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The Moral Imperative of Global Charity: An Analysis and Defense of Peter Singer's The Life You Can Save

Haoran Liu

School of International Culture and Communication, Communication University of Zhejiang, Hangzhou, China
19357388131@163.com

Abstract. Peter Singer discusses the urgency and importance of alleviating global poverty, in the book The Life You Can Save. He emphasizes the critical role of charity, arguing from a utilitarian perspective that individuals have a moral obligation to assist those in need when they can do so without significant personal sacrifice. This paper explores Peter Singer's philosophy in the current context, where the development of the Internet and social media has changed the way information is received by the public, leading to a change in people's recognition of their moral duty to give to others, creating both opportunities and risks for the spread of global charity. The paper defends his position from the perspectives of both the wealthy and the impoverished, discussing the ethical externalities of wealth and the impact of uncontrollable factors on wealth distribution. The paper also discusses the limitations of Singer's framework, such as its reliance on utilitarian principles and the challenges it faces in addressing relative poverty. Despite these concerns, the paper concludes that Singer's ideas provide a valuable approach for addressing global suffering and promoting fairness in this interconnected world.

Keywords: Peter Singer, poverty, charity, moral obligation

1. Introduction

In the context of rapid globalization, the moral duty of giving from the rich to the poor at both the individual and national levels has become a crucial global issue. Peter Singer's moral philosophy, particularly his views on duties to others, provides a framework for addressing this concern. Singer argues that when people can help others without significant harm to themselves, they have a moral obligation to do so [1]. This idea is especially relevant today, given the interconnected global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and war.

The global reach of media has facilitated action through charitable donations and social movements. In The Life You Can Save, Singer stresses the moral duty to help those in extreme poverty, regardless of geographic or cultural distance, calling for rational and consistent donations [1]. This perspective is vital in today's globalized world, where media and communication technologies expose the scale of global suffering, prompting individuals to recognize their moral responsibilities that extend beyond local concerns to the global community.

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This paper primarily explores the logical soundness of Peter Singer's views in the current context. It aims to defend his perspective, arguing for its validity in addressing contemporary ethical challenges while critically examining the possible limitations of his arguments. This paper discusses both logical coherence and weaknesses of Peter Singer's framework, offering a critical perspective on one of the most pressing moral issues of the current context.

2. Theory foundation

Peter Singer's core argument in The Life You Can Save is rooted in his utilitarian philosophical stance. Utilitarianism, as a form of consequentialism, asserts that the morality of an action is determined solely by the consequences it produces. According to this view, the action that is morally right and should be taken is the one that produces the most good, and individuals should pursue maximizing the good while minimizing the sacrifice [2].

Peter Singer first introduced the example of the "drowning child," which is widely used in courses in ethics, in "Famine, Affluence and Morality," where he argues that if individuals have the power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing something morally significant, they are morally obligated to act [3]. In the book The Life You Can Save, Singer expands on this idea by illustrating through various examples that, given the severity of global poverty, individuals have a moral duty to assist those in need, especially when such help does not require significant sacrifice. He believes people should not settle for short-term aid, but instead engage in continuous giving. Through thoughtful donations, people can reduce poverty and save more lives.

He also illustrates the universality of moral responsibility, asserting that geographical distance and relationships should not weaken moral obligations — people must take responsibility regardless of whether the issue is nearby or whether the people suffering are ones they are familiar with.

3. Moral responsibility from both perspectives: the rich and the impoverished

The paper explores Peter Singer's views on extreme poverty and moral responsibility, considering both the opportunities and challenges the advent of social media may bring to global charity. It supports his ideas from the perspectives of both the rich and the impoverished. From the perspective of the rich, they bear an invisible responsibility for poverty through their control of social capital. Even though the wealthy may not intentionally harm the poor, the extreme wealth they accumulate benefits from the economic framework that favors them, indirectly perpetuating poverty. In this way, they should take responsibility for giving to the poor, as their wealth accumulation, either intentionally or incidentally, can contribute to the deepening of poverty. On the other hand, from the perspective of the poor, especially those living in extreme poverty, their situation is often caused by factors beyond their control, making their suffering undeserved and unfair. Therefore, with the aim of alleviating these disparities and offering a fairer opportunity to those affected by uncontrollable circumstances, donating to the poor is a reasonable action.

3.1. Background

In the era of widespread internet access and the rise of self-media, global charity faces both opportunities and challenges. As Singer once pointed out in his work, the advent of instant communication and swift transportation has significantly altered the situation for those who treat people differently based on the distance between them, keeping their responsibility limited. According to data from the International Telecommunication Union, as of 2024, global internet

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penetration has reached 67.6%, with economically developed regions in Europe and North America seeing penetration rates exceeding 85% [4]. Data from the Pew Research Center indicates that more than half of U.S. adults often or sometimes get their news from social media, and this trend continues to grow [5]. The widespread availability and coverage of the internet have facilitated the dissemination of human suffering, enabling more people to become aware of these global issues. By breaking down traditional geographical barriers, it also provides more accessible means of donation. Issues that once seemed distant and irrelevant have now become global concerns.

The rise of the Internet and social media, particularly short videos, has sparked a revolutionary change in how information is received and the choices people make in response to it. Research shows that exposure to extreme ethical issues, which is far greater than that from offline sources, leads to compassion fatigue [6]. This leads to people becoming insensitive to ethical concerns, resulting in a decline in the willingness to donate. Under such circumstances, the rational approach to donation Singer mentioned, rather than the one solely driven by emotional motivation, is growing in significance.

The book The Life You Can Save was published in 2018, at a time when new media had not yet become as widespread, and the role of media in global affairs was not as prominent as it is today. Singer's opinion still provides solid guidance for today's global charity amid the evolving landscape of media.

3.2. The ethical externalities of wealth

Although Peter Singer himself acknowledges that the accumulation of immense wealth by a few billionaires doesn't necessarily harm the poor, substantial evidence suggests that the wealthy, even without intent, can negatively impact the interests of the impoverished [1].

This paper applies the concept of "externality" to explain the impact of the wealth accumulation of the rich on the poor. Externality is a core concept in economics; negative externalities are costs that are infeasible to charge to not provide [7]. The concept has now been adopted by other disciplines, referring to situations where actions have unintended impacts on non-direct participants. The "wealth moral externality" discussed in this paper specifically refers to the unintentional, systematic impact on the poor, caused by the wealth accumulation process of the rich within the constraints of the institutional environment.

From an individual perspective, the wealthy often monopolize social resources through inheritance, political manipulation, legal privileges, and other mechanisms. This monopolization leads to the entrenchment of social stratification, where the rich become increasingly insulated from the struggles of the poor. This widens the gap between rich and poor, making it harder for the impoverished to access resources or opportunities that would allow them to improve their lives. Research shows that one important way in which high-income groups concentrate opportunities is through residential segregation between the rich and the poor [8]. Since public education funding largely relies on local taxes, children in affluent areas tend to receive higher-quality education, which subsequently affects their academic achievements, job performance, and earnings. This further concentrates opportunities and resources, making it increasingly difficult for the impoverished to access the means to improve their lives.

As a result, the limited social mobility of the poor reinforces a system where the rich become richer, exacerbating the divide. This not only limits the social mobility of the poor but also reinforces a system in which the rich grow richer, further widening the gap between them and the poor. Thus, although the wealthy may not intend to harm the poor, the accumulation of wealth by the rich can create a moral negative externality for the poor. Supported by systemic advantages, this

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perpetuates a social and economic divide that undermines the well-being of the disadvantaged. Therefore, from the perspective of the causes of poverty, the wealthy should donate to compensate.

3.3. The impact of uncontrollable factors on wealth

Peter Singer uses examples in his article to show how an individual's wealth is inevitably influenced by factors such as the state of social development, which are often beyond an individual's control. Luck egalitarianism, a concept first introduced by Elizabeth Anderson, asserts that everyone should receive equal regard and respect, free from the effects of undeserved bad luck, such as congenital disabilities or disadvantaged family backgrounds [9]. The random and uncontrollable factors that individuals face at birth, such as the family they are born into, their health condition, intellectual abilities, and social capital, have a decisive impact on a person's life, but they are beyond their control. Therefore, following this framework, charitable donations from wealthy individuals to the poor can help to mitigate the effects of such bad luck by redistributing resources and opportunities that are otherwise unequally distributed due to factors beyond individuals' control.

Peter Singer primarily emphasizes the issue of extreme poverty in his work. Extreme poverty is commonly defined as a state in which individuals or families are unable to meet their basic survival needs. According to the World Bank's standard, extreme poverty is measured based on income and is defined as living on less than $2.15 per day [10]. The 2024 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) indicates that nearly 40% of the 1.1 billion people living in extreme poverty (approximately 455 million) reside in countries affected by violent conflict, severely limiting their ability to improve their circumstances. Furthermore, over half of the 1.1 billion poor individuals—about 584 million—are children under the age of 18, who, like their families, have no control over their situations [11]. Extreme poverty is significantly influenced by environmental factors that individuals cannot control. This aligns with Singer's view that aiding those in need is a moral duty, especially when their circumstances are largely beyond their control. While charity alone may not completely address the injustices caused by uncontrollable factors, it serves as an important tool in alleviating the effects of misfortune and providing individuals with a fairer opportunity for a better life.

4. Critical examination of singer's framework

4.1. Questioning of utilitarianism

According to the utilitarian philosophical stance, individuals should evaluate moral duties based on the outcomes of actions. This approach, which requires moral judgments to be made solely based on the consequences of individuals' actions and aims to maximize overall happiness, often demands that individuals sacrifice their moral integrity—the quality of acting based on personal beliefs, commitments, and emotions [12]. Singer argues that the basic necessities of life can be objectively calculated, and he encourages people to donate possessions deemed "unnecessary." This approach, however, risks compromising individuals' moral integrity by devaluing essential human pursuits. Expenditures on artistic appreciation and meaningful social interaction represent personal spiritual fulfillment. Similarly, providing a more comfortable and prosperous life for one's family embodies emotional bonds through interpersonal care. The rigorous implementation of Singer's framework could alienate individuals from their emotional connections and spiritual pursuits.

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4.2. Questioning for operational-level

Peter Singer primarily focuses on addressing absolute poverty, advocating for individuals to contribute to alleviating the most severe forms of deprivation. However, once absolute poverty is alleviated, a new set of challenges emerges, such as those related to education, healthcare, and broader social issues. These are systemic problems that require more than just voluntary charity. They demand long-term institutional reforms and structural changes to create sustainable solutions, rather than relying on charity.

Moreover, since poverty and wealth are relative concepts, the moral imperative of whether one should donate becomes more ambiguous. What is considered "poverty" in one context may be viewed as a different form of need in another, complicating the decision-making process regarding charitable giving. As a result, while Singer's theory offers a strong moral argument for alleviating suffering, its practical implementation in real life proves to be challenging. The complexity of global inequalities, varying standards of living, and differing societal structures make it difficult to apply his theory consistently and effectively across diverse contexts. Thus, while the intention behind Singer's philosophy is commendable, its application often confronts significant real-world obstacles.

5. Conclusion

Although Peter Singer's views continue to face both theoretical and practical criticism, and are often criticized as overly idealized, the ideas he presents in his book The Life You Can Save can inspire valuable reflection on an individual's responsibilities toward others in an era where media has significantly shaped public consciousness. The paper demonstrates that the charity proposal he advocates achieves theoretical coherence, whether it is viewed from the perspective of the rich or the impoverished, and suggests that the wealthy should donate to the poor as a means of compensation and to maintain social fairness. Moreover, his utilitarian approach provides insightful guidance for addressing current global issues, offering a useful framework for understanding the ethical obligations people have toward others, particularly in the context of interconnected global challenges. These reflections not only challenge individuals to reconsider their roles in a global community but also propose potential solutions for creating a more just and compassionate world.

The paper is primarily based on existing research findings but lacks an in-depth exploration of practical cases and empirical data. Thus, the conclusions of this study are limited. It would benefit from a greater focus on the specific issues and concrete outcomes of implementing Singer’s views in practice.

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