A Synopsis of Singer's *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*

Jason Zarri

Singer, Peter. *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*. Random House, New York, 2009. 207 pages, with notes and an index.

1. *Introduction*

In this article I provide a synopsis of Peter Singer's book *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty,* in which he tries to get his readers to consider, or reconsider, the question of what their obligations are to those who are trapped in extreme poverty. To make the connections between the different ideas and subjects easier to perceive, I will proceed topically, which means that the order in which I discuss certain things is sometimes different from the order in which they occur in the book. As is almost inevitable when summarizing a book of any appreciable length, I will fail to discuss some sections and even chapters, in order to devote more attention to those parts of the book that I regard as the most important. Also, unless otherwise noted, all page references are to *The Life You Can Save*.

Singer begins the first chapter of his book with the following scenario: Suppose that on your way to work you see a toddler flailing about in a pond. There is no one besides you around to help. If you don't act to save the child, he will probably drown. However, saving him means ruining your new shoes, muddying your clothes, and making yourself late for work. "What should you do?", Singer asks (p. 3).

If you're anything like the students Singer has taught, you've responded that you should save the toddler. Compared to the value of his life, ruining your new shoes, muddying your clothes, and making yourself late for work don't matter at all. "Most of us are absolutely certain that we wouldn't hesitate to save a drowning child, and that we would do so at considerable cost to ourselves. Yet while thousands of children die each day, we spend money on things we take for granted and would hardly notice if they were not there. Is that wrong? If so, how far does our obligation to the poor go?" (p. 12). Together, these two questions are the driving force of *The Life You Can Save.*

Comparing the effort to alleviate poverty to "an attempt to reach the summit of an immense mountain" (p. xiii), Singer says,

> We can, each of us, do our part in this epoch-making climb. In recent years there's been a good deal of coverage of some among the very rich who have taken on this challenge in a bold and public way. Warren Buffet has pledged to give $31 billion, and Bill and Melinda Gates have given $29 billion and are planning to give more. Immense as these sums are, we will see by the end of this book that they are only a small fraction of what people in rich nations could easily give, without a significant reduction in their standard of living. We won't reach our goal unless many more contribute to the effort.
> That's why this is the right time to ask yourself: What ought I be doing to help? (footnote omitted, p. xiii)

Singer's goals are: (1) "…to challenge you to think about our obligations to those trapped in extreme poverty", and (2) "…to convince you to choose to give more of your income to help the poor" (p. xiii-iv).

I write this synopsis in the hope that it may convince you to think about these issues for yourself, and also to go on to read Singer's book, in which he develops and defends his views with far more subtlety and sophistication than I can do justice to here. If you do that then I think you can be sure, that whatever conclusions you may ultimately reach, they will be both carefully considered and authentically yours.

2. *Some Common Experiences of the Poor*

According to World Bank researchers, the poor have said that poverty means:

- Being short of food "…for all or part of the year…sometimes having to choose between stilling your child's hunger or your own…".
- That because you can't save money, you have to borrow some if a family member gets sick or your crop fails, and you won't be able to pay it back.
- Not having enough money to send your children to school.
- Living in an unstable house that may need to be frequently rebuilt.
- Not having access to safe drinking water.
  (pp. 5-6)

Furthermore, even those who eat their fill can be malnourished because their diet doesn't provide them with enough of the proper nutrients, and "In children, malnutrition stunts growth and can cause permanent brain damage" (p. 8).

As if all that wasn't bad enough, the poor are often robbed of their sense of human dignity:

> [Extreme poverty] is often accompanied by a degrading state of powerlessness. Even in countries that are democracies and are relatively well governed, respondents to the World Bank survey described a range of situations in which they had to accept humiliation without protest. If someone takes what little you have, and you complain to the police, they may not listen to you. Nor will the law necessarily protect you from rape or sexual harassment. You have a pervading sense of shame and failure because you cannot provide for your children. Your poverty traps you, and you lose hope of ever escaping from a life of hard work for which, at the end, you will have nothing to show beyond bare survival. (p. 6)

As Singer says in the Preface, "…we should remember that even in the worst of times, our lives remain infinitely better than those of people living in extreme poverty" (p. xv).

3. *Singer's Main Arguments*

Singer gives an argument to establish that we are obligated to donate to aid agencies, which he calls "The Basic Argument":

> First Premise: Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.
>
> Second Premise: If it is in your power to present something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so.
>
> Third Premise: By donating to aid agencies, you can prevent suffering from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, without sacrificing anything nearly as important.
>
> Conclusion: Therefore, if you do not donate to aid agencies, you are doing something wrong.
>
> (pp. 15-6)

The premises are hard to reject. Singer admits that "nearly as important" is vague, but he thinks that people can be honest with themselves about what counts and what doesn't. Singer suspects you might be thinking that the argument "…isn't all that controversial. Yet if we were to take it seriously our lives would be changed dramatically" (p. 17). The argument has significant consequences, for it seems to show that all surplus spending—buying things that we don't really need—is wrong:

> We tend to assume that if people do not harm others, keep their promises, do not lie or cheat, support their children and their elderly parents, and perhaps contribute a little to needier members of their local community, they've done well. If we have money left over after meeting our needs and those of our dependents, we may spend it as we please. Giving to strangers, especially to those beyond one's community, may be good, but we don't think of it as something we *have* to do. But if the basic argument presented above is right, then what many of us consider acceptable behavior must be viewed in a new, more ominous light. When we spend our surplus on concerts or fashionable shoes, on fine dining and good wines, or on holidays in faraway lands, we are doing something wrong. (p. 18)

Singer also tries to show that traditional views on helping the poor agree with the conclusion of his argument. According to Christian, Jewish, and Islamic teaching, helping the poor is not optional, but obligatory. Singer cites several passages to show that early and medieval Christians took Jesus' teachings about charity for the poor very seriously (pp. 19-20). According Thomas Aquinas, widely revered as one of the greatest of the medieval Scholastic philosophers, if we have more than we really need we owe the excess amount to poor, and he cites Ambrose—a Doctor of the Church—and the Decretum Gratiani—a compilation of canon law—in support of his opinion (p. 20). Singer also points out that the Talmud, a highly authoritative "…record of discussions of Jewish law and ethics by ancient rabbis" (p. 21) teaches that Jewish people owe ten percent of their income as *tzedakah*—a Hebrew word meaning *charity*, or literally, *justice*—for the poor (p. 21). Similarly, every year Muslims who have more than a minimum amount of wealth have to give *zakat* for the poor, which amounts to 2.5 percent of their assets and includes "…cash and other liquid assets" (p. 21).

Singer also quotes the Confucian philosopher Mencius, who seems to have had a similar attitude about what kings owe their subjects. On meeting King Hui of Liang, Mencius is reported to have said,

> There are people dying from famine on the roads, and you do not issue the stores of your granaries for them. When people die, you say, "It is not owing to me; it is owing to the year." In what does this differ from stabbing a man and killing him, and then saying "It was not I, it was the weapon?" (Mengzi [Mencius] Liang Hui Wang I, http://chinese.dsturgeon.net/text.pl?node=16028&if=en. Quoted in Singer, p. 22).

4. *Why Don't We Give More?*

"So why don't we save children in developing countries, if the cost of doing so is modest?", Singer asks (p. 46). He describes six major reasons.

1. *The Identifiable Victim*. People will do more to save a single, identifiable individual than they will do to save a group, especially when they have a picture of that person. Singer explains this by appealing to a leading researcher on the subject, Paul Slovic. Slovic posits a distinction between two psychological systems, the affective system and the deliberative system. The first involves emotions, and the second involves reasoning. A single individual is mote salient to the affective system, and this system is more likely to motivate us to act than the deliberative system is (pp. 46-50).

2. *Parochialism*. People are more likely to help their family, friends, and countrymen (or countrywomen) than they are to help those living far away from them (pp. 50-2).

3. *Futility*. "In general, the smaller the proportion of people at risk who can be saved the less willing people are to send aid" (footnote omitted, pp. 52-3).

4. *The Diffusion of Responsibility*. We are less likely to help if others who are also in a position to help aren't doing anything. (pp. 53-4).

5. *The Sense of Fairness*. People are less likely to help if they think that that would be doing more than their fair share (pp. 55-6).

6. *Money*. Money—or even being primed to think about money—makes people less helpful. On page 58 Singer says that Kathleen Vohs, and her colleagues Nicole Mead and Miranda Goode, "…suggest that as societies began to use money, the need to rely on family and friends diminished, and people were able to become more self-sufficient" (pp. 56-9).

In the final section of the chapter, Singer rebuts those who would use these six psychological effects to argue that "it's not in our nature" to give (p. 59). Evolution might explain why we have these intuitions, but it doesn't justify us in relying on them or those of our feelings that are based on them.

Singer closes the chapter with some evidence that people can be rationally persuaded to give. Concerning an article that he had written for *The New York Times*, Singer says that he had

> …included telephone numbers that readers could call to donate to UNICEF or Oxfam America. These organizations later told me that in the month after the article appeared, those phone lines brought in about $600,000 more than they usually took in. Now that's not a vast sum… . Still, it does mean that the article persuaded a significant number of people to give. Some of those donors have continued to do so" (p. 61).

5. *Evaluating Charities*

According to Singer, one problem facing charities is how to keep track of their impact:

> If, for example, an agency working to reduce global poverty cuts staff who have expert knowledge of the countries in which they work, the agency will have to lower administrative costs, and may appear to be getting a higher percentage of the funds it receives to people in need. But having removed its experts from the payroll, the agency may well be more likely to end up funding projects that fail. It may not even know which of its projects fail, because evaluating projects, and learning from mistakes, requires highly qualified staff, and paying for them adds to administrative costs. (p. 83)

To guard against this problem, Holden Karnofsky and Elie Hassenfeld started the organization GiveWell to evaluate charities for their effectiveness. Singer says, "…the information GiveWell seeks is just the information we need to answer the questions posed by the argument set out in this book: Is it true that a relatively modest donation to an aid agency can save a life? And if so, which agencies do this best?" (p. 85).

Random controlled trials could be used to test charities' projects for effectiveness, but some charities choose not to do so, because the trials can cost as much as the projects themselves (p. 94). Still, Singer thinks it would be good to set aside some money to conduct such trials, because "It is better to help only half as many people, but be sure that you are really helping them, than to risk helping no one, especially if a successful project can then be scaled up to really help many more" (p.94) Furthermore, "…some aid projects may bring benefits that cannot be quantified" (p.94). Two examples are capacity building—i.e., helping the poor become self-sufficient—and supporting women in fighting for their legal rights.

Singer describes a project, called the Millennium Villages Project, devised by economist Jeffry Sachs. The project attempts to provide several forms of aid at once. Villages "…can choose among programs that provide safe drinking water, vitamin and mineral supplements for children, immunization programs, bed nets, and a deworming program to get rid of internal parasites" (pp. 118-9). Of the $110.00 worth of aid given per person per year, $10.00 per person comes from the village. If things work out, after five years, the aid can be stopped. There is evidence that crop yields have increased, that women have gotten more involved in community work, that some girls can now go to school, and that safer drinking water has stopped children from getting diarrhea (pp. 119-20). Singer says that around 2010 to 2012 we should know whether this project works (His book was published in 2009) (p. 120). According to the Millennium Villages Project's website, their goals are:

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

(Millennium Project, <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/goals/index.htm>)

So, what progress has been made towards these goals? As of this writing (June 2012), their website says:

> Many countries are reaping the benefits of globalization and are on track for achieving at least some of the Goals by the appointed deadline of 2015. Between 1981 and 2001, according to World Bank estimates, the number of people living in extreme poverty dropped from 1.5 billion to 1.1 billion. And as a proportion of people in the developing world, extreme poverty fell from 40 percent to 21 percent of the population. Many regions, especially large parts of East Asia and South Asia, experienced dramatic economic and social progress. […] But progress on the Goals has been far from uniform. There are huge disparities among and within countries. Some countries are on track to meet most, if not all, of the Millennium Development Goals and many will reach at least some of the Goals. However, sub-Saharan Africa is stuck in a poverty trap of crisis proportions, with a continuing rise in extreme poverty and stunningly high child and maternal mortality rates. Asia is the region with the fastest progress, but even there hundreds of millions of people remain in extreme poverty. Other regions have mixed records: in Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe there has been slow or no progress on some of the Goals, and persistent inequalities are undermining progress on others. (Millennium Project, <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/resources/qa5_e.htm>)

A little discouraging, perhaps, but all the more reason to do as much as we can while we still have enough time to do something.

Singer gives some examples of aid that we can know to be cost effective even without formal studies. His first main example is the installation of hand-pump operated wells. This spares women and girls from having to spend two to three hours a day fetching water, and gives girls the time to go to school. Second is the building of schools themselves, whose benefits go without saying. The third main example Singer gives is of procedures to restore sight to the blind. Blindness is a significant problem in poor countries, because the blind cannot work and people with disabilities don't get much support. Having their sight restored would drastically improve their lives, and others could also benefit from the work they would then be able to do.

Microfinance, the lending of small amounts of money to the poor so they can start their own businesses, has helped many people. Some have become successful entrepreneurs. Others, while less successful, have been helped to cope with financial emergencies, or to eat adequately throughout the year (p. 92). "When someone falls sick, the family may raise the money to pay for a visit to the doctor by selling a cow or a goat, or even a part of their land. Small loans make it possible to avoid selling their most precious assets and sinking deeper into poverty" (p. 92).

6. *What You can Do: Becoming Part of the Solution.*

Singer makes the point that it may cost more than advertized to save a life (pp. 85-9). To take one example, bed nets designed to protect people from malaria-carrying mosquitoes cost about $10.00, but most who use the nets would not have gotten malaria anyway. To *make sure* you save a life you would have to give more than $10.00. But I, personally, wouldn't recommend that you get discouraged. Even if the amount you give is not *guaranteed* to save a life, it still may, and even if it doesn't, it can still *contribute* to saving a life. Based on Jeffrey Sachs' estimate of the effectiveness of bed nets, Singer calculates that at a cost of $10.00 per net delivered, it will cost $200.00 to save a life, not counting "debilitating but nonfatal" cases of malaria (pp. 86-7). So let's say that you and nineteen others each donate $10.00. Together you have managed to save a life, and though none of you individually gave enough to guarantee that a life would be saved, if any of you had failed to give, there is a strong chance that the person you actually saved would have died—assuming, as I take to be reasonable, that if one of you had failed to give that wouldn't have made it any more likely for someone else to give instead.

How much, though, should we give? In chapter 9, Singer considers the question, "Is our fair share really all that each of us is obliged to do," (p.144). To help us ascertain the answer, he describes a variant of his pond scenario:

> You are walking past the shallow pond when you see that ten children have fallen in and need to be rescued. Glancing around, you see no parents or caregivers, but you do notice that, as well as yourself, there are nine adults who have just arrived at the pond, have also seen the drowning children, and are in as good a position as you to rescue a child. So you rush into the water, grab a child, and place him safely away from the water. You look up, expecting that every other adult will have done the same, and all the children will therefore be safe, but to your dismay you see that while four other adults have each rescued a child, the other five just strolled on. In the pond there are still five children, apparently about to drown. The "fair-share" theorists would say that you have now done your fair share of the rescuing. If everyone had done what you did, all of the other children would have been saved. Since no one is in a better position to rescue a child than anyone else, your fair share of the task is simply to rescue one child, and you are under no obligation to do more than that. But is it acceptable for you and the four other adults to stop after you have rescued just one child each, knowing that this means that five children will drown? (pp. 144-5)

Singer thinks not:

> The others have, by refusing to help with the rescue, made themselves irrelevant. […] It is not the fault of the children whose lives are at risk that there are other people who could help rescue them but are refusing to do their fair share. The action or inaction of these people cannot make it right for us to let children drown when we could easily save them. (footnote omitted) (p. 145)

Singer next discusses the issue of *how much* we are obliged to give. He examines the standards advocated by three contemporary philosophers, Richard Miller, Garrett Cullity, and Brad Hooker. Each of them proposes a standard which is moderately demanding. Miller thinks that "…we ought to give to the point at which, if we were to give more, we would run a "significant" risk of worsening our lives—but we do not need to go beyond this point" (pp. 146-7). Cullity "…believes that we should give to the point at which further contributions would undermine our pursuit of "intrinsically life-enhancing goods" such as friendship, developing one's musical talents, and being involved in the life of one's community" (footnote omitted , p. 147). Finally, Hooker "…argues that we should try to live according to the code that, if widely accepted, would lead to the best outcome. Hooker asserts that we are morally required to help those in greater need "even if the personal sacrifices involved in helping them add up to a significant cost," but that we are not required to go beyond this threshold" (footnote omitted, p. 147).

Singer acknowledges that "…the obligations Miller, Cullity, and Hooker posit may be considerably more demanding than the fair-share view" (p. 148); however, he thinks that these views are ultimately mistaken:

> Many people get great pleasure from dressing stylishly, eating well, and listening to music on a good stereo system. I'm all for pleasure—the more the better, other things being equal. There's no denying that there is value in the things that Miller, Cullity, and Hooker think we are entitled to spend our money on. But my argument does imply that it is wrong to spend money on those things when we could instead be using the money to save people's lives and prevent great suffering. […] We can do something about these things. That crucial fact ought to affect the choices we make. To buy good stereo equipment in order to further my worthwhile goal, or life-enhancing experience, of listening to music is to place more value on these enhancements to my life than on whether others live or die. Can it be ethical to live that way? Doesn't it make a mockery of any claim to believe in the equal value of human life? (p. 149).

In chapter 10, Singer proposes that people should give "…roughly 5 percent of annual income for those who are financially comfortable, and rather more for the very rich" (p. 152). Later in the chapter, when discussing a similar standard, he says,

> The more you earn, the easier it should be to give, not only in terms of dollars, but also as a percentage of your income. If you earn $500000, giving 5 percent is no hardship at all. It still leaves you with $475,000, which should be enough for anyone. If you earn only $50,000 and are supporting a family, however, finding a spare $2,500 to give away might be tough. So the suggestion that you should give 5 percent of your gross income demands a lot from people on incomes that are, for an affluent nation, relatively low, and is too easy on people with higher incomes. (p. 162)

After refining his initial proposal a bit, Singer settles on a scale on which different income brackets should give different percentages of their incomes, though for each income bracket above the smallest bracket people would still continue to give that portion of their income at those levels. Thus those in the bracket from $105,001 to $148,000 should contribute 5 percent of their income, those in the $148,001 to $383,000 bracket give 5 percent of the first $148,000 and 10 percent of the remainder, those in the $383,001 to $600,000 bracket should give 5 percent of the first $148,000 10 percent of the next $235,000 and 15 percent of the remainder…and so on, until we come to those making over $10.7 million, who should give 5 percent of the first $148,000, 10 percent of the next $235,000, 15 percent of the next $217,000, 20 percent of the next $1.3 million, 25 percent of the next 8.8 million, and 33.33 percent of the remainder (p. 164). If people gave at these levels, Singer says, it would generate "a total of $471 billion a year for the world's poorest billion people" (p. 165), which is far more than $ 189 billion per year that Sachs' estimated would be the maximum needed to meet the Millennium Development Goals (p. 165).

Singer thinks that "…the rich in other nations should share the burden of relieving global poverty" (p. 167). He suggests that one-third would be a fair amount for the United States to contribute.

> On that basis, extending the scheme I have suggested worldwide would provide more than $1.5 trillion annually for development aid. That's eight times what the UN task force estimated would be required to meet the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, and twenty times the shortfall between that sum and existing official development aid commitments. It is ample to cover not only the aid itself, but also research and experimentation into what forms of aid work best. (footnotes omitted, p. 167)

Furthermore, he says,

> If the UN task force is right, then the Millennium Development Goals are far too modest. If we fail to achieve them—as present indications say that we well may—we cannot excuse ourselves by saying that the target was a burdensome one, for it plainly is not. The target we should be setting for ourselves is not halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty, and without enough to eat, but ensuring that no one needs to live permanently in such degrading conditions. (p. 168)

Singer has a seven-point plan to make you part of the solution to the problem of world poverty, which I will quote in full:

> 1. Visit www.TheLifeYouCanSave.com and pledge to meet the standard.
> 2. Check out some of the links on the website, or do your own research, and decide to which organization or organizations you will give.
> 3. Take your income from your last tax return, and work out how much the standard requires you to give. Decide how you want to give it—in regular monthly installments, quarterly, or just once a year, whatever suits you best. Then do it!
> 4. Tell others what you have done. Spread the word in any way you can: talk, text, email, blog, use whatever online connections you have. Try to avoid being self-righteous or preachy, because you're probably no saint, either, but let people know that they, too, can be part of the solution.
> 5. If you are employed by a corporation or institution, ask it to consider giving its employees a nudge in the right direction by setting up a scheme that will, unless they choose to opt out, donate 1 percent of their pretax earnings to a charity helping the world's poorest people. (See chapter 5 for examples of such schemes.)
> 6. Contact your national political representatives and tell them you want your country's foreign aid to be directed only to the world's poorest people.
> 7. Now you've made a difference to some people living in extreme poverty. (Even if you can't see them or know whom you have helped.) Plus, you've demonstrated that human beings can be moved by moral argument. Feel good a bout being part of the solution.
>
> (pp. 168-9)

Also, I would recommend that you visit the websites www.givewell.org and www.charitynavigator.org, which evaluate charities, and check out their lists to see which ones are the highest rated.

7. *Objections*

In chapter 3 Singer examines several objections to giving to charity in order to alleviate poverty. As this is one of the most important parts of the book, I will devote somewhat more space to it than I have to the others.

Some of these objections are based on some comments "…made by students taking an elective called Literature and Justice and Glennview High (that's not its real name), a school in a wealthy Boston suburb. As part of the reading for the course, teachers gave students an article that I wrote for *The New York Times* in 1999, laying out a version of the argument you have just read, and asked them to write papers in response" (pp. 24-5).

The first objection that we will consider is based on a relativistic view of morality. One student, Kathryn, writes "There is no black and white universal code for everyone. It is better to accept that everyone has a different view on the issue, and all people are entitled to follow their own beliefs" (p. 25). Singer responds that some things are so wrong that most of us would try to stop a person from doing them, not leave them alone: "We can and do try to stop people who are cruel to animals, just as we try to stop rapists, racists and terrorists" (p. 25). Furthermore, "…if we reject moral relativism in some situations, then we should reject it everywhere" (p. 25).

The second objection is that people have the right to spend their money on themselves because they have earned it (p. 26). Singer replies that, first, talented people in poor countries find it almost impossible to succeed, no matter how hard they work, because the environment is inadequate. According to Singer, Herbert Simon, an economist and social scientist who won the Nobel Prize, estimated that "social capital" accounts for "…at least 90 percent of what people earn in wealthy societies" (p. 26). Social capital includes a society's having such things as an efficient banking system, a police force, courts, roads, communications, and a reliable power supply (p. 27). Second, "right" doesn't imply "should". Singer is talking about what we should *choose* to do with our money, he is not arguing "for higher taxation or any other coercive means of increasing aid" (p. 28). Neither is he arguing *against* a governmental role; his aim is rather to convince the individual reader that they "… can and should be doing a lot more to help the poor" (p. 28).

Another objection is that Americans already give more than their share through taxes. (pp. 33-5). Singer's response is that, despite what many people think, less than 1 percent of government spending goes to foreign aid. Speaking of four surveys asking Americans what portion of government spending goes to foreign aid, Singer says that

> A majority of people in these surveys also said that America gives too much aid—but when they were asked how much America should give, the median answers ranged from 5 percent to 10 percent of government spending. In other words, people wanted foreign aid "cut" to an amount five to ten times greater than the United States actually gives! (p. 35)

Even adding in private aid leaves "…America's total aid contribution at no more than 25 cents of every $100 earned…" (p. 35).

Some people think that "Giving people money for food breeds dependency" (p. 36). Singer's response is that we should not give money or food directly to the poor except in emergencies, because otherwise it can indeed breed dependency. Also, food from developed

nations can destroy local markets and make farmers less inclined to produce a surplus in order to sell it. We need to help them meet their needs sustainably through their own work. Singer thinks that finding the right form of aid will not be simple, but it can be done (p.36).

Some also think that, if you give all you have to the poor, there will be no economy (pp. 38-9). Singer's reply is that if *you*, or even every reader of his book did that there would be no significant impact on the economy. There is a need for people to give more because not many give a large amount; and if everyone gave a lot more than they actually give, people wouldn't need to give away all they have.

It is evident that, in general, people care more about family and friends than those who are unknown to them. This gives rise to the objection that it is unrealistic to expect people to treat everyone the same (pp. 39-40). Singer responds that there's nothing wrong with caring more about your family and friends than others, but if your family and friends don't need the money that you could donate to charity anywhere near as much as the poor do, you should give the money to the poor. If you family and friends did need it as much, it would be alright to give it to them instead.

Later on in the book, Singer addresses an argument of some who, following Thomas Malthus, say that there will not be enough food to feed everyone as the human population continues to grow, and hence that donating to famine relief or similar causes only makes things worse in the long run (p. 121). Singer has three replies to this.

> First, we would have more than enough to feed everyone if we ate grain directly instead of feeding it to animals. Because it takes more than one pound of grain to produce one pound of animal flesh, feeding grain to animals is wasteful (pp. 121-2)
>
> Second, one reason why people have many children is so that they can be taken care of in their old age. As a country becomes more affluent that is no longer as much of a concern and people have fewer children (p. 123)
>
> Third, it is within our power to curb population growth without using coercive measures. For instance, girls in poor countries who have a secondary education have fewer children than those who do not, the rate of childbirth perhaps being below the replacement rate (i.e., the rate at which parents have enough children who survive into adulthood to "replace" them in the population). Contraception can also help deal with the problem of overpopulation (pp. 123-4)

Still another objection comes from Economist William Easterly. In his book *The White Man's Burden*, he claims that the West's aid to poor nations has been ineffective. Over the last fifty years it has spent $2.3 trillion on aid, and yet it "…it had not managed to get twelve-cent medicine to children to prevent half of all malaria deaths." It also "…had not managed to get four-dollar bed nets to poor families…" (*The White Man's Burden*, p. 4; quoted in Singer p. 105.) Singer has no difficulty showing that this doesn't amount to very much. For affluent nations, it comes to 30 cents of every $100.00 of total income earned. Also, a lot of aid is given for political or military reasons, not to help the poor. Furthermore, "…some countries, including the United States and Australia, tie their aid to the purchase of goods that they make, thus boosting their own economies but making the aid less effective." (p. 108). It is therefore unsurprising that Western aid has been ineffective.

Singer argues that, even if we assume that $60.00 per person per year all goes to the poor, that still costs less than what you might spend on an evening out (p. 109). So if Western aid has been ineffective even for basic things like preventing death from malaria, it "…might be because what we have given specifically for them was too little" (p. 109).

Finally, some worry that aid may not help the poor, or that it may even harm them. One possible instance of this is the economic phenomenon known as "Dutch disease". The problem is that when money enters a country, the value of its currency will rise relative to the value of the currency of its trading partners, which raises the price of exports and makes the country's manufacturers less competitive (p. 112). However, this can be avoided. "When aid is used to improve infrastructure, agricultural methods, and the skill levels of the workforce, it enhances productivity and leads to increased exports that outweigh the Dutch disease problem" (p. 112). More problematic are agricultural subsidies and trade barriers. These "…undercut poor countries' efforts to increase their exports in an economic sector where their climate and cheap labor give them a natural competitive advantage" (p. 113). Nevertheless, Singer thinks that eliminating agricultural subsidies and trade barriers is not very probable, and so it is better to try to help poor countries in other ways (p.114). For him, economic growth is not really the important thing. We should focus on "…the goals that lie behind our desire for growth: saving lives, reducing misery, and meeting people's basic needs" (p. 115).

8. *Some Critical Comments*

On page 65 Singer says,

> Jesus told us not to sound a trumpet when we give to the poor, "as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men." Instead, he advised, we should give so secretly that not even our left hand should know what our right hand is doing. Only then would we be rewarded in heaven, rather than on earth. Indeed, many of us believe that if people are motivated only by a desire to "be honored by men" or to improve their reputation for generosity, that they are not *really* being generous, and will not be generous when no one is looking. Similarly, today when people give large sums with a lot of fanfare, we suspect that their real motive is to gain social status by their philanthropy, and to draw attention to how rich and generous they are. But does this really matter? Isn't it more important that the money go to a good cause than that it be given with "pure" motives? And if by sounding a trumpet when they give, they encourage others to give, that's better still. (footnotes omitted)

I have two critical points. First, Jesus also said, "… let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16, NRSV). There might seem to be a conflict here, but I think it can be resolved, for it is the *motive* behind giving or doing good works that makes the difference. In the one case it is to be "honored by men," in the other it is so that others will "…give glory to your Father in heaven."

This brings us to the second critical point. We should distinguish between the goodness of the states of affairs brought about by one's actions, the moral status of the actions themselves (whether they are right or wrong, and if so how right or how wrong), the goodness of the agent's character, and the goodness of the state of affairs of the agent's acting with a certain motive. I would say that someone who gives in order to be praised for it has done the right thing, and that the resulting state of affairs—i.e., *the poor receiving money*—is good, but the agent's impure motive *prima facie* implies that they have a bad character. Furthermore, *the agent's acting with an impure motive* is a bad state of affairs; it would have been better for them to have given with a pure motive. One might agree with Singer that "…we should encourage [people] to be more open about the size of their donations…" (p. 67), but if so one should encourage them to be open for the right reasons, which means doing so to help to poor, not to help themselves.

9. *Conclusion*

The Life You Can Save is a paradigm of a good work of philosophy: It is well argued, engagingly written, and deals with a subject that matters a great deal. I would recommend it to anyone who wants to think deeply, clearly and carefully about our obligations to people trapped in extreme poverty. Out of respect for his efforts to help those who are less fortunate, I will conclude this synopsis, as Singer concludes his book, with a reflection on the life of a man that he knew and held in high esteem:

> I was lucky enough to know Henry Spira, a man who spent his life campaigning for the downtrodden, the poor, and the oppressed. Since he never had much money, his form of philanthropy was to give his time, energy, and intelligence to making a difference. […] When he was around seventy, Spira developed cancer and knew he did not have long to live. I spent a lot of time with him then, and in one of our conversations I asked him what had driven him to spend his life working for others. He replied:
>
> > I guess basically one wants to feel that one's life has amounted to more than just consuming products and generating garbage. I think that one likes to look back and say that one's done the best one can to make this a better place for others. You can look at it from this point of view: What greater motivation can there be than doing whatever one possibly can to reduce pain and suffering?
> > (p. 173)

Other References

The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 3rd edition, New Revised Standard Version, edited by Michael D. Coogan, Oxford University press, 2007

Easterly, William. *The White Man's Burden*. London, Penguin, 2007

Mengzi [Mencius] Liang Hui Wang
http://chinese.dsturgeon.net/text.pl?node=16028&if=en

The Millennium Project, <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/>