CHAPTER 11

THE STRUGGLES FOR EQUALITY: CIVIL RIGHTS, RACISM, POVERTY, AND IMMIGRATION

John Trumbull's 'Declaration of Independence' commissioned in 1817

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- **11.1** Discuss the promise of equality as embodied in the ideals of the Enlightenment.
- **11.2** Discuss Martin Luther King's philosophy of nonviolence in fighting for equality.
- **11.3** Analyze the utilitarian argument for equality.
- **11.4** Articulate the moral arguments behind one's duty to help the less fortunate as proposed by Peter Singer.

11.1 THE IDEALS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE PROMISE OF EQUALITY

The late 18th century witnessed the climax and the political embodiment of the ideals of the **Age of Enlightenment**, as the American Revolution and the French Revolution brought back an idea that had remained dormant

since ancient Greece: democracy. In France, the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man declared that "all men are born and remain free and equal in rights." Prior to that, in 1776, the 33-year-old Thomas Jefferson with the help of Benjamin Franklin and James Madison wrote the Declaration of Independence, which contains what is perhaps the most sweeping and promising statement of human rights the world has seen: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed" (Declaration of Independence, In Congress, July 4, 1776).

In both countries, the promise was rich. It is worth noting that in both countries and elsewhere around the world, the promise was and remains real, but the political and social realities have taken a long time on the road to fulfillment. In the young American republic, racism was institutionalized from the start, enshrined in a Constitution that counted blacks as portions of persons and in fact permitted the institution of slavery to continue. The Native-American Indian population was first ignored by the new country, and then decimated in a shameful genocide in the late 19th century. Most of what is now the United States spoke Spanish a century before it spoke English, but Hispanics would nevertheless be treated as suspect, as not quite Americans. Clearly, "the consent of the governed" promised by the young republic was far from reality. That we have come a long way is as obvious as it is that we have a long way to go. "All men are created equal" remains what it was in 1776, a blueprint for the future, a dazzling promise of democracy.

> ***"The time is always right to do what is right."***
> Martin Luther King

The struggle for racial equality is a major chapter in the work in progress, that is, American culture. Moral concerns for two centuries have included everything from **Natural Law** arguments to defend slavery alongside Holy Scriptures that specifically recommend it. Leviticus 25, 44–46 is clear on the subject: "You may purchase male or female slaves from among the foreigners who live among you. You may also purchase the children of such resident foreigners, including those who have been born in your land. You may treat them as your property, passing them on to your children as a permanent inheritance. You may treat your slaves like this, but the people of Israel, your relatives, must never be treated this way." The New

Testament, taken literally, is also quite clear: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear. Serve them sincerely as you would serve Christ"—this verse from Ephesians 6, 5 is one of more than a few examples. One of the most subtle and most powerful scenes in Steve McQueen's 2013 motion picture *12 years A Slave*, written by John Ridley, shows a Baptist minister preaching to a group of slaves outdoors in a plantation, with Holy Bible in hand. He does not misquote the Bible.

Slave auction in Richmond Virginia in 1856. A women stands alone as bids are offered, 1856 engraving with modern color.
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MORAL PHILOSOPHERS: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. (1929–1968)

A man of action, a man of peace, and a man of God, **Martin Luther King** was born in Atlanta on January 15, 1929, the son of Martin Luther King, Sr., and Alberta Williams King. He attended Morehouse College in Atlanta as an undergraduate and later Boston University for his doctorate in theology. He became head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and also, like his father, he served as pastor to the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

He came early to nonviolence, after his mentor Bayard Rustin introduced him to the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. After a trip to India with his wife Coretta, the young preacher translated Gandhi's ideas on nonviolent actions to a Christian framework, already preaching from his pulpit in 1957 that "The aftermath of nonviolence is redemption. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation. The aftermath of violence is emptiness and bitterness." By 1959, King began preaching that nonviolent action was needed to change injustice. "The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, so that when the battle's over, a new relationship comes into being between the oppressed and the oppressor."

The monument to Dr Martin Luther King circa May 2013. The memorial opened on August 22, 2011, after more than two decades of planning, fund-raising and construction.
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MORAL PHILOSOPHERS: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. (1929–1968) *continued*

The moral philosophy King developed, usually drenched in the considerable rhetorical powers of his Baptist preacher's armor, was a quest for "civil rights and social justice," as the Nobel Prize committee cited, "that all the inhabitants of the United States would be judged by their personal qualities and not by the color of their skins."

His quest was a relentless, nonviolent fight against the evils of racism, poverty, and militarism. His fight against racism continues to inspire the struggles to eliminate all prejudice, such as **anti-Semitism** and **Islamophobia**, **homophobia**, **misogyny**, prejudice against the disabled, and any other form of institutionalized bigotry that keeps people from being all that they can be. "Racism is a philosophy based on a contempt for life," King said. "It separates not only bodies, but minds and spirits."

"There is nothing new about poverty," he said. "What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it. The time has come for an all-out war on poverty." King's stand against militarism put him in conflict with his ally LBJ, who was in the midst of the national tragedy—the Vietnam War. For all that, King's words sound relevant in the 21st century: "A nation that continues each year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

After Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955 for refusing to sit in the back of a public bus, King led the Montgomery boycott that lasted 385 days and ended racial segregation in Montgomery buses.

With the SCLC, King and Rustin organized an unprecedented demonstration, the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The leadership of the march was impressive: In addition to King and Rustin, it included Freedom Rider and future U.S. Congressman John Lewis, representing the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); Roy Wilkins for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); Whitney Young for the National Urban League; A. Philip Randolph from the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; and James Farmer from the Congress of Racial Equality. President John F. Kennedy and U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, wanting to ensure the success of the march, enlisted the help of church leaders as well as that of the United Auto Workers union to help bring marchers to the capital.

"I have a dream" patriotic design symbol.

MORAL PHILOSOPHERS: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. (1929–1968) *continued*

The march was indeed a success, and the question of inequality gained international attention. It was here, before a crowd of more than 250,000, that King gave his powerful "I Have a Dream" speech.

On October 14, 1965, Martin Luther King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Tragically, by the time President Lyndon Baines Johnson succeeded in passing the 1964 Civil Rights Act, John F. Kennedy had been assassinated, a fate his younger brother Robert F. Kennedy met on June 6, 1968. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, as he was preparing for another march on Washington. He was 39 years old.

11.2 MARTIN LUTHER KING AND THE MORAL CASE FOR EQUALITY

Until President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and until the end of the Civil War, it was the Holy Bible and Natural Law—paired with property rights guaranteed by the federal government—that provided the bedrock of moral arguments used by the Confederacy. They remained the main arguments for the founders of the Ku Klux Klan, whose members still think of themselves as good Christians according to the Klan's unique take on the Southern Baptist tradition. The drawbacks of moral arguments that depend on either Divine Command or Natural Law, which we discussed in the chapter on other influential moral theories (Chapter 6), are worth keeping in mind because their cultural impact is still with us. Kantian arguments from the universality of human dignity have had a considerable impact on the civil rights struggle, including providing some of the foundation of Martin Luther King's arguments. Kant, after all, places a moral emphasis on human dignity, something reason shows we all share.

FOCUS ON: April 9, 1968

The historic sign for Ebenezer Baptist Church hangs during renovations, on what would have been Martin Luther King Jr's 82nd birthday, January 15, 2011, Atlanta.
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I was only 18, a freshman at Emory University in Atlanta, when Martin Luther King was killed. We were a group of freshmen, a dozen or so in a large crowd of mourners outside before the portals of Ebenezer Baptist Church. We couldn't get into the church, where the private service took place for the family, and the speakers included the young activists Andrew Young and Jesse Jackson. Mahalia Jackson, a family friend, sang King's favorite spiritual "Take My Hand, Precious Lord." After the service, the SCLC's Rev. Ralph Abernathy came through the church doors with Coretta Scott King and led the mourners outside as the coffin was placed on a wooden cart. Jesse Jackson carried the flag of the United Nations in front of the procession. By his side were John Lewis, a future U.S. Congressman and at the time a key student leader in the movement. With them was Andrew Young, future U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations but just another mourner on that day.

There were more than 100,000 of us in those Atlanta streets that day; the crowd was thick. I recognized other Emory students and some friends from Georgia Tech, and Agnes Scott College, but there were people of all ages and people of all races.

King had been denied a state funeral or the time to lie in state. Georgia Governor Lester Maddox called King "an enemy of the country" and beefed up the Georgia State Patrol presence as a warning to the crowd. The governor also at first refused to have the United States and Georgia flags fly at half-mast, but he was forced to do so on federal orders: President Johnson declared a national day of mourning.

There had been a service a few days earlier in Memphis, Tennessee, where King was murdered. There also had been riots around the country after the murder. But not today.

The service in Atlanta was in the church where Dr. King, his father, and grandfather had preached. The Ebenezer Baptist Church was his church. Morehouse College was his alma mater, and that is where we were marching for the public memorial.

The Atlanta police took care of the street closings and otherwise stayed away. The SCLC's own staff handled the crowd. The infamous Georgia State Troopers were lined up around the state capitol as the mourners marched by. The troopers were decked up in riot gear, ready to use their sticks. Police dogs lined the capitol. They did not get to work much that day. There were no disturbances; there was no violence. That day belonged to Martin Luther King, the American Nobel Peace Prize laureate whose life was ended by hatred.

The march was quiet, often silent, with only brief outbursts of spirituals heard ahead or behind us, and sometimes loud crying as we approached the Morehouse campus three-and-a-half miles later. At the end, we sang "We Shall Overcome."

Soon enough I became acquainted with the smell of tear gas, with the ugliness and violence that too often greet nonviolent demonstrations. Too often I encountered hatred myself. I certainly sang "We Shall Overcome" again after that, many times, in the Emory quad, in political demonstrations in Atlanta and Fort Bragg, and in the National Mall in Washington, D.C., occasionally with the likes of Joan Baez or Peter, Paul, and Mary leading crowds even larger than the 100,000 mourners at Morehouse. But if I live to be a hundred I will never forget how it felt to sing it in Atlanta that afternoon, in sadness, and in hope. That march, that day, was different.

For this 18-year-old Cuban refugee who became an American citizen four years later, that day gave me a glimpse into the meaning of this country. The hatred is not who we are. We are better than that. We shall overcome. The truth shall make us free, and we'll walk hand in hand. "Deep in my heart, I do believe, that we shall overcome someday."

Octavio Roca

For all their Kantian and Christian connections, King's arguments throughout his sermons and other writings are mainly utilitarian. He was fighting for the same rights that white Americans already had, and it would not harm white people who already had those rights if black people had them as well. He was impatient with those fellow preachers in the movement who told him to wait, slow down and take it easy, and not be so impatient. "The time is always right to do what is right," King insisted.

Indeed, not just King's but also most other successful arguments against institutionalized racism—including those that have been successful before the Supreme Court, sometimes with unexpected results—have been utilitarian arguments from harm, that is, arguments that no significant harm will come to those who already have civil rights if those same civil rights are bestowed on a group that does not have them. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s opened the door for the other liberation movements that followed to this day.

> ***"Because of the Civil Rights movement, because of the laws President Johnson signed, new doors of opportunity and education swung open for everybody—not all at once, but they swung open. Not just blacks and whites, but also women and Latinos; and Asians and Native Americans; and gay Americans and Americans with disabilities. They swung open for you. And they swung open for me."***
>
> U.S. President Barack Obama

11.3 THE UTILITARIAN ARGUMENT FOR EQUALITY

It is worth noting that today's multicultural and multiracial classroom—very likely including your ethics class—was illegal in much of the United States until the **Civil Rights Act of 1964.** In 1963, Alabama Governor George Wallace, Jr., was intent on stopping the racial integration of the University of Alabama, famously declaring that "In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." The tyranny in question was the federal government's mandatory racial integration of the university. Four brave young African-Americans in fact succeeded in enrolling, with historic results.

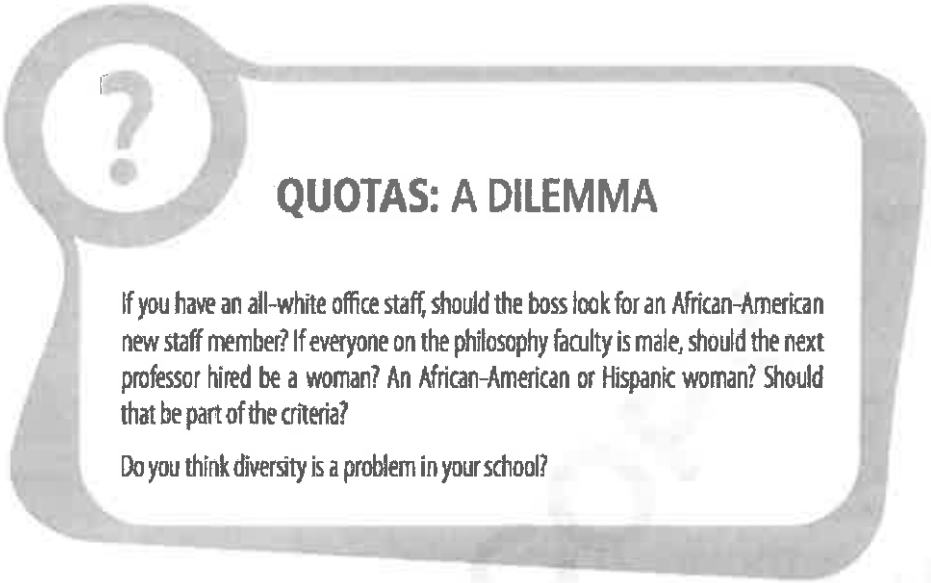
The argument is breathtakingly simple: What are the consequences of racial integration at the University of Alabama? Students of all races may attend and receive an education. Was any unhappiness brought about by these consequences? Yes, of course. White racists were and perhaps still are upset by having to sit alongside students of other races in the classroom. But their unhappiness is not as deep as that of being denied an education to begin with. Giving one minority group the right to have an education did not take away that right from the majority group; it merely meant that more students could get an education. That is an elegant, exquisitely simple illustration of a classical utilitarian argument, including the admission that no act is without good and bad consequences. These consequences may bring happiness or eliminate unhappiness, which is right, or do the opposite, which is wrong. But not every happiness or unhappiness carries the same weight, according to John Stuart

Mill, and the happiness and unhappiness of those directly affected by the consequences in the same way is the one that counts the most. That was and remains a powerful argument.

That utilitarian argument also has been influential, with repercussions for virtually every human rights struggle in the 20th and 21st centuries. The rights of women to take part in combat in the U.S. Army, a recent fight, did not take away any rights from male soldiers; it only meant that women also could have that career choice. Marriage equality does not take away the rights of same-race couples or straight couples; it only means that interracial couples and same-sex couples also have those same rights. "But that's not natural," an objection voiced initially in all these recent examples, is a Natural Law argument easily dismissed. "Not liking those people" is an expression of someone's feelings and is therefore always true. But also it is not an argument.

> ***"You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'you are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair."***
>
> U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson

All of this makes **affirmative action** an interesting issue. Unlike integrating schools that have no actual limit on the number of its students, and unlike the issues of women in combat or marriage equality, affirmative action can and does mean that if one person gets a place in a medical school class, another person will not. The legal concept of affirmative action began in the late 1950s and was expanded in the 1960s and 1970s. A preferential treatment of African-Americans and other minorities who historically had been denied equal rights translated into quotas in everything from schools to the workplace. It has been argued that these quotas would make schools and workplaces better and would thus be beneficial for society as a whole even if they in fact caused harm to those not included in the process who might have been included without affirmative action.



QUOTAS: A DILEMMA

If you have an all-white office staff, should the boss look for an African-American new staff member? If everyone on the philosophy faculty is male, should the next professor hired be a woman? An African-American or Hispanic woman? Should that be part of the criteria?

Do you think diversity is a problem in your school?

American symphony orchestras have been using a clever solution to discrimination for decades: They have blind auditions. When an orchestra has jobs for, say, five new violinists, the applicants for that job simply play the violin behind a screen, with the music director, assistant conductor, and first-chair violinist sitting on the other side of the screen. All they hear is the playing, and that is how the violinists get the job. Still, if fewer women or minorities have the chance to study in the best conservatories, the result may be a mostly white, male orchestra. Is that a problem? In most other cases, from college applications to interviews to become a CEO, the interviewee's race, gender, and ethnicity are clear and, right or wrong as this may be, those factors can affect the hiring process.

Some powerful arguments for and against affirmative action acquired renewed urgency by the 2014 U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding Michigan's ban on affirmative action. The issue divided the court. Chief Justice John Roberts, writing the majority opinion, indicated that the racial inequalities that might have made affirmative action desirable generations ago were no longer the case and that, in fact, affirmative action today is a form of racial discrimination. "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race," wrote Chief Justice Roberts.

Justice Roberts' arguments carried the majority, and the U.S. Supreme Court in 2014 upheld Michigan's ban on affirmative action. Race-conscious university admissions are no longer legal. The implications of the court ruling in other contexts are still being discussed.

DO YOU SPEAK AMERICAN?

Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor believes that racism is still a factor in American society, and one of her examples perhaps echoes the experience of many students. If someone asks about you and you mention your last name is, say, Smith or O'Donnell and you're from Chicago, few people will follow up with another question. If your last name happens to be González, or Watanabe, Mahmudi, or Babatunde, and you say you're also from Chicago, you are likely as not to be asked "But where are you *really* from?"

A beautiful ballerina we know, a native Texan of Hispanic ancestry who now runs a major classical ballet company in San Francisco, is fond of telling how when she mentions that her family is from Texas, she's often asked "Oh, when did your family move to this country?"

"My family didn't move. The border moved," she answers.

Have you ever been asked where you're really from? Have you ever asked anyone that question?

In a scathing 58-page dissenting opinion, aimed at Chief Justice Roberts' assumptions that the conditions of racism that brought about affirmative action no longer exist, Justice Sonia Sotomayor noted that "While our Constitution does not guarantee minority groups victory in the political process, it does guarantee them meaningful access to that process. It guarantees that the majority may not win by stacking the political process against minority groups permanently, forcing the minority alone to surmount unique obstacles in pursuit of its goals—here, educational diversity." In other words, in Justice Sotomayor's legal opinion, race still matters.

Sonia Sotomayor: Why Race Still Matters

"Race matters for reasons that really are only skin deep, that cannot be discussed any other way, and that cannot be wished away. Race matters to a young man's view of society when he spends his teenage years watching others tense up as he passes, no matter the neighborhood where he grew up. Race matters to a young woman's sense of self when she states her hometown, and then is pressed, 'No, where are you really from?' regardless of how many generations her family has been in the country. Race matters to a young person addressed by a stranger in a foreign language, which he does not understand because only English was spoken at home. Race matters because of the slights, the snickers, the silent judgments that reinforce that most crippling of thoughts: 'I do not belong here'."

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor

Judge Ruth Bader Ginsberg joined Judge Sonia Sotomayor in her dissent. "The Constitution does not protect racial minorities from political defeat," wrote Justice Ginsberg. "But neither does it give the majority free rein to erect selective barriers against racial minorities."

The point of disagreement among the U.S. Supreme Court Justices hinges not on racial equality, which both sides indicate is desirable and right in their individual arguments; rather, the question is a factual one: Does racism still exist in American society? Does race still matter? Both sides of this question have provided challenging answers. But in truth, evidence of racism—perhaps not as institutionalized as it once was but real nevertheless—is difficult to ignore. The wide-ranging 2015 Department of Justice report on the systematic racism of the Ferguson, Missouri, Police Department is only the latest suggestion that the problems of racism and poverty remain difficult to ignore.

"If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it."

Peter Singer

THE PERSISTENCE OF PREJUDICE

An elected state official, Oklahoma State Representative Sally Kern, said recently that "I taught school for 20 years, and I saw a lot of people of color who didn't want to work as hard. They wanted it given to them." In 2014, Cliven Bundy, a Nevada rancher who had managed not to pay federal taxes on the federal land he had been using as a grazing field for his cattle for 20 years, refused to pay those taxes when requested and turned away at gunpoint officials from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. The millionaire job creator was hailed by some including U.S. Senator Rand Paul as a hero in the fight against big government, but he was also condemned as a "domestic terrorist" by U.S. Senator Harry Reid. On April 23, 2014, in a town meeting speech that went beyond cattle to subjects including welfare, abortion, and minority rights, Bundy came up with this: "I want to tell you one more thing I know about the Negro. They abort their young children, they put their young men in jail, because they never learned how to pick cotton. And I've often wondered, are they better off as slaves, picking cotton and having a family life and doing things, or are they better off under government subsidy? They didn't get no more freedom. They got less freedom."

"Negroes" were better off as slaves, according to Bundy.

Perhaps the poor are better off that way too. That the poor will always be with us was a commonly held Natural Law belief as capitalism grew alongside industrialization in the 19th century, and the idea that government handouts and entitlements are insults to the individual's integrity and capacity to work has caught on politically more than once. Spending cuts on education and welfare and cutbacks on food stamps or veterans' benefits often seem to cause harm to the most helpless citizens with little in the way of benefit for the country at large: That is the utilitarian argument put forth by philosophers and theologians as varied as Martin Luther King, Jr., Peter Singer, and Pope Francis.

> ***"A nation that continues each year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."***
>
> Martin Luther King, Jr.

President Barrack Obama's 2010 Affordable Care Act to provide healthcare to the millions of Americans who would otherwise not afford it

was attacked with the same arguments that greeted President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1965 Medicare Amendment to Social Security and, earlier still, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1935 Social Security Act. The arguments are by no means settled on any of these laws, but each one openly recognizes that both equality and equal protection under the law are goals, not realities. And the problem is by no means exclusively American. The question of immigration, addressed by Pope Francis from the Vatican in 2014 on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, makes the case that poverty, immigration barriers, and racism are moral and spiritual dilemmas as well as political questions everyone should heed.

The New York Times, in a lead editorial on April 22, 2014, following the Supreme Court's Michigan decision on affirmative action, accused the court of having "a blinkered view of race in America." It would seem Justice Sonia Sotomayor has a point in sounding the alarm that "we ought not sit back and wish away, rather than confront, the racial inequality that exists in our society." That inequality extends to immigration policies in this and other developed countries. That inequality extends to the increasing number of poor people, of hungry people. Apparently, race still matters, and racism is still very much with us.

11.4 READINGS ON EQUALITY AND POVERTY

READINGS: MARTIN LUTHER KING, Jr.: THE SWORD THAT HEALS

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) here explains his justification for nonviolent civil disobedience, encouraging young people to be arrested with the full knowledge that they do not deserve that treatment. The great Civil Rights leader makes a case for standing up for one's rights and shaming the oppressors who keep people from those rights.

There were no more powerful moments in the Birmingham episode than during the closing days of the campaign, when Negro youngsters ran after white policemen, asking to be locked up. There was an element of unmalicious mischief in this. The Negro youngsters, although perfectly willing to submit to imprisonment, knew that we had already filled up the jails, and that the police had no place left to take them.

When, for decades, you have been able to make a man compromise his manhood by threatening him with a cruel and unjust punishment, and when suddenly he turns upon you and says: "Punish me. I do not deserve it, I will accept it so that the world will know that I am right and you are wrong," you hardly know what to do. You feel defeated and secretly ashamed. You know that this man is as good as you are; that from some mysterious source he has found the courage and the conviction to meet physical force with soul force.

So it was that, to the Negro, going to jail was no longer a disgrace but a badge of honor.

Angry exhortation from street corners and stirring calls for the Negro to arm and go forth to do battle stimulate loud applause. But when the applause dies, the stirred and the stirring return to their homes, and lie in their beds for still one more night with no progress in view. They cannot solve the problem they face because they have offered no challenge but only a call to arms, which they themselves are unwilling to lead, knowing that doom would be its reward. They cannot solve the problem because they seek to overcome a negative situation with a negative means.... The conservatives who say, 'Let us not move so fast,' and the extremists who say, 'Let us go out and whip the world,' would tell you that they are as far apart as the poles. But there is a striking parallel: They accomplish nothing.

When the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say 'There lived a race of people, black people, fleecy locks and black complexion, of people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights." And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization.

READINGS: PETER SINGER: FAMINE, AFFLUENCE, AND MORALITY

Peter Singer (b. 1946) is an Australian philosopher whose embrace and transformation of utilitarianism have made him one of today's most influential and controversial moral philosophers. He is the author of Animal Liberation, Practical Ethics, and Rethinking Life and Death. In this article, he makes a utilitarian argument that it is not a question of charity, but rather of moral duty to help those who need help if we are able to give that help without causing ourselves comparable harm.

As I write this, in November 1971, people are dying in East Bengal from lack of food, shelter, and medical care. The suffering and death that are occurring there now are not inevitable, not unavoidable in any fatalistic sense of the term. Constant poverty, a cyclone, and a civil war have turned at least nine million people into destitute refugees; nevertheless, it is not beyond the capacity of the richer nations to give enough assistance to reduce any further suffering to very small proportions. The decisions and actions of human beings can prevent this kind of suffering. Unfortunately, human beings have not made the necessary decisions.

What are the moral implications of a situation like this? In what follows, I shall argue that the way people in relatively affluent countries react to a situation like that in Bengal cannot be justified; indeed, the whole way we look at moral issues - our moral conceptual scheme - needs to be altered, and with it, the way of life that has come to be taken for granted in our society.

In arguing for this conclusion I will not, of course, claim to be morally neutral. I shall, however, try to argue for the moral position that I take, so that anyone who accepts certain assumptions, to be made explicit, will, I hope, accept my conclusion.

I begin with the assumption that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad. I think most people will agree about this, although one may reach the same view by different routes. I shall not argue for this view. People can hold all sorts of eccentric positions, and perhaps from some of them it would not follow that death by starvation is in itself bad. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to refute such positions, and

so for brevity I will henceforth take this assumption as accepted. Those who disagree need read no further.

My next point is this: if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it. By "without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance" I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent. This principle seems almost as uncontroversial as the last one. It requires us only to prevent what is bad, and to promote what is good, and it requires this of us only when we can do it without sacrificing anything that is, from the moral point of view, comparably important. I could even, as far as the application of my argument to the Bengal emergency is concerned, qualify the point so as to make it: 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.

An application of this principle would be as follows: if I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing.

The uncontroversial appearance of the principle just stated is deceptive. If it were acted upon, even in its qualified form, our lives, our society, and our world would be fundamentally changed. For the principle takes, firstly, no account of proximity or distance. It makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor's child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away. Secondly, the principle makes no distinction between cases in which I am the only person who could possibly do anything and cases in which I am just one among millions in the same position.

> ***"If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it."***
>
> Peter Singer

I do not think I need to say much in defense of the refusal to take proximity and distance into account. The fact that a person is physically near to us, so that we have personal contact with him, may make it more likely that we *shall* assist him, but this does not show that we *ought* to help him rather than another who happens to be further away. If we accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us (or we are far away from him). Admittedly, it is possible that we are in a better position to judge what needs to be done to help a person near to us than one far away, and perhaps also to provide the assistance we judge to be necessary. If this were the case, it would be a reason for helping those near to us first. This may once have been a justification for being more concerned with the poor in one's town than with famine victims in India. Unfortunately for those who like to keep their moral responsibilities limited, instant communication and swift transportation have changed the situation. From the moral point of view, the development of the world into a "global village" has made an important, though still unrecognized, difference to our moral situation. Expert observers and supervisors, sent out by famine relief organizations or permanently stationed in famine-prone areas, can direct our aid to a refugee in Bengal almost as effectively as we could get it to someone in our own block. There would seem, therefore, to be no possible justification for discriminating on geographical grounds.

War refugees at the Keleti Railway Station on 5 September 2015 in Budapest, Hungary. Refugees are arriving constantly to Hungary on the way to Germany.

There may be a greater need to defend the second implication of my principle - that the fact that there are millions of other people in the same position, in respect to the Bengali refugees, as I am, does not make the situation significantly different from a situation in which I am the only person who can prevent something very bad from occurring. Again, of course, I admit that there is a psychological difference between the cases; one feels less guilty about doing nothing if one can point to others,

similarly placed, who have also done nothing. Yet this can make no real difference to our moral obligations. Should I consider that I am less obliged to pull the drowning child out of the pond if on looking around I see other people, no further away than I am, who have also noticed the child but are doing nothing? One has only to ask this question to see the absurdity of the view that numbers lessen obligation. It is a view that is an ideal excuse for inactivity; unfortunately most of the major evils - poverty, overpopulation, pollution - are problems in which everyone is almost equally involved.

The view that numbers do make a difference can be made plausible if stated in this way: if everyone in circumstances like mine gave £5 to the Bengal Relief Fund, there would be enough to provide food, shelter, and medical care for the refugees; there is no reason why I should give more than anyone else in the same circumstances as I am; therefore I have no obligation to give more than £5. Each premise in this argument is true, and the argument looks sound. It may convince us, unless we notice that it is based on a hypothetical premise, although the conclusion is not stated hypothetically. The argument would be sound if the conclusion were: if everyone in circumstances like mine were to give £5, I would have no obligation to give more than £5. If the conclusion were so stated, however, it would be obvious that the argument has no bearing on a situation in which it is not the case that everyone else gives £5.

It might be thought that this argument has an absurd consequence. Since the situation appears to be that very few people are likely to give substantial amounts, it follows that I and everyone else in similar circumstances ought to give as much as possible, that is, at least up to the point at which by giving more one would begin to cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents - perhaps even beyond this point to the point of marginal utility, at which by giving more one would cause oneself and one's dependents as much suffering as one would prevent. If everyone does this, however, there will be more than can be used for the benefit of the refugees, and some of the sacrifice will have been unnecessary. Thus, if everyone does what he ought to do, the result will not be as good as it would be if everyone did a little less than he ought to do, or if only some do all that they ought to do.

The paradox here arises only if we assume that the actions in question - sending money to the relief funds - are performed more or less simultaneously, and are also unexpected. For if it is to be expected that everyone is going to contribute something, then clearly each is not

obliged to give as much as he would have been obliged to had others not been giving too. And if everyone is not acting more or less simultaneously, then those giving later will know how much more is needed, and will have no obligation to give more than is necessary to reach this amount. To say this is not to deny the principle that people in the same circumstances have the same obligations, but to point out that the fact that others have given, or may be expected to give, is a relevant circumstance: those giving after it has become known that many others are giving and those giving before are not in the same circumstances. So the seemingly absurd consequence of the principle I have put forward can occur only if people are in error about the actual circumstances - that is, if they think they are giving when others are not, but in fact they are giving when others are. The result of everyone doing what he really ought to do cannot be worse than the result of everyone doing less than he ought to do, although the result of everyone doing what he reasonably believes he ought to do could be.

The outcome of this argument is that our traditional moral categories are upset. The traditional distinction between duty and charity cannot be drawn, or at least, not in the place we normally draw it. Giving money to the Bengal Relief Fund is regarded as an act of charity in our society. The bodies which collect money are known as "charities." These organizations see themselves in this way - if you send them a check, you will be thanked for your "generosity." Because giving money is regarded as an act of charity, it is not thought that there is anything wrong with not giving. The charitable man may be praised, but the man who is not charitable is not condemned. People do not feel in any way ashamed or guilty about spending money on new clothes or a new car instead of giving it to famine relief. (Indeed, the alternative does not occur to them.) This way of looking at the matter cannot be justified. When we buy new clothes not to keep ourselves warm but to look "well-dressed" we are not providing for any important need. We would not be sacrificing anything significant if we were to continue to wear our old clothes, and give the money to famine relief. To do so is not charitable, or generous. Nor is it the kind of act which philosophers and theologians have called "supererogatory" - an act which it would be good to do, but not wrong not to do. On the contrary, we ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so.

One objection to the position I have taken might be simply that it is too drastic a revision of our moral scheme. People do not ordinarily judge in the way I have suggested they should. Most people reserve their moral

condemnation for those who violate some moral norm, such as the norm against taking another person's property. They do not condemn those who indulge in luxury instead of giving to famine relief. But given that I did not set out to present a morally neutral description of the way people make moral judgments, the way people do in fact judge has nothing to do with the validity of my conclusion. Moral attitudes are shaped by the needs of society, and no doubt society needs people who will observe the rules that make social existence tolerable. From the point of view of a particular society, it is essential to prevent violations of norms against killing, stealing, and so on. It is quite inessential, however, to help people outside one's own society.

The issue here is: Where should we draw the line between conduct that is required and conduct that is good although not required, so as to get the best possible result? This would seem to be an empirical question, although a very difficult one. What it is possible for a man to do and what he is likely to do are both, I think, very greatly influenced by what people around him are doing and expecting him to do. In any case, the possibility that by spreading the idea that we ought to be doing very much more than we are to relieve famine we shall bring about a general breakdown of moral behavior seems remote. If the stakes are an end to widespread starvation, it is worth the risk. Finally, it should be emphasized that these considerations are relevant only to the issue of what we should require from others, and not to what we ourselves ought to do.

I do not, of course, want to dispute the contention that governments of affluent nations should be giving many times the amount of genuine, no-strings-attached aid that they are giving now. I agree, too, that giving privately is not enough, and that we ought to be campaigning actively for entirely new standards for both public and private contributions to famine relief. Indeed, I would sympathize with someone who thought that campaigning was more important than giving oneself, although I doubt whether preaching what one does not practice would be very effective. Unfortunately, for many people the idea that "it's the government's responsibility" is a reason for not giving which does not appear to entail any political action either.

It is sometimes said, though less often now than it used to be, that philosophers have no special role to play in public affairs, since most public issues depend primarily on an assessment of facts. On questions of fact, it is said, philosophers as such have no special expertise, and

so it has been possible to engage in philosophy without committing oneself to any position on major public issues. No doubt there are some issues of social policy and foreign policy about which it can truly be said that a really expert assessment of the facts is required before taking sides or acting, but the issue of famine is surely not one of these. The facts about the existence of suffering are beyond dispute. Nor, I think, is it disputed that we can do something about it, either through orthodox methods of famine relief or through population control or both. This is therefore an issue on which philosophers are competent to take a position. The issue is one which faces everyone who has more money than he needs to support himself and his dependents, or who is in a position to take some sort of political action. These categories must include practically every teacher and student of philosophy in the universities of the Western world. If philosophy is to deal with matters that are relevant to both teachers and students, this is an issue that philosophers should discuss.

Discussion, though, is not enough. What is the point of relating philosophy to public (and personal) affairs if we do not take our conclusions seriously? In this instance, taking our conclusion seriously means acting upon it. The philosopher will not find it any easier than anyone else to alter his attitudes and way of life to the extent that, if I am right, is involved in doing everything that we ought to be doing. At the very least, though, one can make a start. The philosopher who does so will have to sacrifice some of the benefits of the consumer society, but he can find compensation in the satisfaction of a way of life in which theory and practice, if not yet in harmony, are at least coming together.

How Does Inequality Affect You?

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How do you identify yourself? Do you call yourself a liberal, conservative, libertarian, or socialist? Are you a feminist? Is your being poor, middle-class, or rich relevant to your position on civil rights? On women's rights? Workers' rights? Gay rights? Immigration? Does your own racial, ethnic, or cultural identity affect your position?

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CHAPTER PHILOSOPHERS

Bergoglio, Jorge Mario (Pope Francis) (1936–) an Argentinian Jesuit, His Holiness Pope Francis is the first pope from the Americas in the Catholic Church's millennia-long history.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. (1929–1968) key figure in the struggle for civil rights, this American Nobel Prize laureate carried a relentless fight against the evils of racism, poverty, and militarism. His ideas continue to inspire the struggles to eliminate all prejudice, such as anti-Semitism and islamophobia, homophobia, prejudice against the disabled, and any other form of institutionalized bigotry that keeps people from being all that they can be. He was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968.

Singer, Peter (1946–) a native of Melbourne, Australia, Singer is one of the most influential and controversial contemporary utilitarians; he is the author of several books on moral philosophy including *Animal Liberation, Practical Ethics, and Rethinking Life and Death*.

KEY TERMS

Affirmative action the institutionalized practice of favoring groups that historically have not been treated fairly by society; an institutional preferential treatment of these groups; in the United States, affirmative action in both educational institutions and the workplace often led to quotas in admissions or in hiring to achieve a more diverse student body or office. Affirmative action was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2014.

Age of Enlightenment is an era from the 1650s to the 1780s in which cultural and intellectual forces in Western Europe emphasized reason, analysis, and individualism rather than traditional lines of authority.

Anti-Semitism persistent bigotry, prejudice against Jews, for no reason other than their being Jewish.

Civil Rights Act of 1964 championed originally by President John F. Kennedy and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, the then President Lyndon B. Johnson, and considered a landmark in American history and American law, this Act of Congress officially ended institutionalized racial segregation in the United States. It has been the most significant legal factor in interpreting the struggles for the equality of other oppressed groups in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Homophobia persistent bigotry and prejudice against LGBT people including lesbians and gay men for no other reason than the fact of who they are or whom they love.

Islamophobia persistent bigotry and prejudice against Muslims for no reason other than their being Muslims.