

Moral Thinking: An Introduction To Values And Ethics

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Peter Singer on Charity and Duty

Hello everyone. Now in continuation with Module 5, where we talked about Applied Ethics, in the first part, we introduced certain problems in Applied Ethics. And we wanted to see, how we can connect with the world out there, with the moral concepts that we have learnt. Now, here we have a full-fledged paper, in Applied Ethics, which has been quite a popular paper. It is a paper of 1972. It is called, *Famine Affluence and Morality*.

It is written by a renowned Ethicist, a Philosopher, and also an Activist, Peter Singer. You might have heard of him, in the vegan debate. But, this is an essay of 1972, which is published in a Philosophical Journal, called *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. The reason I choose this essay for you, this is considered as a classic, in Applied Ethics.

This is an essay which not only argued in academia, but also moved people out there. It made a difference to the world out there. And, it is set in a real world setting, asking for a real world change, from an academic channel, from a Philosophical Channel, arguing certain conceptions that we all had. So, you can look up this paper. This paper is quite popular.

I think, just a internet search for this paper, will get you an access to this paper. Otherwise, it is located on JESTER, with the stable link mentioned here. Now, you will also find a Google Talk of Peter Singer, on this particular paper, on YouTube. So, you could also take a look at that, if that interests you. So, let us go ahead with this paper.

It would be advisable, that you go through this paper, before you listen to this presentation. And, that paper itself should be, not just intellectually stimulating, but also motivating you into looking at the ethical domain, from a very practical perspective, from a perspective, to make a difference in the world out there, and not just as an academic exercise. So, what is the context. The context of this paper is, 1971. There is

the current day Bangladesh.

And, that is how, we can also connect to it. Because, this paper has been inspired and written from, the events taking place in our subcontinent. This is the year of 1970. There is a famine in East Bengal, now Bangladesh. The war between Pakistan and India, and the liberation of Bangladesh, takes place around this time.

This time, when Bangladesh comes into being, Bangladesh has constant poverty, cyclone, and civil war. A sudden high intensity demand, on a fledgling government. The fledgling government is the Bangladeshi government, which has just come into being, post the war between India and Pakistan. And, Bangladesh has been liberated. So, the 1971 war, post which India liberated Bangladesh from Pakistani control.

And, the Bangladeshi government came into being. The nation state of Bangladesh, came into being. It also connects with me. I mean, I would like to share a personal anecdote also. Because, not an anecdote, but just a fact that, this is an incident that also rouses quite a bit of emotions in me.

Because, my father also happened to be a war veteran of the 1971 war. So, the ugliness of war is visible first hand. And, when Philosophers take cognizance of it, and write about it, and making an appeal to the world, it seems that, very convincing that theory is indeed connected to practice. I hope, you also have this feeling, once you go through this paper. It is not the duration, or not the time.

Like many Philosophical papers, you would look at, or many theoretical arguments, and papers that you come across. These are papers, not to be ignored, because they are from decade, or half a century back. But sometimes, they make such classical arguments, and they have had such stalwart positions, in the literature, that they continue to be relevant, irrespective of their time. And, this paper is particularly, one such paper. So, coming back to the context, there is a high intensity demand, on a fledgling government, with very limited resources, and located in one of the resource starved regions of the world, that is the Asian subcontinent.

In no way, the author understands the situation, to be fatalistic. That means, nothing has to be fated to be this way. And, this is a situation, which can be made different, with involvement of people. So, the moot question, the author asks is, what do others do. What ought to be done by others, in individual and collective capacity.

That means, not just as governments, but individuals also. So, the situation then was, at the individual level, people have not responded, in the magnitude required. If you go

through, or go through the images of the war, or 1971-72, East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh, there is abject poverty, scarcity, hunger, and a complete penury, and suffering, that was there. And, a picture can say, more than a 1000 words. So, if you will just Google through those, or look out on the internet, on these images, you will understand the passion, with which, Peter Singer is writing this.

So, he notes that, at the individual level, people have not responded, in the magnitude required. Responded, basically in the Western, and in the more affluent nations of the world, the response has not been, as much as required. There have been some exceptions, as always there are exceptions, and there are outliers, people who have contributed quite a bit. But, these are exceptions. And, it has not come to the level, at which they wanted.

At the government level, assistance has not come at the massive levels, required for sustained assistance. This is describing the situation, before getting into the argument. A comparison of the expenditure of the governments, and that is taken as the indicator of the reflection. So, different expenditure, the government's expenditure, under different heads. And, we are talking about, other nation states, particularly affluent nation states.

So, their expenditures, when taken under different heads, how does that, from there we indicate, what is the percentage of contribution to this calamity, that struck the young nation state of Bangladesh, in 1972. Generally, this emphasises, the almost perpetual situation of the world, where there is suffering, and affluence coexisting, with not enough transfer of resources, taking place. The relatively well resourced prioritise, the utilisation of their resources. And, Singer finds fault with this prioritisation, both at the individual, and the collective level. So, the observation that Singer starts, is that, the Bangladesh situation is an instance, of a broader pattern.

The pattern is, there is widespread suffering and venury, throughout the world, at all times, even now. And, this coexists with affluence and wealth, in the world. But, there is not a transfer of resources, from this affluent part of the world, to this suffering part of the world. Both are neither at the level of the individuals, citizens of the affluent world, to the citizens of the suffering world, or at the level of the collective. That is, from governments of affluent worlds, to the governments of suffering worlds.

So, this brings forth the question, that we had talked in an earlier lecture, or that, what the well resourced owe, to the ill resourced. Or, if the rich owe anything to the poor. That is the basic question, that Singer talks about. Now, Singer makes certain assumptions. Now, when you go through the paper, you will be able to, a part of the reading, as an analytical paper, you would like to list out the reasonings, the axioms, that

the author brings about.

And then, assess the argument, as it comes about. So, he makes fairly commonplace assumptions. But nevertheless, it helps to articulate it out. His assumptions state, and I quote, suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, are bad.

End quote. Second, again a quote, 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. End quote. So, here is a crucial claim, that the author is beginning to start lay down. That, 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. That means, my luxury is of less comparable moral importance, than my neighbour's suffering.

So, therefore, instead of investing in my luxury, I ought to be, it is a moral mandatory to transfer my investment, or my resources, rather from, or diverted from my own luxury, to my neighbour's suffering. The above principle is crucial, apparently appealing, but implying great changes, if applied. So, in principle, it sounds very generous. It is crucial, and appealing to, but if applied, what are the great changes, that it comes.

First is, proximity. Proximity both in spatial and relational terms, from the event becomes immaterial. That means, where the suffering is, and who is suffering, starts to become immaterial. We, as human beings, tend to be concerned about our, or have a higher degree of concern about our proximity, both in relation, and in space. Your immediate neighbour's suffering, hurts you more than somebody suffering, 1000 kilometres away, with the same suffering. Your close friend suffering, hurts you more, moves you more, than your distant friend suffering.

So, this character of proximity, now seems to be something, that singer is attacking. That proximity, both in spatial, and or relational terms, from the event, becomes immaterial. And second, the actions, assumed or actual of others, similarly placed, ought not to make a difference to one's actions. What it simply means, what others are doing, should not be making a difference, to what I am doing. This is again, this is critiquing the group effect, that if a developed country is donating, or is not donating aid, to a suffering nation, that should not affect other nations, and write also, at the level of individuals.

So, these two assumptions are crucial, and draw a remarkable change, from an earlier Ethos, that we would hold. That first, that we do not give proximity, the weightage that it generally gets. So, spatial or relational. And second, how others in our situation, say in

the situation of affluence, are reacting, should not determine, how we choose to react to it. These both seem to be counterintuitive measures.

And, this is what, singer's crucial claim is arguing for. He starts by saying that, numbers lessen obligation. As in the described situation, there are a large number of agents, who could act to make a difference. But, does this possibility, reduce the moral onus, on each agent. Why should I give more than anyone else, in my situation.

So, the crucial question is, well, if there are so many people, who can alleviate a problem out there, why should I be doing it. This is the mentality, that singer attacks. There is no reason, or we should not be holding this mentality, that what others are doing will influence, what I am to do. Why should I give more than anyone else, in my situation. If everyone in my situation, makes a certain contribution, the crisis is solved.

So, I should contribute so, irrespective of whether people actually contribute, or not. So, to assume that, others will contribute, or do not contribute, should not influence our decision. But, there is a fallacy here. The fallacy here is, that the premise is in the form of a hypothesis. Whereas, the conclusion is given as a factual status.

That is the fallacy. So, just because you average it out, that well, if there are hundred billionaires in the world, and each one gives one million, generating hundred million for a tragedy, that may have struck. So, that solves the problem. So therefore, I should give one million, being a billionaire. Right. Now, I am not a billionaire, and not even a millionaire.

But, this is how the reasoning takes place, which Singer points out as fallacious. That, one cannot abstractly divide responsibility, by the number of people, who are in a position to help, and just do one little part on that. So, because the premise here is an hypothesis, it is an assumption. And the conclusion comes out to be, a category of, gives a factual status.

It makes a claim, thereof. Now, the Utilitarian reading is, if everyone does what he ought to do, the result will not be as good as it would be, if everyone did a little less than what he ought to do. Or, if only some do, all that they ought to do. Excess sacrifice would be a waste, unnecessary suffering caused, including the deficiency at the donor's end. So, the Utilitarian reading here is a little contrary to common thinking, that if everyone does what he ought to do, the result will not be as good as it would be, if everyone did a little less than what he ought to do.

Or, if only some do, all that they ought to do. So, to have excess sacrifice made, would

be a waste, unnecessary suffering caused at the donor's end. So, the crux is that, if everyone contributes as much as they can, there might be an excess donation, and causing an unnecessary excess suffering at the donor's end. The result of everyone doing, what he really ought to do, cannot be worse than the result of everyone doing, less than what he ought to do. Although, the result of everyone doing, what he reasonably believes he ought to, could be. So, here again, the claim here is that, the result of everyone doing, what he really ought to do.

For example, 100 billionaires, each suffering that can be alleviated with 100 million currency units. And, each billionaire, if spares 1 million currency units, that should be sorted out. But, if each one does a little less than that, the suffering is still going to continue. But when, so cannot be worse than the result of everyone doing, less than what he ought to do.

If everyone does more than, what they are required to do. So, each billionaire donating a million, is a better situation than, each billionaire donating less than a million. So, although the result of everyone doing, what he reasonably believes he ought to do, could be worse. Now, certain conceptual revisions that, Singer talks about is, Duty and Charity. He questions this traditional moral categorisation, between duty and charity. Singer points out that, the traditional distinction between duty and charity as untenable.

The duty and charity are two different categories. The charitable person is praised, but the one who is not, is not condemned. This consumption alongside penury, does not raise eyebrows. And, here we can talk about the Indian experience with inequality. So, here he brings about a distinction, or asks for a conceptual revision between duty and charity.

Well, charity is something, which seems like optional. But duty is something, which needs to be done. So, Singer's argument is that, charity should not be treated as charity. Rather, charity should be given the status of duty. So, the charitable person is praised, but the one who is not, is not condemned. So, Singer ups the moral bar, saying that, those who are not charitable, deserve to be condemned.

And, a classical example, which perhaps the Indian subcontinent is still rife with, and even the world in general, is the existence of extreme luxury, along with penury on its side, or abject poverty on its side. That this seems to be, that there is something wrong, for this luxury to coexist with this penury. And, the one who is in that position of affluence, ought to donate, and contribute to the poor. And, this is not an act of charity, rather an act of duty. So, this notion of Super-Arrogatory Acts, if you have come across this.

Super-Arrogatory Acts are debunked. It is not okay, but positively wrong, not to perform the hitherto regarded Super-Arrogatory Acts. So, he claims, the notion of Super-Arrogatory Acts. What are Super-Arrogatory Acts? Super-Arrogatory Acts are acts, which are excellent, if you perform them, but nothing condemnable, if you do not do it. So, just as giving arms to a beggar, it may be morally creditable action, to give arms to a beggar.

But, it is not a condemned action, not to give arms to a beggar. But, Singer's argument here is that, this whole notion of Super-Arrogatory, needs to be debunked, because there are no such things as Super-Arrogatory Acts. When, there is a situation that demands intervention, that intervention, when it can come as in the form of transfer of resources, from the affluent to the suffering, it no more is a Super-Arrogatory, or a charitable act, but it ought to be a duty. And, that is the conceptual revision, that Singer is asking for. His call is to withdraw, the distinction between duty and charity.

The current demarcation is not correct, and needs to be revised. The transfer of surplus resources, to acute scarcity, is morally necessary. That is the crucial point, he is making, that the transfer of surplus resources, to acute necessity, or scarcity, from affluence, is morally necessary. Not Super-Arrogatory, not desirable, not charitable. And, then what come out to be the implications of redrawing this distinction.

This distinction keeps the domain of duty, limited, but rigid. Expanding it, would supposedly make all the tenets weaker. The entrance from charity, into duty, would weaken the existing tenets, in the duty domain. So, now if there is a bucket of lists, that we think as duty, and then there is another bucket, we think as charity. Singer argues for, moving some items from the bucket of charity, to the bucket of duty.

But, what could this do. This could make the tenets weaker. So, what he means is that, well, there are already some tenets here. If we overpopulate, or if we bring about, what is hitherto understood as charity, into the domain of duty, the entire notion of duty, might be weakened. Right. That the sense, it raises the bar too high, and people would not be comfortable with duty.

Local tenets are shaped by local societal needs, from localised context. Extraneous participation does not enhance localised needs, and may instant be a drain on local stability. So, these are the worries. If we redraw the distinction, what can happen. One is, the whole notion of duty can become weaker.

Because, the notion of charity remains optional. But, if it is brought about as a notion of duty, then that makes the whole notion of duty, weaker. For example, if somebody

contributes voluntarily to a, say an earthquake relief fund. That is a sense of charity, when one donates. But, if one is mandated by the law, to donate say, 10% or 5% or 1% of their earnings, to that earthquake relief fund, that would bring about a weakness in the notion of duty.

That, why should I be doing it. There might be protests, and duty might become then, distasteful or weak. And the second point here, talks about local societal needs, from the localised context. Because, this duty, according to Singer, is now no more connected with proximity. So, anywhere far ahead, or there is a suffering far away, one still should be able to support the suffering far away.

But, what about localised needs. And, that this kind of an outlook, may actually be a drain on local stability. These are the worries, that might happen, from redrawing this distinction, between duty and charity. This may be the explanation of the built difference, between duty and charity. But, this provide a justification. So, Singer again counter argues that well, these might be the explanation of already existing differences, between duty and charity.

But, do these differences provide a justification, to hold on to this distinction, between duty and charity. Singer, of course answers in the negative. This point is, the moral point of view requires us to look beyond our society, it has to be trans-perspective. So, this valuing the local, over the global, is not acceptable.

This is not the moral point of view. The moral point of view requires us to look beyond our society. And, it has to be trans-perspective. And, it is quite feasible, with the means available now. Yes. And, particularly now, and this paper was written, almost half a century back, over half a century back.

To think of it, it is quite an old paper. But, still relevant, what it talks about, is that, now we live in even more globalised world, where in 1972, the West was aware of the suffering of Bangladesh, through reporters sending back images and writings, from the war field, or from Bangladesh. But today, suffering through the electronic media, can be easily viewed and accessed, anywhere in the world, in real time. So, that makes us both, aware of suffering elsewhere, and also the means of resource transfer now, make it much easier for us, to transfer resources to the needy, to the suffering of a calamity, that has come, suddenly struck people unprepared. Sidgwick and Urmson, two other philosophers argue that, we need to have a basic moral code, which is not too far beyond the capacities of the ordinary man.

For otherwise, there will be a general breakdown, with the compliance of the moral

code. So, this is again a critique of Singer, where certain philosophers argue that, Singer's proposed code of ethics, is pushing it too hard. And, pushing it so hard, or asking people to spare their luxury, for helping the suffering, and almost mandating it as a must, and condemning it, when it is not done, is putting a strain on the ordinary sense of morality, that we have. And, this could actually lead to a breakdown of the moral code of conduct. So, where should we draw the line between, conduct that is required, and conduct that is good, although not required, so as to get the best possible result.

Now, this is the crucial question. It is a question of calibration. It is a calibration, that is also going on right now. So, when tax rebates are given for donations to charitable organisations, it is a way of encouraging people to donate. Yet, it is not mandated. But, this is the calibration, which we need to work out. When tax rates are raised, say for the purpose of education, when the government lays taxes on incomes, for the purpose of education.

That is an example of a mandate, or a calibration, more towards Singer's proposal. So, how do prevalent moral standards, affect the decisions, people take. That is a question. If it does, then the locus of the change is from the collective, not only within. And, that is where is a call to revise moral standards. A moral binary, is it a moral binary, will such a massive increase in moral expectation, unsettle and weaken the existent norms.

So, this is a small dialogue, that takes place in response to Singer's proposal. That, how does this change come about. How does this change, Singer, how do you propose that, this change comes about, from charity to duty. Does it come from the level of the individual, or does it come at the level of the collective. If everybody around me, are donating to a suffering far away, I will be inspired to donate, or it is a change that should come from within.

The call is to revise moral standards. And, will such a massive increase in moral expectation, unsettle and weaken the existent norms. That is a constant worry, that talks about, that are we becoming too idealistic, too unsustainably idealistic, and expecting the same from others, or mandating the same from others, causing a crumbling in the moral fabric of people out there. So, let us look at the conclusions.

Here, this paper is clearly an attempt for moral revision. Suffering is an evil. This is axiomatic, and not open to debate here. In this case, it is not fatalistic, and can be positively alleviated by the action of other. So here, there is a strong motion of action, that is being talked about that. These are not sufferings, that are fatal, and have to be accepted.

But, these are sufferings, that are sudden, that can be alleviated by involvement of others. The balance is, how much do others, relatively value the elevation of suffering, which may not be proximate. That is the balance, that is now Singer is asking to recalibrate, more in favour of alleviating the suffering of others, rather than looking after or investing resources in the comfort to luxury of one oneself. So here, he redraws this distinction between duty and charity, and thins the notion of supererogatory. That, a lot of acts, that seem to be supererogatory, need to be understood as duty.

So, with this brief paper, and I hope you have enjoyed reading it. And, this is a paper that called in, and raised a lot of money and resources, to be transferred to Bangladesh, to help it stand on its own feet. Because, a calamity comes, to an unprepared nation. And, it is at that time, that others can help. So, it seems for Singer, it is morally unacceptable, that there can be luxuries, coexisting with suffering. So, instead of having the luxury, one morally ought to divert it, not as a charity, not as supererogatory act, not as anything obligatory, but something mandatory, to transfer it to the others.

So, in war times, when celebrations are banned, or when rich people are not allowed to hold celebrations, is also an example of the kind of worldview, that Singer is arguing for. Now, I leave it on to you, to judge, whether this argument holds, whether you are convinced of it. Singer, Peter Singer is an activist, and has gone ahead, and continued to argue for his cause, and has made quite a difference to the world out there. So, the overall purpose of this paper was to, give you a close familiarity to, what an essay in Applied Ethics feels like.

How you would like to come up with it. How would you like to assess it. So, please go ahead, read it, and do react to this essay. And, start thinking in terms of, Applied Ethics and essays, or concepts, connecting concepts, where you can build arguments here. That is all, for now. Thank you. .