

CRITIQUE OF PETER SINGER'S NOTION OF MARGINAL UTILITY

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The modern-day society is pressed by the question of foreign aid and charity in light of the Syrian refugee crisis and other atrocities occurring in the world. The ever-present circumstances leave those in a more affluent environment pondering their roles in alleviating global suffering. Peter Singer, a modern consequentialist, proposes a potential solution. In his piece, *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*, he describes a moral framework, in which the affluent should find it their duty to reduce suffering in other places in the world. In essence, Singer argues that people in relatively affluent countries should give to charity as a moral obligation. He argues that it should be a moral duty, as opposed to an act of charity, to give in order to minimize suffering. His argument, however, raises many questions. One of the major questions raised from his argument is the question of how much one ought to give? Singer responds to this question by answering that one should give to the point of marginal utility. He argues that the point of marginal utility is the point in which something of comparable moral importance is compromised. In this paper, I will seek to critique Singer's notion of marginal utility and the comparability of moral importance, while also arguing that, despite the problematic notion, one still should give to charity as an act of duty in alignment to Singer's moral framework.

In order to discuss Singer's notion of marginal utility and comparable moral importance in an appropriate context, his entire argument must be examined. In *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*, Singer takes the case of the famine in Bengal as his example. He bases his argument under the assumed premise that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad. He argues, "if one possesses the power to prevent

something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.”¹ In order to exemplify this principle, Singer portrays a narrative of where a child is drowning in a shallow pond. He explains that saving the child holds greater moral importance than ruining one’s clothes in the process, and therefore, ought to take priority. Singer objects to the claim that charity is supererogatory—an act, which it would be good to do, but not wrong not to do²—but rather argues that it is a moral obligation and a duty to give when capable. Singer argues that one should give to the level of marginal utility, critiques the consumer society and its distorted view of charity, and advocates for people to act in alignment with this moral framework.

Singer’s notion of marginal utility, however, raises many questions. His notion of marginal utility does not specify an exact amount one ought to give, or an amount that constitutes marginal, or whether one should give a certain amount proportionate to one’s given income. Additionally, his notion of marginal utility raises further problems in that it begins to conflict and violate other utilities. For example, the duty to pursue marginal utility may discourage the pursuit of competition and innovation. It may additionally raise guilt when one fails to fulfill one’s duty. Although the pursuit of marginal utility may serve the utility of those in famine in Bengal, it serves less utility to the market and society as a whole if the lack of incentive discourages competition and innovation. It would also serve less utility at the individual level if one must suffer the sense of guilt, or worry about avoiding guilt by the obligation to pursue marginal utility. In this way, Singer’s notion of

¹ Singer, Peter. “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.” *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, Second Edition. Edited by Russ Shafer-Landau. 2013. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2013 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 466

² *Ibid.*, 469

marginal utility may serve the utility of those starving from a famine, but it may lose social utility in other areas. The ambiguity of Singer's definition of marginal utility not only leads one to confusion, but also diminishes social utility in other areas of life.

In response to such objection, Singer would highlight that giving at a point of marginal utility should happen at the point where anything of comparable moral importance is not compromised. He defines comparable moral importance as "without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent."³ For example, a person should not absurdly starve oneself to save another from starvation. Nor should a parent suddenly decide not to provide for one's family for the sake of one's duty to give. He, therefore, clarifies his definition of marginal utility by stating that, "we ought to be preventing as much suffering as we can without sacrificing something else of comparable moral importance."⁴

His attempts to clarify marginal utility only leaves room for more confusion, as comparing moral importance is not possible without an objective reference point. His reasoning raises the question of whether moral values can be compared in the first place. According to Singer's reasoning, one moral value outweighs another. This line of discernment seems clear-cut in the scenario of the famine and the drowning girl. Moral comparisons are, unfortunately, often much more complex and ambiguous. Singer takes this into account in his TED talk, and uses the example of a service dog helping a blind man, which costs approximately \$40,000 for training etc. He compares this to the \$20-\$40—the cost of curing a blind person suffering from trachoma in a developing country. He analyzes

³ Ibid., 466

⁴ Ibid., 470

the relationship to conclude that the cost of one service dog can treat up to 2000 people suffering from trachoma. He jumps to the conclusion that the treatment of 2000 is obviously the better thing to do.⁵ This account seems like a perfectly fine conclusion to a good utilitarian, but the blind man who is dependent on the service dog for daily action may interpret the story differently. The absence of the dog would mean that he would no longer be able to go out of his house without avoiding potential dangers. It seems, ironically, clear that the comparable moral importance for the blind man would be for him to keep the dog. As seen in this example, Singer's view of marginal utility and comparable moral importance, does not account for variety or diversity of moral values.

Take the example of a parent who values the education of his or her child. The cost of sending a child to an expensive private school in America may be equivalent to the cost of education for a couple hundred children in a developing country. It seems obvious for the utilitarian to argue that it is far better to have the education of couple hundred children than to have one child in America attend an expensive private school. The parent of the child may, however, disagree because he or she highly values the quality of education of his or her child. The parent may believe that failing to provide the best possible education is a compromise of a comparable moral importance. If moral importance were to be compared, it would require a universal and objective reference point that would help adjudicate the various comparable moral values by its respective importance. This would mean that there would be some sort of scale that measures the importance of one moral value over another, like valuing the treatment of 2000 trachoma patients over one blind man in need of a service dog. Considering that certain values, such as one's life, liberty, and the pursuit of

⁵ Singer, Peter. "The why and how of effective altruism." TED. Mar. 2013. Lecture

happiness are non-quantifiable values, it seems absurd to argue that one's value be comparably more important than another's value.

These objections might be circumvented through Singer's two versions of his framework: the strong and moderate versions. The strong version is the equivalent to the argument aforementioned, where one should pursue marginal utility in their duty of charity, and Singer posits that this is the version that seems more correct in his view.⁶ The moderate version, in contrast argues that,

...[One] should prevent bad occurrences unless, to do so, we had to sacrifice something morally significant—only in order to show that even on this surely undeniable principle a great change in our way of life is required. On the more moderate principle, it may not follow that we ought to reduce ourselves to the level of marginal utility, for one might hold that to reduce oneself and one's family to this level is to cause something significantly bad to happen.⁷

Singer relaxes the reins of the duty to marginal utility, and considers the case where it is also possible to reduce oneself to the level where something morally significant is compromised. Although Singer himself sees no reason to choose the moderate version over the strong version, his moderate version satisfactorily accounts for the diversity and the incomparability of moral values.

Furthermore, Singer claims that his area of concern is the distorted value system of the current consumer society. In his claim arguing against supererogatory, he adds,

All I am arguing here is that the present way of drawing the distinction [between duty and charity], which makes an act of charity for a man living at the level of affluence which most people in the "developed nations" enjoy to give money to save someone else from starvation, cannot be supported.⁸

⁶ Singer, Peter. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." 471

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 469

He also notes, in discussing his moderate version that the moderate level is sufficient only if it clearly gives away enough to ensure that the consumer society, marked by extravagant and absurd spending, slows down or disappears entirely. Therefore, it can be safely assumed through his critique that Singer is primarily concerned with the distorted consumer society that absurdly uses money on extravagance rather than necessity.

Singer's notion of marginal utility and comparable moral importance are problematic because they violate other utilities in the process and does not account for the diversity of moral values and the incomparability of certain values. Singer's moderate version of his framework, however, accounts for these problems by abandoning marginal utility and replacing it with "something of moral significance," thereby leaving room for various moral values to coexist. Additionally, under the context of Singer's criticism of consumer societies, it seems reasonably evident that Singer's goal is not to seek marginal utility, but rather minimize the absurdity of the current consumerist culture—where money is spent on trivial things rather than saving those dying from starvation. Singer's moral framework of the duty to charity seems problematic in many areas when marginal utility is a contingent condition, but when it is excluded, it satisfactorily provides an imperative for a person to give when one is capable and without thereby compromising an important subjective moral value.

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