GOD, THE GOOD, AND UTILITARIANISM

Perspectives on Peter Singer

EDITED BY
JOHN PERRY

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
CHAPTER 10
Remember the poor: 
Duties, dilemmas, and vocation
Eric Gregory

This volume hopes to renew a conversation that has a long history in the academy, the Church, and the wider world. In addition to various precursors in English and Scottish moral philosophy, theistic engagement with the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill had a profound impact on Anglo-American theology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the 1960s and 1970s, Christian ethics focused explicitly on various theories of act-and rule-utilitarianism. Ongoing debates about proportionalism in Roman Catholic moral theology trade upon the extent to which proponents of this view adopt a form of consequentialism inconsistent with church doctrine.

Today, however, sustained engagement with utilitarianism by theologians typically occurs more indirectly through proxy debates in economics, public policy, political theory, and psychology. Deontological and utilitarian ethics still frame many discussions in normative and applied ethics. Peter Singer’s own writings have done much to fund this interest, often provoking polemical charges of immorality and irrationality by philosophers and theologians alike. At the same time, the growing appeal of virtue language in theological circles tends to focus on character and goodness rather than right action. In contrast to previous generations, contemporary Christian ethics has been shaped more by alliances with Kantian contractualism and Aristotelian virtue ethics than utilitarianism. Indeed, despite the appeal of proportionalism or the soft consequentialism of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian Realism, it is difficult to think of a prominent Christian consequentialist or even explicit treatment of contemporary utilitarian philosophers in recent Christian ethics. It is therefore a welcome development for theological ethics to engage directly one of the most influential and recent philosophical expressions of utilitarian thinking.

It takes a lot of work to avoid trivial generalization and get to the point of achieving disagreement through such engagement. Apparent similarities exist alongside obvious differences. For example, Christians and utilitarians like Peter Singer often stress the demandingness of the moral life and the value of practical reasoning in addressing situations of conflicting goods. They defend an egalitarianism that seeks to promote the universal good rather than only avoid harm. They reject moral relativism and highlight the dangers of self-deception and rationalization in the quest for reflective equilibrium. At the end of this essay, I raise another possible agreement: denying genuine moral dilemmas where moral transgression is unavoidable. But the primary focus of this essay is another shared concern characteristic of the cosmopolitan and other-regarding thrust of Christian and utilitarian traditions: practical efforts to realize and motivate stringent duties of beneficence to the global poor.

Christian and utilitarian traditions are perfectionist in the sense that they are interested in practices that promote human flourishing and discouraging those practices that diminish it. These commitments often track familiar distinctions between beneficence and justice, but they also trouble any strict separation of the two. Indeed, some defend utilitarianism as a philosophical extension of Christian agape, transforming the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31) into a thesis of moral universalizability. They also sometimes invoke a Christian rejection of supererogatory action in the face of moral laxity and covetousness. In so doing, and by way of contrast to some modern moral traditions, both Peter Singer and Christian ethics offer moral evaluations of individuals and not simply the justice of their social groups or institutions. Both Christianity and Singer’s philosophy hope to generate new moral cultures in response to affluence and severe poverty.

Critics of both Christian ethics and Singer’s utilitarianism argue that they foster untenable moralism. Contemporary Christian ethics, however, tends to reject utilitarianism as well. Many claim utilitarians focus on the overall good in the world in ways that distort rather than extend morality by making morality itself an object of ultimate devotion. Utilitarians are thought to be tempted to ‘play God’ by assuming it is their responsibility to make history turn out right. Christian ethics, on this view, begins with

---

1 See, for example, Joseph Fletcher, Situation Ethics: The New Morality (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1966), and Richard A. McCormick, SJ and Paul Ramsey (eds), Doing Evil to Achieve Good: Moral Choice in Conflict Situations (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1978).

---

3 I here borrow a formulation from John Howard Yoder for a slightly different context. Yoder makes a case for Christian pacifism in terms of obedience rather than effectiveness by arguing that following Jesus excludes “any normative concern for any capacity to make sure that things would turn out right.” See John Howard Yoder, The Politics of Jesus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 240.
persons and their relationships rather than abstract norms or reasons for action. It should not be governed by maximizing states of affairs, satisfying preferences, or pursuing decision procedures that only a perfect God might know without perplexity. Moreover, the fictional examples told by philosophers in motivating a utilitarian calculus are thought to bully us into having intuitions we should not entertain. Such cases impoverish our understanding of the moral life. Many Christian ethicists seek refuge in claiming that there are principles we cannot argue towards, but only argue from. But there are telling reasons why social, economic, and technological realities have led to a resurgent pairing of Christian ethics and the work of Singer in relation to moral obligations in the face of material abundance and extreme poverty.4

This essay pursues these reasons in historical, theological, and philosophical registers. I hope to sketch places where further conversation might be needed, either within utilitarian and Christian traditions or between them. As with other authors in this volume, an overarching goal is to promote a perhaps unlikely coalition of moralities and communities frequently opposed. Ethical theory can aid practical decision-making. But agreement with Singer’s claims does not rely upon the utopian hope of achieving consensus about conflicting ethical theories. Undermining his version of preference utilitarianism or his views on human dignity will not defeat his claims about the moral implications of extreme poverty.

Facts matter for moral evaluation. Let me begin by stipulating agreement with the facts that Singer and others have presented about affluence and poverty, including the claim that poverty-related deaths due to exploitation, chronic malnutrition, and lack of access to safe water, sanitation, and adequate shelter are avoidable deaths.5 Fundamental to Singer’s argument is the recognition of a new interdependence where ‘rich and poor are now linked in ways they never were before’.6 These conditions often exacerbate political inequalities that result in further exploitation of the vulnerable by corrupt states and economic actors. These facts, I think, require fundamental re-evaluation of various concepts within Christian ethics. For Singer, aid to the global poor is not simply a nice thing to do. It is morally required given the vast discrepancies in the sorts of lives led by the affluent and the global poor. To fail to aid distant strangers in desperate need constitutes a wrong, not simply a missed opportunity for good. Christians name such moral failures as sins against God and neighbour. To remedy this moral failure requires changing not simply moral attitudes, but also the practices of people in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Some Christians have adopted radical changes in their way of life after reading the many passages from the Bible that enjoin them to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger (Matthew 25; Luke 3: 16; 1 John 3). Much of modern Christian theology, in fact, endorses a preferential option for the poor. Singer has noted that Jesus ‘places far more emphasis on charity for the poor than on anything else’.7 Of course, many Christians have not led lives consistent with this biblical vision.8 On my view, however, a Christian endorsement of Singer’s arguments—and, more importantly, the way of life they call for—can only be a qualified one.

Initial reservations: proximity and vocation

In a later section, I contrast Singer’s story of a shallow pond with the boundary-crossing love of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Before turning to these stories, it is important to note that proximity and distance present more of a challenge for Christian traditions than Singer’s arguments might address. There is a massive literature on the tension between partiality and impartiality in recent philosophy, especially in debates about cosmopolitanism. They bear upon questions about moral obligations at a very basic level, including the place of morality in a good life. Once the claim of need and the duty of easy rescue are acknowledged, for example, how do we constrain such demands without becoming ‘something other than an engine for the welfare of other people...nothing but slaves to social

---


6 Ibid., xii.

7 Ibid., 39. Singer does not enter long-standing theological debates about good works and salvation, but he claims that helping the poor is a requirement for salvation’ within the Christian tradition. Again bracketing Christian disputes about rights-language, he states that for early and medieval Christians, ‘sharing our surplus wealth with the poor is not a matter of charity, but of our duty and their rights’ (29).

8 Singer tells us that he read the Bible during chapel at a Presbyterian boys’ school. He comments, ‘I also read the passage in which Jesus tells the rich man to give all he has to the poor, and adds that it is hard for a rich man to go to heaven as for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. I wondered how that squared with the fact that the most expensive car in the school parking area was the chaplain’s shiny black Mercedes’, in ‘An Intellectual Autobiography’, in Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics, ed. Jeffrey A. Schaler (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2009), 3.
justice? Recent Christian thought also has been focused on debates about universality and particularity.

Christian ethics, I believe, is trying to find a type of moral cosmopolitanism that can endorse virtuous types of particularity even as it rejects vicious ones. Part of the distinctive challenge for Christian theology is that the values of spatial and temporal proximity are never considered merely in themselves or merely contingent as Singer suggests — let alone ‘quirky relics of our tribal past’. Nearness and distance have never been ‘just’ geographic or causal. They are thought to be constitutive of the sorts of affinity that make space and time morally, and theologically, relevant. According to classical Christian theology, divine providence has instituted special relationships, particular loyalties, and distinct identities. These embodied realities set limits on the pursuit of justice and care for others. But the religious logic is more than pragmatic. Friendship, familial relations, and even territorial borders have been thought to be gifts of divine providence that reflect something of our given human nature and God’s ordering of the world. Christians discern their own distinctive vocations within this finite, differentiated, and ordered reality. As Catholic philosopher Robert Spaemann argues, the goodness of creaturely life is grounded in the ‘sensuous, spatio-temporal make-up of life’ and the ‘mediating structure of the ordo amoris’. Karl Barth echoes such claims about the goodness of a bounded creation: the biblical command to love others ‘does not float in empty space’. Christian love, according to Barth, ‘presupposes that the one or many who are loved stand in a certain proximity to the one who loves – a proximity in which others do not find themselves’.

Proximity, then, is more than geographic or contingent. Christian theology has developed strong accounts of particular callings in life parasitic on these notions of providence and creation. They affirm theories of vocation often contrasted with non-theistic theories of ethics. As Robert M. Adams has argued, ‘to accept and pursue a vocation is in large part to have a personal project, or a set of personal projects, to which one is committed’.

10 Singer, Life You Can Save, 133.
11 Robert Spaemann, Hapiness and Benevolence, trans. Jeremiah Alberg (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 10–11. Spaemann argues that ‘near and far’ are rational relations because ‘the one who is faraway is, at that same time, in a relationship of nearness to others’.
13 Ibid., IV.2, 809. Barth even affirms a ‘special solidarity’ of the Christian community as ‘practical and provisional’ (IV.1, 105; IV.2, 807–8).

Remember the poor: duties, dilemmas, and vocation

Christians, this personal project is understood as an invitation from God that Adams describes as having ‘my name on them’. These projects must pursue genuine goods. In fact, vocations often demand a type of devotion to goods that are difficult to sustain. But they are not motivated by direct consequentialist concern with doing the most good. Fidelity to a vocation trades on a distinction between mere selfishness and appropriate theocentric self-interest within the diverse body of Christ. Adams, for example, states that we respond to such vocations as ‘our part in God’s all-embracing and perfect love’. Adams does claim that there might be indirect consequentialist justifications for moral concerns in terms of vocation. Others, like John Hare, have suggested that God coordinates our particular vocations to a final, comprehensive good. Philosophers Tim Mulgan and Brad Hooker have developed sophisticated versions of what Christians might call ‘vocations’ within their own versions of consequentialism. It strikes me that Singer’s utilitarianism has a more difficult time accepting these analogous conceptions of vocation that sustain commitment to particular goods (even moral goods) when tempted to abandon such projects for alternative ones. Mulgan’s and Hooker’s ‘messier’ versions of consequentialism are at odds with Singer’s stricter utilitarianism. They represent suggestive types of consequentialism for Christian ethics that might make room for both human needs and personal goals.

Of course, as Adams and others recognize, Christian appeals to vocation (or its secular analogue) have been made to justify oppressive social, political, and economic arrangements. Vocations, for example, were often linked to feudal notions of ‘stations’ or ‘estates’ widely rejected by modern Christian ethics. Even today, however, Singer’s perspective exposes these appeals as problematic in light of the ways in which human beings choose to ‘distance’ themselves from neighbours in need, artificially shielding their wealth and themselves from the global poor. Empirical realities like developed channels of transportation and effective means of aid (powerfully articulated by Singer) challenge conventional discussions of a
Christian \textit{ordo amoris}. By my lights, long-standing Christian claims about the providential or created structure of moral obligations need revision. Poverty, especially extreme poverty, is no longer seen as a basic fact about the human condition. The ‘neighbourhood’ and the ‘road’ have changed in ways that could not be imagined by classical Christian political theologies. We pass by on the other side of this road, literally and figuratively, every day. Of course, this passing still admits radically different responses to global poverty.

Philosophers like Charles Taylor tell long stories about why we today feel a wider range of moral obligation, a revolution often associated with the rise of humanitarianism and changes in attitudes towards human suffering. For Taylor, ‘never before have people been asked to stretch out so far, and so consistently, so systematically, so as a matter of course, to the stranger outside the gates’. Singer claims most people do not respond to this demand in morally satisfying ways. Taylor, however, expresses more of a Weberian lament about the nature and character of these demands, tracing the transformation of the Church’s proselytizing work into a secular project of ridding the world of suffering. The embodied life of Jesus, while certainly open to interruptions and attentiveness to those in need, suggests that even he did not perform every possible act of beneficence, especially if beneficence is equated with meeting material needs. He seems to have eaten leisurely and attended beach parties. His teachings and lifestyle evoked the scorn of those following the more ascetic John the Baptist. The diverse examples of Christian saints also resist any singular (let alone welfare maximizing) conception of the imitation of Christ as a model for Christian living. In fact, to turn the parable into a moral axiom is to pervert the very contingency of the Samaritan’s response. So someone like Taylor might argue.

A longer history: poverty and the early Church

Christian attitudes towards poverty span a wide spectrum. Poverty has been regarded as ‘both a virtuous ideal and just reward for wrongdoing, as central to the concerns of the gospel and as peripheral, as inevitable as well as unacceptable’. \cite{19} There are now many historical studies of arrangements for poverty relief between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. \cite{20} These social histories complement various philosophical accounts of the transformation from Christian charity to utilitarian benevolence. \cite{21} In fact, unlike Taylor’s dour contrast between a Christian world of charity framed by transcendence and a secular world of bourgeois reform framed by immanent human flourishing, Samuel Fleischaker argues that a commitment to distributive justice itself emerges only after the developments in social science and moral philosophy epitomized by someone like Adam Smith. \cite{22}

Alongside these historical debates, it might be helpful briefly to recall a more distant past: the Christian Church of late antiquity. It is an alien and enchanted past. But thanks to developments in the social history of this period, we can now appreciate the extent to which the biblical imagery of ‘treasure in heaven’ — joining the heavenly and the earthly by money and religious giving — was a defining feature of early Christianity. Many moderns, Christian included, find this union mercenary and distasteful. But these historians argue that while the Greco-Roman world was capable of sponsoring tremendous generosity, it was Christian bishops who invented a category of ‘the poor’ in their exegesis of Jesus’ new mapping of the social world. For Augustine and many pre-modern Christians, the central social imaginary became not the division of citizen and non-citizen, but that between the rich and the poor. As Peter Brown puts it, early Christian thinkers started to pit ‘love of the city’ against ‘love of the poor’. \cite{23} Secular philosophers often contrast global justice (duties owed to those outside one’s borders) and social justice (duties owed to fellow citizens). This early Christian shift, I think, opened the space for a new and influential type of moral cosmopolitanism at odds with a preoccupation with civic glory or honour. It relied on a notion that what goes to heaven literally goes through the poor. For these Christians, precisely because the poor are unable to reciprocate gifts, commerce with the poor was a

\footnotesize{\cite{20} See Brian Pullan, ‘Catholics, Protestants, and the Poor in Early Modern Europe’, \textit{Journal of Interdisciplinary History} 35:3 (Winter 2005), 441–66.
\cite{22} Samuel Fleischaker, \textit{A Short History of Distributive Justice} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
\cite{23} Peter Brown, \textit{Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 73. Brown continues, ‘Charity to the poor in the fourth century was presented by many Christian writers in much the same way as the “gratuitous act” was once presented by existentialist writers in the 1950s. It was an almost terrifying statement of potential boundlessness. But it was also an act of imaginative conquest. To claim such useless persons as part of the body of the Christian community was to claim society as a whole, in the name of Christ, up to its furthest, darkest margins’ (76–7).}
sacrament of God's grace. Wealth was of divine origin, belonging to God, and charity was returning the gifts of God to the people of God. The many sayings of Christ (Matthew 10:42; Mark 9:42; 12:42; Luke 21:2) furnished preachers with an 'entire aesthetic of reversed magnitude . . . they infused the humdrum practices of Christian giving with a sense of drama'.

What is important to note about this counter-culture is not simply a moral view that took compassion seriously. Preachers did sensitize hearers to the suffering and misery around them, much like Singer's popular writings. For these early Christians, however, it was part of something like a 'culture war' between Roman and Christian ideals. Christian bishops offered discourses on compassion and prophetic justice from the Hebrew Scriptures that rivalled, if not exceeded, the best of contemporary global justice literature. Augustine, in fact, feared that wealthy converts who desired to rid themselves of their wealth would leave their dependents destitute and succumb to Pelagian temptations of moral heroism. Picture Bill Gates or Warren Buffett immediately giving away all of their wealth after reading Jesus' instruction to sell possessions and give to the poor (Matthew 19:21). Augustine would come to counsel regular giving and daily prayers for forgiveness, a spiritual and moral practice 'for the long haul'. His attitude towards wealth was similar to his attitude towards sex and politics: use it with care, but do not be dominated by it. This type of Christian preaching generated gifts from the very rich and the average giver, leading to a long Christian tradition of the stewardship of wealth. About 80 per cent of the wealth in the churches of late antiquity came from 20 per cent of the rich. This might not adhere to Singer's standards, but it was better than the broader giving patterns of Rome where only 2 per cent of citizens funded public charities.

To be sure, the early Church wrestled with many of the same issues that continue to this day. Is Christian solidarity with the poor conceived in terms of faceless and statistical 'others' or as brothers and sisters in Christ? Are the poor 'beggars' for charity or, as the Hebrew Scriptures suggest, 'plaintiffs' for justice? Do the 'least of these' in Matthew 25 refer to all human persons created in the image of God or only to 'the brethren' of the Christian community? The pathos of remembering the poor in the early Church was intimately bound up with a renewed emphasis in Christian

writings on the interrelatedness of the love commands. In fact, Augustine dared to suggest that the two commands to love God and neighbour 'cannot exist without each other'. Societies are judged by the quality of their loves, and the treatment of the poor became a characteristic motif of Christian social criticism.

Augustine and other early Christians knew little about the capacities of governments or other institutional actors to relieve poverty. His politics of compassion did inspire numerous practical activities within the Roman Empire's economic system. It was left to later Christian thought to develop institutional charity, or the type of distributive justice that Fleischaker describes. Poverty was simply a fact of life in this darkness after the fall. But Augustine offered a foundational reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan with formative consequences. In On Christian Teaching, he writes:

That the commandment to love our neighbour excludes no human being is made clear by our Lord himself in the gospel . . . When our Lord was asked, 'And who is my neighbour?' by the man to whom he had pronounced these same two commandments and said that the whole law and the prophets depended on them, he told the story of a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho . . . Who can fail to see that there is no exception to this, nobody to whom compassion is not due?

This reading continues to attract many modern thinkers seeking to widen the scope of justice beyond national borders. The early Church, however, often preferred more allegorical interpretations that linked the parable to the saving work of Christ. It was not a very popular text among those worried about building in-group Christian solidarity in the face of various opponents. Of course, the parable has also been a fraught and polemical text in the history of Jewish and Christian relations. The history of Christian readings that rebuke Jewish legalism shapes the experience of modernity, especially this side of Luther's reading of Paul. The parable has encouraged many to think that Christianity preaches universal love while Judaism encourages narrow particularism. Like any biblical passage, the parable has been pressed into the service of many different political and moral agendas. In the 1940s, Henry Luce called upon the United States to be a 'Good Samaritan' to the world, a harbinger of renewed concerns about Christian care for the world. One of the more famous conservative appeals

---

24 Ibid., 86.
26 Brown, Through the Eye of a Needle, 77.
came from the former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. In the heat of welfare debates, Thatcher remarked in a television interview, ‘no one would have remembered the Good Samaritan if he’d only had good intentions… He had money as well.’ Her defence of capitalism follows many who argue that commercial societies expand the opportunities for care. From a very different angle, Martin Luther King, Jr, often invoked the parable to speak about the need to transform economic structures alongside his calls for personal charity.

King’s powerful sermons reflect the visceral quality of the Greek in the parable. The Samaritan is moved in his ‘bowels’ by compassion. Critics of humanitarianism often remind us that compassion interferes with prudence and judgement, not to mention masking relations of power. Augustine also diagnoses the pathologies of compassion. He offers the following example that reminds us of Singer’s shallow pond and so-called ‘compassion fatigue’:

You must take on somewhat the very affliction from which you want the other person to be freed through your efforts, and you must take it on in this way for the purpose of being able to give help, not achieve the same degree of misery. Analogously, a man bends over and extends his hand to someone lying down, for he does not cast himself down so that they are both lying, but he only bends down to raise up the one lying down.

He worries that compassion can provoke a self-righteous attitude that demeanes the dignity of persons and reduces them to an object – a frequent temptation in providing goods and services to the poor. Augustine warns:

Once you have bestowed gifts on the unfortunate, you may easily yield to the temptation to exalt yourself over him, to assume superiority over the object of your benefaction. He fell into need, and you supplied him: you feel yourself as the giver to be a bigger man than the receiver of the gift.

Some critics hold that the rhetoric of compassion and solidarity are merely bourgeois ideologies of social control. In fact, many recent discussions of humanitarianism adopt a severe form of scepticism and call for more revolutionary change. Augustine, like Singer, does not allow this type of suspicion to get in the way of his call for charity. Augustine claims that Christian love is unconditional and universal, but ‘love, like a fire, should

35 Ibid., 8.4. 35 Augustine, On Christian Teaching, 1.28.29.
36 Singer, Life You Can Save, 164-5. 37 Ibid., xiv.

cover the nearest terrain before it spreads farther afield’. But what is the ‘nearest terrain’? Augustine offers this influential picture:

All people should be loved equally. But you cannot do good to all people equally, so you should take particular thought for those who, as if by lot [quota quadam sorte], happen to be particularly close to you in terms of place, time, or any other circumstances.

This formulation is strikingly egalitarian and universal, especially for a Christian tradition that can also romantically celebrate the local, the private, and the familial. Augustine claims that a Christian cannot love every neighbour. But she should love any neighbour who contingently happens across her way. Time and opportunity place limits on the realization of universal love that Augustine thinks must await the consummation of love when God is ‘all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:28). It was left to Thomas Aquinas to develop it with exacting clarity.

Shallow ponds and the Good Samaritan

Singer’s arguments regarding obligation to the global poor also invoke Aquinas, citing the argument that superabundance is owed to the poor by right. His reliance on common moral intuitions and disturbing facts about global poverty has combined to accomplish a rare feat for moral philosophy: it has changed the way people actually live. Like a good preacher, his reasoning aims to convince people and change their behaviour without leaving them paralysed by guilt. In this case, as Singer hoped, it has changed how they spend their money. ‘The Singer Solution to World Poverty’, published in The New York Times, raised more than $600,000 for Oxfam and UNICEF in one month. More recently, Singer has offered a public standard that follows a sliding scale calling for between 5 and 10 per cent of one’s income in the fight against global poverty. For many, the immediate appeal of Singer’s moral argument emerges from the elegance of his shallow pond analogy.

Framing the issue in this way elicits a response that Singer hopes will overcome Darwinian constraints on altruism or what he calls ‘the bounds of human nature’. Debates continue as to whether or not a global economic order exacerbates inequality in relative terms but also helps the poor in absolute terms. Most Christian ethicists join Singer in admitting that free markets can promote moral goods even if they also feed a vicious consumerism. In fact, as
already noted, modern economies allow us to consider aid to distant strangers in previously unimaginable ways. This opportunity raises the moral stakes of affluence and changes the way obligations might be understood.

Some objections to Singer’s modest principle are less palpable than others for Christians who affirm charity’s intimate relation to justice. Christians, presumably, do not need justifications for why they should act morally or consider the interests of others. Counter-arguments that the very poor merit their fate are both empirically dubious and irrelevant for those called to imitate Christ’s unconditional love. Game theory claims that the poor will squander their resources in anticipation of unreciprocated aid or the dangers of foreign aid do merit prudential regard for effectiveness (i.e. incentives and regulations), but they do not undermine the moral imperative. They may also neglect possible transformations in the game itself. Most importantly, objections fail in the light of the consumer behaviour of affluent Christians. Critics, for example, might argue that Singer’s moral ideal implies that affluent citizens reduce themselves to the level of a Bengali refugee. This scenario would mean that no resources are left for future aid – a bad consequence both economically and morally. If affluent Christians were sacrificing anywhere close to the point of what used to be called evangelical poverty, then this objection would warrant more attention. Few Christians reach even the parity considerations of 2 Corinthians 8:14: ‘as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality’. Singer himself admits that ‘most middle-class people in rich nations don’t have to make this choice’. But questions remain.

How should we distinguish between luxury and necessity? One imagines all sorts of practical pleas: ‘this vacation is necessary for my psychic integrity or to save my failing marriage’; ‘this new car or new suit is necessary for my work’; ‘a university education for my son will help him give more aid to the poor in the long run’; ‘I can help the poor in my country more effectively than the poor in distant countries’. Here we enter the attractive world of commensuration of goods.

Many interpreters point out that the Good Samaritan is not a ‘model of heroic, individual extraordinary self-giving at all, but rather a model of love based on interdependence’. The Samaritan acted within, and relied upon, a network of communal resources. In fact, it was because he was able to trust the innkeeper (another member of a despised group) that he was able to go.

about his personal affairs. Aquinas, as Singer notes, affirms the rightness of the distribution of ‘superabundance’ given Christian convictions about the common good. Singer, however, does not comment on Aquinas’s seminal discussion of the differential ‘order of charity’ that shaped Christian morality and continues to inform practical decisions about aid.38

Aquinas’s gloss on Augustine sits uneasily with Singer’s conclusions about the Christian tradition:

[Augustine] says by reason of place, because one is not bound to search throughout the world for the needy that one may succor them; and it suffices to do works of mercy to those one meets with ... He says by reason of time, because one is not bound to provide for the future needs of others, and it suffices to succor present needs ... Lastly he says, or any other circumstance, because one ought to show kindness to those especially who are by any tie whatever united to us.39

Aquinas’s further appeal to the judgement of prudence may strike Singer as pregnant with the possibility of moral evasion. Given the role of human sin in socially constructing relations of nearness and distance, Christians should also question the role these arguments play in debates about moral obligation. Should the concept of neighbourhood change with the globalization of the neighbourhood?

Recent developments in theology signal an emerging rejection of twentieth-century universalism, which was once celebrated against nineteenth-century theologies bound up with nationalism and racism. John Milbank, for example, joins Spaemann and Barth in arguing that that the ‘specificity of given proximity ... is our only creaturely way to participate in God’s equal love for all’. Of course, Milbank also affirms the biblical command to care for ‘those strangers with whom suddenly we are bonded whether we like it or not, by instances of distress’. Milbank’s economics are decidedly socialist, though religious rather than secular in origin. I suspect he would worry that Singer’s proposals traffic too much in the abstraction and austerity of universalism that makes charity an anxious duty, rather than a festive gift offered in gratitude to God. But my question for Milbank and other Christians remain: does globalization change the way we experience the ‘sudden bonds’ of strangers?

38 Edmund Hill notes that Augustine’s ‘rather casual way of leaving the order of charity to chance will not satisfy the scholastic mind, certainly not that of Saint Thomas. He devotes thirteen articles to the subject in his Summa Theologica ... going into great detail. He decides, for instance, that love of parents takes precedence over love of one’s children and love of one’s father over love of one’s mother’. Hill (ed.), Teaching Christianity (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), 127 n. 28.
39 Aquinas, Summa Theologica, II-II, q71, a1.
Legal philosopher Jeremy Waldron offers a nuanced reading that also celebrates a traditional concern about ‘communal and religious boundaries like those that separated Jew and Samaritan’. Yet Waldron elevates another feature of the parable:

those who fail to help the man who fell among thieves are portrayed in the parable as going out of their way not to help, or going out of their way to avoid a decision about whether to help... their not helping is an intentional doing; a decision to cross the road, a choice not to go out of their way to avoid the predication.41

This reading suggests a helpful practical question in making judgements about material resources: are you crossing to the other side? Regularly to ask that question requires more than just being prepared to be interrupted by the ‘sudden appearance’ of a fallen neighbour. It shifts the force of the parable from the philosophical status of the neighbour back to the practices of being neighbourly.

Singer does not spend his life searching the shallow ponds of the world. And there is no biblical indication that the Good Samaritan spent the rest of his life looking for remote strangers in need. Singer aims high in principle. But his public standards accommodate human frailty in practice. Even Singer, whose own practice is much greater than his public standard, admits to ‘not doing all that I should do; but I could do it, and the fact that I do not does not vitiate the claim that is what I should do’.42

Levels of giving by most Christians pale in comparison to Singer. No more than 5–10 per cent of religious giving in the United States goes to charitable uses such as helping the poor. Most of that charity supports domestic rather than global causes. Christians share Singer’s candid admission that humans are failing to do what is right even when not intentionally willing evil. How does one understand this moral failure?

**Conclusion: moral dilemmas**

What sort of dilemma does the injustice of global poverty present to us? Not, perhaps, one of the ‘dirty hands’ variety, in which we must violate prohibitions for the sake of a greater good. But it does plausibly confront us with conflicting obligations. Reflection on global poverty seems to involve weighing prima facie obligations or various goods we could be promoting against each other, as well as complicity in failing to meet obligations that seem morally required. To meet this challenge, some adopt Kantian language, arguing that such duties are imperfect. Most Christians who feel the pull of aiding the distant poor also feel some conflict with other duties, but not in the way that constitutes a genuine moral dilemma, since reducing what we spend on those near and dear will rarely constitute a real harm. But are there moral costs for those who follow Singer’s modest principles? Do the global poor still have justified complaints?

Most Christian traditions adopt an eschatological optimism. This might have a certain confluence with utilitarian hopefulness in the face of doubts about the goodness or harmony of the world, deep pluralism of values, and the avoidability of personal guilt. I take it that most utilitarians reject moral dilemmas. There is always a best possible act available for utilitarians, especially if a distinction between making something happen and allowing it to happen is rejected. Many Christian traditions, especially Thomism, also reject claims that the world is structured in a way that compels one to sin. Moral perplexity is due to ignorance, weakness of will, or perhaps perversity of will. We might feel sad about our failure to aid the global poor, but we are not forced to do evil. The ethical life cannot be that internally inconsistent. To speak theologically, creation is thought to be deeper than the fall. Our anguish is a type of non-moral anguish. As Spaemann puts it, ‘often the only solidarity which is possible with another is an ineffectual wish to help’.43 Of course, some Christian moral traditions are more open to an even deeper moral tragedy. Divine-command theories sometimes entertain the prospect of genuine moral dilemmas that force us to flee to the grace of God. Some even rely on consequentialist arguments about the best of all possible worlds that include such dilemmas in order to generate piety and dependence on grace.

Responses to global poverty, I think, would do well to address such concerns. The fate of the global poor in an age of affluence should elicit moral anguish about our fragmentary and broken loves. This anguish appears regardless of ‘direct’ causal contribution to the plight of the severely poor, even sometimes through our best efforts to help them, which unintentionally reinforce patterns of domination. Of course, some Christians are direct agents of exploitation and domination against the global poor. They might recognize a grief born of guilt. But how do we distribute complicity

43 Robert Spaemann, _Happiness and Benevolence_, 111.
for individuals caught up in systems of injustice thought to be no fault of their own making? The difficult questions that need to be taken up include: How was the state of affairs caused? To what extent is it an effect of unjust acts? Who is obligated to do what to ameliorate the unjust state of affairs? Are any of these obligations absolute? How do the relevant prima facie obligations of assistance weigh relative to other such obligations? And so forth.

Pursuing such analyses plausibly lends credence to a familiar Christian notion that our actions always already participate in sinful realities. Augustinians would call it original sin. Singer states 'the rich have harmed the poor'. Such cases are not resolved by appeal to prima facie duties, pity for the state of the world, or heroic actions of individual Christians or utilitarians. Following Aquinas, we might characterize moral anguish in the face of global poverty as perplexus secundum quid. In such circumstances, we are all faced by situations that involve such a massive history of unjust actions that our wills are not able to respond rationally. Such indeterminacy may reflect not only what Christians call incontinence, but conditions imposed by failures of practical reason itself. If such a tragic tension exists between rationality and the moral life, Christians do well to pursue their own accounts of how a commitment to the moral life relates to divine forgiveness and sanctification. In fact, much of the Christian tradition has counselled repentance as a way of responding to human failure, deflecting our pretension to act morally. But it seems to me that Christian responses to global poverty may require identifying and confessing the sin of sloth. To the extent that utilitarianism is a secularized Christian ethic, it may have analogous conceptual resources for dealing with moral anguish even in its denial of moral dilemmas. Christians would be wise to listen.

44 Singer, Life You Can Save, 39.
45 For discussion of Aquinas and modern approaches to moral dilemmas, see Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Moral Dilemmas', Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 50 (Autumn 1990): 367–82.

Bibliography

PRIMARY SOURCES, INCLUDING CHURCH DOCUMENTS


Aquinas, Thomas. Summa Contra Gentiles.


