

# Assessing Peter Singer's Ethics of Samaritanism from the African Purview

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## Abstract

*In this essay, the motivation is to examine the place of Peter Singer's ethics with specific attention to how it intends to use a utilitarian approach to attend to the problems that arise from poverty and underdevelopment in non-Western parts of the world. In other words, through the use of the method of philosophical analysis, this research makes a critical appraisal of the submission of Peter Singer. When it has been lauded as something of great importance, the input of Singer in proposing an ethical principle to alleviate poverty all over the world, this research argues that Peter Singer's argument would be more justified if he had also considered some factors militating against improved living conditions (most of which are self-induced) in most of the poor countries. To make our point more lucid, this research highlights some militating factors in Africa that mitigate the force of Singer's proposal.*

*Keywords:* Africa, ethics, Peter Singer, poverty, samaritanism

## Introduction

Given the large gap between the rich and the poor in many parts of the world today, several reasons and panacea have been given for the gap. Most of these reasons come usually from the perspective of political economy. Peter Singer's (1972; 2009) bold move to assess the matter from the perspective of ethics has gained widespread attention. Singer formulated that since suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are bad. He furthers that we ought to care for those who are in these and similar positions. In "Famine, Affluence and Morality," he took his cue from the occurrences in India and East Bengal. Singer proceeded to defend his thesis against various counter arguments. His motive is to expose the moral implications of leaving people to suffer and die from basic amenities. In another famous publication *The Life You Can Save*, Peter Singer systematizes the argument in a more advance form to cope with the current realities of the present century.

Personally, I find the scope of Singer's argument appealing however; one must recognize the existential tenet that man will die even when he has all of what Singer says that they must have. In other words, the parts of the world that Singer argues ought to help the poorer parts have done this but can they pursue this ideal at the detriment of their own citizens? I do not

think so. Secondly, Peter Singer fails to understand the kind of economic and political system that operates in a part of the world that he canvasses argument for. For instance, many countries in Africa receive aid and grants from some of these developed countries of the world, the question that Singer (1974) overlooks is the rate of corruption that goes on in these parts of the world. This essay concludes that Singer's venture is not hopeless. One needs to take into account of what happens to the peoples of the world that he sympathizes with. Do these people really think that their situation is as poor as Singer maintains? This is doubtful and in the pages ahead, I make my circumspection more evident.

### **An Exposition of the Core of Peter Singer's Position**

Singer (2009) expatiates on an argument that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are bad. He also affirms that if it is in one's power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so. By donating to aid agencies, one can prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care, without sacrificing anything nearly as important. Therefore, if one does not donate to aid agencies, one is doing something wrong.

Singer argues that it is obvious that an adult ought to save a child from drowning unless that individual is risking something as valuable as the child's life. Singer (2009) points out that as many as 27,000 children die every day from poverty that could be easily and cheaply helped by existing charities.

Singer (2009) says that many of most persons enjoy at least one luxury that is less valuable than a child's life. He says his readers ought to sacrifice such a luxury (e.g. bottled waters) and send proceeds to charity, if they can find a reliable charity (Singer, 2009). This line of thinking seems to be implied in the words of Torbsjorn Tannsjo who informs that:

By changing our way of life radically, each of us could do a lot to improve the situation in the world. We could give money to OXFAM, join organisations that provide medicine to those who really need it, become doctors ourselves and work in poor parts of the world, and so forth. By not changing our lives, it could be said that we commit immoral acts. If we do not change the way that we live, we are perhaps no better than those who were living near the concentration camps during the last century complacently watching the smoke rise from the chimneys of the crematorium furnaces while they went on performing string quartets and playing with their children (Tannsjo, 2002:5).

Singer (2009) spends time clarifying that people have a right to spend mon-

ey any way they want, but says that fact does not change the way one ought to spend it. The author also notes that some people may be indifferent to the impact they could have, but says this consideration also fails to change how people ought to act.

Singer's central thesis is that, a given individual may be able to point to others doing nothing, but that individual still ought to do as much as they can. The title of the book comes from the fact that Singer addresses readers directly, asking them what they will do about "the life *you* can save" (Singer, 2009).

If anyone considers the import and consequences of what Singer writes to the African continent, s/he may see him as supporting and championing the cause for improved standard of living for all of humanity. At this juncture, it is pertinent to give a closer look to Singer's proposal.

### **A Critical Appraisal of Peter Singer's Ethical Position on Aid: Africa in Focus**

While I acknowledge the strengths of the arguments put forward by Peter Singer, it needs to be stated that there are some scenarios that would definitely make his premises for his conclusion problematic. This essentially is what this paper concerns with. There are several ways of responding to the arguments of Peter Singer but I shall reduce these to just two and then support the counter-argument with instances in Africa.

One way of trying to rebut it would be as follows. It is certainly true that, to the extent that we can do something to rectify injustices in the world, we should do so. But problems such as famine and abject poverty in foreign countries are much too difficult to solve to be the direct concern of any individual. Here only political means are effective. We ought to think carefully before we cast our vote in general elections, of course, in order to see to it that the political party with the best suggested solution to these problems wins, but this is about as much as we can do (Tannsjo, 2002:5).

Another way of trying to rebut the argument would be as follows: It may be true that, even if there is little that I, as a moral agent, can do to abolish poverty and famine in the world, there is something I can do to help individual people living in other parts of the world. But is this something I *have* to do if I want to be moral? Could it really be fair to say that unless I give up most of my belongings I am acting immorally? This essay does not think so. It is certainly true that if those who are poor and who suffer from disease and famine do so because the affluent have wronged them, then the affluent ought to compensate them. However, it could be argued that "their misery is a result of natural causes or bad luck on their part" (Tannsjo, 2002:5), or, at

least, not a result of any wrongdoing on the affluent's part. Then it is fine if I help them, but from the point of view of morality, I may very well go on living the ordinary kind of life I do. (Tannsjo, 2002:5-6).

In Africa, there have been several inflows of financial aids. No matter how meager, Singer would want us to believe, the amount would still make much difference rather than turning a blind eye to these peoples. This has far reaching consequences if we remember that Singer (1972) expresses "frustration toward people to become refugees, but emphasize that wealthier countries still have responsibility to alleviate the agony, poverty and suffering" of poor countries (Akintayo & Akintayo, 2013:56). Do these persons see themselves to be in need of proper and serious helps as Singer advocates? Perhaps yes! But we must not forget those who stand in between these persons and the wealthy countries Singer appeals. Most leaders of Third World economy are fantastically corrupt.

Another very important point that Singer raises is the need to control population and birth. This arises as a result of his conviction that there is connection between population explosion and poverty. Again, it must be stressed that most parts of the Third World are still deeply religious and may not heed the call for population control.

This is why I suggest the urgency to look closely at the submission of Peter Singer (1972) in order to show where I think his argument is misleading and consequently impracticable. In other words, the aim is to take a critical assessment of Singer. I intend to show that though his conclusion is not misplaced, the reasoning for that conclusion still needs to be revised properly.

First, for the sake of emphasis, here is the thrust of Singer's argument: "Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are bad" (Singer, 1972:232). He opines further:

If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then we ought, morally, to do it (Singer, 1972:231); It makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbour's child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away (Singer, 1972:232); The principle makes no distinction between cases in which I am the only person who could possibly do anything and cases in which I am just one among millions in the same position (Singer, 1972:233).

Several scholars have found Singer's admonition to morality too extreme even as they laud his argument for bringing a new dimension to perception about the world's poor. For instance, Thomas Nagel says that nobody, not even Singer, will act according to Singer's ideal of giving up all possessions

that are less valuable than a human life. Nagel says that our unwillingness to sacrifice may not be entirely an issue of motivation: Nagel says that we can make moral objections, although he calls Singer's principle "plausible" (Nagel, 2011:13).

Singer (1972) explains through his counter-arguments by suggesting if our moral duty must be limited to distance or nearness. His purpose is to find out the essence of having to help people who live far away and suffer instead of applying the same privilege to those around us? This is why he cites the example of a drowning child. He wants to find out the importance of distance in making this decision. Singer (1972) understands that it makes no difference the type or kind of people one intends to help; if they live far in Bengal or near us. It does not matter, if we will come in contact with them or not in future. The fact of the matter is that we have the moral duty to engage in what is right.

Singer (1972) further cites an example of a drowning child and a witness. He believes that many people will like to rescue him, an action that is morally right. He feels that this action is morally justified because many people will feel that it is bad to allow a child to drown. The counter argument proposes that since I am not the only person witnessing the situation, then what is the essence and reason for saving the boy. Why is it my ethical responsibility to save this child if nobody is helping? Singer postulates that we do have moral obligation to avoid bad situation from happening regardless of if everybody is interested in doing so or not.

Furthermore, Singer (1972) postulates that "In case we accept any rule of impartiality, universality, equality, or whatever, we can't discriminate against somebody just because he is far from us or we are far off from him" (Singer, 1972:232). The idea is to understand that distance must not affect our decision to help or assist people when they are experiencing agony, poverty, or suffering. Our moral obligation or duty is not to consider whether other people are contributing to alleviate these problems in the lives of many people, or do more rather than causing more pain by not doing so.

The premise of his argument about marginal utility refers to the verity that not many people will like to do as much, but as individuals we must encourage ourselves to provide substantially; or do as much as possible to go beyond the call of duty, or what is known as stage of marginal duty; so that one would inflict oneself as much ache as one would prevent in Bengal. He posits that we must attempt to do as much as possible as long it does not hinder or prevent our existence (Singer, 1972).

Additionally, Singer (1972) posits that our ethical obligations also include responsibility and charity. Our responsibility and charity is to help and

assist those who need or help regardless of whether they are our relatives or not. As long as we have the potential and the resources to help; we must help people who need our assistance even those we do not know. To juxtapose this principle and the explanation, it would be morally wrong not to help. Unfortunately, in this era, many people are greedy and egoistic to perform the responsibility of duty and charity because they continually aspire for more wealth and position. Many would also feel that they work too hard to share their resources with others even when they have more than enough.

Our examination of Singer's point of view includes but not limited to the morality of helping those who need our assistance when we can do so; mostly importantly, when it does not hurt us. I believe that we must be flexible to let go of some affluence to save life when the need arises. I also believe that it is the moral thing to do. This is a clarion call that does not accept discrimination, or prejudice against those suffering. The fact is to imagine if we were in the same predicament, would we like to receive help or not? Therefore, I disagree that we should discriminate against anyone who is suffering because of his or her racial background, ethnicity, and distance. Most importantly, human life must be invaluable to us. In the words of Akintayo and Akintayo (2013:58):

Singer (1972) raises a moral argument that our moral and charity obligation is to assist and help people during hard times. As human beings we must provide shelter, food, protection and other cares to those who need them. We must be willing to think about others who need our help. Many are around us who suffer and may expire if we fail to act so that they get the kinds of help or assistance they need. It is our moral duty, an act of charity and responsibility to cater for the needy especially those who continually cry for assistance regardless of the distance when we come across them or hear about them.

From the above, there is the need to ask whether affluent countries have paid a blind eye to the sufferings of these poor nations. While Singer is quick to chide the affluent nations about meager attention to poor nations, he fails to note how the poor nations even manage the little aids given to them. His argument seems to be misplaced that affluent nations have not done their bid in the capacity to eradicate poverty. In the words of Fisman and Miguel (2008: 9): "We hear pleas for debt relief and more generous international aid from America and Europe. Entrepreneurs like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett are spending tens of billions of their own dollars to fight malaria, treat AIDS, and educate Africans, to ultimately "make poverty History."

Fundamentally, it boils down to whether rich countries have already provided too much money to help an African such as Kenya and others out

of poverty—or not nearly enough. Leading academic researchers have lined up on both sides. The answer turns out to hinge critically on one's views of the role that corruption and violence play in the impoverishment of nations. Maybe corruption and violence are mainly just the symptoms of poverty. If this is the case, once rich-country donors finally send enough money to Kenya to jump-start economic growth, its citizens will no longer have to fight one another to survive. On the other hand, if most foreign aid is lost to the grabbing hands of corrupt officials or destroyed in civil strife, then how could aid dollars ever lift countries like Kenya out of poverty? More aid would just enrich already corrupt elite, and could even make the twin problems of corruption and violence worse by giving people even more money to fight over (Fisman & Miguel, 2008:10).

Another very important point that Singer raises is the need to control population and birth. This arises as a result of his conviction that there is connection between population explosion and poverty. Again, it must be stressed that most parts of the Third World are still deeply religious and may not heed the call for population control. Most of the parts of the world with problems deriving from poverty are usually those who have very high populations. All attempts to convince them to control populations have yielded close to no result. This is striking when one recalls the *Almajiri* menace in Northern Nigeria – a clear instance of parental negligence and explosive population leading to mass illiteracy and human underdevelopment.

The problem of leadership and misappropriation of funds cannot be swept under the carpet. Most African leaders place their own private matters above the electorates'. Unfortunately, these are individuals that are in reception of the aids given by the affluent nations. There is no doubt about what would end up with the money from these rich donors.

Obviously, Singer (2009; 1972) does not take cognizance of the kinds of arguments as the one I have highlighted above. However, the point is that even if the rich nations obey the call of Singer and donate more for the poor nations of the poor, the problem of leadership is still very alive with us. This is one of the grey areas that I find with Singer's analysis in this long essay.

When one also considers forcefully, the issue of ethnicity and religion in many parts of Africa, one is likely to find out that the region has more problems than solutions which Singer seems to dose. *The New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* holds that ethnic could mean "... a people whose unity rests on racial, linguistic, religious or cultural ties" (Cayne, 1992:324). Elsewhere, an ethnic group has been defined "as consisting of interacting members, who defined themselves as belonging to a named or labeled social group with whose interest they identify, and which manifests cer-

tain aspects of a unique culture while constituting a part of a wider society" (Sanda, 1976). Though I concede that these definitions are not exhaustive, for the sake of easy comprehension, I use the term 'ethnicity' to connote 'people who are bound together by common interests and whose origin and formation could be traced to linguistic, racial, cultural, geographical ties'. In recent times, the geographical tie is becoming extinct due to occupational migration of indigenes from their homelands to other parts of the country where 'pay is higher'.

In the Nigerian state, ethnic chauvinism has taken over almost every sphere such that the country sacrifices meritocracy for mediocrity. Whilst stating the perceived 'hatred' directed against the Igbos as one of the remote causes of the Civil War, Chinua Achebe (1983:43) reveals:

...the situations in the Nigerian Railway Corporation, in which over half of the posts were occupied by Igbos; the Nigerian Ports Authority; and the Nigerian Foreign Service, in which over 70 percent of the posts were held by the Igbos. Probably the pettiest of the accusations was the lamentation over the academic success of Easterners who graduated in large numbers in the 1965-66 academic year than their counterparts from the West, Mid-West and North.

In a related development, Crawford Young (1979:467) discloses that "...government strategy transformed the federal civil service, corporations, and universities into centers for ethnic bigotry and petty squabbles". This has been the case since the 1960s. In his own words, Chinua Achebe reiterates that: "the ploy in the Nigerian context was simple and crude: Get the achievers out and replace them with less qualified individuals from the desired ethnic background so as to gain access to the resources of the state" (Achebe, 2012:76).

These excerpts show the perceived ethnic apartheid directed against the Igbos by other ethnic groups in the country. These were some of the remote causes that later galvanized into the bloody Nigerian Civil War. The point to note is that what has been stressed by these authors is not peculiar to the Igbos alone. People from other ethnic groups suffer similar deeds as well. At this juncture, it is important to note that there are inter-ethnic clashes on the one hand and intra-ethnic politics on the other. An example of the former is the perceived 'Igbo coup' which pitched other ethnic groups against the Igbos while the Ife-Modakeke crises is paragon for the latter as it involves some fractions within the Yoruba ethnic group.

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society consisting of about 300 ethnic groups (Jekayinfa, 2002:1). It must be stressed that until the arrival of the settler, these



ethnic groups have little or no similar identity in terms of culture and tradition, history, language etc. It was colonialism that actually birthed a country called Nigeria (a derivation from River Nigga – Area). It was a conglomeration of the ethnic groups around the Niger River. This was why the late chief Obafemi Awolowo referred to the country as “a mere geographical expression” (Awolowo, 1947). In a similar stance, Hodkins (1960:2) reveals that:

Prior to the coming of the Europeans to Nigeria, the indigenous Nigerian societies were not static and they were not in equilibrium relations. There were varieties of links which existed between the various states and peoples which were the predecessors of modern Nigeria, For example, there were links among Kanem-Bornu, the Hausa States, Nupe, the Jukun Kingdom, the empires of Oyo and Benin, the Delta States and the loosely associated Ibo communities.

The above excerpt reveals to us, the nature of the kind of relation among the various ethnic groups that form the Nigerian state. My aim here is not to give a history of the formation of the Nigerian state. My *teleos* however, is to show that all the ethnic groups that constitute Nigeria have diverse backgrounds thereby substantiating the tendency of *self* and *the other*, where issues of state are paramount but this is not to say that peoples from these ethnic groups are naturally hostile to one another. On the whole, the situation has been more hostile than otherwise.

Ethnicity in Nigeria involves the identification of Nigerians with the dominant or subordinate majority or minority ethnic groups, all of which co-exist within the same society (Jekayinfa, 2002: 2). It is the case that violence and extremism with ideological girding have become the norm in nearly all parts of postcolonial Africa (Oyekan & Ofuasia, 2017). With this, one considers the critical question of how such a division in opinion can affect national development. I shall cite some cases of intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic riots to evince how instead of promoting national unity and development, ethnic rivalry has impeded it. For Jekayinfa (2002:1):

There have been cases of multi-ethnic vices such as allegiance to ethnic-group, intra-cultural and inter-ethnic antagonism, hostility, aggression, bitterness, hatred, mistrust in the country which have not augured well for the building of a virile Nigerian nation. Rather than harnessing our diversities towards viable nation building, we have become slaves to our ethnic origin to which our allegiance is largely focused at the detriment of nation building.

Ethnic apartheid in Nigeria has brought into existence heart-aches and national disaster rather than unity. Aside some of the conflicts before coloni-

zation and 'independence', the Nigerian Civil War constitutes another crisis that is undeniably tribal (although there were other remote and immediate causes). That war led to the death of many Ibos, Binis and members of other tribes in the country. But the Ibos were the most affected as there are displaced thousands of them even till the present. This is an example of what can occur to the people of a country when one group sees another as *the other*. The perceived animosity among the peoples of Nigeria has inspired the formation of tribal groups. Adebayo reveals this point:

The Odua People's Congress (OPC) was put in place by the Yoruba in the south-western part of the country to fight for the protection and defence of Yoruba in Nigeria. In the eastern part was the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), fighting for cessation of the Igbo ethnic tribe from the Nigeria (Adebayo, 2010:214).

The Warri Ethnic War of 1997, which lasted for about six months also calls for alarm. This was between two minor groups – the Ijaws and the Itsekiris. It is pitiable that the primary cause of this outbreak came after the location of the headquarters of one of the newly created local governments in the area (Jekayinfa, 2002:3). The Ife-Modakeke war is another ethnic crisis that claimed the lives of Nigerians. In Ife-Modakeke area of Osun State, palpable tension had been generated over the location of the headquarters of the newly created Ife-East Local government; Indigenes of the two communities engaged themselves in physical warfare (Jekayinfa, 2002:3). There was also the July 2, 1999 Sagamu Crisis between members of the Odua People's Congress (OPC) and the Hausas. This was the main catalyst for the retaliatory wave in Kano where Yorubas residing in the city were seriously dealt with (Adebayo, 2010:218).

What is there to gain whenever opposing ethnic groups fight? How has the power structure been reacting? Why would you kill fellow humans as yourself in defense of your religious faith? Now, it must be recalled that these religious faiths that cause bitter hostility among Nigerians was 'imported' into the African soil by agents of imperialism and colonialism. This has been maintained in the present day by the neo-colonial regimes in various parts of Africa because it strengthens their stranglehold of power. When the Nigerian masses come to the full reality of how the religious ideology plays the role of a reactionary, they would definitely dispense with it in order for national development to be birthed. Mala and Oseni (1983:32-3) have argued in this connection that:

We must not deceive ourselves; we cannot find 'something' in Christi-

anity and Islam. These religions cannot bring peace and tranquility to our beloved country, to any country. The history of Christianity in Europe, the Crusades, the obnoxious inquisition, the Jihads, the bloody Iranian Islamic Revolution, the Maitatsine religious revolt in Kano in 1981 are all pointers to this hard fact. These religions proclaim peace in churches and mosques but outside them they are doing exactly do opposite of what they proclaim. They are only religions of words and precepts, not of deeds.

From the above exposition, it very clear that religion and ethnicity is still very close to the thinking of most of the poor nations. It needs to be recalled that most of these countries termed 'poor' have enough resources that would uplift and improve the welfare of the people. However, as we have hinted in the preceding section, Singer (2009) fails to take this aspect of resource exploitations and misappropriation seriously. It is certainly true that, to the extent that we can do something to rectify injustices in the world, we should do so. But problems such as famine and abject poverty in foreign countries are much too difficult to solve to be the direct concern of any individual. Here only political means are effective. We ought to think carefully before we cast our vote in general elections, of course, in order to see to it that the political party with the best suggested solution to these problems wins, but this is about as much as we can do (Tannsjo, 2002:5).

Another way of trying to rebut the argument would be as follows. It may be true that, even if there is little I can do as an individual to abolish poverty and famine in the world, there is something I can do to help individual people living in other parts of the world. But is this something I *have* to do if I want to be moral? Could it really be fair to say that unless I give up most of my belongings I'm acting immorally? This essay does not think so. It is certainly true that if those who are poor and who suffer from disease and famine do so because the affluent have wronged them, then the affluent ought to compensate them. However, it could be argued that "their misery is a result of natural causes or bad luck on their part" (Tannsjo, 2002:), or, at least, not a result of any wrongdoing on the part of the affluents. Then it is fine if I help them, but from the point of view of morality, I may very well go on living the ordinary kind of life I do (Tannsjo, 2002:5-6).

### Conclusion

Thus far, I have been able to show that Singer's position is full of issues and problems which make it essentially hard for it to be practicable in a place like Africa. His ethics which reminds one of the Good Samaritan in the Bible cannot be said to yield result in a place like Africa where corruption and lack of

accountability has been woven deep into the fabric of the populace. As a result, this research reaffirms its stance that the morality of aid and relief advocated by Singer will not be able to yield desired result unless the proper atmosphere or status quo that I have used the preceding pages to make obvious are first tended to.

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