

Questions on Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality."

1. What is the first premise in Singer's argument, that he gives in paragraph 5? Why does he say anyone who disagrees should read no further?
2. What is the second premise, that Singer gives in paragraph 6? Why does he think it will seem so uncontroversial?
3. What is the purpose of discussing the case of the child drowning in the shallow pond? What does Singer think the reader will agree with him about the case?
4. What about the second premise makes it very controversial? (Other than that it would change our world if we accepted it.)
5. Why can we not discriminate against someone simply because they are far away? What does the "moral point of view" consider? Singer seems to claim that we have no justification for discriminating on geographical grounds, but is it enough that the considerations he dismisses are not ways of discriminating due to distance, but due to likely success of helping?
6. Singer considers another difference between your relationship to the drowning child and your relationship to those suffering far away: there are millions of other people equally well-situated to help the people suffering far away while possibly only you are in a position to save the drowning child. Why does Singer dismiss this as a psychological difference that is not a moral one?
7. On p233 Singer considers an argument for "the view that numbers do make a difference." What is that view? What is the argument he gives for it? He says that the argument has true premises but he rejects the argument. Why? What's the problem with it? (Make sure you know what the premises are, too.)
8. At the end of p233, Singer returns to the original argument and considers the conclusion: that everyone ought to give as much as possible. Explain how this conclusion follows from the premises Singer has given.
9. Singer considers a "paradox" that seems to follow from this conclusion. The paradox is roughly: the conclusion is that everyone ought to give as much as possible until it would cause serious suffering to them, but if everyone did what they ought to do, this would mean people sacrificed unnecessarily, but this means that if people did a little less than they were required to do that would be better. But that seems absurd. How does Singer respond to this?
10. What does Singer mean when he says "The traditional distinction between duty and charity cannot be drawn, or at least, not in the place we normally draw it."?
11. What are supererogatory actions? What examples does Singer give of actions that we mistakenly think are supererogatory?
12. What is the first objection Singer considers to his position? How does he respond to it?
13. What is the difference between an explanation and a justification? Which does Singer think we can give for the distinction between duty and supererogation? Why?

14. What is the second objection Singer considers to his argument? What is the relevance of the distinction Singer makes between what we should require of others and what we should require of ourselves?

15. Why does Singer think the fact people don't believe a moral conclusion isn't evidence that the conclusion is true? What do you think?

16. St. Thomas makes an appearance on p239. Why does Singer think this quote supports his position?

17. At the end of p240, Singer returns to the two versions of his second premise: a strong and a moderate version. What are those two versions? Singer relies on the moderate version of his second assumption throughout the article, although he states that he believes the strong version to be true. He seems to have in mind that people will be more willing to endorse the moderate version than the strong, and thereby more willing to go along with his conclusions. What are your thoughts about the plausibility of each version of the principle? Are there reasons to believe the moderate version that do not also support believing the strong version?