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Humes 103

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26 September 2025

The Global Village, Moral Obligation, and Involvement in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"

In his 1972 essay, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Peter Singer argues that the world's new status as a "global village" has changed the moral responsibilities of the individual. At the time of Singer's writing, countries were simultaneously grappling with the Vietnam War, the South Asia Crisis, and growing tensions between world powers. On the technological front, global connectivity was making rapid gains. As these historical developments changed people's capability to get involved in international politics, philosophers like Singer recognized a related expansion of the average person's ethical duty. Television began playing a bigger part in Americans' lives in the 1950s, after World War II ("The End of the Golden Age and the Rise of Television"). In the '60s, the rise of the counterculture was deeply tied to young people's rejection of what they saw and heard through this media. The Vietnam War was so fiercely protested in large part because "television had "[brought] the war into the American home" (Johnson). Once the war in Vietnam was in people's living rooms, ordinary citizens began to feel a unique responsibility to either stop or support the ongoing conflict. Peter Singer wrote "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" in 1971, just three years after the Columbia protests, and published it the next year. As he was writing about the individual's moral responsibility, the expanding reach of television was actively personalizing a global issue for American citizens who otherwise might never have looked beyond their own protected lives. This political climate likely contributed to Singer's mentioning of the "global village," a term first coined by Herbert

Marshall McLuhan around 1960 (“Global village”). McLuhan argued that the introduction of different forms of media such as television and radio was due to alter the way that people interacted with the world in a kind of second Renaissance (“Marshall McLuhan Describes the Global Village in 1960”). Singer argues something similar: “[T]he development of the world into a ‘global village’ has made an important, though still unrecognized, difference to our moral situation” (Singer 232). This difference to our moral situation, Singer's assertion that ethical decisions should not be affected by physical proximity to people in need, is a reflection of the philosophical and political trends of Singer’s time. While scholars like McLuhan predicted a complete societal upheaval driven by technology, American youth demanded conversation about a conflict taking place millions of miles away from their homes. Proximity seemed no longer to be a concern, and Singer’s moral principle takes that into account. Aided by increased media coverage of global issues, 1960s and '70s society rejected the notion that distance could prevent individuals from having a hand in world affairs; this aligns with Singer's understanding of the moral implications of the "global village."

Singer expands the word “obligation” to include actions that might otherwise be viewed as supplementary, creating moral wrong where before there was only inaction and thus lending a certain fluidity to his principle of morality. As a thought experiment, Singer presents two scenarios in which an individual might donate to a relief fund. In the first, a person with the ability to donate has “no obligation to give more [than the exact amount that, if donated by everybody simultaneously, would provide total relief]” (Singer 233). Singer’s wording implies that this person does have an obligation to donate that baseline amount. This is significant because society does not usually view donating to charity as a moral obligation. By Singer’s definition, not donating a baseline amount is a failure to fulfill a moral obligation and is thus

wrong. This relates to a concept that Singer introduces later in the essay. He admits to challenging the boundaries of what philosophers consider “‘supererogatory’—an act which it would be good to do, but not wrong not to do” (Singer 235). This first hypothetical scenario, in which it is wrong for an individual not to donate a certain amount to charity, is an example of a challenge to the concept of what is supererogatory. Singer also outlines a second, more realistic scenario. In this case, not everyone who is able to give will donate, so an individual should give more than the baseline amount in order to “prevent more suffering” (Singer 233). According to Singer’s main principle, an individual is obligated to prevent as much suffering as he can without making a comparable sacrifice (Singer 231). This second scenario illustrates how obligation, under Singer’s principle, becomes fluid. A person’s moral obligations may multiply if suffering increases in the world around her. This is a result of Singer’s redefining of acts that were previously considered supererogatory as moral failures. Ethical fluidity may seem apt in an ever-changing world, but it loads a burden of responsibility onto the shoulders of individuals already unsure of how to practically apply moral principles. By defining moral obligation in terms of what problems still need to be solved, Singer risks creating an ideology that is simply too demanding to be feasible, although initially, its inherent flexibility may seem rational.

Just before Singer explores moral obligation, he briefly and ambiguously touches on the concept of involvement, potentially compromising his general argument. According to the philosopher, “most of the major evils—poverty, overpopulation, pollution—are problems in which everyone is almost equally involved” (Singer 233). There are several meanings that Singer might have hoped to communicate by the word “involved.” The first is that of moral obligation. Earlier in the essay, Singer explains that even if a large majority of world citizens could potentially stop an instance of suffering, this fact does not lessen an individual’s ethical

responsibility to attempt to stop it himself. He claims that one has a moral obligation to those in need regardless of the actions of others. Taking this argument into account, one might infer that by "involved," Singer means to say that every individual has an obligation to reduce the effects of broad social evils. However, involvement seems to imply more than just responsibility. Singer might be suggesting that everyone in the world is affected by problems like poverty, overpopulation, and pollution. If this is true, might it have any relation to the aforesaid moral obligation—in short, are we obligated to assist other humans not out of any concern for their wellbeing but because by doing so we are also helping ourselves? To answer this question, one must return to the essay's core principle, the main point that Singer hopes to prove: "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening...we ought, morally, to do it" (Singer 231). This assertion makes no mention of self-interest as a reason for action, so one can infer that Singer did not mean to imply a connection between obligation and egoism. In fact, Singer is widely known as the father of effective altruism, which is in direct opposition with self-serving ethical theory. Based on the textual context of Singer's assertion of universal involvement as well as the overarching principle that his essay attempts to prove, one can assume that Singer means simply to equate involvement with moral obligation. However, his singular use of and failure to define the word "involved" create vagueness which has the potential to undermine his broader argument for altruistic ethics.

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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