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Humes 103

Professor Bory

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Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"

Annotation 1: framing, providing important history about the time in which the author is writing or relationships to when you are reading

Peter Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" was written in 1971 after the Bangladesh Liberation War ended in December 1971. The war in Bengal led to the Bengalis migrating out of Bengal and individuals dying due to a lack of food, shelter, and medical care. Singer, both a Utilitarian and activist, was extremely outraged at the United States government's unwillingness to intervene and send resources to help the nation of Bengal. He wrote a scholarly article criticizing the United States government and elaborated on strict principles that citizens of the United States should follow. When it came to the United States government, he criticized the amount of money put into miscellaneous landmarks or 'non-relevant' projects instead of investing the money to help relieve the ongoing famine of other nations (Singer 229). And the suffering of Bangladesh was highlighted by Singer, becoming the inspiration for his main principle: If suffering can be avoided, anyone from any nation should morally help avoid it as long as they themselves do not trade anything of moral worth (235). Singer, outraged about the situation in East Bengal, centers this sole humanitarian issue in his article to instead focus on general radical rules one should follow for there to be maximized happiness and well-being all over the world (utilitarian principle).

Annotation 2: explicating key words or ideas, defining how the words or phrases are being used in the context of this argument

“Duty” and “Charity” in Singer’s article are defined separately from one another, specifying how they do not equal one another. Charity, as defined by American society, means a voluntary act of giving help, typically money, to those in need, and it’s viewed as a generous act. Duty, as defined by society, typically means a moral or legal obligation. Singer goes on to define charitable acts like giving to “charities” or organizations that thank others for “their generosity” (235) and critiques them, drawing the line between charity and duty. He angrily argues that what society collectively regards as charity is actually not ‘supererogatory’ (Singer 235) or a charity act at all, but instead one’s duty. There is a second principle established that selfishly spending money on things that one doesn’t need is not correct, and if one has extra money it should be donated to famine relief (Singer 235). Based on utilitarian principles, any action is regarded as a duty if it will cause more happiness than pain, and that comes in the form of sacrificing one’s small happiness for the larger happiness of society even from across the world. This becomes the baseline for Singer’s argument as to why everyone should implement his ‘radical’ principles. But the question comes in when we begin to wonder how this is scaled at a greater level of implementation in institutions and systemically. One’s individualistic achievements cannot be compared to institutional possible larger contributions to famine reliefs.

Annotation 3: Clarifying, asking questions about author’s intentions or meanings

From all the principles proposed, Singer suggests that his principles might have “radical” implications when compared to society’s consensus of morals. I was curious as to why he used “radical” as opposed to extreme or drastic, but within the word “radical” lies politically affiliated implications that are meant to be more fundamental or revolutionary as opposed to simply meaning: a bit exaggerated.

Singer does not believe the principles he suggested are meant to be taken lightly, but instead taken in a way that affects our fundamental thinking of morals. There should be an integration of these moral changes within our day-to-day spending choices (Singer 236). There is a distinction again made between those who violate norms needed to function in society, or more “superagatory” norms, and how, actually, those norms aren’t superagatory at all (Singer 236). As opposed to how society generally views morals, Singer proposes to further increase the extent of a strict moral scheme to judge everyone for not helping out in relief as opposed to simply abiding by the “imperatives of duty” (236). Since we as a society collectively typically agree on moral schemes and focus on norms that help us function as a society, we forget to remember people outside of our society (Singer 237). This is where Singer’s idea of radicalness comes in, because his proposition to change our thinking of our morals is a fundamental moral change within our thinking and cannot simply be fixed by changing in small ways.

On my honor I have neither given nor received unauthorized information regarding this work, I have followed and will continue to observe all regulations regarding it, and I am unaware of any violation of the Honor Code by others.

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Works Cited

Singer, Peter. *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*. Philosophy & Public Affairs, 1972