

Rich and Poor

Peter Singer

Of all the pieces in this book, Peter Singer's "Rich and Poor" may be the one that most unsettles readers. In it, Singer argues that affluent people who don't give sums of money to prevent starvation in the world are committing a sophisticated form of murder. He also tries to explain why most of us refuse to see the situation that way. Singer has taught bioethics at Princeton University and written on a variety of controversial ethical issues, such as euthanasia. His book *Animal Liberation* is a text of great importance in the animal rights movement.

Some Facts about Poverty

At the end of the twentieth century, the World Bank sent out a team of researchers to record the views of 60,000 women and men living in extreme poverty. Visiting seventy-three countries, the research team heard, over and over, that poverty meant these things:

- You are short of food for all or part of the year, often eating only one meal per day, sometimes having to choose between stilling your child's hunger or your own, and sometimes being able to do neither.
- You can't save money. If a family member falls ill and you need money to see a doctor, or if the crop fails and you have nothing to eat, you have to borrow from a local moneylender; he will charge you so much interest that the debt continues to mount, and you may never be free of it.
- You can't afford to send your children to school; or if they do start school, you have to take them out again if the harvest is poor.
- You live in an unstable house, made with mud or thatch that you need to rebuild every two or three years, or after severe weather.
- You have no close source of safe drinking water. You have to carry it a long way, and even then, it can make you ill unless you boil it.

Along with these material deprivations goes, very often, a humiliating state of powerlessness, vulnerability and a deep sense of shame or failure.

Extreme poverty, as defined by the World Bank, means not having enough income to meet the most basic human needs for adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, sanitation, health care or education. In 2008, the Bank calculated that this requires a daily income that is the purchasing power equivalent of about US\$1.25 per day in the United States. This is not the foreign exchange equivalent of US\$1.25, which might not be so bad, because as everyone who travels from a rich country to a poor one knows, the currencies of rich countries often have much greater purchasing power in poor countries. The World Bank's definition takes that difference into account: the poor earn only as much as will buy, in their currency, the quantity of necessities that \$1.25 will buy in the United States. The bank estimates that 1.4 billion people have less income than this.

In industrialized countries, people are poor by comparison to others in their society. Their poverty is relative — they have enough to meet their basic needs and usually access to free health care as well. The 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty in developing countries are poor by an absolute standard: they have difficulty meeting their basic needs. Absolute poverty kills. According to UNICEF, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 8.8 million children under five years old died from avoidable, poverty-related causes in 2008. That comes to 24,000 — think of it as a football stadium full of children — dying unnecessarily every day. (The number of children dying has been falling steadily since the 1960s but still remains far too high.) Millions of adults also die because of absolute poverty. Life expectancy in the rich nations is now seventy-eight years; in developing countries, it is around fifty. When absolute poverty does not cause death, it still causes misery of a kind not often seen in the affluent nations. Malnutrition in young children stunts both physical and mental development. Millions of people on poor diets suffer from deficiency diseases, like goiter, or blindness caused by a lack of vitamin A. The food value of what the poor eat is further reduced by parasites such as hookworm and ringworm, which are endemic in conditions of poor sanitation and health education.

Death and disease apart, absolute poverty remains a miserable condition of life, with inadequate food, shelter, clothing, sanitation, health services and education. This is the "normal" situation of our world. At least ten times as many people died from preventable, poverty-related diseases on September 11, 2001, as died in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on that black day. The terrorist attacks led to trillions of dollars being spent on the "war on terrorism" and on security measures that have inconvenienced every air traveller

since then. The deaths caused by poverty were ignored. So whereas very few people have died from terrorism since September 11, 2001, approximately 30,000 people died from poverty-related causes on September 12, 2001, and on every day between then and now, and will die tomorrow. Even when we consider larger events, like the Asian tsunami of 2004, which killed approximately 230,000 people, or the 2010 earthquake in Haiti that killed up to 200,000, we are still talking about numbers that represent just one week's toll for preventable, poverty-related deaths — and that happens fifty-two weeks in every year.

Some Facts about Affluence

We can juxtapose a picture of "absolute affluence" against this picture of absolute poverty. Those who are absolutely affluent are not necessarily affluent by comparison with their neighbors, but they have more income than they need to provide themselves adequately with all the basic necessities of life. After buying (either directly or through their taxes) food, shelter, clothing, basic health services and education, the absolutely affluent still have money to spend on luxuries. The absolutely affluent choose their food for the pleasures of the palate, not to stop hunger; they buy new clothes to look good, not to keep warm; they move house to be in a better neighborhood or have more space for the children to play, not to keep out the rain; and after all this, there is still money to spend on home entertainment centers and exotic holidays.

At this stage, I am making no ethical judgments about absolute affluence; I am merely pointing out that it exists. Its defining characteristic is a significant amount of income above the level necessary to provide for the basic human needs of oneself and one's dependents. By this standard, the majority of citizens of Europe, North America, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and the oil-rich Middle Eastern states are all absolutely affluent. There are also hundreds of millions of affluent people in countries like China, India and Brazil, although there is also extreme poverty in those countries. These affluent people have wealth that they could, without threatening their own basic welfare, transfer to the extremely poor.

At present, very little is being transferred. In 1970, the United Nations General Assembly set a modest target for the amount of foreign aid that the rich nations should give: 0.7 percent of Gross National Income, or 70 cents for every hundred dollars a nation earns. Forty years later, only Denmark, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway and

Sweden have reached that level. In 2008, the United States and Japan, the two largest economies among the affluent nations, gave only 0.19 percent, or 19 cents in every \$100 they earned. Australia and Canada did only slightly better, at 0.32 percent, whereas France, Germany and Britain were around the average for affluent nations, giving between 0.38 and 0.43 percent. In comparison to their income, what the rich nations are giving is relatively trivial.

The Moral Equivalent of Murder?

These facts suggest that, by giving far less than they could, rich people are allowing more than a billion people to continue to live in conditions of deprivation and to die prematurely. This conclusion applies not only to governments but to each affluent individual, for each of us has the opportunity to do something about the situation; for instance, to give our time or money to voluntary organizations that are helping to provide health care, safe drinking water, education

and better agricultural techniques for the poor. If, then, allowing someone to die is not intrinsically different from killing someone, it would seem that we are all murderers.

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10 Is this verdict too harsh? Many will reject it as self-evidently absurd. They

would sooner take it as showing that allowing to die cannot be equivalent to killing than as showing that living in an affluent style without contributing to an aid agency is ethically equivalent to going over to Ethiopia and shooting a few peasants. They point to several significant differences between spending money on luxuries, when we could use it to save lives, and deliberately shooting people. Let us look at some of these differences and then consider which of them really are morally significant.

First, the motivation will normally be different. Those who deliberately shoot others go out of their way to kill. Motivated by malice, sadism or some equally unpleasant motives, they want their victims dead. A person who buys an iPod presumably wants to enhance her enjoyment of music — not in itself a terrible thing. At worst, spending money on luxuries instead of giving it away indicates selfishness and indifference to the sufferings of others, characteristics that may be undesirable but are not comparable to actual malice or similar motives. Second, it is not difficult for most of us to act in accordance with a rule against killing people: it is, on the other hand, very difficult to

obey a rule that commands us to save all the lives we can. To live a comfortable or even luxurious life, it is not necessary to kill anyone, but we do have to allow to die some whom we might have saved, for the money that we need to live comfortably could have been given away. Thus, the duty to avoid killing is much easier to discharge completely than the duty to save. Saving every life we possibly could save would mean cutting our standard of living down to the bare essentials needed to keep us alive.¹ To discharge this duty completely would require a degree of moral heroism utterly different from that required by mere avoidance of killing.

A third difference is the greater certainty of the outcome of shooting when compared with not giving aid. If I point a loaded gun at someone at close range and pull the trigger, it is virtually certain that the person will be killed; whereas the money that I could give might be spent on a project that turns out to be unsuccessful and helps no one.

Fourth, when people are shot, there are identifiable individuals who have been harmed. We can point to them and to their grieving families. When I buy my iPod, I cannot know who my money would have saved if I had given it away.

Fifth, it might be said that the plight of the hungry is not my doing, and so I cannot be held responsible for it. The starving would have been starving if I had never existed. If I kill, however, I am responsible for my victims' deaths, for those people would not have died if I had not killed them.

These differences need not shake our previous conclusion that there is no intrinsic difference between killing and allowing to die. They are extrinsic differences, that is, differences normally but not necessarily associated with the distinction between killing and allowing to die. We can imagine cases in which someone allows another to die for malicious or sadistic reasons. We can imagine a world in which there are so few people needing assistance and they are so easy to assist, that our duty not to allow people to die is as easily discharged as our duty not to kill. We can imagine situations in which the outcome of not helping is as sure as shooting. We can imagine cases in which we can identify the person we allow to die. We can even imagine a

¹ Strictly, we would need to cut down to the minimum level compatible with earning the income which after providing for our needs, left us most to give away. Thus, if my present position pays me \$100,000 a year but requires me to spend \$30,000 a year on living in a more expensive location than I otherwise might, I cannot save more people by moving to an inexpensive rural area if that will mean taking a job that pays only \$60,000.