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A Moderate Approach to Extreme Altruism.

Brendan Terry

A Moderate Approach to Extreme Altruism.

BY **Brendan Terry**

In "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Peter Singer advances a "Strong Principle" of moral action that has prodigious implications: "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" (231). Singer's Strong Principle is a hotly contested, influential topic in Utilitarian ethics.[1] As Singer himself recognizes, "If [the Strong Principle] were acted upon, even in its qualified form, our lives, our society, and our world would be fundamentally changed" (231).

The Strong Principle requires moral agents to be extremely altruistic. It is Singer's theoretical keystone to the most radical practical realization of his argument: affluent people (by global standards) have the duty to donate money to charities that effectively assist the world's poor until they themselves are nearly as poor as the people whom they send money to help. The Strong Principle makes three main claims in support of such a duty. It explicitly stipulates that one's *capacity* to help is proportionate to one's *moral responsibility* to help, and it implicitly suggests that one's duty to help others is not lessened by physical distance or whether one is among millions capable of providing assistance (231).

Though I agree with these conclusions, I consider the Strong Principle to be based upon a deceptive predicating assumption, introduced at the start of Singer's essay: that "suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad" (231). In a previous paper, I demonstrated that this predicating assumption embeds in its characterization of "bad" the moral imperative that Singer presents in the Strong Principle (from which he derives all of his conclusions). Thus, Singer assumes his own conclusions, or begs the question. This opens

[1] The essay has over two thousand citations to date.

his argument to technical objections that undermine the philosophical grounds of his call to action. However, I contend that the Strong Principle is worthy of alternative supporting arguments because it radically conceives of extreme altruism as a moral obligation (Brock).[2]

To consider altruism in a moral sense, I must clarify what I judge to be moral concerns, or what I mean by "morality." I agree with Bernard and Joshua Gert, who argue that morality is an "*informal public system* that all rational persons, under certain specified conditions, would endorse." An *informal public system* is a normative system that is knowable by and rational to follow for all to whom it applies; it also, roughly stated, does not involve an authority that definitively decides how it functions. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed description of under which specified conditions rational agents must operate to agree upon a morality, a significant condition worth noting here is that all agents must be sufficiently informed (Gert).

I also consider the Strong Principle to be a moral rule, since it provides clear guidelines to evaluate our actions in relation to harms, and I am persuaded by Gert's observation that "moral rules do seem to limit their content to behavior that directly or indirectly causes or risks harm to others." The Strong Principle has a societal aim—to mitigate severe suffering—so it also conforms with the claim that "having a certain sort of social goal is definitional of morality" (Frankena).

From the perspective of morality as an informal public system and the Strong Principle as a moral rule whose goal is to mitigate severe suffering, we can begin to analyze the Principle's merits in a shared context. Consider it again: "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." One could object that the Strong Principle supposes *allowing* harm is very morally wrong, but one reasonably could believe only *doing* harm is very morally wrong (Woollard). Under this interpretation, the Strong Princi-

[2] This is Gillian Brock's characterization of the Strong Principle.

ple's position is generally cast as consequentialist—Singer is himself a consequentialist. As Fiona Woollard and Frances Howard-Snyder write, "consequentialists believe that doing harm is no worse than merely allowing harm while anti-consequentialists, almost universally, disagree."

However, I would argue that the Strong Principle does not explicitly indicate that doing harm is equal to allowing harm. In "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Singer only suggests that allowing harm, in extreme circumstances, can be very morally wrong. Someone who accepts that allowing harm is even slightly morally wrong would likely accept that allowing extreme harm could be very morally wrong; for example, such a person, consequentialist or not, may believe that letting someone die is generally very wrong. Indeed, because the severe suffering that Singer examines is tantamount to death, and since that suffering is quite practically preventable (through donation to certain charities, for instance), the aspect of the Strong Principle which claims that "allowing harm is morally wrong" seems tenable ("What Makes a Charity Effective?").

Another objection to Singer's Strong Principle is that it proposes too extreme a form of "obligatory beneficence" (Beauchamp).[3] In "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Singer predicts such an objection, so he proposes an additional weak principle: "If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing *anything morally significant*, we ought, morally, to do it," (emphasis added) which adheres to:

> the more or less classic idea...that a person P has an obligation of beneficence to help another whenever the other is at risk of significant loss of or damage to some basic interest; P's action is necessary (singly or collaboratively) to prevent this loss or damage; P's action (singly or collaboratively) is likely to prevent the loss or damage; and P's action does not present significant risks, costs, or burdens to P while the benefits that the other

[3] As Tom Beauchamp writes, "the language of a *principle* or *rule* of beneficence refers to a normative statement of a moral obligation to act for the others' benefit, helping them to further their important and legitimate interests, often by preventing or removing possible harms."

person can be expected to gain outweigh any burden that P is likely to incur (Beauchamp).

Of course, Singer's Strong Principle opposes this traditional view since it suggests that one has a moral obligation to help alleviate suffering until one reaches "marginal utility, the point at which, by giving more, one would cause oneself and one's dependents as much suffering as one would prevent in [others]" (Singer 234). So the Strong Principle suggests a moral obligation to give even when there *are* significant "risks, costs, or burdens to P." Only once one reaches marginal utility, where one's capacity to assist becomes negligible, does one no longer have the moral responsibility to assist. Thus, the acceptance of marginal utility as a practical limit to one's obligation to help appears to be the theoretical keystone of the Strong Principle. I will reduce this to the question of altruism vis-à-vis egoism: if I am affluent and have a high standard of living, what could morally oblige me to be as highly altruistic as Singer proposes?

If I were highly altruistic, I would not be significantly influenced by how helping others could benefit me. I would choose to help people based on how much they needed help rather than how much I desired to help them—I would help impartially. Indeed, self-interest would be an insignificant consideration in establishing the morality of my actions (Kraut). This could perhaps lead me to break social expectations of decency. For example, if I were highly altruistic (and informed), I probably would not choose to buy gifts for my other affluent friends—which would lose me social capital and be difficult emotionally—because that money could be used to help people who severely suffer.[4]

More absurdly, if I were to come across a hungry homeless person in the street, I might choose not to give him a couple dollars' worth of

[4] As a sidenote, a common empirically-dependent response to extreme altruism is that the suffering can and ought to help themselves. Though some use this claim to argue against altruism altogether, most use it to argue against a moral obligation to be extremely altruistic. However, in a recent literature review entitled "What Makes Charity Effective?" I presented convincing evidence that people who severely suffer cannot be expected help themselves to escape from such suffering.

food, which would make me feel callous and have other consequences, because I would know that my money, with the appropriate electronic fund transfer, could help a person almost dead from starvation half a world away.

In one classic defense of impartiality in moral decision-making, Bentham, Mill, Kant, and Sidgwick argue that "when we think morally about what to do, reason takes a god's-eye perspective and sets aside the emotional bias we normally have in our own favor, or in favor of our circle of friends or our community" (Kraut).

While this view could defend the Strong Principle, I do not find it especially compelling because while it captures why one ought to help others, it does not directly respond to my question: "Why should *I,* given my natural self-interest, help others?" Kraut expounds: "It is as though we forget about locating ourselves as this particular person; we abstract away from our normal self-centered perspective and seek the solution to a practical problem that anyone similarly impartial would also arrive at." How could anyone reasonably be expected to act morally, if this were the case?

In another classic defense of impartiality, Hume, Schopenhauer, and Smith argue:

> It holds that there is something extraordinarily valuable in the sentimental bonds that take hold among human beings—a feature of human life that is overlooked or distorted when morality is understood solely or primarily in impersonal terms and from a god's-eye point of view. In favorable conditions, we naturally and emotionally respond to the weal and woe of others; we do not and should not look for reasons to do so (Kraut).

This stance, however, condones the ignoring of reason by moral agents. Therefore, importantly, it does not fit Gert's definition of morality as a normative system that is both knowable by and rational to follow for all to whom it applies.

I offer a position somewhat between the two presented above, and my conclusions promote the same morality as the Strong Principle: "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." My argument is in short that individuals must *reason* from their innate emotions to a morality that encourages essentially pure altruism (D'Agostino).[5] I postulate that we as human beings are fundamentally distinct persons, not simply part of a larger social organism that has a duty of self-preservation.[6] I also posit that morally right actions do good for an entity that holds significant intrinsic value (e.g. a person). These predicating assumptions serve to clarify what I mean when I refer to "other people" and their moral status. I assume that, in the vast majority of cases, others experience severe suffering in extremely negative ways "similar" to how I would experience such suffering myself. Secondly, I assume that a person's subjective experiences have significant immanent value for that person. Thirdly, I assume my subjective experiences to be valuable *in and of themselves*; restated, *my* subjective experiences hold objective value.[7]

Combining assumptions one and two, I conclude that the immanent negative value of my own severe suffering would be extremely significant for me. Combining assumptions two and three, I conclude that, objectively, each person's subjective experiences have significant immanent value. Now I will make an empirical claim: with a given amount of assistance, the extremely negative subjective experiences of the severely suffering can be improved incomparably more than my significant, yet not as extremely negative or positive, subjective experiences. Combining conclusions one, two, and the empirical claim, I finally conclude that, morally, since I ought to take actions that do good for what holds significant value, as a relatively affluent person I have an obligation to help those who suffer severely to the point of marginal utility.

My argument does not rely directly on a bird's-eye-view of morality, or irrationally following one's emotions, or most tenets of consequen-

[5] Here, I answer "[t]he justificatory problem...of satisfactorily answering the question 'why be moral?'" My approach "is reductionist in a pretty straightforward sense: it derives moral reasons from non-moral ones."

[6] I wish to differentiate myself from the view, espoused by David O. Brink and T.H. Green, that "individual human beings are mere fragments of a larger social whole."

[7] For more on immanent (intrinsic) value, see Zimmerman.

tialism. Instead, it reasons from widely accepted premises to support the first conclusion (that one's capacity is proportionate to one's obligation), the second conclusion (that distance is unimportant), and the third conclusion (that one's obligation persists whether or not others also have that obligation) in Singer's Strong Principle. Though I will more rigorously defend my argument in later work, it offers, even now, a more explicit justification for Singer's Strong Principle than he provides himself. Our duty is indeed to perform actions of extreme altruism; that is, those of us who are relatively affluent ought to assist those who suffer from terrible, yet preventable, disease and poverty until we are near their level of suffering, too.

Epilogue

An abstract position like the one I've taken in this paper can be so counterintuitive that it seems highly implausible even if it has no glaring philosophical flaws. To better understand such an argument, philosophers often consider it with less abstraction by representing it with one or more thought experiments. A complex philosophical argument can be evaluated through multiple linked thought experiments. With ethical thought experiments, I find it helpful to consider myself as one of the actors and to narrate the experiments in the first person; this method respects the intuitive fact that moral decisions often feel personal. Below, I put forward a narrative of interrelated thought experiments that, I hope, makes Singer's Strong Principle more intuitively acceptable.

Out of nothingness, I was called into being, a floating man, in a dark sky high above the Earth. There was no wind, my limbs were splayed, and my body was so calm that I could not even perceive my own breathing or heartbeat. I had no physical experience; I discovered a great joy in being free from the pains or pleasures of experience. Still, I was somehow aware of my own existence; it seemed that my "self" arose out of my consciousness, unprovoked. In this moment of realization, however, I felt the air that buoyed me up suddenly give way, and I plummeted down from the heavens.[8]

[8] This thought experiment is adapted from Avicenna's 9th-century thought experi-

I plunged into ocean depths and opened my eyes. They burned with salt as my body was gripped by cold. Water rushed into my nose; a chill shivered up my spine. I writhed my way upwards and, when I surfaced, I coughed out water between gasps for air. Across the starlit waters, I glimpsed land nearby. I made my way toward it. During this swim, I reminisced about the peace I had felt as a floating man; this peacefulness had been upended by my plunge. Despite this, I did not feel my sense of self fade as my physical experiences intensified—it merely found new forms of expression (in the consideration of my surroundings). Lost in these reflections, I did not notice the water turn brackish, and was thoroughly surprised when I reached the banks of an estuary. I stood, waded ashore, and began to walk upstream.

At dawn, I perceived a building in the distance. As I got nearer, I saw that the building was a medical clinic. I decided to enter and inquire as to where I might be, but, before I reached the door, it swung open and a doctor sprung out to greet me. "You must be tired from traveling," she said; she then sat me down and fetched me a muffin and a glass of water. There were five half-dead patients in the clinic, and they all stared at me with gaunt faces and ghostly eyes. They seemed intrigued by me.

When the doctor returned with my water, I asked her if she could save the patients' lives. She responded: "Each is in need of an organ transplant; one needs lungs, one intestines, one a liver, one a pancreas, and one a heart." Then she watched me with expectation, as if I would suggest what to do next. But I sat mute. Surprised, she continued: "You ought to know that I will do what's right."

I stared at her timorously; she leaned toward me and grabbed me by the arm. Reacting to the unexpected strength in her grasp, I leapt to my feet and asked her what she was playing at. She simply stared at me and said, in measured tones, "You must sacrifice yourself! As the Good Book says, 'We, as human beings, are part of a social organism; the social self establishes what is moral, in that right actions do good

ment of "The Floating Man."

for the social self.' My five patients, who are respected leaders in their respective communities, will fully recover after their transplants. You can exchange your one life for five others. Your family will not suffer from worry that you were murdered; they will think that you died on a pleasurable adventure through the wilderness. When you sacrifice yourself, you will do a great good."

All five patients nodded. Though they were in desperate need and the doctor's argument appeared sound, I still could not convince myself intuitively that I ought to sacrifice myself to save those patients. So I protested to the doctor, and to the patients, that I had a moral status as a conscious being which protected me from the obligation to sacrifice my own life. When I saw their looks of disgust, despair and rage, I realized that they might murder me (without my consent), so I turned, fled the clinic, and ran into the bush.

After I had hiked far enough to make my escape, I came upon a beautiful glade. I looked to the sky above and was overcome with the same joy in existence that I had experienced up there: "There is value just in being, and morality must respect being; all humans, in their being, have this intrinsic value, which gives each of us profound moral status," I reflected. As I reached the end of this thought and dropped my gaze earthward, I was surprised by a sharp cry. As I reflexively turned toward the noise, I saw a small boy crawl out from behind a nearby rock, grab a handful of grass, and eat the grass—all while cautiously watching me. He looked to be nearly dead from starvation.

I imagined how he must feel, and I saw that my opportunity to help him applied to my recent reflections: "It would be very morally bad to allow this being, who holds such great intrinsic value, to suffer," I told myself. I ran over to him, and he told me quietly that he would quite like some apples to eat from the tree above, but he didn't have the strength to climb it. Without delay, I clambered far up into the branches to reach the fruit, then dropped several apples to the ground for him.

When I climbed down and walked over to him, I saw that, though

he was famished, he ate the apples very slowly. As he ate, I naively told the boy that, since I had come into existence a short time ago, I was ignorant of his society. He did not find this peculiar; rather, he reached a hand toward me, grabbed my own, and drew me over to sit down next to him. He then recounted for me a history of the world, as he knew it—a narrative which lasted into the hours of darkness. Afterwards, he fell asleep beneath the apple tree; I could not sleep, so I gazed at the stars and thought of what questions I would ask the boy in the morning.

At dawn, I fetched for us more apples for breakfast. When I saw that the boy's appetite was sated, I asked him if he knew of many other people who severely suffered as he did. He answered, "In my society, very many, perhaps one in five." I then asked about the four out of five people who did not suffer so. What did they do for the suffering? He replied, "Those people give people like me apples, but only out of generosity. Sometimes they give money to organizations, called charities, that feed us." I asked him if he considered me to be one of these people, and he answered perceptively, "It cannot be so. For you did not give me those apples out of generosity."

I told him that he was right, that I felt obliged to help him and not generous in doing so. Furthermore, until the time came when I would snap out of existence like I had snapped into it, I would consider my greatest obligation to be to aid anyone who suffered severely. I would help as many as I could, even people I would never meet, because they each must have intrinsic value—in their own existence and experiences—similar to my own; I would help until to help would lead me to severely suffer or risk death.

Extreme altruism is intuitive if one, as a relatively affluent person, knows people who severely suffer. Without personal connections, though, our intuition tells us that we are not obligated to help those we do not know. If actions consistent with extreme altruism are not intuitive, does that mean that they ask too much of moral agents? If we learn that our intuitions are misguided, should we still let them decide our moral actions?

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