

Annulling Peter Singer's life-saving analogy: Why the analogy is superfluous in the argument for why it is morally wrong not to contribute time or money to aid agencies¹

Ingi F. Vilhjálmsson
iv24@st-andrews.ac.uk

1.1 Introduction

It is difficult to refute Peter Singer's conclusion that people in affluent societies *ought* to contribute time and money to aid agencies and that it is morally wrong of them not to do so.² Every year millions of people in the world's poor countries die of starvation, treatable illnesses and from other poverty related causes. We know this and we also know that these aid agencies can save the lives of some of these people. Singer's conclusion therefore seems very plausible morally speaking.

Even though the conclusion is morally sound there are some problems with the argument via a life-saving analogy which Singer uses to reach this conclusion. Singer claims that failing to donate time and money to aid agencies is morally analogous to not saving the life of someone who is dying right in front of us. Because we have the intuition that failing to save the life of someone who is dying right in front of us is morally wrong then it is, according to Singer, also morally wrong not to contribute time and money to aid agencies, given that we know that these aid agencies save the lives of people in the world's poorer countries.

In this paper I will criticize Singer's life-saving analogy which grounds his morally plausible conclusion. After having explained Singer's argument I will state an

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² Singer, Peter. "Famine, Affluence and Morality."

objection to Singer's use of an analogical argument to reach this conclusion. This is the immediacy objection which I will state to show that the life-saving analogy is superfluous to reach Singer's conclusion. The immediacy objection highlights the second main criticism of the life-saving analogy: the possibility that the analogy is questionable due to a relevant lack of similarity between the two cases being compared in it.

I will then put forward a revision of the argument for Singer's conclusion. I will claim that we should state the argument for the conclusion deductively, using the principle which Singer uses in his analogical argument as a universal moral principle. Recasting the argument in this deductive, non-analogical way removes the objections to Singer's argument which arise as a consequence of it being stated analogically and makes it more difficult to criticize the argument's conclusion. Stating the argument deductively simplifies and strengthens the argument for a conclusion which is not reasonably rejectable and therefore also better serves the interests of the global poor which it is meant to defend.

1.2. Singer's and Cullity's arguments for the life-saving analogy

Singer uses an argument from a life-saving analogy to argue that a failure to contribute money or time to aid agencies is morally analogous to a failure to save a child who is drowning in a shallow pond, given that one only has to muddy one's clothes to do so.³ Singer begins his argument with the story of the drowning child and a common moral intuition about that case: Most people have the intuition that it is morally wrong of a passerby not to save the life of a person who he sees dying in front of him. From the moral judgment about the drowning child Singer derives a moral principle which states

³ Singer, Peter. "Famine, Affluence and Morality," page 231.

that all else being equal then it is wrong to fail to avert a significant harm to someone's life at an insignificant cost to oneself. According to Singer this moral principle does not distinguish between whether the dying person is close or far away from us, for immediacy does not influence our moral obligation to help the dying. Singer thinks that the fact that a person is physically near to us may make it more likely that we will help that person but it does not show why we rather ought to help that person.⁴ The next step in the argument is that the moral judgment that it is morally wrong not to donate time and money to aid agencies is derived from the moral principle.

Singer's subsumptive argument for the life-saving analogy has the following form.

A moral judgment at stage one: It is morally wrong not to make a small sacrifice in order to save someone's life *directly*.

A general moral principle at stage two: Failing to avert great harm to someone else at a comparatively insignificant cost to oneself is wrong (all else being equal).

A moral judgment at stage three: It is morally wrong not to contribute to aid agencies.

One of the problems with subsumptive justification in arguments like Singer's is highlighted by Jonathan Dancy.⁵ According to Dancy we cannot extract principles from our moral judgments about particular cases because that kind of judgment would itself be based on a moral principle. Dancy says that if a moral judgment is subsumptive, as Singer assumes in his argument, then it needs moral principles to begin with and that those principles cannot be gotten from a moral judgment on pain of an infinite regress.⁶ The justification in Singer's argument leads to such an infinite regress because he does

⁴ Singer, Peter. "Famine, Affluence and Morality," page 232.

⁵ Dancy, Jonathan. *Ethics without principles*, page 5.

⁶ Dancy, Jonathan. *Ethics without principles*, page 5.

not assume that the moral judgment which the argument starts from is grounded in a moral principle. The claim which I am making here is that subsumptive arguments for the life-saving analogy are in fact deductive arguments with an unstated and a concealed universal moral premise, dressed up as arguments from analogy.⁷ This is a common criticism against arguments from analogy for some critics claim that all arguments from analogy can be recast deductively.⁸

Another problem with subsumptive justification is that the judgment we begin with at stage one will always underdetermine the content of the moral principle at stage 2. The moral principle which we derive at the second stage will always be more general than the judgment stated at stage one.⁹ We could, for example, derive the moral principle that failing to help someone *directly*, like in the pond case, is morally wrong. From that moral principle we could derive the judgment that not donating time and money to aid agencies is not morally wrong.¹⁰ Such a conclusion would be contrary to Singer's intention and conclusion in the life-saving analogy but it would still be a completely valid conclusion within a subsumptive argument.

Cullity wants to hold on to the three-stage structured argument for the life-saving analogy which Singer put forward but also to meet this challenge to it. Cullity thinks that this challenge can be met by arguing that what is morally analogous in the two types of cases, the pond case and the aid agency case, is that inaction in both of them amounts to a failure of beneficence towards other people.¹¹ Beneficence, according to Cullity, is a practical concern for other people's interests. By a practical concern Cullity means a

⁷ Juthe, A. "Argument from Analogy," page 1.

⁸ Juthe, A. "Argument from Analogy," page 19.

⁹ Cullity, Garrett. *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, page 14.

¹⁰ Cullity, Garrett. *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, page 14.

¹¹ Cullity, Garrett. *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, page 14 and 32.

concern which is expressed in action.¹² Identifying this common moral property in the inaction in the two kinds of cases is, according to Cullity, a sufficient condition for defending the life-saving analogy. The stance that I will take, on the other hand, is that we should not hold on to this subsumptive version of the argument because of the many inherent problems in this kind of analogical argument; we can shun so many problems by recasting the argument deductively. What I do argue for, echoing Cullity, is that we should use beneficence to ground the universal moral principle in the deductive argument.

Next I will explain how and why the life-saving analogy can be seen to be superfluous in the argument for Singer's conclusion.

1.3. Is the analogy superfluous and questionable: The immediacy objection

The most forceful criticism against the similarity of the moral properties of the two cases in the life-saving analogy is the immediacy objection. This objection states that it affects the reason which we act on in the two cases whether or not we are able to help the person who is in danger *directly* and whether or not my help will be mediated by another agency.¹³

According to Cullity we always have a reason to help a dying person, whether it is directly or through aid agencies, but that it is a psychological fact that our motivation to save people's lives is triggered more easily when someone is dying right in front of us. The reason we have to save the life of the child in the pond is more motivationally engaging than the reason we have to donate money to aid agencies. According to Cullity

¹² Cullity, Garrett. *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, page 16.

¹³ Cullity, Garrett. *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, page 21.

immediacy creates *further* reasons for an agent to help persons in life-saving cases. It is more blameworthy and therefore possibly more wrong not to save the life of the child who is drowning in the pond than not to donate time and money to aid agencies.¹⁴ If I can help a dying person directly and if my help is not mediated by another agency then it is more wrong of me not to do so than to fail to assist a dying person who I can only help indirectly and through other agents. In a situation where I have to choose between saving a person directly, like in the pond case, and saving a person indirectly, like in the aid agency case, I should choose to save the person who I can save directly.

This claim of Cullity does not contradict his claim that the life-saving analogy should be maintained because inaction in both of the cases amounts to a failure of beneficence.¹⁵ That is to say: Cullity wants to avoid the reasons of immediacy by basing the argument on an argument from beneficence where reasons of immediacy do not play a part in deciding whether the two cases are analogous or not. According to Cullity the fact that both cases amount to a failure of beneficence is a sufficient condition to hold the analogy together.

The lack of the importance of immediacy in Cullity's argument from beneficence for the life-saving analogy raises a fundamental question: If reasons of immediacy do not make a moral difference when stating why the pond case and the aid agency case are morally analogous, why bring them into the argument to begin with? That is to say: Why start the argument by stating the bedrock moral judgment that failing to save someone's life *directly* is morally wrong, if the immediacy inherent in the claim does not serve a

¹⁴ Cullity, Garrett. *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, pages 19 and 29. Another philosopher who shares Cullity's view is Frances Kamm who thinks that we have common sense intuitions which tell us that we have a stronger duty to help those who are near to us than those who are at a greater distance from us. Kamm, Frances. "Does distance matter morally to the duty to rescue," page 655.

¹⁵ Cullity, Garrett. *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, pages 11 and 16.

purpose in reaching the conclusion that it is a failure of beneficence? The reasons of immediacy seem superfluous in the argument to begin with. If the reasons of immediacy are superfluous then the life-saving analogy, which is based on comparing the two cases which have distinct levels of immediacy, is also superfluous. We should not compare these two cases, which have distinct levels of immediacy, in the argument to begin with because they do not play a part in the argument. On Cullity's account we shun these reasons of immediacy when pointing to what we think is analogous between the two cases on Cullity's account: that both amount to a failure of beneficence.

A second problem which the immediacy objection leads to is whether it shows the life-saving analogy to be a questionable analogy due to the relevant dissimilarities between the two cases being compared in the analogy.¹⁶ The life-saving analogy is possibly such a questionable analogy because it is an argumentative analogy and not an explanatory analogy: an analogy used merely to explain something.¹⁷ Only argumentative analogies can be questionable analogies. The life-saving analogy is an argumentative analogy because it is used to prove a point: that inaction in the aid agency case is morally wrong because it is analogous to inaction in the pond case.

But this possible criticism does not undermine the analogy or refute it. The reason why it is difficult to undermine the analogy via this questionability criticism based on the immediacy objection is the vague nature of analogical reasoning. Any two objects can be said to be alike in many ways: A chair and a computer can be said to be alike because

¹⁶ Kahane, Howard and Cavender, Nancy. *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric: The Use of Reason in Everyday Life*, page 97.

¹⁷ Kahane, Howard and Cavender, Nancy. *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric: The Use of Reason in Everyday Life*, page 98. Plato's cave analogy in the *Republic* is an example of such an explanatory analogy.

they weigh less than a hundred pounds and are both located in a university room.¹⁸ But are we justified in constructing an analogy out of the two cases where we liken the chair and the computer together because they share these properties? This is a common problem in arguments from analogy: Are the two cases which are being likened in the analogy similar enough to warrant the comparison? Because of this dissimilarity between the cases in an analogy, or because an argument has not been given to support the claim that the objects which are allegedly analogous are sufficiently similar in relevant respects, arguments from analogy often turn out to be fallacious.¹⁹ There is, on the other hand, no single correct way of making the necessary restrictions on the relevance and importance of similarities in the two cases being compared in an analogy. That is to say: There is no correct method to verify whether two cases are sufficiently similar to draw an analogy between them. The assessment of similarities in two cases in an analogy depends therefore on an “intrinsically relative judgment.”²⁰ Because of this vague nature of analogical reasoning it is both very difficult to give a conclusive case *for* the analogy and also *against* it. The question I wish to highlight with this discussion is whether the benefits of drawing the analogy outweigh the possible questionability and the negative consequences of drawing it? My answer to this question is no: We should discard the analogy from Singer’s argument.

There is a way to avoid the comparison of the two cases in Singer’s subsumptive version of the life-saving analogy while holding onto the argument’s morally plausible conclusion. If we avoid the comparison between the two cases we avoid the problems which stem from the question: How analogous are the pond case and the aid agency case

¹⁸ White, Jefferson. “Analogical Reasoning,” page 584.

¹⁹ Howell, Tracy and Kemp, Gary. *Critical Thinking: A Concise Guide*, pages 128 – 129.

²⁰ White, Jefferson. “Analogical Reasoning,” page 584.

and is it valid to liken them together? This can be done by using the pond case and the aid agency case as cases in two separate deductive arguments which have Singer's principle as a universal moral principle.

1.4. Discarding the life-saving analogy and the revision of the argument

Stating the argument for the pond cases and the aid agency case deductively rids us of the problems which arise as a consequence of using an analogical argument. The immediacy objection is, for example, no longer an objection to the argument once the argument has been stated deductively. The revised argument stating our moral duty to contribute time and money to aid agencies has the following form:

A general moral principle at stage one: Failing to avert great harm to someone at a comparatively insignificant cost to oneself is wrong (other things equal).

A premise at stage two: Aid agencies avert great harm to people's lives.

A moral judgment at stage three: Contributing nothing to aid agencies is wrong.

Singer justifies the moral principle by taking the assumption for granted that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are bad and then derives the principle from this assumption.²¹ In Cullity's parlance the assumption which grounds this principle is morally plausible because not acting when one knows that people are suffering and dying from lack of food, shelter and medical care amounts to a failure of beneficence towards these people.

Another philosopher who thinks that such a principle is reasonable is Thomas Scanlon.²² Scanlon claims that such a principle, which he calls the Rescue Principle, could not reasonably be rejected. According to Scanlon's contractualist moral theory our

²¹ Singer, Peter. "Famine, Affluence and Morality," page 231.

²² Scanlon, T.M. *What we owe to each other*, page 224.

thinking about right and wrong should be structured around finding principles which others, insofar as they are similarly motivated could not, reasonably reject.²³ The universal moral principle in the deductive argument cannot reasonably be rejected. What I am arguing for is that we should base our argument stating our moral duties to the global poor on something similar to Scanlon's universal Rescue Principle which then is grounded in beneficence; not on a life-saving analogy.

Using this universal principle we can also restate the argument deductively for why it is wrong not to save the life of the child in the pond case:

A general moral principle at stage one: Failing to avert great harm to someone at a comparatively insignificant cost to oneself is wrong (other things equal).

A premise at stage two: Saving someone's life directly is averting great harm to someone's life.

A moral judgment at stage three: It is morally wrong not to make a small sacrifice in order to save someone's life *directly*.

Instead of having one analogical argument where the moral principle is derived from the pond case, and then the aid agency case is derived from the moral principle, we have two separate deductive arguments which have the same general moral principles at stage one. Some of the positive effects of making this revision to Singer's and Cullity's arguments will be discussed next.

1.5. Conclusion

One of my two intentions in this paper has been to highlight the reasonability of the conclusion in Singer's argument that it is morally wrong not to donate money to aid agencies. But I have tried to show that the reason why the conclusion is plausible should not be seen to hinge on the moral similarity between the two kinds of life-saving cases

²³ Scanlon, T.M. *What we owe to each other*, page 191.

but on the plausibility of a universal moral principle grounded in beneficence: That we should show concern for other people's interests and that not doing so is morally wrong. If we restate the argument in this deductive way then we do not have to speculate about the difficult question of how morally analogous the two cases are: It becomes trivial in the argument. If we make this restatement then some of the discussions about Singer's paper become obsolete because the main focus in the discussion about his argument has been about the validity of the life-saving analogy and not the plausibility of the argument's moral principle. Making this restatement shifts the focus of attention away from the life-saving analogy and to the most important aspect of Singer's argument: the moral principle which he argues for.

Reaching this conclusion in a deductive argument will force the skeptics and the critics of this conclusion to argue against the validity of the principle and not the validity of the life-saving analogy which grounds the conclusion of the argument for the life-saving analogy. One of the reasons why a deductive argument is superior to an analogical one is that the critics of Singer's and Cullity's arguments can claim that by undermining the life-saving analogy they are thereby undermining its conclusion. My claim, on the other hand, is that the validity of the life-saving analogy does not influence the reasonableness of the conclusion that it is morally wrong not to donate time and money to aid agencies, but that arguing via the life-saving analogy gives this mistaken impression.

If the universal moral principle, which grounds the two arguments above, is reasonable then we owe it to the global poor, who are dying by the millions every year of hunger and treatable illnesses, to state the argument which grounds our duties to them as simply, directly and convincingly as possible. The hope is that as a consequence the

citizens of the affluent world will rather be convinced by the argument's conclusion and will rather start to act according to the principle because of its inherent reasonableness. Discarding the life-saving analogy is a step towards that objective because the analogy casts an unnecessary shadow of doubt on the validity of a moral principle which cannot be reasonably rejected. In order to fortify the argument grounding our duties to the global poor we therefore *ought* to begin our reasoning for the conclusion from that moral principle and not from the intuitive plausibility of the moral judgment which grounds the argument for the life-saving analogy.

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