

Obligation and Over-Demandingness: Reassessing Singer's Ethics of Altruism

Madhusmita Dobai

Lecturer in Philosophy, Pran Nath College (Autonomous), Utkal University

Abstract

Peter Singer's landmark essay "*Famine, Affluence, and Morality*" (1972) radically redefines the moral boundaries of human obligation, arguing that affluent individuals have a duty to prevent suffering wherever possible, provided doing so does not entail a comparable moral sacrifice. This paper critically examines Singer's principle, distinguishing its strong and moderate formulations, and arguing that the strong version, though normatively ambitious, is philosophically untenable and practically infeasible. The analysis focuses on three principal objections: the demandingness objection, the collapse of the duty–charity distinction, and Singer's neglect of proximity and relational obligation. It further extends the debate into contemporary ethical contexts: global poverty, climate change, and global health ethics to evaluate the applicability and moral sustainability of Singer's framework in real-world crises. The paper argues that while Singer's principle rightly expands the moral imagination, only a moderate interpretation grounded in collective and institutional responsibility can balance moral universality with human finitude. The conclusion defends a reformulated version of Singer's principle as a feasible guide for both individual and systemic ethics in an interdependent world.

Keywords: *Singer, obligation, demandingness, supererogation, global justice, climate ethics, effective altruism*

Introduction

Peter Singer's "*Famine, Affluence, and Morality*" (1972) remains one of the most influential and controversial essays in modern moral philosophy. Written in response to the Bengal famine, it challenged the complacency of affluent societies toward global suffering and sought to expand the scope of moral responsibility beyond national and personal boundaries. Singer's central claim is starkly simple yet morally transformative: if we can prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we are morally required to do so. This principle, formulated in both strong and moderate versions, seeks to redefine the ethical relation between the individual and the distant other.

Singer's argument builds on the consequentialist tradition of utilitarianism, extending the principle of impartial beneficence to global ethics. The strong version of his principle demands that individuals prevent suffering wherever possible, regardless of personal cost, whereas the moderate version permits moral limits based on the significance of what must be sacrificed. Singer himself endorses the strong formulation, claiming that genuine moral progress requires transcending the traditional boundaries between duty and charity. Yet this position has provoked extensive philosophical debate, particularly around the demandingness of moral obligations, the erosion of supererogation, and the neglect of proximity and partial commitments.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a critical reassessment of Singer's principle from both theoretical and practical standpoints. The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, it clarifies the conceptual structure of Singer's

two formulations and evaluates their utilitarian premises. Second, it advances three key objections: (1) the demandingness objection, which challenges the psychological and practical viability of Singer's strong principle; (2) the collapse of the distinction between moral duty and supererogation, which undermines the coherence of moral praise and moral obligation; and (3) the problem of proximity, which questions Singer's rejection of relational or spatial considerations in moral deliberation. Finally, the paper extends this analysis into contemporary ethical applications including global poverty, climate change, and global health crises to demonstrate how the moderate version of Singer's principle can be reformulated as a realistic and sustainable moral framework for the twenty-first century.

The central claim defended here is that Singer's moral vision, while profoundly illuminating, becomes self-defeating if interpreted through the strong version of his principle. By contrast, the moderate principle of moral obligation, when embedded in collective and institutional contexts, preserves Singer's humanitarian impulse while avoiding the pitfalls of moral overreach. The paper concludes that ethical progress requires neither moral sainthood nor moral minimalism, but a balanced conception of obligation that aligns moral idealism with human capacity.

Singer's Framework of Moral Reasoning

Singer's argument rests on the utilitarian foundation of impartial beneficence. Drawing from the Benthamite and Millian tradition, he evaluates moral acts solely by their consequences for overall well-being. The guiding intuition is illustrated through Singer's well-known "*drowning child*" analogy: if one can save a drowning child at the cost of muddy clothes, one is morally obligated to do so. According to Singer, the fact that most global suffering occurs at a distance does not diminish our moral responsibility, since distance is morally irrelevant.

He formulates his principle as follows:

Strong Version: *"If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby causing something worse to occur, we ought, morally, to do it."*

Moderate Version: *"If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it."* (Singer, 1972)

The difference between these versions is subtle but crucial. The strong version effectively requires individuals to sacrifice almost all material comfort until they reach a state comparable to those they aid. The moderate version, by contrast, sets a moral limit by excluding sacrifices of "*moral significance*." While both are grounded in utilitarian reasoning, the strong version transforms morality into a demanding ideal of continuous altruistic sacrifice.

Though Singer's humanitarian motivation is clear, his strong principle invites skepticism. Many critics argue that his theory is not a guide to moral life but a form of moral perfectionism that ordinary moral agents cannot live up to (Murphy, 2000; Cullity, 2004). To examine this claim, we may turn to the demandingness objection.

The Demandingness Objection

The demandingness objection challenges moral theories that require agents to sacrifice so much of their well-being that morality becomes an oppressive burden. Originally articulated in response to act-utilitarianism, the objection claims that a moral theory should not require more than what can reasonably be expected from human agents.

Singer's strong principle exemplifies this problem. If we accept that it is morally wrong to spend money on trivial luxuries when that same money could prevent starvation, then most ordinary actions buying clothes, dining out, attending entertainment become morally impermissible. As Garrett Cullity (2004) observes, Singer's principle "*threatens to moralize every aspect of daily life.*"

Liam Murphy (2000) proposes a refinement of utilitarian reasoning by introducing the idea of collective obligation: moral requirements must be distributed fairly among agents, considering what others are also contributing. Singer's principle, however, operates at the level of individual obligation, demanding that each agent act as though they alone are responsible for global suffering. This approach ignores collective structures of moral responsibility and leads to a moral theory that is over-demanding both psychologically and socially.

Furthermore, demandingness undermines moral motivation. If moral standards are set at impossibly high levels, individuals may disengage entirely, leading to moral paralysis rather than action. A sustainable ethical principle should motivate compliance, not guilt-induced withdrawal. Thus, Singer's strong version, while normatively pure, fails as a practicable ethical guide.

Supererogation and the Duty–Charity Collapse

A second major issue with Singer's strong principle is its rejection of the distinction between duty and supererogation. In traditional moral theory, duties are actions that are morally required, while supererogatory acts are praiseworthy but not obligatory. Singer's framework erases this line: every act of charity becomes a moral duty, and failure to give becomes moral wrongdoing.

Singer's inversion of moral categories is evident when he claims that giving to famine relief is not an act of charity but a moral obligation. As he puts it, "the traditional distinction between duty and charity cannot be drawn in the way it usually is" (Singer, 1972). On this account, not donating to aid agencies is as morally blameworthy as allowing a child to drown in front of one's eyes.

This radical revision has profound implications. It implies that almost all affluent individuals are living immorally, since they could always give more. However, moral philosophers such as Shelly Kagan (1989) argue that a moral system must allow for supererogation space for moral excellence beyond duty. If every moral act becomes obligatory, the very concept of moral praise collapses, as there is no longer a distinction between the minimally decent and the heroic.

Moreover, from a Kantian perspective, Singer's position misrepresents the nature of moral duty. For Kant, beneficence is an imperfect duty: one must sometimes promote others' happiness, but agents retain discretion

over when and how to do so. Singer's principle converts this imperfect duty into a perfect one, stripping moral agents of autonomy.

The upshot is that Singer's moral universe admits no supererogation only failure to meet endless duty. While this aligns with consequentialist impartiality, it undermines the phenomenology of moral life, where moral worth often arises from voluntary acts of goodness that go beyond what is owed.

The Neglect of Proximity and Relational Obligation

Singer's third major assumption that distance is morally irrelevant has been widely criticized. He contends that moral responsibility to a nearby child drowning in a pond is identical to responsibility toward distant victims of famine. Physical or emotional proximity, he claims, cannot justify moral discrimination.

Yet this view ignores the moral relevance of relational contexts. As Bernard Williams (1985) argues, moral reasoning that disregards personal attachments becomes "alienating," severing agents from their own projects and relationships. Morality, on this view, cannot demand that individuals abandon the partialities that give life meaning. Consider the scenario: one's father requires a life-saving blood transfusion at the same moment a stranger nearby is in distress. Singer's principle offers no ground for prioritizing the father. Yet common moral intuition and virtue ethics alike regard such preference as not only permissible but morally commendable. Proximity and intimacy generate special obligations that Singer's impartial consequentialism cannot account for.

Susan Wolf (1982) further develops this critique in her essay "*Moral Saints*." If moral worth is measured solely by maximizing welfare, then the moral saint becomes an agent devoid of personal identity and human attachments. Singer's strong principle, by demanding continual altruism, risks transforming moral life into an abstract arithmetic of utility, detached from emotional reality.

Thus, the disregard for proximity and relational duty renders Singer's principle normatively rigid and psychologically implausible. A plausible ethical framework must balance impartial concern with the moral legitimacy of partial attachments.

Toward a Moderate Principle of Obligation

Having identified the limits of Singer's strong principle, we may ask what a more realistic and sustainable moral principle would look like. The moderate version that Singer himself mentions but does not endorse offers a promising alternative:

"If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it." (Singer, 1972, p. 241)

This formulation retains the utilitarian emphasis on preventing harm but acknowledges that moral obligations are bounded by the agent's capacity and the moral weight of competing commitments. It also preserves the distinction between moral requirement and moral heroism.

Garrett Cullity (2004) defends a similar position, arguing that a principle of beneficence must recognize thresholds of cost beyond which sacrifice becomes supererogatory. Moral obligation should not

demand that agents reduce themselves to the level of those they assist. Instead, morality should function as a cooperative enterprise in which individuals contribute to alleviating suffering within reasonable limits. This moderate account also aligns with a virtue-ethical perspective, where moral excellence is measured not by relentless altruism but by the cultivation of balanced dispositions generosity, compassion, and prudence. A person who gives beyond comfort but within reason exemplifies moral virtue without succumbing to moral exhaustion. The moderate principle, then, reconciles the universality of moral concern with the finitude of human agents. It encourages substantial moral responsibility without moral martyrdom.

Applications and Contemporary Implications

Singer's principle does not exist in a philosophical vacuum. Its force lies in its attempt to translate moral theory into concrete guidance for global problems poverty, humanitarian crises, and now climate change. Assessing the practical reach of Singer's obligation principle reveals both its moral appeal and its pragmatic limits.

Global Poverty and Humanitarian Relief

Singer's central motivation was the moral complacency of affluent societies toward global destitution. Half a century later, the global wealth gap persists: while the cost of preventing deaths from malaria or lack of clean water is low, discretionary spending in wealthy nations remains extraordinarily high. Contemporary development economists (Pogge 2002; Risse 2005) have argued that the global economic order itself perpetuates suffering, creating structural obligations rather than purely individual ones.

Singer's strong principle seems to imply that every non-essential luxury is immoral so long as preventable deaths exist. Organizations such as The Life You Can Save and GiveWell inspired directly by Singer seek to operationalize this demand through effective altruism. Effective altruism channels Singer's consequentialism into a data-driven movement, arguing that individuals can maximize moral impact by donating to cost-effective causes. Yet, as critics like MacAskill (2015) and Srinivasan (2019) observe, translating the strong principle into lifestyle prescriptions risks creating moral guilt without systemic change. Donations alleviate symptoms but may leave exploitative structures intact.

A moderate interpretation of Singer's principle fits this landscape better. It encourages substantial giving and moral awareness while recognizing limits of individual capacity and the need for collective political reform. Rather than moralizing consumption absolutely, it calls for institutional mechanism's progressive taxation, ethical trade, and global justice frameworks that distribute beneficence fairly.

Climate Change and Intergenerational Ethics

The climate crisis extends Singer's principle into a temporal dimension. Future generations are the "distant strangers" of our time. If we can prevent catastrophic climate outcomes without sacrificing something of comparable moral importance, we are obligated to act. Applied literally, Singer's strong version would demand radical lifestyle overhauls ending air travel, meat consumption, and high-emission industries regardless of cost. This mirrors the same over-demandingness problem: individual action cannot alone bear the entire moral weight of planetary mitigation.

Philosophers of climate justice (Gardiner 2011; Broome 2012) have argued that moral responsibility must be allocated collectively across states and generations. Singer's framework, when moderated, can inform these debates by grounding a principle of non-negligence: individuals and institutions alike must prevent foreseeable harm when doing so does not entail comparable moral sacrifice. This yields a proportional standard for climate ethics demanding serious mitigation and adaptation efforts while avoiding moral paralysis.

Pandemic and Global Health Ethics

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Singer's reasoning re-emerged in questions of vaccine distribution and public-health solidarity. If one can prevent suffering and death through affordable collective measures masking, vaccination, sharing medical resources one is morally obligated to do so. However, the strong principle would imply that affluent nations must continue diverting vast resources abroad until global health parity is achieved, a requirement politically and economically infeasible. The moderate interpretation instead endorses shared but differentiated obligations: affluent agents bear greater but bounded duties to assist, aligned with capacity and proportional sacrifice.

Moral Motivation and Practical Realism

Real-world application shows that Singer's strong principle often triggers moral burnout rather than sustained altruism. Studies in moral psychology (Miller 2014; Snow 2010) suggest that excessively high moral standards reduce compliance. A workable moral system must therefore balance aspirational ethics with motivational psychology. The moderate principle achieves this by framing beneficence as an attainable norm that encourages consistent engagement regular giving, ethical consumption, civic responsibility without demanding total renunciation of personal goals.

Institutionalizing the Moderate Principle

Singer's insight remains transformative if reinterpreted institutionally. States and corporations, not just individuals, possess the power to prevent massive harms without equivalent moral loss. Policies such as global health funds, climate-finance mechanisms, and fair-trade agreements can embody the moderate principle at scale. This reframing transforms Singer's individual moralism into institutional consequentialism a pragmatic route toward global justice.

Conclusion

Singer's *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* remains a landmark in applied ethics, challenging complacency and expanding the moral imagination beyond national and personal borders. Yet its strong principle of obligation, while intellectually compelling, collapses under the weight of its own moral demands. It erases vital distinctions between duty and supererogation, ignores the ethical relevance of proximity, and imposes expectations that exceed human capacity for sustained altruism. The moderate version of Singer's principle, by contrast, represents a philosophically coherent and humanly achievable moral framework. It maintains the spirit of Singer's universal beneficence while integrating psychological realism and moral pluralism. Ultimately, moral progress does not require the eradication of all self-interest, but the cultivation of responsible compassion—one that recognizes

both the universality of suffering and the limits of human endurance. Ethics must guide, not overwhelm; inspire, not condemn. In that sense, the moderate principle best fulfils the promise of moral philosophy: to make the good both intelligible and livable. Singer's strong principle radiates moral urgency; it forces moral agents to confront global suffering as an immediate personal concern. Yet its practical translation demonstrates the same over-demandingness that undermines its normative force. Applied without qualification, it risks guilt-driven moral paralysis or unrealistic heroism. The moderate version interpreted through collective responsibility and institutional design retains Singer's cosmopolitan compassion while ensuring moral feasibility. In an era defined by systemic crises poverty, climate change, pandemics the challenge is not to abandon Singer's vision but to embed it in sustainable forms of obligation. The moral task is continuous: to expand the circle of concern without erasing the limits that make moral life livable. Ethics, rightly understood, should guide action within the human horizon of possibility.

References

- Broome, J. (2012). *Climate Matters: Ethics in a Warming World*. W.W. Norton.
- Gardiner, S. (2011). *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*. Oxford University Press.
- MacAskill, W. (2015). *Doing Good Better: Effective Altruism and a Radical New Way to Make a Difference*. Gotham Books.
- Miller, C. (2014). *Moral Character: An Empirical Theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Pogge, T. (2002). *World Poverty and Human Rights*. Polity Press.
- Risse, M. (2005). "How Does the Global Order Harm the Poor?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 33(4), 349–376.
- Snow, N. (2010). *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory*. Routledge.
- Singer, P. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–43.
- Srinivasan, A. (2019). "The Limits of Effective Altruism." *The New York Review of Books*.