

Revisiting Peter Singer's International Aid Theory: Interpretation and Challenges

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Abstract: Utilitarianism is an important analysis path of international aid, Peter Singer's international aid theory. It is one of the representative theories. The "aid obligation" of rich countries to poor countries is the core of Singer's international aid theory. Peter Singer demonstrated the obligation of rich countries and their peoples to assist the poor abroad through the "drowning child" thinking experiment, and his theory of international aid was born. He believes that on the basis that people have an obligation to rescue children who have fallen into the water, rich countries and their people also have an obligation to help those who are far away in poverty. There are many criticisms of Singer's moral argument, and his aid theory still faces some serious challenges: aid theory presupposes an unreasonable view of responsibility, the standard of "similar moral importance" imposes harsh requirements on people, and also faces some utilitarian criticism.

Keywords: Peter Singer, international aid, utilitarianism

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of poverty and hunger is a common phenomenon in the world. With the increasingly serious problem of poverty and hunger, it has been continuously concerned by scholars from all walks of life. As small as a citizen, as large as a government or even an international organization, they all play an important role in improving and solving such problems. Peter Singer's utilitarian theory of international aid can be said to provide a new idea for solving the problem of global poverty. This paper will first discuss how Singer extends the conclusion from "people need to rescue drowning children" to "rich countries and their people should help people in poverty" through the ideological experiment of "drowning children," then discuss Singer's international aid theory, and finally analyze some severe challenges faced by Singer's aid theory.

2. The "Drowning Child" Example

The case of "drowning children" is a thought experiment of Singer. Suppose someone pass a pond on your way to class and he see a child drowning, what would he do? Keep going your way? Or stop to save people. Obviously, even if he promise to meet a friend or go to class, stopping to save someone will make he late. The pond is shallow but muddy. If he go to save the child, he'll certainly break your best shoes on your feet. But most are sure to put the child's life more important than punctuality, more important than the best shoes. Therefore, Peter Singer believes that there is not much difference

between children drowning in front of some people and children starving in Africa, but one is right in front of these people and one is farther away from these people. Therefore, if people do not help those poor children who are far away, those children who can survive through assistance will die because they have not received assistance. In fact, thousands of children die every year from poverty-related causes such as hunger, war, medical care and high temperatures. About 6.3 million children under the age of 15 died in 2017, or about one death every five second, and most of those deaths were avoidable [1]. And millions of infants and young children die every year due to the lack of clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, proper nutrition or basic health services [1]. So why don't people give money to help African children. Why do many people have different behaviors towards African children with life-threatening and drowning children? In some people's eyes, it is necessary to help children who are drowning in front of them. If they do not take action, they will think it is morally wrong, but they do not think it is morally wrong when they do not help poor children in remote areas. Therefore, Singer advocates that people minimize the consumption of luxury goods and donate the money saved to aid agencies to help those who are absolutely poor. For example, eating an expensive meal less every month or buying an expensive pair of shoes less every year, these money may be donated to save an African child from starvation, or someone can afford to buy an air conditioner so that he can avoid the fate of dying from a treatable heat stroke. The money people need to spend on doing this may not be much higher than the price of that pair of shoes. But for such views and measures, it is difficult to guide life with this philosophy, and not everyone can accept it, but this does not mean that Singer's idea is wrong.

3. Singer's International Aid Theory

In Singer's theory, the decision to save a drowning child was made because he insisted on a moral principle: "People have the ability to prevent very bad things from happening without sacrificing things that are morally similarly important, and then someone should act in this way". In our opinion, this principle is reasonable in the matter of rescuing drowning children. But Singer wants to extend it and put the use of this principle into the relief of poor residents in remote areas. In Singer's view, in rich countries and their peoples have an obligation to help poor residents, in addition to this principle, but also need two premises, that is: lack of food, shelter and medical attention caused by the suffering and death is bad [2]. And "somebody can stop some absolute poverty without sacrificing anything of similar importance morally" [3]. In Singer's view, the first premise is a crucial moral premise that supports the whole argument, and he has proved that this premise can be accepted by people with different ethical positions (consequentialism and non-consequentialism); premise two is unlikely to be questioned; premise 3, though controversial, can be established, although the precise amount that can prevent absolute poverty will vary according to the different ethical views that people accept. If someone recognize the correctness of the above principles and these premises, then it is equally important and reasonable for the rich countries and their people to assist the poor people and for these people to help the drowning children. If the rich countries and their people do not provide assistance to the poor, then they are unreasonable, just as it is wrong for Singer not to save the drowning child, which is beyond everyone's understanding. Following Singer's theory, people will draw a conclusion: people in rich countries do not increase their contributions, which means that the poor continue to suffer from absolute poverty, which will lead to malnutrition, disease and death. This conclusion applies not only to the government, but also to every absolutely wealthy individual. Then it's like the point that people often make when talking about positive euthanasia and negative euthanasia: "If there's no inherent difference between allowing someone to die and killing someone, then public all look like murderers." [3]

In fact, there is a potential contradiction between the equality principle and the utilitarian principle of utilitarianism in essence. Above the principle of equality is that everyone's interests should be

given equal attention. However, the utilitarian principle requires the public to operate on those behaviors that can provide the best interests. This cannot avoid the emergence of a conflict: when people in order to ensure the maximization of interests, they must sacrifice the interests of certain individuals, which undermines the principle of equality. Singer opposes species discrimination and calls for equal consideration of all beings with perceived suffering, while acknowledging that equal consideration leads to unequal treatment and may not actually protect all animals in practice [4]. From here, the research can understand that in Singer's theory, the existence of perceived pain refers to those who are poor, and the equal consideration of them is to assist them to alleviate their pain. Here the paper sees the shadow of Singer's theory of animal liberation, and equal consideration will lead to unequal treatment, and excessive consideration of poor people will cause inequality to the rich. And people still exist a problem that "Can my assistance make a constructive improvement in the poverty that exists in the world? If not, is it necessary for me to provide personal assistance?". So on the issue of how much aid and equal consideration, Singer put forward two versions of strong and weak [2]. The strong version is that people should prevent some bad things from happening, unless doing so would sacrifice something of similar moral importance. According to the strong version, the public should lower their material level to the brink of becoming poor. In Singer's view, nothing is as morally important as aid to those who are going to die of poverty. The weak version is: people should prevent some bad things from happening. This means that everyone can act according to their personal wealth level and living standards. It can be seen from the weak version that people can provide corresponding assistance according to their own understanding of the importance of morality and will not reduce their living standards to the same level as the poor. However, Singer is actually more inclined to the implementation of the strong version.

4. Challenges to Singer's Theory of International Aid

4.1. Singer's International Aid Theory Is Based on an Unreasonable View of Responsibility

In Singer's case of drowning children, drowning children cannot be responsible for their own behavior, but need to be responsible for the passing pedestrians. In the same way, who needs to be responsible for those who have been in absolute poverty for a long time? From the perspective of Singer's theory, it is assumed that rich countries and their people are responsible for these people who are in absolute poverty. If the people of the rich countries passing by do not come to assist the poor people who are falling into the water, then the rich countries and their people are wrong. Such responsibilities and views are unacceptable to many people. Dale Jamieson firmly opposed this view. In his view, poverty is not only an accidental event caused by the natural environment, but also a special background and cause of poverty. Long ago, it may have originated mainly from unstable world environments and social forms, such as wars. Now, in this era, perhaps unpeaceful factors still exist, but the most important reason for people's poverty in most countries and regions should be the problem of poor decision-making by local governments [5]. Similarly, it should be the local government should be responsible for the "falling" poor people. If it can be proved that the bad situation of those poor people is caused by rich countries and their people, then rich countries have certain obligations to assist the poor [6]. However, if this cannot be proved, it requires rich countries to provide assistance. The presupposed view of responsibility behind Singer's aid theory will weaken his theory. Under this assumption, some philosophers believe that most of the current status of poverty is indeed caused by rich countries. Thomas Pogge is a representative of this view. In his view, there are two main reasons for global poverty. One is the historical injustice. Some countries and regions have been colonized and invaded by powerful countries. These actions from the powerful make the countries that are enslaved and exploited poorer, thus making the strong countries richer. The second is the current unjust global political and economic systems, which are formulated by rich countries.

One of its distinctive features is that it benefits the rich countries rather than the poor countries. Therefore, Pogge believes that for historical injustice, rich countries should compensate those poor countries based on the consideration of justice. For the second reason, it proposes to reform the current global political and economic system to make the global political and economic system more equitable. For the first reason that Pogge says, the public need to confirm whether poverty in poor countries is due to historical injustice. If this is the case, it is also reasonable to propose that rich countries compensate them. For the second cause of poverty, if as Pogge says, the current global political and economic system is unjust, then the rich countries and their people are responsible to the poor countries for the improper benefits derived from it. However, this is based on certain conditions and premises. Rich countries need to provide assistance to poor countries, which requires objective criteria to evaluate them. It would be unfair to arbitrarily demand that all rich countries should be held accountable for any poverty and provide assistance, because the country's strength may not be built on weapons and institutional exploitation.

4.2. The Concept of “Similar Moral Importance” Puts Forward Strict Requirements for People

In Singer's view, nothing has the same moral importance as the life of the absolute poor. This leads to an extreme conclusion about donation, that is, everyone has the obligation not to spend money to buy luxury goods or unnecessary decorations, and to use these saved money to help those who are poor until the donation is about to put himself at the critical point of poverty. A premise of this extreme conclusion is that an undisputed assessment of moral importance, that is, nothing can have the same moral importance as human life, so at any time “people have the ability to buy luxury goods but choose to buy a simple and simple thing” is not a sacrifice of moral importance. But the reality may be that a person's excessive assistance to the absolute poor can make his life worse, thus depriving him of the pursuit of valuable goals. For example, if someone is a scientist, he must buy the most sophisticated and expensive instruments to improve my scientific research efficiency and accelerate my scientific research output. If someone is a fashion designer, she will buy some advanced fabrics and jewelry to help my art appreciation and fashion design. According to Singer's “morally important” concept, this could make life worse for rich countries and their people, or simply lower the happiness index. Therefore, from the understanding of the importance of morality, Singer's more harsh view of aid is also questioned. Perhaps Singer can use the weak version of the aid standard to support his theory, that is, to assist those who are absolutely poor, as long as some morally important things are not sacrificed. Simply put, the public don't have to help others until they are going to be poor. In Singer's book *The Life You can Save*, he also expresses his more moderate views in the form of charts. People can sacrifice something almost as important as morality. People don't need to continue to pay, but they must pay a small amount of property, and they can donate different property according to each person's different economic level, 5 % or 15 %. So people whose income is \$147,000 would, in Singer's scheme, be giving away 5%, or \$7,350, leaving themselves \$139,650, but if their income rose to \$148,000 they give away 10 percent, leaving only \$133,200. That makes no sense. He even uses the same method as the progressive tax rate to analyze this problem [7]. In Brian Barry's view, this defense is useless, because for Bentham utilitarians, it is a kind of evil to make a person's trousers stained with mud. From the perspective of individual-centered utilitarians, such thinkers who stand in the other extreme direction of utilitarianism, this defense is likely to draw another extreme conclusion: rich countries and their people can make no sacrifices on the issue of global poverty [8], and Singer's theory may be weakened by this view. Representatives of critics such as Colin McGinn argue that it is not morally wrong for individuals not to provide aid, and that it is the government's responsibility rather than the individual's responsibility to assist the poor. This is a more incisive view.

4.3. Some People Think That Singer's International Aid Theory Also Faces Some Criticisms of Utilitarianism

For people, Andrew kuper is a representative of this view. He put forward a vision: Singer would go through a pond every day, and every day there will be about fifty children drowning, what should he do? According to Singer's rescue theory, the measures he needs to take should be to fulfill the responsibility of "passers-by" and try his best to rescue 50 drowning children [9]. The final result is that he may need to take a day to rescue these drowning children, rather than to teach students. Princeton University, where he worked, knew about this, but did not help Singer to rescue these children. Then modify it again, these fifty drowning children are not poor children in remote areas of Singer's theory? There are so many poor people in the world, according to Singer's relief theory. Rich countries and their people need to do those rescue actions. However, there is a value in their lives beyond survival. Rich countries and their people have other things to pursue besides keeping their poor people alive [8]. It is also morally unacceptable to let them give up jobs that are of multiple significance to them and give up the things they pursue. Because, "Some of the things people seek are essential to the existence of 'themselves', to give them up is really a burdensome obligation". William Bernard has also said that people should not be a tool for maximizing benefits or survival [10]. It can be seen that Singer's international aid theory is too demanding for people and still faces some of the challenges that utilitarianism often encounters.

5. Conclusion

In general, the view of this paper is not fully agree with Singer's point of view, arbitrary without any premise that: people have an obligation to help others in all circumstances. It is wrong not to help others. If helping others becomes an obligation, it needs to be under certain condition. Although his theory has a lot to be affirmed, it also faces some challenges. One is that there is an unreasonable view of responsibility behind the aid theory. The second is that Singer's assessment of similar moral importance is too harsh, and such assessments can easily lead to extreme results. The third is that the theory of aid is too demanding on people, everyone has the nature of pursuing personal self-interest, and assisting others is a valuable quality.

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