Famine & Affluence

When it comes to the ethical conundrum of famine and affluence, many can agree that, “Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad” (Singer 227.). Peter Singer and John Arthur both wrote compelling arguments as to how they believe wealth should be distributed. After taking both arguments into consideration, John Arthur’s article, *World Hunger and Moral Obligation: The Case Against Singer*, related most with my personal beliefs on how wealth should be distributed. One philosopher in particular that I believe would most agree with John Arthur’s position is John Stuart Mill. Various factors should come into play when determining how wealth should be distributed, such as rights of entitlement as well as past efforts.

In John Arthur’s, *World Hunger and Moral Obligation: The Case Against Singer*, Arthur starts off his article by stating that most of us who are wealthy in comparison to the millions living in poverty just assume that the money left over after buying our necessities is ours to do whatever we please. Arthur goes on by examining the main principles of Peter Singer’s, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” which completely disagrees with the assumption that even though millions of people are starving our money can be spent in whatever way we want. John Arthur agrees with Singer’s widely accepted first main point, which is that, “Suffering and death from lack of food shelter and medical care are bad” (Singer 227.). John Arthur then examines Singer’s more controversial principle, which he calls, “the greater moral evil rule” (Arthur 241.). The greater moral evil rule in short states that people may only keep their earnings if there is no way for them to prevent something bad from happening by giving their earnings away. Arthur says that Singer’s greater moral evil rule would require an immense redistribution of wealth. John Arthur brings up an analogy used in Peter Singer’s article about a child drowning in a pond and how not helping would be wrong even if it meant ruining our clothes because clothes are obviously not as important as the life of a child. Arthur states that moral equality must bring about equal consideration of interests of others and respect for certain rights. John Arthur then brought two notions of entitlement into play, which Peter Singer ignored in his article, called rights and desert (Arthur 242.). Arthur divides moral rights into two categories, negative rights of noninterference, such as the right to life or the right to exercise religious freedom. These rights require that people do not interfere with the rights of others. Positive rights of recipience, are not natural they are rights earned because someone has agreed, promised or has been contracted to give you those rights. John Arthur states that our code expects that we respect positive and negative rights as well as lend help to those in need, but we also have our own rights and justifications as to why we may not extend help to complete strangers or if the need of another is substantially costly to us; such as giving up an organ of our body. The second notion of entitlement brought forth by John Arthur is desert. Desert is what you deserve
based on what you have worked for or the effort that you have put in. Arthur gave an example of this by using a scenario of an industrious farmer who worked hard year round to harvest a surplus of food while his lazy neighbor went fishing all summer. Singer would say that the industrious farmer must help his neighbor and give away the surplus that he worked hard for to prevent the lazy neighbor and his family from suffering. Arthur says that we should look at the pros and cons of giving the surplus away as well as the fact that the industrious farmer deserves the food because he worked hard and earned; outweighing his lazy neighbors need. John Arthur says we must look back at past efforts in order to determine if we are to be rewarded or punished. If we ignore the past we show lack of regard justice, fairness, and respect. Arthur finishes his argument against Singer’s article by stating that our moral code must be rational, practical, and must be able to gain a majority of support from almost everyone in order to work. He states that a reasonable way to give help to those in need is “when there is no substantial cost to themselves, that is, when what they are sacrificing would not mean significant reduction in their own or their families’ level of happiness” (Arthur 245.). In fact, it might not be that much different from our current moral code.

One philosopher that I believe would agree with John Arthur’s article is John Stuart Mill. John Mill’s “Greatest Happiness Principle” or Principle of Utility is Utilitarianism. His supreme moral principle is supposed to bring about “the greatest happiness for the greatest amount of people” (Hollenberg 1 Nov.). Going back to the story of the industrious farmer and his lazy neighbor; if the hard working farmer helps aid his lazy neighbor in order to cease his suffering the farmer will then become unhappy as a result because all his hard work just went to his lazy neighbor who didn’t put in the time and effort like he did. According to John Mill this would make the farmers action wrong because it brought him unhappiness. Both philosophers believed that rights to property, money or even a kidney should take into consideration how you came to posses the items. For example, if you stole, were born with, or given an item as a gift the rights of ownership would change. Like John Arthur, John Stuart Mill believed that wealth is the end product resulting from hard work, but the distribution of wealth should be determined by the decisions and will from people. John Stuart Mill believed that capital would begin to circulate to individuals if they became more productive and put in work rather than just waiting for people to come to their aid. John Stuart Mill also believed that human institutions and moral codes should determine the distribution of wealth. If everyone had to give up his or her hard earned money to help the less fortunate, there would be far more unhappy people than those who would actually be happy. John Stuart Mill and John Arthur both believed that some aid should be given to those less affluent, but only if it doesn’t significantly impact your own level of happiness or that of your family.

As I stated in my introduction, both John Arthur and Peter Singer have compelling arguments about how they believe wealth should be distributed. Both philosophers believed aid needs to be given to those less affluent, but personally I believe that Peter Singer’s approach to redistributing wealth is a little too extreme. John Arthur’s argument against Singer seemed more realistic and applicable to our society today. One new criticism of Peter Singer that I think should be taken into consideration is that if we
completely change our system drastically, no one will support it because it is such a change from what we are currently used to. Yes, people say they like change, but as soon as they hear it involves taking hard earned money out of people’s pockets to help aid the poor, people are going to quickly ignore what he has to say and not take the time to listen. Considering that we currently live in a world where people are under the impression that the extra cash left over after buying daily necessities is to be used in whatever way we please, many people in society today would frown upon having to give it all away to someone less fortunate. I’m not saying that all people are selfish and don’t give to the less fortunate, I just agree with John Arthur’s statement that says we should help aid those less affluent by giving only as much as we can so that it doesn’t significantly impact our own level of happiness or our families. I agree with the fact that we must look back as well and see how we came to posses certain objects in our life. If you worked hard for some extra cash than you should be entitled to do what you want with it rather than having to give it away to a stranger who is living in poverty. When I help aid those less fortunate I will give them at least five dollars, some food, old clothing or sometimes more during the holidays because it won’t cause a significant impact on myself; it will only raise the happiness level of the person in need.

In conclusion, John Arthur’s article, *World Hunger and Moral Obligation: The Case Against Singer*, related most with how I believe wealth should be distributed. John Stuart Mill’s moral system of Utilitarianism coincided most with the main principles of Arthur’s argument against Peter Singer. We must take rights of entitlement into consideration and look back at past efforts to determine what a person deserves. Furthermore, we should help aid those less affluent by giving as much as we feel wont cause significant impact in our lives, our happiness, and our family’s happiness.
Work Cited


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