
The recent attention paid to the transnational issues in Anglo-American philosophy owes its origin to Peter Singer’s seminal article ‘Famine, Affluence and Morality’ (*Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1.3 [1972], pp. 229-43). Singer’s main concern was direct aid for famine relief, though he asserted, but perhaps did not sufficiently emphasize, that there are other types of aid for alleviating poverty-related suffering in the world. In any case, the core idea was that the individual and the government are obligated to do whatever would produce the best outcome. Singer’s use of the now-famous example of the drowning child to make vivid the case for overseas emergency relief was not meant to imply that the only type of aid is the donation of money in the form of emergency relief funds. Rather, the intent of the analogy was to bring home the point that distance does not make a moral difference. Along with this, Singer’s concern was to show the urgency of our duty to help, with the same level of zeal, in doing whatever would bring the best overall beneficence. The consequences need not be measured by their immediacy—often development-related aid is more effective in redressing poverty though it may be less immediate—but the duty to help should be no less urgent.

Singer’s new book, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, based on the Terry Lectures delivered at Yale University, addresses the issue of aid in alleviating poverty, but it also discusses three other emerging global issues not mentioned in the 1972 article. In the book, the demand for a new ethic is equally urgent, although the scope of individual moral responsibility in meeting these demands is far less stringent than in the article. Instead, Singer now stipulates political responsibilities of nations and institutions. These responsibilities are stringent indeed, but Singer makes room for national self-interest in deciding political obligations, anchoring his demanding beneficence principle to political reality—a realistic move that is refreshingly different from his earlier abstract cosmopolitanism.

The most salient mark of the new international reality, Singer notes, is the redefinition of national sovereignty due to the forces of an aggressive global economy, pervasive effects of global ecology, and the emergence of a human-rights culture that increasingly points to the moral irrelevance of national boundaries. Ethics should reflect this new reality, according to Singer, in promoting international collaboration so that measures to combat poverty-related deprivations would be no less urgent than the global responses to violations of negative rights.

Singer discusses four major global issues in *One World*: environment, global trade, human rights, and foreign aid. It is unclear, though, why Singer would not discuss some other emerging global concerns that transcend national boundaries and point to the need for global cooperation, such as the spectre of international terrorism,
AIDS and other deadly communicable diseases, the global sex trade, and drug trafficking, to name just a few. It is true that some of the concerns raised by the issues he does not discuss are subsumed under the larger logistics of the four major issues that he does discuss, but a brief explanation as to why he selects only the four concerns and leaves out the rest would have been helpful.

The global issues Singer tackles in the book have overlapping concerns and are tied together by a common need for effective political and institutional directives that he claims would adequately respond to the challenges of a new global ethic. This underscores the need for a stronger and more effective international legal and political order and a corresponding redefinition of national sovereignty—two recurring themes in Singer’s book. His support of humanitarian military intervention to prevent egregious violation of human rights, for instance, is due to the idea that human-rights concerns may legitimately override sovereignty issues. But, in view of the potential for abuse in policies of intervention to secure rights, Singer lays down just-war type considerations as guiding principles for such operations, with the reminder that they may be undertaken only in rare circumstances and under the directive of a stronger and reformed United Nations. Likewise, Singer asserts that the World Trade Organization can do much more in making free trade work for everyone if it actively promotes policies such as better labour practices and higher environmental standards in the developing world, coupled with liberalization of trade barriers in affluent countries. As he notes, economic globalization without strict guidelines and strong enforcement mechanisms for justice and equity is bound to be detrimental to the welfare of the poor.

Singer’s idealized vision of a new world order raises questions about its practicality. For instance, the recent US-led invasion of Iraq, which happened despite strong opposition by the international community and without the approval of the United Nations, highlights the importance of Singer’s point, while also making vivid the need for a realistic assessment of moral pronouncements. This is not an isolated phenomenon—in reading Singer’s book one often wonders how practical he intends his prescriptions to be. Though Singer seems to be aware of this gap between the normative ideal and the political reality, he nonetheless emphasizes the importance of moral imperatives in world affairs.

Singer seems to be right, because normative claims of justice and fairness have an important role not only in setting the ideal but in practice as well. For instance, though international relations are usually guided by power and self-interest, the concept of fairness is invariably brought in when there is a dispute. This is not only evident in international trade agreements, environmental policies, and other mutually agreed-upon treaties, but in military interventions as well. Though hegemonic interests may often be couched under the pretence of moral imperatives, it is the latter, usually under the broad rubric of a just-war doctrine, that gives military ventures their legitimacy.

Singer should be credited for the cosmopolitan idea of fairness in his utilitarian doctrine that he introduced in 1972. However, that doctrine was widely criticized for being unrealistically demanding, hence unacceptable. In general, both the utilitarian globalism and the rights-based global egalitarianism have been critiqued for not paying enough attention to the empirical details of who ought to do what for whom. Both theories have been branded as ‘abstract cosmopolitanism’—either too strong or mere empty formality. Consequently, over the years, rights-based global