

**Peter Singer's individual responsibility  
&  
the role of institutions**

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## **Introduction**

Singer's argument, that he set out in his '72 paper 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', had and still has a big appeal. Nonetheless, some thirty five years later, our consumption-oriented behavior has not changed a bit, or even has (some might say) evolved contrary to his plea. I shall argue that, although I take his main idea as correct, his elaboration with emphasis on individual responsibility is unrealistic. Further, I shall argue for a conception of institution that could replace his emphasis on individual responsibility and thereby downplay most of the criticism on his work.

## **Peter Singers theory**

Singers main aim - in the background of the happenings in Bengal in 1971 - is try and convince it's reader that "the whole way we look at moral issues - our moral conceptual scheme - needs to be altered, and with it, the way of life that has come to be taken for granted in our society." (Singer, p230) The reason is that he feels bad about the negligence of the western world towards severe cases elsewhere. The way by which he supports the argument is pretty simple. He deduces it from two rather trivial assumptions. The first assumption is that "suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad" (Singer, p231 & p241). The second assumption is that "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it." (Singer, p231) Of this last moderate assumption there is a strong utilitarian counterpart, called by Singer the strong thesis, which I will not consider in this article.<sup>1</sup> Further he notes two things. Firstly, that his principle takes no account of distance, which, he argues, is also morally insignificant if we take the principle of impartiality (or sortlike). Secondly, that the number of people that can make the difference is morally insignificant (i.e. it's everyone's responsibility). The outcome is simple: we should do much more than we do now. It's our moral duty.

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<sup>1</sup> Singer considers the utilitarian thesis more correct. I will omit it because it is apt to cause more problems than I am willing to treat. Those problems will come to the fore during the article, and in the footnotes. The moderate thesis imposes that a great change in our way of life is required, whereby it is also prone to less problems. Even more, it seems undeniable. (cf. Singer, p.241)

## **Problems with his theory**

Of course, there are problems with his theory. First of, we need structural change where he only talks about unconditional transferring of money. But the money could also go to a bottomless pit. So, there should be some guarantee that the money is wisely spent on, for example, enabling poor people to afford more and better foodstuffs and shelter, on financing more and better schools and basic health services, or improving the local infrastructure (i.e. in helping them help their selves). As Pogge (p9) further notes: “when such projects are undertaken with the genuine aim of effecting enduring processes in the world’s poorest regions [...] they are generally far more cost-effective at saving and improving human lives than the so-called humanitarian interventions are”. Singer anticipates this in a less reaching way while arguing that we should support the organization that promotes the best future effects. (cf. p240) It arises from his concern that we could only postpone the starvation or some similar disaster.

There is also the closely related issue of justice involved. If a country is the sole cause of its disaster, to what extent is its moral claim for help justified? Singer leaves no room for individual or collective responsibility<sup>2</sup>, whereas for example, the Rawlsian difference principle extended to the global scale (cf. Beitz) does.

Further, everyone who’s not a hardcore cosmopolitan feels much more inclined to save his own family member if he/she is drowning than he feels inclined to save his own countryman, let alone a foreigner. So, if Singer wants to make a duty out of our charity, then, according to the communitarians, he must explain what sort of bond we have with those in need, and whether this bond is enough to underpin that duty. Singer doesn’t explain this.

Further, in collective form of activism one has also the complications of collective cooperative behavior, which I will discuss below in more detail.

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<sup>2</sup> His strong thesis completely excludes any kind of responsibility. While his moderate thesis leaves room for adjustments, Singer doesn’t make any use of it.

## **His emphasizes on individual responsibility and its complications**

Singer (p240) argues that activism is better than inaction and private contributions. His main complaint is that “at the individual level, people have, with very few exceptions, not responded to the situation in any significant way. Generally speaking, people have not given large sums to relief funds; they have not written to their parliamentary representatives demanding increased government assistance; they have not demonstrated in the streets, held symbolic fasts, or done anything else directed toward providing the refugees with the means to satisfy their essential needs.” (Singer, p229) But, isn't this a somewhat naïve view of activism? Such forms of activism he describes happen when one feels harmed or treated unjustly in some way. And even if one is harmed or treated unjustly, some line needs to be crossed before one would feel inclined to demonstrate in any way. It costs time, energy, organization and resources - compared to the costs of the harm done, - things that people evaluate before they engage themselves in any form of activism. The absolute damage of injustice must be much larger than the absolute cost of activism.

There is also a complication in his writings that arises from his plea that if others don't give any money, you should still give (a lot). But his argument imposes the problem of free riding. If one waits long enough, a lot of people will give money, and the problem will be solved. So, one could simply wait long enough and avoid his moral duty, knowing that eventually others will transfer enough money. Further, on the level of countries, a similar problem can be found. While countries are inclined to rationally pursue their own self-interests, the outcomes of their collective actions could be irrational. Such forms of problems are usually dubbed 'collective action' problems. A classic example is the so-called 'Prisoner's Dilemma'. (cf. Kymlicka, p130-131) In our particular case the outcomes would be morally wrong (i.e. doing nothing about the situation) The Belgians have no reason to demonstrate for government supported relief funds if they suspect (or worse: know) that no other country supports it. Therefore, I think that those few who do demonstrate (like Singer) are inclined to stumble across much ignorance. As Kymlicka notes (p130 et al), it is not enough know what should be done, or even to agree on it, but rather that it is necessary to establish some mechanism to compel compliance with it.

Here we have our first incentive to rather search the solution in global institutions than individual action.

Further, Singer makes a good point: the fact that transferring money to relief funds is seen as an act of charity in our western society (Singer, p235). According to him this is a wrong custom, and although we can give an explanation for it (cf. Singer, p236-237), the explanation doesn't justify it. So he argues for a change of our moral conceptual scheme. Still, even if we take Singers view for granted (i.e. that transferring money to relief funds is a moral duty, and not an act of charity), that doesn't mean all our problems will be solved. It would even cause new complications. One potential example of a complication - that a strong revision could lead to a general breakdown of compliance - he both gives and dismisses. But there is an other complication that is a direct consequence of the vagueness when it comes to the amount of money we should give according to the moderate thesis.<sup>3</sup> Singer just argues that we should give because it is our moral obligation. The complication arises in combination with his moral scheme and the lack of a good definition of 'morally significant' (in the moderate thesis) in his writing. To explain this, suppose for a moment that we change people's moral scheme in Singer's way. So, when a disaster happens I would feel a great moral obligation to give money to relief funds. How much I should give to meet my moral obligation – which I strongly feel I must meet – I do not know. Compare it for example with knowing that you have to be at place X (the hospital where your friend lies and whom you owe a visit), but not knowing where place X is. So, it seems as if an adjustment to Singers moral scheme could sooner lead to moral torment than to moral satisfaction.

But, as noted at the start, the point of this paper is not so much to criticize him, as I (with many others) believe that there is a kernel of truth in his plea. And the culprit is probably his elaboration with emphasizes on individual responsibility. What I want to show is that there is a way to circumvent most of the criticism. That criticism is mainly concentrated

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<sup>3</sup> As I already noted, I will not consider here the strong utilitarian thesis, although it gives us a tool - the utilitarian calculus - as a means of calculating the required sum, based on the things we know. Reason is that it seems to require (in certain cases) reducing ourselves to the level of marginal utility, an outcome that seems too radical and hardly just. It is also prone to much criticism that can be brought up against utilitarianism. So, although it can be used to downplay this last criticism, in turn it also creates many problems.

(in order of argument) on lack of structural change, whether the harmed's claim to help is just or not, lack of distinction between fellow and foreign humans, his emphasizes on individual responsibility, possibility of free riding and collective action problems and eventually also the lack of guidance about the amount of money we should give. I'll try to show that with the appropriate concept of an institution those critiques can be downplayed. With it, on the national and international level there would be no problems with cooperation, and although there is no strong relationship between individuals, there is between states (as long as we share the same understanding of it). Transferred money would also be far better utilized if it was the concern of centralized institutions.

### **Gehlen's view on institutions<sup>4</sup> and its application**

In 1956 Gehlen formulated with his concept of 'Aussenstützen' (i.e. external support) a solution for the elevation of the weight that a subject can barely carry on his own back. One of these weights is just the moral duty that Singer is trying to make us feel responsible for. Institution, etymologically, refers both to the action (i.e. institutionalization) and to the product (i.e. the noun, the specific institution). According to where one wants to lay the emphasis on, another aspect of it is stressed. Gehlen lays the emphasis on the latter aspect and by that sees the institutions having the same role as those external supports.

To understand this, one must first share Gehlen's premise: the view that human is a imperfect being. As we are flooded by various external stimuli, our lack of strong instinctive power would condemn us to total helplessness if we did not had some guide to hold on to. Where the animal has a strong instinct that fulfils this guiding function, the human has to rely on a 'second nature' (i.e. the institution), which relieves the human of its simulative burden. These institutions of a society one must understand broadly. Social forms, production forms, forms of justice, rites etc. form the rules and building blocks wherein the stimuli and reactions must move. In the form of such rules those behavior patterns function as institutions which constitute a framework of legal operation and a guideline for moral action. Those who do not stick to the rules are sanctioned in some

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<sup>4</sup> In this chapter I will base myself on the writings of Visker in the chapter 'Aussenstützen en instituties - Breuklijnen in de hedendaagse wijsbegeerte' and 'Idolen van de dood - Vier hypothesen'.

way. So there is some form of autonomy and assertiveness that emanates from these institutions. The sole intention of Gehlen is to deduce the independency and autonomy of institutions from the human nature. This is probably best sketched with an example.

It was until recently customary that, in case of decease, the surviving relatives carry mourning clothes during a certain period of time, specified according to their immediacy or affinity degree. It went as a behavior pattern to which one had to conform to or endure a penalty in form of social sanctioning. This is a form of institution that Gehlen is aiming at: it echoes the customs of a community (i.e. to carry black before and after a funeral.) It is clear that the individual in this case, when he gets overwhelmed by grief, is presented a guideline from the outside which he can follow. By following the ritual he doesn't stand alone: by following the ritual the grief is carried by the whole community. Furthermore, cemetery as institution gives the deceased symbolically a place outside oneself and the ritual also determines the moment on which the mourning stops. Such obligations are lost nowadays - one considers them rather as an intolerable interference of the community in private life of the individual. But the price for that de-institutionalization seems to be that nowadays people complain more and more that they are struck with their grief. One can expect that, as a result of such de-institutionalization of mourning, there is an increased risk of unmanageable stimuli.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows I will not argue whether he succeeds or not in his intention. His theory is by no means without problems.<sup>6</sup> But the interesting part in his theory is its ambitiousness and plausibility. That's why I'll try to concretize it, and see what its implications could be.

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<sup>5</sup> In case of our example, the de-institutionalization could lead to increased risk of melancholia. Analogously, one can argue that our oppressive feeling of not knowing how much we should pay, while experiencing the duty to pay as a moral obligation, is an effect of the lack of appropriate institutions. What those institutions could look like I shall sketch further on.

<sup>6</sup> The view of institution as a noun is not unproblematic. Standard critique we find in works of Habermas for example, who is suspicious for any form of 'vedinglichung', and rather supports the institution as action. (This view implies that we should constantly question the institutions.) Metaphorically: what 'solidified' should be 'communicatively liquidified'. The distinction that Zijderveld launched between 'institutes' and 'institutions', is also lacking in Gehlen's work: he confuses the institute (for example the church, etc.) with the institution (for example the religion, etc.).(cf. Visker, p117)

So, why should our institutions prescribe how I should dress or how long I should mourn? As already argued, according to Gehlen, it's in our own interest. The institutions give us guidelines as to how to deal efficiently with the death of a family member. Previously and analogously, I argued that one needs guidelines for the amount one should pay. So, in a similar way we might ask why the state should prescribe how much I should pay? To answer that, we might better look at an example that better fits in the current theme.

Looking at the news and seeing some disaster happen, makes us morally obliged to deposit money to relief funds. But when can we say that we have fulfilled our moral obligation? Is 1€ enough, or 100€? Singer presents one situation that is likely to occur in the current world where we understand the support of relief funds as an act of charity: he says that it "is more or less certain that not everyone in circumstances like mine [i.e. let's say middleclass western citizen, aware of the disaster elsewhere] will give 5£." Knowing that, which seems obvious, would raise the cost significantly, thereby making it for many people unreachable, and resulting in a feeling of deficiency and carelessness<sup>7</sup> in many. But suppose we adopt Singers moral scheme and experience generosity as a duty (and not as charity). Then we would all give something and such situation wouldn't likely occur. Still, those who are wealthy, and give a bit relative to their wealth (i.e. a lot relative to common wealth), will make the newspapers, and show themselves as generous and fulfilling their moral duty. That would set standards that are unreachable by the majority of people, thereby creating a feeling of moral deficiency in the masses. Or suppose, you give 5€ and at Sunday, you invite some equally well-off friends at diner. And suppose you discuss the disaster, whereby they mention they each gave 100€ Mentioning that you only gave 5€ would bring you in an odd situation of being thought of a penny pincher.

All these results have one thing in common: they are results of our doubt about the amount of money we should give away. The severeness of the result depends on the moral weight we attach to our duty. Institutions, in Gehlen's view, could pose a solution to such problems (i.e. sensory overload in Gehlen's terms). For example, the government could establish a charity institution which could make a fixed deposit scheme based on

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<sup>7</sup> This is because of the 'collective action' problem. Why should I cooperate (i.e. pay much) if I suspect the other to defect? (i.e. not to pay, not cooperate)



people's income and other factors - similar to a taxation scheme - which could be used to issue money when a disaster occurs. An institution, in this sense, would give us a grip on our moral duty. Giving the prescribed amount of money would ease the feeling of moral obligation, giving the feeling of meeting your moral duty. Not giving, on the other hand, would lead to some form of sanction, for example, being seen a penny pincher by the community.

Note that, according to this view, it is not necessary to see the obligation as a duty, (like Singer suggests we should)<sup>8</sup> while at the same time free riding is restricted. Institutions could promote the transfer of money as an act of charity. But the sole fact of institutionalizing the act would give it an institutional weight (i.e. obligating us to cooperate), whereby the neglect of it would lead to communal sanctions (i.e. cost of non-cooperation). So, through such institutions, we could warrant the transfer of money without adjusting peoples moral conceptual shame - whereas Singer suggest that the only way we could warrant the transfer of money is by the change of peoples moral conceptual scheme.

Furthermore, a closely related problem that can pose itself is whether we should or should not give to relief funds. One of the criticisms I gave earlier held that the call for help must be just to a certain extent in order to be genuine. If we let the individuals decide whether it is just or not, the results could be similar as those sketched above. An appropriate institution would also relieve this burden of questioning it.

Furthermore, if the institution's ethics is based on equality of all people, then special relations between countries would not play any significant role. It is much easier to make institutions (national or global) insensitive to special relations, than it is to make individual people. Therefore, the strength of the 'I rather help my family member than a fellow countryman, let alone a foreigner' argument is downplayed.

Furthermore, the institution that collects the money would be far better informed concerning the best and most efficient way to spend it than individual citizens would be.

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<sup>8</sup> "We ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so." (Singer, p235) and "All I am arguing here is that the present way of drawing the distinction, which makes it an act of charity [...], cannot be supported." (Singer, p235)

This way, the money would not be scattered over various organizations. Eventually the best case would be a global institution that collects money and coordinates relief operations. It is also in everyone's interest as every country is prone to disaster.<sup>9</sup>

By way of conclusion I also would like to draw attention to Habermas' critique on such forms of institutions as I think it is relevant here. (See footnote 6) Because it seems that this institution would bear a lot of responsibility, it is in everyone's interest that it operates well. Habermas' critique on Gehlen's idea of an institution is that it might end up obscured, and therefore that it could lead to collective inappropriate actions. Therefore, it is equally important that one keeps questioning the foundation of such institution, and as long as one can ground it rationally, the institution can be seen as an aura emphasizing that rationality.

## **Conclusion**

Singer's 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' is one of his best-known philosophical essays in which he sets out a strong moral appeal, that is at the same time very problematic. I have first set out his work. Then I briefly went over its complications. Thereafter I argued that many of those complications could be solved if one uses a particular form of institution in place of his emphasis on individual responsibility.

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<sup>9</sup> Again, here too are many complications. Some countries are better prepared for disasters, while others lay in risky areas with unprepared infrastructures.

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