

Singer Solution to World Poverty and Lifeboat Ethics: A Christian Perspective

The moral responsibility we, as Christians, owe to our poorer brethren is well documented in the Bible as a necessity. From Cain's example of what *not* to do ("Am I my brother's keeper?" Genesis 4:9) to Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), and from Mosaic law telling the Hebrews to treat outsiders fairly because they were once outsiders themselves (Leviticus 19:34) to the exhortations of the Epistles, and in so many other places in between, there is no doubt that God wants, and even demands, we take care of those less fortunate than us. One of the four Cardinal Virtues (justice) and one Theological Virtue (charity) are at least partially satisfied by acting on this command. But we still have two other Theological Virtues (faith and hope) and three other Cardinal Virtues (prudence, temperance and fortitude) to consider when speaking of ethical matters. Do they, or do they not, come into the realm of taking care of those less fortunate than ourselves?

In an effort to help the gentle reader work through this question, I will provide three different approaches. The first two are very popular secular solutions, and are often taught together in college ethics classes so the student can compare ideas. Indeed, one can find both of them in a single PDF file available at https://res.cloudinary.com/segl/image/upload/v1634740837/Singer-Solution-to-World-Poverty-Lifeboat-Ethics_bvygn3.pdf. The first solution, the 1999 "Singers Solution to World Poverty," written by Peter Singer, places justice and charity above all. The second solution, the 1974 "Life Boat Ethics: the Case Against Helping the Poor" written by Garrett Hardin, places prudence above else. While I do hope the gentle reader will read these arguments for himself (together, they are only 11 pages long, including some images), I will write as if one has not yet read them. The third solution will look at this problem through all seven virtues. This final solution is open-ended, as I believe all ethical questions should be. Only God is perfect in His advice; the best I can do is help others to seek this perfection.

Before we start, I just want to point out that, at least according to Steven Pinker's book *Enlightenment Now*, world poverty is gradually disappearing. While I disagree with Pinker on *why* things are improving, he does provide good, qualitative evidence that things *are* improving. The improvement certainly is not because affluent nations followed Singer's solution, and the dire predictions of Hardin's pessimism seem to be refuted at this time. But it is not my intent to discredit the predictions these two papers made, but rather to explain why, based on their assumptions, their conclusions were both logical and reasonable. If their predictions appear to be wrong, but their logic is sound, then we should question if their assumptions were correct.

Singer begins his essay by using a Brazilian film called "Central Station" (1998) as his case study. In the movie, Dora is offered \$1,000 to persuade a nine-year-old boy to follow her to a certain address, where she has been told he will be adopted by wealthy foreigners. After completing this mission, she purchases a TV set with her money. Her neighbor tells her the boy was too old to be adopted, and that the child will be killed in order to harvest his organs. She feels remorse and resolves to get the boy back. This, of course, is a very appropriate and noble response for Dora. But remorse is an emotional response, and Singer will use emotion throughout the rest of his paper. Without realizing it, the gentle reader has now accepted that saving the child's life is the one and only moral imperative. This is known as a "snuck premise." By using this snuck premise, justice and a corrupted form of charity will be held above all else. The other virtues must now operate, if at all, within the framework of justice instead of being used freely.

Singer next points out that had Dora decided to keep her TV instead of searching for the boy, the audience would have felt her to be a monster. Yet then the moviegoers go home in cars that are fancier than what they need, to homes larger than what they need, and enjoy furnishings there in excess of their needs. Singer then points out that "donated to one of a number of charitable organizations, that money [spent on these luxuries] could mean the difference between life and death for children in need." He promptly asks what the difference is between Dora selling the child for money so she could get a TV and the audience buying things they don't need, or getting things that are nicer and fancier than what they need. Singer has now transferred the remorse of Dora onto the guilt of the audience. And while this turnaround may come as a shock to the gentle reader, I don't think many people would deny that yes, we could give up a few things now and then to save someone's life. This is a rational interpretation and a logical conclusion of Singer's example.

But now Singer takes a short tangent. Singer calls himself a utilitarian, but grossly understates what being a utilitarian means. He defines it as "one who judges whether acts are right or wrong by their consequences." This is not a "wrong" definition, but notice just how vague the word "consequences" is. It implies that the Cardinal Virtue of prudence is being used (looking to the future), but true prudence means coming up with options and *then* looking to outcomes. Taken as a whole, the sentence does not really focus on looking at options, but rather if a single option has a beneficial outcome - specifically, the outcome of saving children's lives. This is one example of how forcing other virtues to abide by a supreme virtue causes corruption, and we are far from finished here.

Getting back to what utilitarianism is, the original definition was focused on "pleasure" as the consequence, as pleasure is a universal experience for all higher forms of life. By being universal, it was originally believed that utilitarianism would be more or less consistent worldwide. Naturally, rather than grow into a universal moral code, utilitarians quickly, predictably, and justifiably became identified as hedonists. Utilitarians who wished to separate themselves from hedonists became more apt to claim something along the lines of "the most good for the most people." I recommend *Love and Responsibility* (pages 18-24 of Grzegorz Ignatik's translation) by Father Wojtyla (later Saint John Paul II, Pope) for more information on this moral system.

But even under this definition, Singer still has a problem. The child has at least six life-saving organs (two kidneys, two lungs, a heart and a liver), meaning his sacrifice can potentially save six other lives. He also has other organs (such as eyes) that can improve the quality of life of even more people. Sacrificing this child under utilitarianism is actually an ethical practice. Soon, Singer will claim \$200 can save a child in a poor country. By Singer's own arguments, we find that Dora should have been paid \$1,200 instead of \$1,000. So not only is she helping save six lives, she is undercharging for her services. But Singer, being vague in what "consequences" means, can, of course, deny any such accusation. By not being explicit in what *his* definition of utilitarianism means, we have to take it in the context of the paper, which is to save the lives of children. We are placing lives of children above all other concerns, this time by our own discovery. But while Singer's self-aggrandizing of his moral purity backfired, he still presents a logical argument on saving children's lives. His explanation was lacking, but his argument is sound based on his assumptions.

Singer next brings up Peter Unger's book *Living High and Letting Die*, and chooses one hypothetical story from it. Unlike "Central Station," which is a realistic scenario, this example is quite contrived, and the points being made are forced. Singer's chosen example from the book is a variation of the "Trolley Dilemma" (one is standing next to a railroad track switch and a trolley is coming -- one set of tracks has five people on it and the other has one, which set of tracks does one send the trolley down?). Bob sees a runaway rail car coming down a set of tracks while he stands at a switch. If he

leaves the switch alone, the car will run over and kill a child too far away for Bob to yell a warning to, but if he throws the switch then the rail car will destroy his antique collector's car he chose to park too close to the side track. This collector's car is his retirement plan, as he knows he can sell it and be set for the rest of his life. In the book, Bob allows the car to kill the child and he enjoys his retirement later.

After this tale is over, Unger tells us that for every \$200 raised (in 1996 dollars), a sickly two-year-old will be given a great chance to become a healthy six-year-old, allowing him to survive the most deadly stage of his impoverished life. He then provides all the contact information necessary to make a credit card payment (which Singer includes in his essay, but I have not verified that it is still valid). This leaves the reader with no excuse not to simply pull out one's cell phone and save the life of a child right then and there.

If one does not respond immediately, Singer accuses one of being "able but unwilling to donate to overseas aid." By looking exclusively through justice and charity, Singer has gone from placing guilt on others, to placing guilt on one's self, and then accuses us of ignoring the problem. "If you still think that it was very wrong for Bob to not throw the switch ... then it is hard to see how you could deny that it is also very wrong not to send money." Singer does ask for options, which is an act of prudence. But as I hope to demonstrate later, prudence needs to be at the beginning of the decision cycle. Ideally, all possible options on how to care for others should be considered, but, again, we find ourselves limited to only options that *include* one giving money to the poor.

Singer then addresses some "herd mentality ethics" that I won't discuss here. If one accepts the assumptions Singer has, then his logic is sound and his conclusion is correct. But Singer is still not done with us, as so far he has only guilted the reader into saving one child. "Now that you have distinguished yourself morally," Singer goes on to ask us if we will reward ourselves with a fancy dinner downtown. Singer points out that this meal costs money, and there are other children who could still die. He admits that one meal won't save a child, but it would only take a few simple meals at home over eating at a fancy restaurant to save another child. As Singer astutely says, "There's the rub ... at what point can you stop?" This is another well-known flaw in utilitarianism, and many utilitarians have modified their code with the concept of the "balance of happiness." Again, I would refer one to *Love and Responsibility*. But I propose that Singer, based on the evidence of this essay, does not accept this concept. Still, Singer at least recognizes that there is a point when one should no longer give, presumably because one's own life is just as important as that of an unknown child (this is still a concept that falls under justice).

Singer proceeds to relook at Bob's situation with various alternative scenarios. In these scenarios, instead of pitting the life of an unknown child against his retirement, Bob is somehow trapped on the tracks and has to decide how much of his body he is willing to lose instead of his beloved car. Bob might be willing to lose a toe, or a foot, or even a leg to keep his car. But at some point, Bob will realize he is better off sacrificing his retirement than experiencing the injury. Singer then applies this concept to how much one should give to help the poor.

Singer spends a couple of paragraphs lamenting the reality that so few people and governments are taking action to help the poor. He claims that if everyone did their "fair share," then drastic measures need not be taken. But just because some do their fair share does not eliminate the problem. Therefore, the moral thing to do is to do all one can. Once again, we see guilt being transferred. This time, guilt goes from the population at large to those who are already trying to help. In doing so, he clearly shows he is not one of the utilitarians who accepts the "balance of happiness" concept, but

instead has placed saving lives as being all-important. He cements this claim with "I can see no escape from the conclusion that each of us with wealth surplus ... should be giving most of it to help people suffering in poverty."

Singer ends his essay claiming that Americans spend only \$30,000 on necessities (1999 dollars). According to Singer, anything an American makes over that should be donated to charity. According to Singer, "If we don't do it, then we should at least know that we are failing to live a morally decent life." Unmentioned at all here is that if those in power have such values as Singer does, and make laws to redistribute the wealth if the people won't volunteer on their own, then we have socialism (regardless of the form it is presented as).

Now, I don't care if one finds Singer's conclusions agreeable or disagreeable. Morality, as Singer rightfully claims, is not a popularity contest. I do believe I have shown that Singer's suggestion that using the child for organs is wrong actually goes against Singer's stated moral code, but a poor choice of analogy on Singer's part does not discredit the logic of the main point (especially since his vague language allows him an out). In the end, Singer's logic is consistent with placing justice and charity above all else, as are his conclusions. Regardless of what "injustice" one wants to stop (world hunger, disease, poverty, education, global warming, etc.), the end result is the same. One is only righteous by becoming part of the community one wants to save. This, by the way, is the logic behind the "Critical Theories" being taught to children at all grade levels today. Environmentalism is especially scary, as man is the source of all of the world's woes. Being the cause of the world's problems, mankind needs to become extinct (abortion, assisted suicide, sterilization of gradeschoolers with "gender-changing operations," etc., are all popularly supported by most of the more radical environmentalists). Anything short of becoming one with those one wants to save leaves one becoming "part of the problem." The one and only way to avoid Singer's conclusion is to not accept justice and charity as the ultimate expression of morality.

But before we get to explore all seven virtues, let us see what happens when prudence is held as the ultimate expression of morality. In Hardin's work, he seeks options and then attempts to predict what each option is likely to lead to. This is how prudence works, and let us see if we get a more agreeable solution to the problem.

Hardin begins by pointing out an inherent absurdity that the world is a spaceship run by committee, something some environmentalists use as an analogy. The absurdity is the claim that no one person has the right to dictate how the spaceship operates. As everyone is affected by the fate of the spaceship, everyone should have an equal voice in the matter. Hardin will prove his point shortly when he talks about the "tragedy of the commons," but I do not know why he chose to save this explanation for later. But the problem (using my own words) is that when one person commands a space ship, he is responsible for everything and everyone on the ship. He has a moral obligation to make a judgment that best satisfies all relevant factors and needs. When a ship is run by committee, each member is only responsible for his own portion of the ship, and therefore has no natural concern for the other areas. If one has the charisma to influence the others in the committee, then one's area will benefit at the expense of the other areas. This benefit to his programs are not necessarily because this program is the most deserving, but because the committee member has the most charm. We saw this disaster play out during the Covid-19 panic, when the medical "professionals" were allowed to disregard transportation, economic, commerce, education, religion, national security and every other matter that is essential to a healthy nation.

Hardin segues from this liberal spaceship fallacy to an analogy that will underlie everything else

he says later. In this analogy, he describes the wealthy nations as lifeboats, whose citizens have shelter and provisions. The poor countries do not have lifeboats, and their citizens are in the water. While Hardin would like very much for those in the lifeboats to simply pull those in the water into the boats with them, the problem is that the number of people in the water far exceeds the remaining seats on the lifeboats. The boats will flood and capsize long before even a significant fraction of them are rescued from the water. "Complete justice, complete catastrophe," is Hardin's summary of this option.

Notice that this option is exactly what Singer proposed as the *only* moral solution, so right off the bat prudence has ruled out Singer's ethics. I am not trying to suggest that Hardin is right and Singer is wrong, but rather pointing out how radically different the conclusions are by simply looking at a different virtue.

Hardin does offer one example of temperance to Singer's solution, and that is to allow some people into the lifeboats. This, however, changes the dynamic of the lifeboats. If the boats are filled to capacity, then illegal boarding will still cause the boat to capsize. And the more people in the boat, the quicker the supplies in the boat will be consumed. This presents a small but important problem, as now the time the lifeboat has left to find resupply is shortened. But all allegories eventually break down (if they never did, they would not be allegories but the real things). In the lifeboat case, the breakdown is that except for taking on people in the water, the population of the lifeboat will never grow. In real countries, population growth happens even without immigration. But the main point of this allegory is that space and supplies are limited, and the rest of his paper focuses on this reality.

While the numbers have changed since 1974, the premise that affluent nations tend to reproduce at a slower rate than poor nations is still valid. Hardin's numbers suggested poor nations expand their populations three to four times faster than affluent nations. By his calculations, if an affluent country today had the same population as a given poor country, then in 87 years (a slightly above average but attainable lifetime for those in affluent nations) the poor country will have a population eight times larger than the affluent one. The point shown here is that the charitable work of an affluent country must increase with time just to keep up. The "fair share" Singer spoke of will increase exponentially with every generation.

Hardin then talks about the tragedy of the commons to help explain his remaining options and why he has such a pessimistic outlook on their likely conclusions. The term "commons" comes from the ancient idea of having some land for all citizens to use. A herder on his own land will normally rotate cows from one area to another to ensure the land can support his herd indefinitely. But if the same cows are allowed on land that everybody else uses, he has little reason to worry about what condition the land is left in when he is done. Commons can work if everyone does their part, but it only takes one to ruin it for all the others. He then looks at two "food bank" ideas (one was already in place, the other was proposed at the time of his writing and created shortly afterwards) and how the tragedy of the commons affects them.

The "Food for Peace," or Public Law 480, was the precursor to the World Food Bank, having existed since the 1950s. Of course, the humanitarian effort was promoted by politicians and the media, but Hardin points out what was not discussed in public. \$7.9 billion was spent to send U.S. food surplus to poor countries in the 1960s. Furthermore, between 1948 and 1970, over \$50 billion was spent on other economic aid. While all Americans had to pay for this through taxes, a number of American industries got quite rich off it. Farmers were paid full market price for the food. Those who made farm machinery, fertilizer and other products farmers need also benefited from the new demand. This food was stored in elevators until it was shipped out, benefiting those who rent such things. Of

course, the railroad and shipping industries got paid to move it. The demand the government gave these industries meant competition for everyone else who wanted these services, raising prices for them in addition to the taxes already being paid. But PL 480 also created a government organization to oversee this program, and they naturally had a vested interest to promote the program regardless of how efficient it was. As a result, while one does hear how many were fed by this program, no discussion is ever made on the possibility of a better alternative. And those who benefited from PL 480 had every incentive to make this a global operation, regardless of efficiency. And we see this global operation in today's United Nations World Food Bank.

Hardin does acknowledge that neither these industries getting rich, nor the tax and inflationary impact on the public at large discredit the programs. The real question is temperance: is more good being done than harm, and if so, are there still more efficient alternatives? He doesn't answer this question, but he does use prudence to bring out matters that should be considered by whoever does decide to answer. Emergencies are part of life. Those who don't plan for likely emergencies are responsible for their own lack of foresight. Knowing that someone else will take care of any emergency a poorly run nation may find itself in does nothing to encourage that country to better organize itself.

He ends his talk on the World Food Bank (which, remember, was not official at the time he wrote this) by addressing some minor issues. Countries that are allowed to fail may have their populations reduced to the point that the struggling country can sustain itself. Prudent countries will have their populations grow and possibly reach parity when their surplus resources are equivalent to that of the poorly run countries. He therefore concludes that food sharing is just a tragedy of commons after all. Furthermore, rich countries only show the disparity between them and the poor countries when they do this, causing resentment instead of gratitude (there is plenty of evidence to support that this ingratitude exists, but I won't address that here).

His paper actually ends rather abruptly, but makes it clear that he believes a "green revolution," regardless of how many more people can be fed through technology, would only delay the inevitable overcrowding of the planet.

Just like with Singer, I am not going to say Hardin is right or wrong. I am only trying to point out what the logical conclusions of these options are, and the gentle reader can decide if they are acceptable or not. Hardin's argument, like Singer's, is internally consistent (although Hardin is a lot more honest in his choice of words). His conclusion is that, at least with countries that are not even trying to improve their own situation, giving aid now will only cause larger problems later on. One may find him pessimistic, depressing, or even heartless. But again, morality is not a popularity contest. It has been almost 50 years since he wrote this, and although his predictions have not yet been found to be so disastrous, there have also been a lot of changes since he wrote it. The Earth has been found to be more bountiful than he assumed, technology has improved efficiencies, and while there is still a lot to be desired in many world governments, there has been noticeable improvement. However, his basic premise that unless world growth stagnates, then there will come a time when the Earth can no longer support the population, remains valid. The liberal organizations that are busy promoting birth control on a global scale are only acting logically if they agree with this premise as well.

But before I submit my third option, I do want to point out how much closer Hardin is to the Christian ideal by focusing on prudence. Temperance made a cameo appearance. Charity was not seen as non-negotiable (like with Singer), yet was still considered in a lesser form. Justice was actually more fully realized, as Hardin assumed that the affluent's dignity was at just as important as the poor.

Remember, for Singer, the affluent's dignity was defined by how they treat the poor. Finally, the paper seemed to push one to use fortitude to do the right thing, even if it was disagreeable to do so. It's as if prudence is an open invitation to [almost] all the other virtues. And indeed it is. This reality is what prompted Saint John Paul II, Pope, to claim prudence was the first of the Cardinal Virtues: "It is just this that ensures the virtue of prudence first place." ("L'Osservatore Romano," Weekly Edition in English, 2 November 1978, page 5). But we still have two more virtues to consider, and minor corrections with the others. And I hope the gentle reader will see this makes all the difference.

When we look at faith, as in faith that God gave us what we *need* as a species, then some of the pessimistic edge comes off of Hardin's logic. Faith does not deny the tragedy of the commons, but it does encourage one to find solutions to its problems. Likewise, hope makes a difference. We can admit that this world is limited in what it can support while at the same time believing God has something better for us before we reach that limit. Also, when faith and hope are properly acknowledged, one's fortitude tends to strengthen. We can worry less about a perfect solution, and focus more on a doable solution. As Saint Teresa of Calcutta said, "If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one."

A proper look at charity and justice will let us recognize that there are some who are on hard times and deserve some assistance, while at the same time understanding that there are some who are perfectly willing to be "spoon fed" their entire life. This allows us to use temperance to get us out of the "either/or" mentality that completely dominated Singer's paper and greatly influenced Hardin's. A healthy application of temperance will not only tell us we should seek and help those who do deserve assistance, but also to stop wasting resources enabling those who will only abuse any help they get. Furthermore, a proper look at justice and charity also points us to the needy in our own country (neither paper addressed the needy in affluent countries).

In the end, a proper balance of these seven virtues actually gives us more tools to help the needy. We are not locked into a single "social ill" to crusade against, but we can judge for ourselves when, where, why and how to be charitable. We don't need a Singer to tell us what to do, and a Hardin won't be able to discourage us. Charity in this way is true storge (loving the unlovable -- to love others like God loves us), not the faux charity that is defined and motivated by guilt. And this pure form of charity leads to a purer form of justice. By being able to discern for oneself what charity should look like, one's own dignity is validated while at the same time one is validating the dignity of others.

Life is complex, so simple fixes will not work. The seven virtues are flexible enough to deal with life's complexities, yet intuitive enough to be easily applied. They don't have us look at the problems of the world we should or should not fix, but rather let us do a self-examination on what we can do and the ability to accept what we cannot do.

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