Global **Justice**, World **Hunger** and Extreme **Poverty**

Do we have an **ethical obligation** to help *eradicate* extreme poverty and world hunger?
“As I write this... **people are dying**... from lack of food, shelter, and medical care. [Moreover], the suffering and death that is occurring is **not** inevitable and not unavoidable in any fatalistic sense of the term... It is not beyond the capacity of the richer nations to give enough assistance to reduce any further suffering to very small proportions. [Bottom line], **the decisions and actions of human beings can prevent this kind of suffering. Unfortunately, human beings have not made the necessary decisions**... [And] neither individuals nor governments can claim to be unaware of what is happening...”

Peter Singer – Famine, Affluence, and Morality

“Many of our **attitudes** concerning the **obligation** we have to **provide aid to those in need are unjustified**....”
What’s the source of our misguided attitude?

“Because giving money is regarded as an act of charity, it is not thought that there is anything wrong with not giving... [However], we ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so...”
Why should we give?

Singer’s argument for morally obligated relief

1. Suffering and death from a lack of food, shelter, and basic medical care are bad.

2. If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then we ought, morally to do it.

3. It is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.

Therefore,
We are morally obligated to prevent suffering and death caused by the lack of food, shelter and basic medical care.

“This argument shows that giving money to famine relief is *not* an act of charity (that is, a supererogatory gesture) but rather a moral duty...”
Another argument for morally obligated relief

(1) If there is no moral obligation to perform some action X, then action X is supererogatory (i.e. above and beyond the call of duty)

(2) The act of giving money to famine relief is not a supererogatory act

Therefore,

(3) There is a moral obligation to perform the act of giving money to famine relief

If you don’t give aid to help, you are acting immorally
How does Singer justify his principle of preventing bad occurrences?

“On your way to work, you pass a small pond. On hot days, children sometimes play in the pond, which is only about knee deep. The weather’s cool today, though, and the hour is early, so you are surprised to see a child splashing about in the pond. As you get closer, you see that it is a very young child, just a toddler, who is flailing about, unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond. You look for the parents or babysitter, but there is no one else around. The child is unable to keep his head above the water for more than a few seconds at a time. If you don’t wade in and pull him out, he seems likely to drown. Wading in is easy and safe, but you will ruin the new shoes you bought only a few days ago, and get your suit wet and muddy. By the time you hand over the child to someone responsible for him, and change your clothes, you’ll be late for work. What should you do?”

Peter Singer – *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*
“If I know that there are children dying of diarrhea in Africa, then I ought to do something to get clean water to those children. This will mean spending money on the improvement of foreign lands (money I might otherwise have spent on entertainment) but this is insignificant, while the death of a child would presumably be a very bad thing...”

“[This principle] requires us only to prevent what is bad, and not to promote what is good, and only when we can do it without sacrificing anything that is, from a moral point of view, comparably important...”
A few **worries** to consider...

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**The so-called **proximity** objection**

- We have a moral duty to save Singer’s "drowning child" because the child is right there in front of us and in desperate need.

- However, the globally poor are very far from us and as such somewhat out of our sphere of moral responsibility

“I may have a moral duty to give of my surplus to help save suffering children in a distant land, but I have a stronger duty to help those with whom I have intimate or contractual ties...”
“The fact that a person is physically nearer to us, so that we have personal contact with him, may make it more likely that we shall assist him, but this does not show that we ought to help him rather than another who happens to be further away. If we accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality [of human life], or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us...”

The so-called **how much is enough objection**

Doesn’t Singer’s argument lead to the conclusion that almost nothing we do is moral? Couldn’t we always do more to aid?

After all, of which of your activities can you say that you could not have prevented some harm or suffering by refraining from engaging in that activity and instead dedicating yourself (in an intentional and willful way) to the elimination of harm and suffering?

Doesn’t Singer’s argument show that the only moral people are those who dedicate their entire lives to famine relief and so on?
Zell Kravinsky is an American investor and utilitarian who is known for making a non-directed kidney donation to a stranger and for donating the vast majority of his personal wealth to charity. Kravinsky justified the donation mathematically noting that the chances of dying as a result of the procedure would have been about 1 in 4,000. Kravinsky believed that, under the circumstances, “to withhold a kidney from someone who would otherwise die means valuing one’s own life at 4,000 times that of a stranger”, a ratio he termed “obscene”.

“This conclusion is one which we may be reluctant to face. I cannot see, though, why it should be regarded as a criticism of the position for which I have argued, rather than a criticism of our ordinary standards of behavior. Since most people are self-interested to some degree, very few of us are likely to do everything that we ought to do. It would, however, hardly be honest to take this as evidence that it is not the case that we ought to do it”
The so-called **desert objection**

“Suppose, for example, that an industrious farmer manages through hard work to produce a surplus of food for the winter while a lazy neighbor spends his summer fishing. **Must our industrious farmer ignore his hard work and give the surplus away because his neighbor or his family will suffer?** What seems clear is that we have more than one factor to weigh when it comes to the morality of such a situation. Not only should we compare the consequences of his keeping it with his giving it away; we also should weigh the fact that **one farmer deserves the food since he earned it** through his hard work...”

The so-called **life boat objection**

- Rich countries are lifeboats carrying the affluent people of the world in an ocean swarming with the drowning poor, who are desperately trying to scramble into the boats or grasp some of the food on board.
- Like a country, each lifeboat is limited in terms of the number of people it can sustain, and to maintain a margin of safety it should carry fewer passengers than it’s maximum capacity.
- If one of the lifeboats takes on any more passengers or throws vital supplies overboard to the unfortunate swimmers, everyone—rich and poor—will perish.
The so-called **life boat objection**

- So it would seem that either the boat will capsize or those on board will slowly starve.

- As such, the only reasonable option is to refuse to help the poor drowning people. Sadly, millions will be lost, but at least the millions already on board the boats will be saved.

- Therefore, contrary to Singer’s reasoning, but nevertheless based upon utilitarian grounds, the moral duty that affluent countries have is not to provide aid to the poorer, starving, overpopulated countries.