

# Peter Singer's Theory of International Aid: Core content, Questioning and Defense

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**Abstract.** Since the 21st century, people around the world have shown unprecedented concern for disasters occurring overseas, but the effectiveness of international aid has failed to meet expectations. In order to encourage rich people to contribute to international aids. Peter Singer has put forward a theory on international aid, arguing that against the backdrop of globalization and the development of Internet technology, people have a moral obligation to provide international aid. Singer contends that wealthy countries and individuals should provide global assistance because they have the ability to do so without sacrificing something more important. However, Singer's theory faces numerous challenges. This article will introduce the three most representative challenges that Peter Singer faces, as well as Peter Singer's own supplementation and reinforcement of his theory in response to these challenges. Finally, based on the author's summary of Singer and other thinkers, regarding the topic of international aid, the author puts forward his own solutions.

**Keywords:** International Aid, Peter Singer, Moral Obligation, Effective Altruism, Global Poverty.

## 1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, people around the world have shown an unprecedented level of attention to disasters occurring overseas. Although disasters occurring in countries thousands of miles away are difficult to directly affect people's normal lives, they can still arouse people's attention and discussion, which is an objective fact. However, international aid, which accompanies international attention, does not have the same powerful force. It is not uncommon for international aid to fail to meet expectations. For instance, "In 2024, the United Nations' appeal for \$2.6 billion in aid for the Democratic Republic of the Congo received only one-third of the funds. In 2024, the humanitarian community sought nearly \$45 billion to help 185 million of the world's most vulnerable people in crisis situations, but at that time, only 5% of the funds were in place, leaving a funding gap of more than \$42 billion [1]."

Moreover, in many countries, there are significant differences among the public regarding whether international aid should be provided. A CNN public opinion poll on August 9, 2023, showed that 55% of American respondents believed that Congress should not approve more funds for aid to Ukraine, 45% supported the approval of relevant funds, and 51% thought that the United States had already done enough and did not need to provide additional support to Ukraine.

## 2. Peter Singer's Core Theory

With the continuous strengthening of the trend of globalization and the continuous development of Internet technology, information spreads at an unprecedented rate. We can learn about what is happening in any corner of the world in real time, and the physical distance no longer serves as a high wall separating different countries and regions. This inevitably brings about some problems. We can now clearly understand the tragedies around the world. We are well aware that people in many parts of the world are suffering severely from extreme poverty and hunger. "That's why this is the right time to ask yourself: What ought I be doing to help [2]?" Do we have a moral obligation to provide assistance? Are we capable of providing effective assistance? Facing this unprecedented situation in history, Peter Singer put forward his theory.

## 2.1. Strong Moral Obligation to Prevent Harm

Singer said: “If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it [2].” Singer gave an example to illustrate this point: “On your way to work, you pass a small pond, as you get closer, you see that it is a very young child, just a toddler, who is flailing about, unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond. If you don’t wade in and pull him out, he seems likely to drown. Wading in is easy and safe, but you will ruin the new shoes you bought only a few days ago, and get your suit wet and muddy. Then what should you do? The answer is obvious, how could anyone consider a pair of shoes, or missing an hour or two at work, a good reason for not saving a child’s life [2]?”

## 2.2. Moral Obligation Irrespective of Distance

Firstly, because this principle does not take into account the degree of closeness or distance. There is no moral difference between the child of my neighbor who is ten yards away and the strange Bengali child who is thousands of miles away when it comes to the people we can help. Secondly, this principle also does not distinguish between the following two situations: Singer is the only person who can do something, and he must be just one of millions of people in the same situation. Singer said: “Ask yourself if you can deny the premises of the argument. How could suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care not be really bad? Think of that small boy in Ghana who died of measles. How would you feel if you were his mother or father, watching helplessly as your son suffers and grows weaker? You know that children often die from this condition. You also know that it would be curable, if only you could afford to take your child to hospital. In this circumstances you would give up almost anything for some way of ensuring your child’s survival [3].”

## 2.3. Effective Altruism

The effective altruism, that is, using reason and evidence to help others and enhance overall well-being in the most effective way, emphasizing the importance of focusing on efficiency in altruistic behaviors so as to make limited resources have the greatest positive impact. And Singer's argumentation process can be simplified into the following steps: First, the deaths caused by shortages of food, drinking water, and housing due to extreme poverty are bad. Second, regardless of where suffering and death occur, as long as one has the ability to provide assistance and does not need to sacrifice something more important, one should provide assistance. Finally, people living in affluence have the ability to provide assistance and do not need to sacrifice something more important. Therefore, people living in affluence should provide global assistance. As Singer put forward: “This premise is very difficult to reject, because it leaves us some wiggle room when it comes to situations in which, to prevent something bad, we would have to risk something nearly as important as the bad thing we are preventing. “Nearly as important" is a vague term. That’s deliberate, because I’m confident that you can do without plenty of things that are clearly and inarguably not as valuable as saving a child’s life [1].”

## 3. Challenges to Peter Singer's Theory

Peter Singer's theory provides a reliable solution to the world's poverty problem and embodies his lofty ideals and ambitions. However, the author admits that, despite the significant influence that Peter Singer's theory has already exerted, it still has many deficiencies. Firstly, in real life, his theory has failed to effectively encourage wealthy individuals to actively participate in global aid efforts. The worldwide gap between the rich and the poor is still widening. Instead of increasing international aid, wealthy countries have witnessed a resurgence of the right-wing wave in Europe and the United States since 2015. Nationalist ideas have begun to prevail, and many countries have a rather negative attitude towards providing aid to other countries. For example, “for the United States, there are commitments, but doubts remain about their implementation. For example, at the U.S.-Africa Summit

in 2022, the United States pledged to invest \$55 billion to support the "Agenda 2063 of the African Union." However, only \$15 billion of this amount was for newly signed projects, and the remaining \$40 billion was a repackaging of various U.S. initiatives and agreements with Africa in recent years [1].” It is worth mentioning that, among these aids, the vast majority are not the gratuitous aids that Peter Singer has been seeking. Many of them are bilateral agreements with the feature of win-win cooperation, and wealthy countries still maintain a dominant position in these agreements. In addition, Peter Singer's theory also faces many academic doubts. Many scholars have challenged his reasoning process and conclusion. Among them, Williams is the most famous. Indeed, there are problems such as unclear definitions and insufficient details in Peter Singer's reasoning process. In this section, the author will present three of the most representative academic doubts, which cover the entire reasoning process of Singer's theory.

### 3.1. Equal Responsibility in Practice

Singer used the example of a drowning child. The author agree that the passer-by has the responsibility to save him, but this is on the premise that there is no one else around and the responsibility of saving him lies entirely on him. However, the situation of global poverty is not like this. For example, a poor child needs 100 to be free from hunger for a month, and there are a thousand people who have the ability to help. Then, each person should be charged 10 cents instead of requiring each person to donate 100 to be free from hunger for a month, and there are a thousand people who have the ability to help. Then, each person should be charged 10 cents instead of requiring each person to donate 100 to offset the donations of those who have not fulfilled their responsibilities. But such an ideal situation usually does not occur, because the assistance of wealthy people to those in extremely poor regions is not mandatory. There will inevitably be a situation where some people choose to help while others turn a blind eye. In such a situation, those who choose to help will inevitably have to bear more responsibilities. For example, if there are a total of ten children who have fallen into the water, and five passers-by choose to jump into the water to save them while the other five passers-by choose to ignore it, then each of the passers-by who choose to help will have to save two children. This leads to two problems. First, it is unfair to the passers-by who choose to save the children, as they need to bear additional losses. Second, the passers-by may not have the ability to save two children, and in the end, some children will still be drowned.

### 3.2. The Sacrifice of Donation

Singer proposed that assistance should be provided if there is no need to sacrifice something more important. Singer mentioned this point in his book as well: “What is a parent’s duty in extreme circumstances? Are there times when our obligation to others is equal to or greater than that to our family? You should love your own children, that goes without saying, and not to do so would be both wrong and unnatural. But should you put your own child’s life at risk in order to save hundreds of others? Fortunately, few of us will ever be faced with that question [2].” However, the criterion for judging what is more important is extremely vague. And in most cases, such sacrifice is implicit and not easily noticeable. This point is not reflected in the example of the boy who fell into the water, because the sacrifice in this situation is obvious: it will dirty the new shoes. And this sacrifice is clearly less valuable than a life, so it is easy to make a judgment. But in real life, such examples hardly exist, and it is difficult to make corresponding value judgments in most cases. For example, a person decides to join an enterprise with a higher salary in order to enhance his ability to donate. But this enterprise is a military industry enterprise, which produces a large number of weapons every year, leading to casualties in war-torn areas. Then, should one join the military industry enterprise for the sake of donation? Here is another example. A mother increases her working hours in order to donate more money, thus neglecting the time spent with her children. Then, should she give up her personal freedom and the opportunity to accompany her children for the sake of donation? From the above two examples, the author can lead to a conclusion that it is very difficult to determine whether the sacrifices made are "more important or equally important". If, from a moral perspective, the author

emphasizes that people living in affluence have a moral responsibility for those who die due to extreme poverty, then people have to consider some other moral issues, such as personal freedom, parental responsibilities, etc., and compare their importance with that of relieving poverty. And this is a more controversial and complex topic.

### 3.3. Origin of Inequality

Although geographical and climatic factors are indeed incentives for the unequal distribution of wealth between the rich and the poor, it cannot be denied that with the deepening of globalization, the unequal distribution of wealth on a global scale has increasingly become a result caused by human actions. In fact, the wealth of many regions and countries is precisely the cause of the poverty in some other regions and countries. For example, in 16th-century Britain, wool merchants drove farmers off the land in order to obtain huge profits. The wealth of the merchants was the reason for the poverty of the farmers. If the wealth of the merchants is now returned to the farmers, then the losses caused by the back-and-forth transfer of wealth are completely meaningless. So why not refrain from exploiting the interests of farmers in the first place? Another example is that colonists transported wealth away from Africa. If the wealth is transported back, then the consumption of freight costs for this round trip is completely meaningless. So why not keep the wealth in Africa from the very beginning? At present, the wealth in poor regions is still continuously flowing to wealthy regions. For example, some Western countries still maintained control over the economic lifelines of African countries. This situation is called "neo-colonialism". For instance, "financial control and currency linkage are the policy tools that France has long used for French-speaking African countries. The purpose is to maintain France's influence and control over the African economy, and then create a pro-French political environment in Africa. All the foreign exchange reserves of the countries in the CFA franc zone need to be centrally stored and managed by the regional central bank. On the other hand, the central banks of West African and Central African countries need to deposit 50% of their foreign exchange reserves (65% in the case of Comoros) into the "operation account" (compte d'opération) opened by the French Ministry of Finance in Paris. African countries need the approval of a mixed committee with French members to use their foreign exchange [4]." Therefore, simply transferring wealth will inevitably lead to meaningless losses. Moreover, the wealth that has been transported will eventually fall back into the hands of wealthy countries and wealthy individuals, so this is not a method to maximize efficiency.

## 4. Singer's Defense

As the author put forward above, the greatest challenge that Peter Singer faces is that to a certain extent, his theory lacks scientific rigor. The definitions of some terms are ambiguous, and there are many aspects that conflict with common daily viewpoints. In response to these doubts, Peter Singer made some supplements to his own theory. The first point is to reduce the restrictiveness when his theory is applied. The original text is as follows: "If we have the ability to prevent something very bad from happening without having to sacrifice anything of moral significance, then morally speaking, we should act accordingly." In this version, Singer imposed limitations on the sacrifices made in fulfilling the obligation to assist the poor. In the definitions supplemented by Singer, "something very bad" refers to the suffering and death caused by the lack of food. In comparison, expenses such as buying a new car, new clothes, a big house, and so on, are simply not of moral significance at all. In addition to the doubts about the definitions of the terms, we can observe that many challenges focus on the reasoning process. And Singer's theory, so to speak, is merely a research field or a social movement rather than a systematic moral theory. Therefore, these challenges require a response from the moral theories that Singer uses to support his viewpoints. This section will focus on the two major theoretical premises that Singer employs to defend his argument.

#### 4.1. Consider Interests Equally

Singer proposed: "In ethical deliberation, we should give equal consideration to the similar interests of all the objects affected by our actions." Its true meaning is that "the interests that are considered equally do not vary depending on whose interests they are." People can see that Singer believes that for the similar interests of different morally relevant entities, as long as their interests have the same weight, there should be no differential treatment based on their identities, where identities refer to race, gender, place of origin, social status, and so on. Then why should people consider interests equally? Firstly, it is a natural phenomenon that everyone cares about their own interests. If people conduct ethical thinking from a universal ethical perspective, then they should admit that everyone cares about their own interests. So, people cannot assign special weight to their own interests and then regard the interests of others as unimportant. Sidgwick once mentioned: "From the perspective of the universe (if I may say so), the good of any one person is no more important than that of another, unless we have special reasons to believe that better can be realized in the former than in the latter." Here, the "perspective of the universe" refers to a rational perspective that transcends oneself, a more universal perspective. Based on this theory, Singer argues that people cannot ignore the suffering of poor children thousands of miles away just because they are concerned about their own interests.

#### 4.2. Unequal Treatment of Interests

Certainly, the above theory can only explain why people have the obligation to provide international aid, but it doesn't show why they need to sacrifice their own interests to satisfy the interests of others. This is undoubtedly an unequal treatment of interests. However, due to the huge differences in the living situations between the rich and the poor, Singer believes that this kind of inequality is excusable. "For example, a doctor has only two doses of painkillers. One patient has a cracked bone and is suffering intense pain, while the other patient just has a minor scratch. In this case, if the doctor chooses to inject both doses of painkillers into the patient with the cracked bone, Singer believes that this kind of inequality is quite reasonable. In this way, the pain levels of the patient with the minor scratch and the patient with the cracked bone can be made as similar as possible to the greatest extent [5]". Therefore, this unequal way of treatment has led to a more equal result. However, it should be noted that Singer does not aim entirely at achieving an equal outcome. He merely hopes to emphasize through this that we need to eliminate the influence of factors such as social status on moral value judgments, so as to achieve the goal of considering only interests when making moral judgments. Since the approach of making moral judgments based on interests is to maximize interests, this does not necessarily lead to the equal treatment of interests.

Here is another example, "Now a doctor needs to treat two patients. The first patient has already lost one leg, and the toes of his other leg are at risk of being amputated due to injury. The second patient has all four limbs intact, but one leg is injured and at risk of amputation. However, the doctor only has enough medicine to treat one patient. If the decision is made with the aim of achieving equal outcomes, then the first patient should be treated, so that both patients will lose one leg. But this is not what Singer advocates [5]." According to the principle of maximizing interests proposed by Singer, the second patient should be treated. Although this will lead to an unequal outcome between the two, precisely because of such situations, the principle of equal consideration of interests may, in some cases, widen rather than narrow the gap between people at different welfare levels. However, what people should consider is the increase or decrease of the overall interests.

It is precisely based on the principle of maximizing the good and the principle of equal consideration of interests that Singer can fully justify his views. First of all, since the interests of every individual should be considered equally, people should not believe that their own interests deserve special weight just because of their special identities (such as factors like race, social status, gender, place of origin, and so on). In this way, when people know that a poor person in a distant country needs help, he/she cannot simply think that his/her own interests should be given special consideration just because of his/her special identity, thus ignoring the sufferings of that poor person

in the distant country. Since all people are morally equal, there is no moral reason to deny that the sufferings of others are not worthy of being taken seriously. And based on the requirement of maximizing the good, as a wealthy person, if using a portion of his/her money to do good deeds can bring about greater good for those being helped, then he/she should donate his/her money until reaching the point of marginal utility where no more maximum good can be generated.

## 5. Conclusion

To some extent, the viewpoints that this paper mentioned above have raised some doubts and made some supplements to Singer's theory. Although Singer's response further reinforces his viewpoint, from a practical perspective, the author believe that this paper can still put forward some more efficient solutions. To ensure the principle of equal responsibility, people should, at the government level, levy taxes on every wealthy person who has the ability to pay, and conduct resource allocation at the government level, or even at a supra-national dimension. For example, when people encounter the situation of ten children falling into the water, each one does not need to jump into the water to save them personally. Instead, the government can collect a certain amount of tax from each passer-by and hire a professional lifeguard by the river, who will bear the responsibility of rescuing the children who have fallen into the water. Secondly, in order to avoid the resource losses caused by the repeated transfer of wealth, people should focus on the current international pattern where wealth continuously flows from poor countries to rich countries and enable poor countries to have the autonomy to develop high-end industries and the autonomy to exploit natural resources on their own.

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