompass all human beings. In the words of Martha Nussbaum (1996:4), a leading figure in the cosmopolitan movement, "the cosmopolitan is the person whose primary allegiance is to the community of human beings in the entire world." Cosmopolitanism, therefore, rejects the narrow provinciality of parochial loyalties and attachment that necessarily conceive community in restrictive terms. Stevenson (2003:7) elegantly captures the essence of the cosmopolitan spirit when he says:

> Cosmopolitanism is a way of viewing the world that among other things dispenses the national exclusivity, dichotomous forms of gendered and racial thinking and a rigid separation between nature and culture. Such a sensibility would be opened to the new spaces of political and ethical engagement and seeks to appreciate the ways in which humanity is mixed into intercultural ways of life. Arguably, cosmopolitanism is concerned with the transgression of boundaries and markers and the development of all inclusive, cultural democracy and citizenship.

Implicit in the above description by Stevenson is that cosmopolitanism involves a positive attitude towards cultural difference; it incorporates a disposition that seeks to construct broad allegiances across parochial identities such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, etc., to encompass the entire community of humanity in some form of universal solidarity. In one word, cosmopolitanism defines the morally significant community as one that is broad enough to include the whole of humanity. Any attempt to define such a community in a less inclusive form is regarded by the cosmopolitan as morally reprehensible.

Implicit in the idea of cosmopolitanism as indicated by Nussbaum is the notion of a primary allegiance to the community of humanity. This suggests that our obligations are not limited to our compatriots but extends to every individual human person. Andrew Dobson (2006:166) clarifies the nature of cosmopolitan obligations when he sought to specify how cosmopolitans might answer two important questions about our obligation i.e. (1.) *Who is obliged, and to whom?*

and (2.) *what are we obliged to do?*. In Dobson's terminology, the first question relates to the scope of our obligation while the second refers to the nature of our obligation. On the question of scope, cosmopolitan affirms that our obligations are in principle "Universal" as "it covers relations between all human beings"(Ibid:167). If there is a general consensus among cosmopolitans on the scope of our obligations, there is, however, a variety of perspectives about the nature or the content of our obligation. In the words of Dobson (Ibid :167)

> …Cosmopolitanism's answer to the question of the *nature* of obligation –what are we obliged to do? – is less easy to summarise. There are in fact various answers. For example, we are obliged to avoid deception, to avoid harm (Linklater,1998), to cultivate and exercise certain virtues (e.g. compassion), to empathise, to pity, to work towards the creation of open communities of discourse (Linklater, 1998), to refrain from participating in unjust institutions (Pogge, 2002), to do justice (Jones, 2002).

Dobson's list of the different perspectives on the list was intended to be a representative sample, thus he fails to mention Singer's idea of the content of our cosmopolitan obligation, which essentially is the duty of alleviating global poverty.

Now that we have expressed some ideas on "cosmopolitan obligations", it is important that we shed some light on Utilitarianism. As a moral theory, Utilitarianism is a particularly attractive position given its simplicity and apparent consonance with our moral intuitions. Most people, for instance, will agree that the consequences of our actions and inactions do have some moral significance. In its traditional formulation, utilitarianism deems actions right or wrong depending on whether they maximize or minimize human happiness. To paraphrase Jeremy Bentham (1988:2), utilitarianism refers to the principle which approves or disapproves of every action according to the tendency with which it appears to maximize or minimize the happiness of individuals affected by the action.

Having laid out the conceptual framework that underpins Singer's discourse, we may now turn to the specific arguments he provides for the proposition that the affluent owe a cosmopolitan obligation to alleviate global poverty.

Cosmopolitan Obligations: Singer's Utilitarian Account

In his 1972 article "Famine, Affluence and Morality", which is regarded as one of the classic formulations of our cosmopolitan duties, Singer provides a powerful utilitarian argument to demonstrate that the rich have a moral duty to provide aid to the poor. Singer's subsequent writings, of course, continues to elaborate on the main arguments of "Famine, Affluence and Morality."

In laying the groundwork for his position in the said article, Singer provides three major premises, acceptance of which leads to the conclusion that we owe a cosmopolitan obligation to alleviate global poverty.

The first premise simply states that suffering *and death from the lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad* (Ibid:231). For Singer, this proposition is relatively uncontroversial. Therefore, he held that most people would endorse it even if they reach the same conclusion through different routes (Ibid:231). In line with utilitarian thinking, this premise typically legislates the minimization of pain and the maximization of happiness.

The second proposition is a conditional statement which, just like the first, Singer hopes will appeal strongly to our moral sensibilities*: if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought morally to do it* (Ibid:231). The phrase "without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance" is better understood from the utilitarian consequentialist perspective. Singer was in essence saying that when we weigh the consequences or cost of the action required to prevent the "bad" in question from happening, and we discover that the cost of preventing the bad is minimal relative to the bad to be prevented, we are obligated to prevent the bad.

Interestingly, in spite of the obviously demanding nature of the second proposition, Singer thinks it does not go far enough. He therefore constructs a stronger version which demands that in our bid to prevent the "bad", we ought to give until we reach the level of marginal utility - that is the level at which by giving more, I would cause as much suffering to myself or dependents as I would relieve by my gift. By extension, Singer here suggests that the level of sacrifice required to help the poor is such that will reduce us to very near material circumstances of the former.

The third premise implicit in Singer's argument is *that if it is in our power to prevent suffering from lack of food, shelter and medical care without sacrificing something of comparable moral importance, we ought morally to do it*(Ibid: 231). Notice the subtle difference between premise the second and the third premise is the substitution of "bad" with "lack of food, shelter and medical care". The logical move here is very clear. It simply implies that if we ought to prevent something "bad", and we admit that lack of food, shelter and medical care are "bad" we are under obligation to prevent these deprivations.

On the strength of the above premises, Singer concludes that if we consider the prevalence of extreme poverty within our world and the amount of suffering and death that can be prevented by a tiny fraction of the resources of the affluent, it is the moral obligation of the latter to alleviate global poverty.

To illustrate the soundness of the argument that we are obligated to assist the poor when doing so do not require sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, Singer asks us to imagine that we are walking past a shallow pond and found a child drowning. Singer concludes that we ought to wade in and pull the child out, even if it means getting our clothes muddied in the process. The implication of this thought experiment, according to Singer, is that just as we are obligated to save the drowning child, we have a duty to alleviate the suffering of the impoverished wherever they are found in the world.

If we take a close look at the argument set forth by singer we can make a few general observations. The first is the cosmopolitan

understanding of our obligations. Singer makes clear that proximity, distance or special ties are irrelevant in deciding whether or not to help the poor. Instead, he argues that the duty to help the needy applies to all individual irrespective of the presence or lack of special ties with them. In fact, one of the points that Singer tries to demonstrate with the allegory of the drowning child is that we are obligated to rescue the drowning child irrespective of our relationship to the victim. As he puts it:

> No doubt we instinctively prefer to help those who are close to us. Few could stand a child drown; many could ignore a famine in Africa. But the question is not what we usually do, but what we ought to do, and is difficult to see any moral justification for the view that distance or community membership makers a crucial difference to our obligations (Singer, 1983: 65).

Simon Caney (2005) corroborates the cosmopolitan status of Singer's argument when he considers it as an example of global utilitarianism which is obviously cosmopolitan at some fundamental level, since the argument takes into account each person's utility and treats all individuals impartially.

The second observation relates to the conventional distinction between duty and charity, obligation and supererogation. Generally, we tend to hold that the duty to help the poor is a duty of charity, that is, an act which would "be good to do" but "not wrong not to do".(Singer, 1972:235). Singer, however, insists that based on the strength of the premises he provides for the conclusion that the affluent ought morally to help the poor, the duty to help the poor is a moral obligation and not an act of charity. Thus, Singer breaks down the traditional distinction between duty and charity. For him, at least within the utilitarian account, the basis for helping the poor is the maximization of utility and not the satisfaction of the demands of charity. We do not condemn those who fail to give to charity, but for Singer the affluent who fails to prevent suffering by giving when it does not involve the sacrifice of anything of comparable moral importance, fails to act morally and should be condemned. From the above analysis, it is clear that Singer's argument for our obligation to help the poor is not an attempt to justify

charitable acts. Instead, Singer sets out to show that the obligation to help the poor is stronger than charity.

Evaluating Singer's Account of Cosmopolitan obligations

Singer's utilitarian account of cosmopolitan obligations has been subjected to a barrage of criticisms from a variety of quarters. Some of these criticisms indicate the weaknesses of Singer's argument while others are simply beside the point. Here in this section, we will enumerate some of the cogent criticisms, but first we must highlight the strength of Singer's argument. Undoubtedly, Singer has succeeded in constructing a persuasive argument that demonstrates that something is wrong when the affluent ignore the plight of the global poor who daily struggle with preventable suffering and death. If anything, Singer convincingly demonstrates that the prevention of suffering and preservation of life should be high up on our list of values. Hence, the sheer moral force of his argument impels us towards sympathy for, and concrete action on the behalf of the less fortunate. Beyond this, Singer's argument, to my mind, also shows that proximity and shared nationality is not a tenable reason to be biased towards some subsection of the poor rather than others. As the drowning child analogy bears out, the potential rescuer is not motivated by the fact that the victim is American or Australian but only by the realization that she's human.

Objections to Singer

The first major objection to Singer's view on the duty of the affluent to the poor, points to the over-demanding and the unduly stringent obligation that the theory imposes upon the individual. As we indicated earlier, while Singer provides two maxims that indicate the level of sacrifice that is required of the affluent in helping the poor (the weak and the strong version), he clearly prefers the strong version which requires that "we ought to give until we reach the level of marginal utility. Put differently this implies that we give to the point where we are reduced to very near material circumstances of the poor!" It is for this reason that Singer's theory has been accused of failing to specify a reasonable limit to the universal duty to sacrifice on behalf of the vulnerable. To demand that we work fulltime to maximize utility is to ask us to go beyond the call of duty, given that

billions of people in the world live in absolute poverty (see www.worldbank.org)

A related objection to Singer's account of justice is that in its fixation with the need to maximize the good, it fails to provide a "conceptual space for heroic and saintly acts". In fleshing out his utilitarian conception of cosmopolitan obligations, for instance, Singer argues that the adoption of his major premises will predispose the affluent to a less wasteful and less-self-interested lifestyle. Thus, he advocates that the affluent refrain from buying new clothes in order to look well dressed so that whatever is saved thereby is sent to meet the needs of the poor. However, when the affluent heed this plea, they are, within Singer's framework, not engaging in charity, rather, they are only satisfying the demands of duty. Thus, Singer's theory discounts the traditional distinction between duty and charity. The inability of Singers account of justice to recognize this basic distinction is regarded as a major flaw by Kok Chor Tan. In his estimation, any moral theory that fails to recognize the distinction between obligation and supererogation does not only seem to involve itself in a *reductio ad absurdum* but also flies in the face of our common sense morality (Tan, 2004:42).

Yet another objection raised against Singer's argument for helping the vulnerable is what Christopher Wellman and Andrew Altman (2009) calls the "Particularity Problem." The particularity problem arises because while Singer's arguments probably establish the obligation of the rich to assists the victims of poverty, it does not provide a convincing reason why the "wealthy folk must perform the particular chore of sending money to help those in absolute poverty" (Ibid: 142). To expatiate on the particularity problem, consider the fact that millions of people across the world suffer from a variety of evils such as poverty, torture and genocide. Singer must concede that the wealthy individual retains the prerogative of deciding which of this evils to combat, particularly where he lacks the wherewithal to deal with all the evils. Singer however submits that the wealthy ought to help the poor without providing justifications for why they should particularly focus on poverty. Nor does Singer provides any basis for taking the position that the assistance should be in the form of money. It is possible, for example, to lobby political leaders or corporate executives to come to

the aid of the poor. This is the Particularity problem. Altman and Wellman (Ibid: 156) put it succinctly:

> There appears to be a particularity problem for Singer's samaritanism. Even if we take for granted that the indecent conditions of others morally obligate us to help them, the Singerian arguments fail to establish that one's Samaritan energies must be focused on the particular problem of absolute poverty or the particular method of contributing money to relieve poverty.

Singer's arguments for global distributive justice appear to have been weakened by the preceding objections. It is really the case that his position demands a level of sacrifice that is higher than the requirement of conventional morality. Most individuals certainly do not think that they are morally compelled to help the vulnerable until they are reduced to a level close to the material condition of the latter. What Singer's argument however clearly demonstrates, particularly with the drowning child illustration, is that while we may have some discretion over how we dispense our resources we fail to act morally if we do not make concrete effort to ameliorate the plight of the poor. On the other hand, the criticisms considered here put a big dent on Singer's position. How do we for instance respond to the charge of overdemandingness, which has been levied against Singer's proposition that we are obligated to contribute to famine relief funds or even the particularity problem?

Reconstructing Singer's argument

One particular way to overcome the objections raised against Singer's postulation about our cosmopolitan obligations is to reconstruct the argument from one that is built on the utilitarian duty to maximize happiness to one that focuses on the patently unjust global economic system that dictates the basic background rules under which the affluent and the poor operate. In fact a critical shortcoming of Singer's fixation on the need to provide aid for the purpose of ameliorating global poverty is that such a perspective conveniently glosses over the more fundamental global structural factors that, in the first place, are largely responsible for the production and perpetuation of radical inequality and global poverty. As Andrew Belsey (1992:47) puts it, "in

the face of hunger and starvation both development and relief aid should be provided but the cause of justice is best served by a structural transformation away from unequal global relations based on exploitation…" Interestingly, the literature on global poverty is replete with analyses of how the present global economic order further impoverishes the poor and deepens their material deprivation. (See Samir Amin, 1976, Thomas Pogge, 2008). Pogge, for instance, has convincingly demonstrated that our skewed global economic order harms the poor.

According to him, there is a "global basic structure", i.e., a set of economic and political institutions that has profound and enduring effect on the distribution of the burdens and the benefits among peoples and individuals around the world. To demonstrate the existence of such a structure Pogge draws attention to the traffic of international and intra-national economic transaction which is profoundly shaped by an elaborate system of treaties and convention about trade, investment, loans, patents, copyrights trademarks, double taxation, labour standards, environmental rights and the use of sea beds resources, etc (Ibid:17).These, according to Pogge, are the different aspects of the global institutional order that marginalizes the disadvantaged and vulnerably poor, while maximizing the interest of the rich, privileged few. With particular reference to resource and borrowing privileges which the present global order concedes to illegitimate government and juntas on the account of the principle of sovereignty, Pogge (Ibid: 118) has this to say:

> any group controlling a preponderance of the means of coercion within a country is internationally recognized as the legitimate government of this country, territory and people regardless of how this group came into power, of how it exercises power and to the extent to which it may be supported or opposed by the population it rules.

Pogge goes on to argue that when the international community gives despotic and illegitimate governments recognition as well as resource and borrowing privileges, it becomes willy-nilly accomplices in a system that promotes injustice by failing to protect the interest of the

poor and the marginalized (Ibid:119). Pogge's point is not that the international community is not merely failing in its negative duty not to harm the poor, he actually contends that the citizens and government of the affluent nations, whether intentionally or not, are imposing a global institutional order that “foreseeably and avoidably reproduces severe and wide spread poverty”(Ibid:118). The worse off, he continues "are not merely poor and often starving but are being impoverished and starved by our shared institutional arrangement which inescapably shape their lives”(Ibid:118). Pogge thus submits that the shortcomings of the global institution order, the rules, norms and practices that form the background condition of global economic and political relations, are evidently unjust to the degree that they perpetuate and deepen global poverty.

Aside from Pogge, dependency theorists have convincingly demonstrated that the underdevelopment and abject poverty in the developing world is largely a function of the relations of exploitation that exist between the former and developed countries. Johan Galtung (1971), Paul Baran (1957), Ande Gunder Frank (1989), to mention a few thinkers of the dependency school, in their different ways have developed insightful accounts to show how the unjust global economic architecture is implicated in the production of global poverty. Gunder Frank’s argument in particular is quite compelling. According to him, development and underdevelopment are two sides of the same coin, a single historical process in which the logic of the capitalist system permits the metropoles (developed countries) to extract surpluses, which leads ultimately to the underdevelopment of the satellites (developing countries). In the words of Gunder Frank (1989:1), the contemporary radical economic inequality between the North and the South “is in large part the historical product of past and continuing economic and other relations between the satellite underdeveloped and the now developed metropolitan countries. Furthermore, these relations are an essential part of the structure and development of the capitalist system on a world scale as a whole.”

In essence then, the development of underdevelopment and poverty can be traced to the historical evolution of the capitalist system, which was foisted on the rest of the world by colonial powers.

If we combine Pogge and Gunder Frank's arguments, we may conclude that the unjust global economic order is largely responsible for the widespread poverty, which today confronts humanity. Thus to argue exclusively for a cosmopolitan obligation to provide financial aid to alleviate global poverty is not to come to grips with the reality of the impact of global economic structure on the poor. With proper emphasis on the impoverishing effect of the unjust global capitalist system, it becomes possible to argue that the affluent owe the duty to ameliorate global poverty not on the basis of any utilitarian consideration but on the ground that they are causally responsible for the plight of the poor.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined Singer's utilitarian arguments for grounding our cosmopolitan obligations to aid the poor. While we submit that he succeeds in establishing that the affluent owe a prima facie obligation to alleviate global poverty, we also posited that the barrage of criticisms raised against Singer considerably weakened his argument. Thus, there is a need to reconstruct Singer's argument in order to reach the same conclusion that he sought to establish by stressing the role of the skewed global economic order in the production of poverty and underdevelopment. This perspective is certainly superior to Singer's utilitarian arguments because apart from the fact that it is not vulnerable to the objections against Singer's position, it also points in the direction of the global structural reforms that is required to reduce global poverty. In highlighting the structural factors responsible for production and accentuation of global poverty, our position do not necessarily reject the assertion that the affluent owe the obligation to provide the poor some form of aid. Our contention however, is that until the global economic order is fundamentally restructured to reflect the ideals of justice, fairness and equality, a critical mass of the human community will continue to wallow in abject poverty.

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1. The world Bank for instance estimates, based on US 1.25$ per day poverty line, that the world's poor have increased from 1.1 billion in 1981 to 1.9 billion in 2005. Check figures from www.worldbank.org

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