

March 30, 2007

- **Giving: How much is ‘too little’? How much is ‘too much’**

To motivate the discussion on Singer, Arthur, and Slote, I offered the following scenario:

You’re a new homeowner and you maintain somewhat of a disciplined budget. It’s Saturday, and it’s your Mom’s birthday, and you’ve set aside ~\$100.00 to take her out to lunch or dinner, and basically spend the day with her. Your mother is advanced in age, and you don’t get to see her all that often. As you’re about to leave, you get a knock on your door.

It’s a representative from the Homeowner’s Association, who is asking for a minimum donation of \$100.00 for a fund the Association has set up on behalf of a resident --Joe Blo, who lives alone and seems to have no immediate family who live nearby. You’ve heard about Joe “through the grapevine,” but you hardly know him at all.

What you’ve heard about Joe isn’t especially flattering. He has a drinking problem, he definitely has financial problems and can’t seem to hold down a steady job. Recently he was in the hospital and is struggling to pay his medical bills, and is in danger of defaulting on his mortgage. Aside from falling behind on his payments, he has been unable to spend the time or money for upkeep of his house and lawn.

This has caused the Association some consternation. The dilapidated state of his yard and home is devaluing its “curb appeal” and has implications for lowering the property value(s) for the adjoining homes, sending ripple effects throughout the neighborhood. However, being ‘bleeding hearts,’ the Association has decided to intervene by creating this assistance fund for Joe. (Aside from his lifestyle which has contributed to the conditions for his presently dire predicament, Joe is otherwise a mild-mannered guy; in other words, easy to take pity on.) The representative explains the situation to you, and in addition to the \$100.00 contribution asks if you could spare time that afternoon to join other members in a “let’s clean up Joe’s lawn and help fix up his home” event.

You’re pretty caught off-guard by this surprise visit, and a little annoyed by it all. After all, you were about to leave the house, looking forward to spending a day with Mom celebrating her birthday, and looking forward to it. What should you do?

- **Peter Singer**

Almost everyone in all three sections agreed that according to Singer, it is your *duty* to change your plans: “Blow off your Mom and help out Joe Blo,” ...for that day, at any rate. As **Pearl Hong (\$0207)** pointed out, this is a typical instance satisfying the second major premise of Singer’s argument which does the bulk of the justificatory and explanatory work in his argument:

[I]f it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without 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.

Singer (*What's Wrong?* 537)

Obviously the sacrifice would not make you (or your Mom) suffer in a manner of comparable moral worth, compared to what Joe might have to go through (regardless of whatever he did to get himself in such a fix) should the Homeowner's Association (HA) and others choose to look the other way. You might feel annoyed and your Mom might "guilt you out," but these are hardly instances which qualify as being 'comparatively bad.' Obviously, the act of charity initiated by the HA would promote a moral good *at least* as "signific[ant] to the bad thing we can prevent." Joe may get so touched by the gesture that it might literally cause him to change his life for the better, in all senses of the word. Moreover, in line with the Utility Principle, since Joe otherwise tries to be a good neighbor and has never done anything actively destructive (i.e. in the form of vandalism, noise disturbances, etc), the effect of assisting Joe would have concretely positive ramifications for the entire community. In hard economic terms, it would reverse the decrease in property value and increase the re-sale values of the homes nearby. In less tangible ways, it would foster stronger community ties and a proportionately greater sense of communal cohesion.

In addition, according to Singer, the fact that you don't happen to know Joe at all and don't live close by is completely irrelevant with respect to your duty to help him out. As far as the HA goes, had they chosen instead to deal with the problem by sicking a mean lawyer onto Joe by threatening a lawsuit (for breach of HA covenant terms) and basically attempting to toss him as fast as possible is also irrelevant in the face of this duty you have to assist Joe. "[T]he 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." (ibid). If anything, had the HA chosen to ignore Joe or to go after him in a harmful way (trying to toss him out) your corresponding duty to assist Joe should be proportionately all the more, within the limits set by your margins of utility. (You should obviously not go bankrupt in your attempt to help Joe).

- **John Arthur**

Arthur retorts: "the greater moral evil rule [i.e. what Arthur refers to the second premise of Singer's argument as quoted above] trades simplicity for accuracy." (546) Arthur is arguing that Singer's rather ambitious and somewhat theoretical stance¹, like many grand theories which seem to look at ethics 'from the top down,' *over-simplifies*. Arthur reminds the reader, by looking at the act of making judgments 'from the bottom up,' ultimately *four* different factors comprise the shaping of such judgments: our assessment of positive and negative rights, on the one hand, as well as our assessment of positive and negative deserts on the other. In addition, our moral perspective pertaining to the former, is forward-looking (in the sense the we project future scenarios and envision what may occur depending on the how we choose...consequentialists or utilitarians may view such outcomes as the end-all, be-all of ethics, but the fact remains *all* ethical decisions involve some degree of projecting and anticipating.) On the other hand, when appraising deserts, we look to the past.

¹ Recall your instructor Darren Hick's refrain: 'Utilitarians view morality as a giant math problem' (i.e., the problem of optimizing the distribution of happiness, and minimizing the distribution of suffering, over a given domain of utility.)

Almost everyone in all three sections agreed that according to Arthur, it's morally *permissible* to cancel your plans with your Mom and help out this resident, but it's certainly not morally *obligatory*. **Christopher Young (§0202)** pointed out that essential reason you're under no moral obligation here is that you are not contractually bound to assist Joe—so Joe, in other words, cannot claim any *positive entitlement* on you or on the HA. Your helping him, in other words, is 'supererogatory,' not obligatory. To recall Judith Thompson's oft-used expression: "It would be *very nice of you* if you did, but..." (you're under no obligation to).

Moreover, if you *do* choose to assist Joe here, you're certainly entitled to be judgmental towards Joe, and possibly even warn or scold him. ("Don't expect handouts from us, go get yourself some help in AA," etc.) In other words, in making such a decision to assist Joe you recognize the undesirability of the *future* consequences if you choose not to help, and this recognition or appraisal overrides what you consider may be Joe's *negative deserts*. (His dire predicament resulting from his somewhat undisciplined and self-destructive lifestyle.) Recall the diligent farmer/lazy farmer illustration: "Not only should we compare the consequences of [the productive farmer's] keeping it [his food] with his giving it away; we should also weigh the fact that...his deserving the product of his labor is outweighed by the need of his lazy neighbor...but being outweighed is in any case not the same as weighing nothing!" (546)

In short, Arthur is reminding us of the innate complexity of making decisions like this (whether to give or not to give). Conversely, treating this issue (as Singer does) in terms of a notion of simple duties is akin (according to Arthur's terms) of focusing on just the issue of positive rights, at the expense of all else, and extending this issue beyond its natural domain. Recall that Arthur argues that positive rights are contractual (i.e. based on contractual agreements) and therefore not natural (based on what we are). To treat it as a *duty* to help Joe Blo (as Singer does) in terms of some rule-based utilitarianism is for all intents and purposes to assume that positive rights are "natural" rights as well. Joe Blo deserves our aid based on *what* the nature of the desired ideal equilibrium state demands of us.

- **Michael Slote**

Like in the above case, almost everyone in all three sections agreed that according to Slote, it's morally *permissible* to cancel your plans with your Mom and help out this resident, but it's certainly not morally *obligatory*. By the same token, according to Slote, so almost everyone agreed, it's morally permissible to refuse to assist Joe and go ahead with your plans to visit your Mom. **Jasmine Tirado (§0207)** pointed this out, because of the naturally stronger sense of empathy we have toward our immediate family member(s).

Michael Slote, in his virtue ethics of caring, is searching for a theory that would justify our natural inclinations to visit Mom and 'blow off' Joe Blo. "Instead of claiming that actions are right or wrong depending on whether they exhibit or reflect what intuition tells us...one can say that actions are wrong or right depending on whether they reflect or exhibit a deficiency of normally or fully empathic caring motivation." (550)

In general, Slote's virtue ethics of caring is virtually diametrically opposed to Singer's rule utilitarianism. Slote bases morality on value-based *contents* like empathy and caring, while Singer bases morality on abstract *formal principle* like the principle of utility. Moreover, while Singer envisions goodness or minimization of suffering as equally distributed or delocalized across a domain of utility, Slote argues just the opposite for the case of empathy. Empathy is *local*: we share a strongest sense of empathy for those nearest to us, in time and space as well as psychologically. Mom is psychologically (and certainly biologically) 'nearer' to you than Joe

Blo, so your motivation not to hurt Mom's feelings may be stronger and hence override any motivation you might possibly feel in the way of what's good for Joe Blo and for the overall 'curb-appeal' of his house in your neighborhood.

- **Critique of the Joe Blo scenario**

Cooking up thought-experiments and supposedly analogous toy scenarios that are meant to illustrate the issues concerning giving to charity that Singer and others discuss, is more of an art than a science. Interesting questions objections to the scenario I devised were raised.

Lauren Grimes (§0202) for instance questioned the applicability of Joe Blo as an analogue to someone suffering in a developing nation or in a collapsed state. In other words, assuming the HA is analogous to an international charity like Oxfam, and you and your Mom are analogous to typical consumers making typical consumer choices concerning how to spend money on leisure, and your neighborhood is analogous to the world, then Lauren pointed out that the issue of accountability just doesn't seem to carry over. We wouldn't judge a starving family of refugees in the Sudan, for example, like we would Joe Blo. The former are clearly victims to terrible political forces beyond their control. Hence, in this regard, thanks to Lauren's concern, it would be better to compare Joe Blo with some *governing body* of some collapsed state with a huge internal crisis. In other words, oftentimes international charities have no choice but to pay off what are often corrupt if not outrightly roughish elements of the governing body, just so the aid worker can even *enter* and *travel safely* to reach the populations in crisis. By the same token, by assisting Joe Blo in this manner the HA has decided to strike a similar Faustian bargain: in the hopes that the direct assistance to Joe will give him incentive to make reforms in the way he 'governs' himself and his lifestyle.

Sarah Kimel (§0206) also questioned the proportionate impact Joe Blo has on the neighborhood as being analogous to the relation between a distant nation in trouble and an affluent Western nation. Certainly, echoing Sarah's point, one thinks of the analogy of a bullet-proof armor-plated limousine with tinted windows cruising through some bad neighborhood: This is meant to represent (according to Robert Kaplan, author of *The Coming Anarchy*) the relationship between industrialized and developed nations versus underdeveloped and war-torn nations. The limos cruise around this wasteland, its drivers shielded and oblivious to war-zone outside. By the same token, *prima facie* Western nations seem relatively removed or not directly affected by distant famines, etc.

To a certain extent, that is. I conceived of the Joe Blo scenario to specify a domain of utility (in this case, the neighborhood) that would seem relevant to Singer's points. No doubt, perhaps Joe Blo's actions proportionately affect the status of the neighborhood in a more prominent sense (the smaller the community, the more vulnerable it is...) nevertheless the impact is *indirect*. Joe's personal problems have engulfed his lifestyle that they put a strain on the community (though this wasn't Joe's primary intention.) By the same token, a country in crisis' domestic problems can mushroom and indirectly affect the web of international relations.

Adil Zahman (§0206) raised the question of whether or not it is obvious according to Slote, that you should really blow off Joe, by pressing further on the nature of the relationship you have with Mom in this scenario. Mom is elderly, you don't get to see her very often, but she's not suffering and she is certainly not imperiled like Joe is. So it's not quite so obvious that Slote would endorse your actions to avoid helping here, since the issue concerns empathy, especially in the case of suffering. Adil pointed out, in other words, that choosing

Mom over Joe would make better sense in this ethics of caring if there was an element of moral weight attached to your upcoming visit to Mom's, in which Mom might be suffering in some form or fashion. (For instance, if Mom were in frail health and you \$100.00 was intended to buy her medication or therapeutic equipment, if she's immobile or infirm.)

Michael Donovan (§0206) also reversed the issue by asking if, according to Singer, since we're all entitled to equal interests, would this come into conflict with what would seem like the obvious duty to assist Joe? In other words, seen from Joe's perspective, regardless of his plight, would Singer's theory give moral ground to Joe for *not* asking for assistance, insofar as such actions may come into conflict with the utilitarian's stipulation that we're all endowed with equal interest and must treat each other so accordingly?