Distance is No Excuse: Singer, O'Neill, and Our Obligations to the Global Poor

Introduction

In a world marked by severe global inequality, the question of moral responsibility toward distant others, especially the poor and starving, poses urgent ethical challenges. As wealth and resources remain disproportionately concentrated in certain parts of the world, the moral burden placed upon individuals in affluent societies becomes an issue of charity and justice. Philosophers like Peter Singer and Onora O'Neill have taken radically different yet compelling approaches to the question, What, if anything, are we morally obligated to do for those suffering on the other side of the world? Should proximity matter? What about whether others are in a better position to help? This essay critically explores the scope and nature of our obligations to the global poor, arguing that moral obligations do exist but must be grounded in a framework that balances practical constraints with moral imperatives. Drawing on Singer's consequentialist argument and O'Neill's Kantian duties of justice, this essay contends that global need must take moral precedence, and that distance and shared responsibility cannot morally justify inaction.

Singer's Moral Principle and Its Implications

Peter Singer's 1972 essay, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," laid a foundational argument in global ethics. Singer posits a deceptively simple yet powerful 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. (Singer 231)" In practical terms, this means that if donating a few hundred dollars to a famine relief organization could save a child's life without

causing substantial harm to ourselves, we are morally obligated to do it. Hence, the principle demands that moral agents take responsibility and action to prevent suffering at a low personal cost.

Singer challenges traditional boundaries of moral concern, especially the notion that geographical distance diminishes our responsibilities. He famously argues, “The fact that a person is physically near to us, so that we can see him and help him, whereas another person is further away and unknown to us, should make no moral difference. (Singer 232)” According to him, if one saves a drowning child in front of them, one is equally obligated to prevent a child’s death abroad, if they have the means. For Singer, moral responsibility is not limited by spatial proximity or national allegiance.

Singer’s approach, however, has been criticized as demanding too much. Even his “moderate” principle leads to the conclusion that we should give away most of our disposable income to humanitarian causes. Singer acknowledges this burden, stating, “We ought to give until we reach the level of marginal utility, that is the level at which, by giving more, I would cause as much suffering to myself or my dependents as I would relieve by my gift. (Singer 234)” For many critics, this argument threatens to collapse the distinction between moral duty and supererogatory acts. Nonetheless, Singer insists that the moral weight of preventable suffering overrides such distinctions.

Are Distance and Shared Responsibility Morally Relevant?

A major challenge to Singer’s view is whether distance or the presence of other potential helpers lessens our obligation. Traditional moral intuitions often prioritize those close to us, such as family, friends, neighbors, as well as fellow citizens. The argument goes along the lines of, if

suffering is closer to home, it is more morally urgent. However, from a strictly moral standpoint, this is difficult to defend.

Singer maintains that neither distance nor the diffusion of responsibility through the existence of other potential helpers makes a difference. He writes, “It makes no moral difference whether the person I help is a neighbor’s child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know. (Singer 232)” He contends that the diffusion of responsibility is no excuse for inaction. This is supported by his drowning child analogy, that the presence of other bystanders does not reduce our moral obligation to help. Nor does it matter if the child is ten feet or ten thousand miles away, if we are equally able to help.

However, this view risks ignoring psychological, institutional, and logistical complexities. Human beings are not impartial moral calculators. Real-world decision-making is filtered through emotional proximity, cultural context, and practical limitations. These factors complicate Singer’s assertion that distance is morally irrelevant, even if it remains theoretically sound.

Prioritizing Local Needs vs Global Suffering

One of the most persistent objections is the belief that we should first care for those within our community, as we have a stronger moral obligation towards the people of our community. National governments often justify prioritizing citizens’ welfare over foreign aid on these grounds. From a political perspective, this is understandable. However, from a moral standpoint, is it justifiable?

Singer would argue no. Suffering is suffering, regardless of borders. He quotes, “Does it matter that we live a few yards from someone, when others are dying a continent away. (Singer

233)" If we prioritize citizens solely because of shared nationality, we risk perpetuating arbitrary moral distinctions, akin to racism or sexism. He compares national boundaries to skin colour or gender. These are all accidents of birth that have no moral significance.

Yet, defenders of moderate nationalism might argue that proximity enhances both the effectiveness and accountability of aid. Additionally, psychological bonds such as emotional and social bonds are stronger within communities, creating moral motivations that are harder to replicate on a global scale. Even so, these practicalities do not absolve us of responsibility to the distant poor; they only suggest we must balance our commitments carefully. Therefore, while not without merit, this view risks entrenching a morally indefensible form of favoritism. Singer's view encourages us to expand our moral circle. His view states, "the traditional distinction between duty and charity cannot be drawn…it is not charitable to save a child from drowning; it is something you ought to do. (Singer 231)"

Onora O'Neill's Kantian Alternative

Where Singer operates from a utilitarian framework, Onora O'Neill's Kantian approach focuses on justice, autonomy, and universal moral duties. In Bounds of Justice, O'Neill writes, "Justice requires not that we hand out aid, but that we support institutions that enable people to govern their lives. (O'Neill 187)" In her view, helping others is not merely about maximising happiness but about respecting their status as rational beings capable of setting and pursuing their ends. Therefore, in her framework, duties of justice arise when existing institutions systematically disadvantage people or violate their autonomy.

O'Neill draws from Kant's principle of treating people as ends in themselves. She contends that justice involves more than clarity. It requires enabling people to be self-governing

agents. This means that aid should not only alleviate suffering but also respect recipients' dignity and promote long-term empowerment.

More importantly, O'Neill distinguishes between two types of duties: Obligations of justice, which are enforceable and owed to specific individuals, and obligations of beneficence, which are discretionary and non-enforceable. When global institutions systematically disadvantage certain populations either through trade policies, debt structures, or global tax systems, those in the position of power have duties of justice, not merely charity, to reform such structures. She writes, "The primary task is not redistribution but the construction of institutions that secure basic justice. (O'Neill 188)"

Her approach thus critiques the systematic roots of poverty and demands structural change, not just individual giving. Hence, she provides a more sustainable and less emotionally burdensome moral approach than Singer's. While Singer calls on individuals to take moral actions, O'Neill pushes for institutional reform that fosters global justice. However, this risks feeling less urgent or personally compelling than Singer's direct appeal to moral conscience.

Between Demandingness and Practicality

A key debate between these frameworks lies in the "demandingness" of moral obligation. Singer's principle, even in its moderate form, is extremely demanding. It demands extreme personal sacrifices. Many argue that it leaves no room for personal projects, leisure, or even familial preference. It risks turning moral duty into an unbearable burden.

On the other hand, O'Neill's Kantianism offers a less personally demanding framework. It allows space for duties to self and community while still holding agents accountable for structural injustice. Yet, some argue that it lacks the immediacy and urgency of Singer's

approach. Hence, it can feel detached from the concrete realities of global suffering. Yet both offer valuable insights. The philosopher Garrett Cullity summarises this dilemma, “the problem with demandingness is not that it asks too much, but that it asks too much of the wrong kind. (Cullity 23)”

A possible middle ground is to accept Singer’s urgency with O’Neill’s structural focus. Individuals should feel a moral pull to act when they can do so effectively without undue sacrifice, but this must be paired with collective action that targets institutional injustice. For example, supporting fair-trade organizations, lobbying for debt relief, and advocating for refugee rights are ways to integrate both frameworks.

Reconciling Moral Obligation with Human Psychology

Another issue worth considering is how to reconcile high moral expectations with actual human behavior. Many people experience compassion fatigue, moral burnout, or simply lack awareness of global issues. A moral theory that demands heroic action from ordinary people is unlikely to be widely practiced.

Some philosophers propose a tiered system of obligations. The system includes minimal duties which entail the basics to not harm. Followed by standard duties, which posit the importance of helping whenever possible. Lastly, the system includes aspirational duties which are to go above and beyond what is the norm and is generally expected. This acknowledges moral gradation without absolving people of responsibility.

Singer’s solution of public campaigns and social norms that encourage giving may help shift behavior. However, institutional changes that make moral action easier and more automatic

may still be more effective. Such institutional changes include tax incentives for global aid or mandatory contributions to a humanitarian fund.

The Role of International Institutions and Collective Responsibility

While much of the philosophical debate on global moral obligation focuses on the individual versus the state, it is equally important to examine the role of international institutions and collective actors in addressing global poverty. Institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were designed, in part, to facilitate global cooperation, development, and human rights. However, their effectiveness and ethical frameworks have often come under scrutiny.

From a justice-based perspective like O'Neill's, institutions should be designed to uphold the autonomy and dignity of all global citizens, not simply serve the interests of weather states. Yet in practice, global institutions have often been criticized for perpetuating inequality. Conditional lending policies by the IMF and World Bank, for example, have historically enforced structural adjustment programs that dismantled public services in poor countries in exchange for aid. Therefore, undermining long-term development. These failures highlight what O'Neill might call a violation of duties of justice, since such practices often "deny equal standing as agents capable of governing their own lives" (O'Neill 190).

On the other hand, transnational NGOs like Oxfam offer models of moral action rooted in both emergency aid and structural advocacy. These organizations often fill gaps left by state actors, but their power is still limited by funding, geopolitics, and local infrastructure. The reliance on NGOs can also allow governments to offload their moral duties, turning systematic

injustice into a charity issue. This is a concern Singer raises when he says, “we must not let the state of the world lull us into thinking that acting is optional” (Singer 239).

Collective action, then, must involve both institutional reform and moral leadership. International cooperation should not only provide aid but also address exploitative trade agreements, tax havens that drain developing economies, and climate change policies that disproportionately affect the Global South. Justice requires that global systems evolve to respect agency and redistribute opportunity, not just wealth.

Finally, we must also consider the role of affluent citizens within powerful democracies who influence these institutions via voting, lobbying, and public discourse. Their inaction or support for unjust policies makes them complicit in systematic harm. Thomas Pogge argued, “Citizens of affluent countries bear responsibility not only for their actions but also for the harms their institutions impose on the global poor.” These ideas reinforce the view that global justice is not the responsibility of isolated agents or distant bureaucracies, but a shared project that requires institutional, cultural, and civic transformation.

Conclusion

Therefore, do we have moral obligations to the poor and starving across the world? Both O’Neill and Singer offer strong affirmative answers, grounded in differing moral traditions. Singer’s utilitarian view demands immediate personal action, regardless of proximity or social context. O’Neill’s Kantian approach calls for long-term structural justice rooted in respect for human agency. While Singer’s model may appear too demanding for everyday moral agents, it offers a moral clarity that O’Neill’s framework sometimes lacks.

The best path forward likely lies in integrating the following views that acknowledge the urgent need to alleviate suffering while also working to restructure global institutions that perpetuate injustice. Distance, nationality, or the presence of others in a position to help are not morally sufficient reasons to absolve ourselves. A just world begins when we recognise the moral weight of global suffering as our shared responsibility and take action accordingly.

Bibliography

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