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SINGER

AND HIS CRITICS

Edited by

Dale Jamieson

BLACKWELL Publishers

8
Our Duties to Animals and the Poor

COLIN McGINN

There is, on any account, much preventable suffering in the world, both animal and human. There are also many deaths that occur before the biological forces of senescence have done their ineluctable work. Suffering is a bad thing, as is premature death. It would be good if there were less of these evils in the world. It would be good, perhaps, if they could be erased entirely, assuming this to be a feasible ideal.[1] As the world stands, things are very much worse than they ought to be. But what are our moral obligations in respect of all this suffering and death? Do we have a duty to relieve as much of it as is humanly possible? Do we, in particular, have the following two duties: (a) to relieve the suffering, and cease the killing, of the animals with which we have dealings; and (b) to relieve the suffering, and prevent the death, of the world's poor and starving and diseased? Peter Singer has argued memorably that we have both duties, and that both are morally stringent: not to fulfill either of these duties counts as a serious moral failing.[2] In this chapter I shall contend that he is right as to (a) but wrong as to (b). I thus invert what I take to be the standard liberal position on these issues, namely that our treatment of animals is not fundamentally immoral while our stinginess with respect to the Third World is morally disgraceful. There is more that is deeply wrong with our treatment of animals, I believe, than with our treatment of the world's poor. (This is not to say, of course, that animals are "more important" than humans.)

Consider the following two arguments:

Argument A

(1) It is morally wrong to cause the suffering and death of animals unnecessarily
(2) We do cause the suffering and death of animals unnecessarily

Therefore:

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(3) What we do to animals is morally wrong

Argument B

(1) It is morally wrong to let people suffer and die unnecessarily
(2) We do let people suffer and die unnecessarily

Therefore:

(3) What we do in respect of suffering and dying people is morally wrong

Just to be a bit more concrete, we are considering, under argument *A*, eating meat, hunting, vivisection, fur coats, and the like; and, under argument *B*, not giving substantial amounts of money to charities that work to relieve the starvation, disease, and misery of the poorest people in the world. Our two arguments then purport to show that these kinds of acts and omissions are morally unacceptable. The arguments look very similar in form, and both concern the badness of suffering and death and our power to prevent them. My view, however, is that *A* is sound while *B* is unsound. Before I defend this view, let me clarify the force of "unnecessarily" as it occurs in both arguments. It does *not* mean "unless there is some reason to do so," for there *is* some reason to kill and eat animals and wear their skins and hunt them for sport – namely, that we derive some benefits from so doing. We enjoy the taste of their flesh, we keep warm and look attractive, we experience "the thrill of the chase." In just the same way, there is also some reason to do such things to other humans. These are not pointless actions; they are rationally motivated. But the force of "unnecessarily" is that these are not actions in which the ends really justify the means, since the benefit we derive is not commensurate with the harm that is inflicted. A large evil is caused for the sake of a small good. In order for the action to have been performed "necessarily" the end would have had to justify the means, everything considered, and not merely count as *a* reason to perform the action. It is not clear that there are any such cases, but they would have to amount to a situation in which the benefit we derive is at least equivalent to the harm we inflict – say, saving our own life by eating a chicken or a pig. Similarly, in the charity case, I do have *a* reason for not giving money to Oxfam, namely that I can spend it on a nice dinner at an expensive restaurant. It is just that this is hardly something I do "necessarily," i.e. for the sake of some value commensurate with the value of the life of the starving person I fail to save. So the force of "unnecessarily" is something like this: "unless there is some benefit to be derived that is at least equivalent to the cost inflicted." And the thought is that I should not be expected to do

something whose cost to me outweighs the benefit I bring to someone else, animal or human. Then in the cases of interest to us here the two arguments enjoin us to refrain from actions that cannot be justified by appeal to parity in the costs and benefits of the action. And it is clear enough that the arguments do not violate this principle, since the costs of our not exploiting animals, or of sending substantial sums to charity, will not be at all large in comparison with the benefits that are brought about. The animal's life will be saved and we will have a somewhat less tasty meal (let's say), and the starving child's life will be saved while we forgo an amusing visit to the cinema. The force of both arguments derives from the fact that they draw attention to a massive disparity between the egoistic benefits we derive from certain actions and the harm to others such actions incur. The arguments depict us as caring far more for our trivial pleasures than for the very life of other sentient beings. We are ready to cause or tolerate untold misery in others as long as we derive some minuscule quantum of passing pleasure in the process. And that looks about as immoral as anything can be. The serious suffering of others is within our control but we choose to promote and permit it rather than give up our trivial pleasures.

I will not say much in defense of argument *A*, since it has been very well defended by Singer and others; I wish to make only two points about it.[3] The first is that it is not necessary to derive the argument from some general form of utilitarianism. We need not take the first premiss to depend upon some such general principle as that it is our duty to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. All the argument requires is that we should not *cause* the suffering and death of an animal unnecessarily; it does not entail that we have a duty to go out into the world and *prevent* as much animal suffering as possible. The argument of course assumes that animal suffering is a bad thing, but it does not commit us to the principle that we should do everything we can to prevent any animal suffering anywhere. Thus the argument is consistent with supposing that there exists animal suffering we have no obligation to prevent, or have a lesser obligation to prevent than that which obtains in respect of animal suffering of which we are the agent.

The second point is that we should not think of animal pain as intrinsically "ownerless."[4] Animal minds are not just bundles of subjectless sensations gathered around a single body. If we conceive of animal pain in this subjectless way, thus refusing to grant genuine selfhood to animals, then we will not see why it is morally significant, since pain matters only because it is pain *for someone*. Putatively ownerless pain sensations have no moral weight, since the alleged pain is not painful *to* a subject of awareness. In other words, animals need to be granted selves if their sensations are to matter morally. This may seem like a major provision,

and one that threatens to exclude animal experience from the moral realm; but in fact it is simply a point about the very concept of experience. As Frege long ago noted (following Kant), the very notion of experience is the notion of experience *for* a subject: there is really no sense in the idea of ownerless experience.[5] An experience always comes with an owner built into it. It is not that you bundle some inherently ownerless experiences together and get a self, as Hume was (partially) inclined to suppose; rather, to speak of experiences at all is already to assume bearers for them – *subjects* of experience. (This is so whether or not the experiences are conceived to be embodied in an organism.) So, since animals have experiences, they necessarily have selves – by Frege's point. Thus it is wrong to cause them pain, because this will necessarily be pain *for* a subject of consciousness.

Let me also note, as a corollary, that this kind of argument cannot be deployed to contest the morality of abortion, since this is precisely a case in which the assumption of sentience is in question. *If* the fetus is sentient and hence, by Frege's principle, is a subject of awareness, *then* it is morally wrong to cause it to suffer and to kill it (unless there is some comparable benefit to be derived, such as saving the life of the mother). But nothing in the argument we have endorsed allows us to object to the termination of an *in*sentient fetus. So it is not, as I have heard it said, that we are irrationally and immorally preferring animals over babies!

Now let us turn to argument *B*. Our focus here must be on the first premiss, since the rest of it seems unquestionable. Is it true? It can sound plausible enough, but I think that is because we tend to hear it as if in a certain context, which the argument goes on in effect to switch. This is the context in which a person in front of us is suffering and dying and we can save her by some simple act of generosity – say, by giving her half our dinner. And I agree that omitting to do this would be morally monstrous. This shows that we cannot find an asymmetry between *A* and *B* by exploiting the act/omission distinction. It is quite true that *B* concerns the wrongness of certain omissions while *A* deals with positive acts, but I would not rest my rejection of *B* on that ground alone, since I think letting someone suffer and die can in certain circumstances be just as bad as killing her – or at least very very bad indeed. The asymmetry I see has far more to do with the context in which the suffering arises and the agent's relation to the sufferer. Let me explain.[6]

First let us turn to Singer's defense of the first premiss. He says: "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing something of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (p. 177);[7] and later "we ought to prevent as much suffering as we can without sacrificing something else of comparable

moral importance" (p. 181). As an illustration of this principle, he gives the example of the shallow pond: we should clearly save a child from drowning even if doing so makes our clothes muddy, since the benefits so vastly outweigh the costs. He notes, however, that the "uncontroversial appearance of the principle just stated is deceptive" (p. 177), since it requires radical changes in our spending habits with respect to charities. For the principle is quite neutral as to the relative locations of the individuals involved, and Singer tells us that "we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us" (p. 178). Just as we cannot discriminate on the basis of skin color or sex or species, so we cannot discriminate on the basis of geography – that would be to commit the sin of "spatialism" (to coin a term). Thus our duties with respect to the distant poor vastly exceed what we customarily assume.

How persuasive is this? By "comparable moral importance" Singer means something similar in type or weight to the suffering that would otherwise occur. We must make the kinds of sacrifices that are less in their costs to us than the benefits we bring to others. One way in which I could prevent a good deal of Third World suffering would be to disallow my child to attend college, thus condemning him to a life of underachievement; or I could decide never to see another ballet or play or film; or I could refrain altogether from eating in restaurants. I take it these are the kinds of sacrifices Singer thinks we should make, since if they are not his principle is toothless and morally conservative. He agrees that these things have intrinsic value but he thinks they are not "comparable" to the suffering that can be prevented by forgoing them. So he must think that the excusing kind of sacrifice would itself have to involve suffering – that, for example, you should not starve in order to relieve starvation.[8] The principle then is to the effect that we ought to relieve whatever suffering will not cause us (or others) to suffer comparably. We should certainly not read the principle as saying that we ought to prevent suffering as long as there is no reason to allow it – which is anodyne and virtually tautological. No, the principle enjoins each of us, in effect, to level the degree of suffering in the world. Thus stated the principle is extremely strong and to my ear lacks all appearance of self-evidence. *Why* exactly should I go around making myself suffer to the point that others suffer? Why, for example, should I give away all my money to New York City beggars, until there are none worse off than me? What about the idea that I *earned* that money and they did not? Why *should* we act so as to equalize the suffering in the world? Only some kind of impartial utilitarianism could sustain such an injunction: that we all have a duty to maximize the general well-being and minimize ill-being. I think this kind of view is generally indefensible – and certainly not self-evident – as consideration of future generations and other problems demonstrates.[9]

But let me just point out some of the more apposite consequences of adopting such a morality.

Suppose you are a beautiful woman sexually desired by many men. The men suffer from libidinal longings that you could easily fulfill. You can relieve these sufferings by having sex with them, say at the rate of ten a day. Let us suppose you could do this without suffering too much ("comparably") yourself.[10] So you could spread a lot of sexual happiness among the male population without sacrificing your own well-being to a comparable degree. (Of course, the same argument could be given for the case of a beautiful man.) Maybe some of your potential partners will become seriously depressed unless their sexual deprivation is relieved, suicidal even. Should you do it? Of course not: why should your life be made into a tool for the satisfaction of other people's desires? Or again, you may be such a witty conversationalist that you could bring cheer into the lives of many bored and depressed people: should you abandon your life and friends in order to minister to people's conversational needs? Obviously not, even though you will bring much more cheer to others than the misery you inflict on yourself. Or think of all the beneficial effects on other people's tennis game you could bring about if you abandoned your career as a top seeded player and devoted yourself to remedial tennis programs. Or consider a feckless gambler you know of who is rapidly sliding into bankruptcy but whom you can save by spending several hours a day with him in the local pub talking about horse racing and drinking beer. Unfortunately, this will involve neglect of your own family and you will not be able to finish the degree you are working toward in the evenings; still, this loss to yourself and your family is not so great as the loss that will result for him if he keeps up his reckless gambling (your pub-related suffering will not be anywhere near as great as his gambling-related suffering). Should you make the sacrifice? Clearly not, I say. The plain fact is that this gambler is not "your problem," though you could indeed help him overcome his (we can suppose that he isn't even a friend – just someone you have observed from afar). And note that there may be a long line of similar gamblers behind him all waiting for you to distract them from their habit while you live an impoverished and tedious life in awful pubs talking to these people. (The matter would be different, of course, if you were somehow responsible for their gambling habit.) Plainly, it is absurd to require people to make such sacrifices – that is, to calculate their duties according to the principle Singer recommends. These are all straight counterexamples to that principle. The principle has plausibility only as a *prima facie* principle of action: you should relieve suffering if you do not thereby comparably suffer, *unless there are reasons that override this* prima facie *obligation*. And the trouble is that there are many reasons that can override it. The issue then is

precisely whether the case of the distant poor is one such reason; no simple recitation of the principle can secure the result that we have stringent duties of self-sacrifice in this regard.

Singer might reply that the suffering he is talking about is of the life-or-death variety, while my examples are not. That may be true, but why does it make a difference? Why is the principle valid for serious suffering but not for milder forms? Is he suggesting that we have no charitable duties toward those who are not in peril of their lives? What about the homeless in our own society, the mentally handicapped, the quadriplegic, the educationally deprived? If we think only "serious" suffering warrants our concern, then all these charities will go by the board. It is equally true in these cases that the relief I can bring about by my charity is far greater than the loss I incur, even though the suffering mitigated is not of the most extreme kind. I can see no reason to discriminate against the only "moderately" needy. And my point here is just that the existence of such a disparity is not *by itself* sufficient to warrant the kinds of remedial actions Singer is advocating – on pain of requiring such actions in the examples I cited. The utilitarian defense of Singer's unrestricted principle, which is the only one I can imagine, implies many other similar principles dealing with other degrees of happiness and unhappiness. But the simple fact is that it is not my moral duty to increase people's happiness until it coincides with mine, or reduce mine until no one is more unhappy than I am. If I should save the drowning child, or indeed the distant starving child, then it cannot be because of the correctness of such a principle, since it is not correct.

In fact, I think such a principle positively bad, morally speaking. It encourages a way of life in which many important values are sacrificed to generalized altruism. To take a particularly proximate one: I could not have become a philosopher if I had lived by such a principle, and neither could anyone else (including Singer), since doing so requires spending one's energies on things other than helping suffering people in distant lands. Every hour spent reading and writing and teaching is an hour that could be spent relieving the sufferings of the poor. But I don't want to live in a world in which people are morally required not to reach their intellectual potential. Just think of how much the human race would have lost if Newton and Darwin and Leonardo and Socrates had spent their time on charitable acts! It should be noted here that Singer's argument is that an individual's duties hold independently of what others decide to do, so that you have them whether or not anyone else does anything to fulfill their own. By this standard we could wipe out philosophy overnight: all philosophers have a duty to devote themselves to charity work, and they will not be saved by the willingness of others to pitch in. I think myself that the cessation of philosophy would be quite a

bad thing. The only way to block this kind of consequence is to restrict the principle in ways that yield no startling revisions in moral policy. Suppose we say that we are obliged to reduce suffering as long as doing so does not interfere with anything such that if it were eliminated the world would be a worse place. Then we would still be allowed to support the ballet and other "frivolous" pursuits such as the arts and sciences, as well as eat good food and all the rest. In fact, anything of positive value will trump the altruistic principle, since anything of value is such that the world would be a worse place without it.

One should not use others as a mere means to one's ends: that is a sound moral maxim. But equally, one should not use oneself as a means to the ends of others. That is what I meant earlier when I wrote of becoming a tool for others' satisfaction. I should not regard my life purely as a means by which other people can have their well-being increased. Just such a conception lurks behind the principle Singer favors: that my duty is to live in such a way as to reduce the suffering of others by increasing my own suffering, or by lowering my level of well-being. That strikes me as a depressing and wrongheaded vision of human life. It involves seeing myself as a means toward the ends of others, and this is no more acceptable than my using them as a means to my ends – indeed, both are wrong for exactly the same reason. It is an abnegation of personal autonomy, of the right to live one's life as one's own, developing one's own talents and potential. Of course, one should not positively harm others – human or animal – as one lives one's own life, but there is no obligation to devote oneself to the relief of suffering one has had no part in producing. The case is really no different from that of the healthy person whose organs could save or prolong the lives of several individuals with diseased organs. Confronted by six people who could use my organs if I were to relinquish them and bid farewell to this life, should I hand them over? Absolutely not, I retort, even though, ranked according to "comparable moral importance," six lives count for more than one. And the reason is just that I should not regard myself as a means to their ends; my life is not yours to commandeer and control, still less to take. I could, similarly, choose to starve myself to death in order to prevent distant others from suffering the same fate, and I may well save more lives this way than in any other; but it is absurd to think that I now have a duty to starve myself to death, by sending all my money to Oxfam, including what I could get by selling food given to *me* by charities – even though my death is just one as against the ten I might save by such "heroism." The rule of equalizing well-being is simply a monstrosity if interpreted in this way. But I see nothing in Singer's discussion to block this kind of consequence. What underlies his position is precisely the kind of utilitarianism of which these cases are *reductions*. Nor is it possible to try to weaken and qualify the

principle to weed such cases out, since then it will be robbed of its philosophical rationale. What is needed is a clean sweep: our attitudes toward charity should not be guided by any utilitarian principle that compares our well-being with that of potential beneficiaries and calculates our duties by the disparity between them. Any defense of charity that relies upon such principles will represent charitable giving, however small, as the first step on a slippery slope toward absurd levels of self-sacrifice, and hence will deter people from giving at all. It will look as if ethical consistency requires extreme levels of self-sacrifice, and then even minimal levels will be avoided in order to avoid intellectual inconsistency. Thus the kind of defense of charity Singer advocates is liable to prove counter-productive.[11]

So what do we owe to the poor of the world? By what principle should our charitable giving be guided? I think decent rational people feel quite unsure about this question; it is not that they know very well and decline to carry out their moral duty. And this seems to me to be the real state of things in this area: morality delivers no clear-cut answer to the question of how much we should deprive ourselves for the sake of distant others. Morality does tell us what to do about the child drowning in the shallow pond and similar cases, but it goes wobbly when it comes to remote sufferering. We naturally feel compassion for such suffering but its moral claim on our lives is unclear, perhaps even indeterminate.[12] The intuition here is that remote suffering is not "our problem" – it does not come within the cone of our moral responsibilities, strictly so-called. Yet we are also aware that we can do something to help the sufferers. The case is somewhat analogous to questions about military intervention in foreign lands: on the one hand, these are not our countries and hence are not "our business"; yet, on the other hand, we know that we could ameliorate the situation if we chose. We thus feel torn on the issue. These cases in turn are not unlike more domestic dilemmas, as when one's relatives are arguing about something and one does not know whether to intervene: the squabble is none of our concern, yet we may know that we could ease the situation by stepping in. I do not believe there is any simple way to resolve such conflicts. The right course of action is highly sensitive to the details of the case. If I were asked to propose a principle that makes the best of a problematic situation, then I could not do better than this: we should help out the distant poor when and only when their need is desperate and we will not sacrifice anything in our own life that makes it meaningful to us. This prescription is (intentionally) vague, and may appear hard-hearted, but as far as I can see it is the best compromise among the various considerations that complicate the issue. The prescription does not require me to cease being a philosopher, or indeed going to the ballet; it requires me only to give up pleasures that form no part of

what makes my life significant to me. Nor is it a prescription I derive from some general theory of morality, such as utilitarianism; it is just an *ad hoc* rule of thumb that seems to strike the best balance between competing concerns and fits my real feelings about my obligations. There is nothing in it that requires me to live hypocritically or inconsistently. It is a mistake, I think, to suppose that we can get anything crisper and more glassily theoretical as a guide to action.

By "distant" here we do not mean, of course, merely spatially distant. My duties to my child do not fall off as he recedes from me in space – say by his going to Africa to do relief work. The relevant notion of distance is social or emotional or political or historical – the extent to which the community in question is bound up with my own by ties of these various sorts. When Singer says that mere distance should not matter he is parodying the relevant notion of distance: my family is close to me in the relevant sense even when I am thousands of miles away. Just as my duties to my family are greater than those I have to my neighbor's family (I should put my child through school, though not his), so my duties to people in Africa are less than my duties to those in my own neighborhood. Such social groupings are not only morally relevant but also morally central. Being especially kind to the stranger in our midst is one reflection of the way the notion of social grouping works: this is the notion of *hospitality*, a notion defined in terms of social groupings. But none of this kind of moral complexity and subtlety shows up in Singer's simple principle. This is not the kind of irrational "spatialism" mentioned earlier; it is what we might call (this time borrowing a term) "socialism". In short: our duties to others are greater the closer they are to us socially.

Let me end with a thought experiment. Suppose Internet technology reaches the stage that we all have plugged into our brains a computer terminal that picks up news broadcasts from all over the world. One of the channels, the Charity Channel, which is compulsory viewing, reports disasters and starvation and disease from all points of the globe, so that we are constantly flooded with information about who is suffering what, with live pictures of the sufferers. Suppose too that we are all equipped with a banking facility that enables us to transer funds instantly to the scene of the suffering, where officials will administer the needed help. We might then see the effects of our charity minutes after we have acted charitably. What should we do in such circumstances? Is this a desirable state of affairs? It would certainly tax our natural compassion to an extraordinary extent, making it difficult to pursue any other interest, aside from keeping up our bank balance so that we can go on being charitable. I myself find this a dystopian prospect, in view of the tension it would set up in my system of allegiances; and I suspect that after a time

I would revert to my present policies, becoming hardened to things I should not have to become hardened to. Human compassion is not infinitely elastic, and it should not be burdened with more than it can handle. It should not, in particular, be dulled by demands that exceed our actual moral responsibilities. The danger of the "global village" is that it sets up an illusion of moral responsibility, in which our natural sympathies are excited in ways that go beyond our duties; and that will not be good for the health of our moral sense. There are, we know, tender souls who are so taken with the romantic sob stories of others that they neglect their real duties; this is not a moral strength, but a weakness. It is part of what we mean when we criticize people for "sentimentality." No doubt this is a better failing than callousness, but it is still a failing. Charities that exploit it are not to be commended for doing so. I am not saying that the charitable impulse is invariably, or even often, sentimental; my point is simply that sentimentality is not to be confused with moral obligation. I certainly feel keen sympathy for the starving people I sometimes see on TV, along with a sense of moral unease; but I do not believe that I have a moral obligation to reduce myself to something close to starvation in order to benefit them. To suppose so is to succumb to sentimentality, not to moral truth. This may seem a stern and flinty attitude, but I think it is the moral position we are really in – and a certain toughness is often the mark of true justice. It is an attitude that would come to the fore if we were continually flooded with broadcasts from the Charity Channel.

To sum up: argument *A* is a sound argument, turning upon the wrongness of causing harm to animals unnecessarily; it is not an argument that asks us to reduce our standard of living for the sake of animals that may be suffering quite independently of our actions. We have a strict duty not to cause animal suffering unnecessarily, whereas it is merely generous of us to relieve the sufferings of remote animals (as it might be polar bears in a bad winter). Argument *B* is unsound because we have no strict obligation to relieve any suffering the world may contain as long as this does not involve comparable suffering. That is just a bad utilitarian principle with no intrinsic plausibility and some highly disturbing consequences. By all means be generous to charities, but do not think of this as an exercise in hedonic redistribution. I am with Singer in believing that the richer nations of the world do far too little to aid the poorer nations, but I cannot accept the kind of utilitarian defence of extreme charity that he advocates. The great appeal of utilitarianism, especially to philosophers, is the promise it holds out of a simple and mechnical answer to moral questions; but moral life is far too complex and subtle for any such practical algorithm. The issue of charity is a textbook case for illustrating the limits and deformities of utilitarianism.

Notes

1 I say "perhaps" because it is not clear that a life totally free of suffering would be a good human life. Suffering builds character, as they say. Still, suffering should be eliminated to the extent that it has no positive side-effects.

2 See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), and Peter Singer, "Famine, affluence and morality," in J. E. White (ed.), *Contemporary Moral Problems* (St Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, 1985), originally published in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, (Spring 1972).

3 For an appreciative review of Singer's *Animal Liberation* see Colin McGinn, "Eating animals is wrong," *London Review of Books*, January 24, 1991, reprinted in my *Minds and Bodies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

4 I elaborate on this point in "Animal minds, animal morality," *Social Research*, 62 (Fall 1995).

5 Gottlob Frege, "The thought," in P. F. Strawson (ed.), *Philosophical Logic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

6 There is more discussion of my objections to Singer's kind of position in my review of Peter Unger's *Living High and Letting Die* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), in *The New Republic*, October 14, 1996. The present chapter is a complement to that review, not just a restatement of it.

7 These quotations are all from Singer's "Famine, affluence and morality." Page references in the text are to the edition cited in note 2.

8 That is, unless you can save more people than you sacrifice: see below for more on this.

9 For more on this see my review of Unger, cited in note 6.

10 I hope it is clear that I am not supposing that doing this would in practice involve zero suffering for the woman. I am just stipulating that the suffering would be relatively minor in order to ask what consequences we should draw from this.

11 I think this is actually a very serious point that philosophers need to ponder carefully. It is always risky to gound one's firm moral intuitions upon contentious philosophical doctrines. The intuitions should not be made hostage to the vagaries of philosophical theory. And people should not be led to believe that their moral feelings require them to accept far-fetched philosophical constructions. Bad philosophical defenses of good causes can do more harm than good.

12 It is not just humans who evoke these feelings and generate these quandaries – there is also the question of distant suffering animals. Consider a colony of mice in Africa hard hit by food shortage. I could ease their suffering by donating the price of a ballet ticket. Should I do it? I would say that my strict duties do not extend this far, but there is still a case that could be made for me to be more generous toward these mice. But exactly how much I should give up for them seems to me entirely moot. What I would insist upon, however, is the point that this case is quite different from a case in which my *pet* mice are suffering a similar shortage. Social proximity is as potent here as in the human case.

McGinn

The critical part of McGinn's essay is concerned with my argument that not to relieve the suffering of the world's poor, when we can do so at little cost to ourselves, is a serious moral failing.

In considering the implications of my view that 'if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing something of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it', McGinn lists three kinds of sacrifices that I might make:

> One way in which I could prevent a good deal of Third World suffering would be to disallow my child to attend college, thus condemning him to a life of underachievement; or I could decide never to see another ballet or play or film; or I could refrain altogether from eating in restaurants. I take it these are the kinds of sacrifices Singer thinks we should make, since if they are not his principle is toothless and morally conservative. (p. 154)

The first of these three examples of sacrifices raises the same questions as the example I have just discussed in the context of Gruen's essay. It is arguably different from the others examples McGinn gives, in two ways. First, as we have seen, at the level of critical morality there are strong arguments against trying to build into a society's morality a requirement that parents make such serious sacrifices of their children's interests, in order to help strangers. Hence we may not want to propagate the idea that not to make such a sacrifice would be a serious moral failing. (This does not preclude making the sacrifice being the right thing to do, when one thinks about it as a first person question.) The second difference relates to the consequences of our decision. If it is true that not allowing my child to attend college will condemn him to a life of underachievement, then not only will this harm him, it may also lead to less good being achieved for others. I may hope that my child will live an ethical life. But as a lifetime underachiever, she may be less effective at relieving suffering than she would have been, if she had been to college.

For these reasons the first sacrifice is not one that *clearly* falls within my category of not being of comparable moral importance to the prevention of suffering and death. The other two sacrifices McGinn mentions do fall within this category. But when McGinn goes on to interpret the principle as being 'to the effect that we ought to relieve whatever suffering will not cause us (or others) to suffer comparably', he goes beyond what I intended to argue in 'Famine, affluence and morality'. The argument of that article is presented so as to be persuasive to people with a wide range of ethical positions. I didn't want to limit the force of the argument to

utilitarians – that would have been preaching to the converted.[27] I therefore used the phrase 'comparable moral importance' rather than 'comparable suffering', in order to allow readers to judge for themselves what is of comparable moral importance. Some, for example, may think that to cheat or steal to get money that could save the lives of people in the Third World would be to sacrifice something of comparable moral importance, namely the breach of the moral rules that prohibit such actions. For others the same would be true, to come to some of McGinn's other examples, of having sexual intercourse with people for whom one cares not at all, of neglecting one's family or of not being able to pursue a life as a philosopher, inquiring into some of the deepest questions about the nature of our world and the direction of our lives. The range of things that might be argued to be of comparable moral importance is wide – and it becomes much wider still if, like McGinn, we go on to consider cases where the bad thing that I am preventing is not death from starvation, but mediocrity at tennis! Thus McGinn's alleged counter-examples to my principle are not counter-examples at all, but claims that certain kinds of behaviour do not fall under it, because they would involve the sacrifice of something of comparable moral value. Some of these claims are highly plausible; for others, I would like to see a more detailed defence. But none of them touches the central argument of 'Famine, affluence and morality'. This central argument retains considerable force, despite everything McGinn says, because for each of us there will be many things on which we spend money that we do not truly believe to be of comparable moral importance to death by starvation (or by malnutrition, or by easily treatable illnesses), and since we can give up those things and prevent death by these causes, the principle is certainly neither toothless nor conservative.

After suggesting that my argument has a utilitarian basis, McGinn then offers another argument against it: it is 'liable to prove counter-productive' (p. 158). But this objection was refuted already in the very first work of the English utilitarian tradition: '"The principle of utility, (I have heard it said) is a dangerous principle: it is dangerous on certain occasions to consult it." This is as much as to say, what? that it is not consonant to utility, to consult utility: in short, that it is *not* consulting it, to consult it.'[28] In *Practical Ethics* I raised this objection to my views about famine relief, and replied to it along the lines Bentham suggests: 'The third version of the objection asks: might it not be counter-productive to demand that people give up so much? Might not people say: "As I can't do what is morally required anyway, I won't bother to give at all"' (PE 245). In response, I referred to the distinction already noted above, between first person decision-making and public advocacy, and said: