

Responding to Global Poverty: Review Essay of Peter Singer, *The Life you can Save*

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Most affluent people are at least partially aware of the great magnitude of world poverty. A great many of the affluent believe that the lives of all people everywhere are of equal fundamental worth when viewed impartially. In some contexts, at least, they will also assert that people ought to prevent serious suffering when they can do so, even at significant cost to themselves. But these same people contribute little or nothing to relief efforts or development initiatives, and do not actively pressure their governments to alter

their economic policies toward poorer countries in ways that might benefit them.

Why do the affluent do so little, and demand so little of their governments, while remaining confident that they are morally decent people who generally fulfil their duties to others? Are affluent people and the governments that represent them *actually* fulfilling their duties to the global poor, despite appearances to the contrary? What kinds of changes in the behaviour of affluent people and their governments could bring about substantial improvements in the lives of the global poor?

The life you can save is Peter Singer's first book that focuses exclusively on these questions, and his most comprehensive engagement with critics of his views. This makes its publication a very significant event. Although Singer has been writing widely about these questions for nearly 40 years, this book distils, in his words, what he has "learned about why we give, or don't give, and what we should do about it" (Singer 2009, x). Singer's aims in this work are intellectual and practical. He challenges how the affluent think about their duties to the poor, and tries to demonstrate that their ideas very likely stand in need of serious revision (Singer 2009, xiii). He seeks to move the affluent to give more of their income to help the poor (Singer 2009, xiii). Singer reaffirms in this book his view that while the attitudes of affluent people toward world poverty can be explained, they are unjustified. People are imperfectly rational, have

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false beliefs about the extent of poverty and the magnitude of their governments' contributions to addressing it. They also sometimes act for self-interested reasons and tend, often unconsciously, to interpret and apply their moral values in ways that will not threaten their own interests. But this doesn't justify their conduct. "When we spend our surplus on concerts or fashionable shoes, on fine dining and good wines, or on holidays in faraway lands" he writes, "we are doing something wrong" (Singer 2009, 19).

Singer defends here what he calls a reasonable standard of giving (RSG) from the affluent to address global poverty. The RSG demands that those earning between \$US105,000 and \$148,000 per year donate 5% of their income for this purpose, and that those earning above this level provide a progressively larger portion of any income they earn above this level (Singer 2009, 179).

In the remainder of this review essay we will raise some questions about the arguments of Singer's characteristically inventive and crisply written book.

Assistance Principles

Two types of principles are commonly invoked in support of the view that we—the affluent in the developed world—have duties to address global poverty. The first type is based on the idea that because the poor are in severe need and we are in a position to alleviate such need at some cost, we have duties to do so—*principles of assistance*. The second type is based on the idea that because the poor are in severe need and we have contributed or are contributing to their need we have duties to alleviate it—*principles of contribution*. Principles of contribution have been invoked in the recent work of the philosopher Thomas Pogge (Pogge 2002), and it is also implicit in the work of many economists, notably including Nobel Prize winners Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz (Sen 2002 and Stiglitz 2002). Singer invokes both of these types of principles in this book, but as in his earlier work, he continues to emphasize assistance principles. In his previous writings, Singer has famously argued that we have duties to assist the global poor by alluding to an analogy of a person passing a shallow pond where a child is about to drown. Just as the passer-by has a duty to save the

child, we have duties to assist the poor. Singer holds that a plausible principle that would explain our reaction to the pond case, and which would also lead us to recognize our responsibility in the global poverty case, states that "if it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so" (Singer 2009, 15). Singer does not specify what it means to claim that something is *nearly* as important as some other thing—he leaves it up to his readers to decide on the basis of their intuitions (Singer 2009, 17).

However, we can think about the notion of relative importance in the following manner. Imagine some person C, who can choose to prevent either person A from bearing some cost X or person B from bearing some cost Y (but not both). If, all else being equal, they ought to prevent A from bearing cost X, then this cost is of greater relative importance than cost Y would be to B. The Singer Assistance Principle (hereafter, the SAP) is therefore quite demanding. If C is faced with the choice of saving A's life or B's hand, then all other things being equal he ought to save A's life. This alone does not show that the SAP would demand that B sacrifice his hand to save A's life. It might be argued that B's hand is *nearly* as important as A's life is. This claim seems hard to sustain. All things being equal, if C is faced with the choice of saving A's life or one of B's hands and one hand each of several other people, it seems that he ought clearly to save A's life, indicating that a hand is not nearly as important as a life.

As Garrett Cullity has pointed out, Singer's analogical arguments are "subsumptive" in form (Cullity 2004, 12–14). That is, he conceives of the task of justifying particular moral judgments as a matter of postulating general principles that these particular judgments can be viewed as expressing. Singer's arguments are potentially quite radical precisely because they have this form. His strategy is to show that a principle that best explains a particular moral judgment in which we have a great deal of confidence, such as the wrongness of failing to save the drowning child in the pond case, would entail that we revise a great many of our other moral judgments. One such judgment is that failing to respond to world poverty is permissible.

Two things must be noted about the SAP: (1) It will justify the RSG only if his empirical claims about

the likely benefits of aid are reasonably accurate; and (2), if his empirical claims about the likely benefits of aid are reasonably accurate, the SAP will likely demand a great deal *more* than the RSG. That is, if aid distributed by NGOs can do as much good as Singer claims it can, then according to this principle those earning between \$US105,000 and \$148,000 per year ought to give *a lot more* than 5% of their income to such organizations, and many of those earning much less than \$105,000 ought to as well. Singer makes it clear that this is his own position (Singer 2009, 165). The RSG could be justified even if Singer's arguments for it are unconvincing, and it might not be justified even if his arguments for the SAP are convincing. Indeed, Singer himself has formulated a less demanding principle. It states that "if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything else morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it" (Singer 1972, 235).

Are Singer's arguments for the SAP plausible? Note that in the initial pond case, all that is at stake for the passer-by is getting his clothes wet and being late for a meeting. We need not appeal to anything nearly as demanding as the SAP to explain our judgement that he acts wrongly if he fails to rescue the child and continues on his way. Another principle that would explain this judgment would be what might be called the Moderate Assistance Principle (hereafter, the MAP). The MAP states that:

If we can prevent something very bad from happening to other people at relatively little cost to ourselves, we ought generally to do so. However, individuals do not in general have duties to take on large costs, relative to what they have, to prevent very bad things from happening to other people.

To show that the MAP is too weak to account for our intuitions about duties of assistance, Singer must appeal to further cases where we have strong intuitions that agents must take on relatively quite large costs to prevent very bad things from happening. One such case, which Singer puts front-and-centre of his argument for the SAP is Bob's Bugatti, a case originally conceived by Peter Unger (1996, 136). Its essential features are the following:

Bob, who has most of his retirement savings invested in a Bugatti, is confronted with the

choice of redirecting a railway trolley by throwing a switch in order to save a child which will result in the destruction of his Bugatti because it has accidentally been placed on the side spur of the line, or he might leave the switch as it stands so that his Bugatti remains in mint condition, which will result in the child's death.

Singer says that in his experience "people almost always respond that Bob acted badly when he did not throw the switch and destroy his most cherished and valuable possession, thereby sacrificing his hope of a financially secure retirement" (Singer 2009, 14).

We have no doubt that Singer has truthfully represented the intuitions of people to whom he has presented the case. We don't think, however, that it is correct to infer from this that "when prompted to think in concrete terms, about real individuals, most of us consider it obligatory to lessen the serious suffering of innocent others, even at some cost (or even at high cost) to ourselves" (Singer 2009, 15). Consider the following case:

Bob's Internet Banking:

Bob is sitting in his house doing some Internet banking. Unbeknownst to his neighbours (the Smiths), he can see and hear them through the open door on the veranda. He notices that they are discussing the state of their terminally sick child, Jimmy. They need a new and expensive treatment to cure Jimmy. They live in a society that has no universal health coverage, they cannot afford the operation themselves, nor are they able to finance it or acquire the funds from relatives and friends. Bob understands that he can transfer the money for the operation with a click of his mouse (he already has the Smith's bank account listed). Clicking over the money would save Jimmy, but most of Bob's savings for retirement would be gone. Bob decides not to click the mouse.

Does Bob act wrongly in this case? When we have presented people with this case they typically express pity for Jimmy Smith, and some indicate that they would praise Bob for his generosity if he were to transfer the funds. They do not think he acts wrongly if he does not click the mouse to make the transfer. What can we make of this? One strategy that Singer

and Unger have employed to great effect when confronted by conflicts in moral judgments about cases that share important features in common is to appeal to psychological factors that, they argue, ought to be viewed as introducing “distortions” into our moral thinking about certain kinds of cases.¹ These factors, many of which are detailed in Chapter four of *The life you can save*, do not appear to be present in Bob’s Internet Banking. Jimmy Smith is an identifiable victim (Singer 2009, 48–51), and our emotions are likely to be excited by his fate (Singer 2009, 53), yet it does not seem to alter our judgment of Bob’s behaviour. Further, we have no reason to believe that Bob’s giving this money to the Smith’s would be futile (Singer 2009, 55–56), counterproductive, or harmful—we might imagine that the hospital is so sure about success that they will give the money back if it is unsuccessful. Nor, apparently, is this a case where we are stumbling because of so-called “bystander effect” (Singer 2009, 57), since Bob has sound evidence (the Smiths are very trustworthy people who have explored every available option to save their child) that if he doesn’t help the family, no one will, and that Jimmy will die. In Bob’s Internet Banking, the SAP fails to explain our intuition that Bob’s conduct is not wrong: all else being equal, if C were faced with the choice of saving Bob’s money from destruction and Jimmy from premature death, she would act very wrongly indeed if she saved Bob’s money.

So far, we don’t have any reason to prefer the MAP to the SAP. In one case, we believe that Bob must make a sacrifice that appears to be beyond what the MAP would demand and in the other case—Bob’s Internet Banking—we believe that Bob is *not* required to make the sacrifice that the SAP seems to demand. We think, however, that the MAP can be specified in a way that it can support our judgments about *both* cases.

MAP 2

While people do not in general have duties to take on large costs, relative to what they have, to prevent bad things from happening to other people, agents may be required to take on such costs under special circumstances. In particular,

such sacrifices may be required of those who have exposed their assets to undue risk, or where the agent would initially bear the cost of her sacrifice, but others would be required to step in and compensate her for her costly preventive action afterwards.

Exposing one’s assets to undue risk

Note that in Unger’s original case, Bob is what the late philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser would have called a *schlemiel*—Yiddish slang for a habitual bungler, or a dolt. It is pretty ridiculous of Bob to have invested nearly all of his assets in a Bugatti, use the repository of his savings to engage in the risky business of driving and then leave it near the end of a railway siding. The cost of a base model new Bugatti Veyron is roughly \$US1.5 million. Perhaps he has not wronged anyone by investing his savings in this way, but he has acted very imprudently, exposing himself to undue risk of serious loss. Cars are easily damaged, expensive cars are very attractive targets for theft, and are of little use value relative to other material assets such as dwellings. It may for that reason plausibly be argued that he has no right to protect his savings, thus exposed, at the cost of the child’s life. In addition to having acted imprudently, it might also be argued that it is unfair of Bob to drive around in such expensive cars. Drivers of extremely expensive cars increase third party insurance for everybody, including those who prefer to use little money on cars, since the expected expenses to be paid for reparation increases. Since they place such valuable assets on the road, they also raise the cost to others seeking to avoid damaging them. If, for instance, a driver of an old Mazda accidentally is about to make a slight dent to a mint-condition Bugatti, she might chose a second option which will damage her old Mazda significantly, as the cost of reparation might still be less than a small dent to a Bugatti. If the other car was another old Mazda, she could have made the dent and compensated the owner. By having placed the Bugatti on the road, Bob has made driving more costly for others.

The relevance of voluntarily imposing undue risk upon oneself can be further sharpened by considering the case of Bob’s Dolce & Gabbana Elite Sunglasses:

Bob is walking through the woods wearing his beloved Dolce & Gabbana Elite sunglasses, in

¹ Unger writes, “Our intuitions on very many cases, both hypothetical and even actual, do nothing toward reflecting these Values, as they’re produced by powerfully Distortional Mental Tendencies that prevent us from responding in line with the Values” (Unger 1999, 173–175).

which he has invested nearly all of his savings for his retirement. He realises that a tree is starting to topple, and will crush the arm of a child playing nearby if he does not move quickly to act. The child will survive, but will forever lose use of his arm. Bob can save the child's arm, but his sunglasses will fall off his face as he runs to the child and will be crushed and rendered worthless by the fall of the tree. He stays clear and lets the tree crush the child's arm.

We have found that many judge Bob to have acted very wrongly in this case. Yet in the banking case, the same amount of money may be involved, and much more is at stake for Jimmy (his life) than is at stake for the child in the sunglasses case. If a third party C were to be faced with the choice between saving Jimmy's life or the arms of two other children, then all else being equal she should save Jimmy's life. Yet many seem to think that Bob acts wrongly in the sunglasses case and not in the banking case. We think that this is because to walk around with sunglasses that are extremely expensive is to impose undue risk upon oneself. It is due, at least in part, to this consideration that some objects—sunglasses, cars, and other luxury items—become “fair game” when a lot is at stake for others, while other things—one's savings, primary dwellings, and limbs—are not.

Cost Sharing

Another factor that may be influencing us in claiming that Bob ought to save the child in some of these cases is that we may think that we, or society, can and ought to step in and compensate Bob for his emergency expenditures. David Miller has usefully distinguished *immediate* responsibility for bearing costs from *final* responsibility for bearing them (Miller 2001, 468). Perhaps considerations of undue risk in the sunglasses and Bugatti cases are such that people will resist the idea that he should be shielded from *final* responsibility for bearing these losses. Let's therefore consider a case in which he has not imposed undue risk on himself:

Bob and the Avalanche:

There is an unexpected avalanche that threatens to bury a child. Fortunately, Bob is able to redirect the avalanche, but the only way he can

do so will lead it to the new house in which he has invested his savings.²

If we think that Bob ought nevertheless to go on with the rescue, we certainly *ought* to compensate him, at least if we're relatively well-off. We would very likely have different intuitions about cases like Bob's if we left individuals alone when shouldering final responsibility for assisting people in severe need. Moreover, if we are not prepared to compensate Bob, we ought not to judge him harshly if he chooses not to redirect the avalanche. The willingness to compensate and to cover losses seems to be a requirement for demanding of others that they should carry significant losses in order to assist third parties to whom they have no special duties.

Suppose that in the pond case Bob must sacrifice some of his body parts in order to save the child. Should he sacrifice a finger to prevent the child's death? Perhaps. What about a hand, an arm, or a leg? Few would maintain that Bob has a *duty* to shoulder this much cost, even if they might praise him for doing so. What is special about these cases is that the losses incurred by Bob cannot be easily or fully compensated for. It is of course open to Singer to argue that losing a hand, an arm, or a leg is indeed *nearly* as morally significant as the loss of the child's life. But this strikes us as implausible. If C were faced with deciding whether to save a child's life or the single hands or arms of several other people, then all other things being equal he ought to save the child.

We conclude that Singer's arguments for the SAP as presented in this book are not convincing. Alternative assistance principles like the MAP can, when specified to take account of special cases involving voluntary imposition of undue risk and cost sharing, explain better our intuitive judgments about duties to aid people in need.

Duties not to Contribute to Harm

Those who affirm principles of contribution argue that we must view our duty to address world poverty as based on stringent and specific ethical requirements not to contribute to severe harms and to compensate

² Why does he have no insurance? Well, assume that if he had, the company would not cover damages caused by natural incidents, or that it would not cover them since Bob himself directed the avalanche towards his own new house.

those who have been harmed as a consequence of failing to meet these requirements (Barry 2005). This second type of argument invokes the moral principle that it is seriously wrong to harm innocent people for minor gains and that agents have stringent and potentially quite demanding responsibilities to address harms to innocents to which they have contributed or are contributing (Pogge 2002). Contribution-based reasons to address poverty are typically thought to have three key aspects. These reasons are *demanding*, in that those who have contributed to harm ought to do more than those who have not to alleviate it. These reasons are *stringent*, since those who have contributed to harm have stronger reasons to help diminish it. And these reasons are *specific*, since those who have contributed to particular harms have more reason to mitigate them than other harms.

Although Singer is most well known for arguing for the principle of assistance and continues to emphasize it in this book—nearly all of his moral argument for aid focuses on it—he also invokes principles of contribution. He does this when he is arguing that even those that reject principles of assistance should nevertheless take themselves to have duties to address world poverty. He writes, “There are many ways in which it is clear, however, that the rich have harmed the poor” (Singer 2009, 31). He cites phenomena such as damages caused by global warming (Singer 2009, 35), support for brutal dictators as a means of securing cheap natural resources (Singer 2009, 32–34), and even various forms of damaging intergovernmental aid (Singer 117–119) and agricultural subsidies (Singer 2009, 122). Singer does not consider in this book whether contribution-based duties should take precedence over assistance-based duties, as is commonly believed. This is a significant omission, because this issue can be of considerable practical significance. For while principles of assistance and contribution can complement each other—as when some agent has both contributed to the incidence of poverty and can address it effectively at moderate cost (and it is clearly this type of case that Singer wants to emphasize)—they may also pull in opposite directions. It may be that some agent can much more effectively address the poverty of those to whose deprivations she has *not* contributed than the poverty of those to whose deprivations she has contributed. For example, this may happen when addressing the

poverty of those affected by global warming—or by colonialism or by corrupt puppet regimes installed by former colonial powers—turns out to be much more costly than addressing the poverty of those whom we affected much less through our conduct. In cases like this principles of assistance would seem to pull in one direction—encouraging the agent to focus her efforts on the people whom she can most easily and significantly benefit. Principles of contribution, on the other hand, pull her in the opposite direction—encouraging her to focus on those deprivations to which she has contributed even when doing so is less efficient from the perspective of lessening deprivations overall.

The conflict between contribution and assistance-based reasons for action can become quite acute when the likely effects of prospective interventions to improve the circumstances of the poor are not known. Contributing money to aid organizations can help the poor, but it can also harm them. If reasons not to contribute to harm are much more stringent than reasons to assist, then evidence that some intervention to improve the lives of the poor may harm them or others should be a reason to reconsider the intervention. Singer could of course deny this, but then he would be at odds with the commonsense moral intuitions that he wishes to appeal to in this book. Thomas Pogge’s claim that, “a project that saves the lives of 100 children but also kills five others is ordinarily judged, if not altogether impermissible, at least much less choiceworthy than a project that, saving the lives of 95 children, only reduces harm” (Pogge 2007), seems correct.

Singer does not engage with this issue because he does not appear to take very seriously the risks that NGO-delivered aid will do harm. He does take pains to acknowledge that aid can be improved and that a lot of aid has not benefited the poor. He even acknowledges that some aid has done some harm, singling out food aid (Singer 2009, 116–117) and aid provided by affluent states to promote their political ends (Singer 2009, 115) as examples. At the same time, however, he makes the following summary judgment about the effects of aid: “The worst that can be said with any certainty is that in the past, a lot of official aid has been misconceived and misdirected and has done little good” (Singer 2009, 121). People familiar with the literature on aid will find this to be a far too sanguine assessment. They will claim that aid, and not merely so-called “official aid”—aid that is

provided by governments or multilateral organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF—has sometimes done a great deal of harm. He claims that people have unjustifiably made negative summary judgments about aid because they have focused too much on so-called official aid and not enough on the activities of NGOs. Criticizing William Easterly's book, *The white man's burden* (Easterly 2007), Singer claims that it ignores almost entirely the work of non-government organizations: mentioning them “only four times in a book of 400 pages and in none of these references is there a sustained discussion of the NGOs work” (Singer 2009, 118). This is a fair criticism of Easterly (and of recent work by Dambisa Moyo), but it does not accurately represent the work of aid critics as a whole. Singer is correct that we should not generalize too easily from studies of so-called official aid to findings about aid of other kinds, but we cannot therefore assume that unofficial aid is immune from problems that have bedeviled official aid either (Wenar 2006, Horton forthcoming). Critics have detailed why projects implemented by NGOs can, as Fiona Terry (a former president of Médecins Sans Frontières in Australia) has put it, “contradict its fundamental purpose by prolonging the suffering it intends to alleviate” (Terry 2002, 2). Government authorities (and in some cases non-government *de facto* authorities), with whom NGOs must negotiate and work with if they are to have any hope of being effective, can divert funds channeled to them by the NGOs directly for harmful ends. Or they can instead use funds that they would otherwise have had to devote to ends such as funding education, addressing basic health needs, and improving infrastructure for harmful or potentially harmful purposes. Any significant influx of external funds into a poor area with weak institutions risks contributing to corruption. Even if the government does not use resources freed up by the provision of aid for *harmful* purposes, their use may not result in any net benefit for poor people relative to what they would have had were aid not to have been delivered (Feyzioglu et al. 1998). Still other critics have been concerned that large-scale interventions by NGOs may inadvertently slow or prevent the formation of policy and institutional reforms that will bring sustainable long-term benefits to the target societies (Smillie 1995; De Waal 1997). We are not convinced that these critics of aid have shown either that it is a waste of time to fund

development projects, or that William Easterly is correct when he claims that activists ought to change their emphasis from raising more aid money to making sure that the aid money reaches the poor. Efforts to make sure that the money reaches the poor also engender costs, and it is an open question whether such costs are worth it (Wenar 2006). A plausible case can be made that some types of aid, including so-called official aid that is focussed on development initiatives, may have done long-term good and that it may continue to do so (Minoiu and Reddy 2009). However, a great deal of care needs to be taken in making claims about the effectiveness of aid in relieving poverty. To quote an author that Singer cites approvingly in another context in his book, “the debate about aid effectiveness is one where little is settled” (Rajan 2005, 54).

How then, should we think about duties to assist in light of the fact that the effectiveness of a great many aid interventions are, at present, not known, and that interventions may have harmful effects? In light of these facts, it might be tempting simply to reject standards like Singer's RSG. After all, if we are not confident that an intervention will bring benefit and we think there is a chance it will do harm, commonsense moral intuitions seem to militate against our making the intervention. Consider the following case, a variation on one developed by Leif Wenar (Wenar 2003, 296):

Rescue at the Lake

Rescuer sees three people drowning in the lake. The only way to get to them in time is to dive off of the end of the nearby dock, and even if one does this there is a chance that the rescue effort will fail. There is a densely-packed crowd of people on the dock, and one will have to push through them to get to the place where one can dive off. It's possible that in pushing through the crowd of people, one will cause at least one person to fall into the lake and drown.

It is certainly not obvious that the rescuer can proceed in this case. But we do not think that this provides a decisive reason to reject Singer's RSG for two reasons. First, intuitions about cases like this may vary significantly depending on the likelihood of various harms and benefits that this and other potential interventions would have. If the number of lives at stake in the rescue is very high and the risks

of doing harm a relatively low, it seems that we may have good reason to proceed. Second, it is not obvious that this case models accurately this situation with respect to the provision of aid to the poor. There are other types of cases in which the risk of harm does not seem to give us such weighty reasons to refrain from attempts to prevent harm from occurring.

Rescue at the Lake 2

Rescuer sees that three people are drowning in the lake. He can embark on a rescue mission that is likely to save at least some of them. All of them are almost certain to drown if he does not intervene. He knows, however, that should he undertake this mission it will very likely result in his killing at least one of them, since he must drive his boat very quickly towards them and at least one of them is likely to be sucked under his boat's propeller.

We think that it is because all of the people who the rescuer risks harming in this case have a reason to agree to what might be called “randomized harming” (Øverland 2005). In this case, each of these people has reason, *ex ante*, to agree to run the risk of being killed by him to raise their probability of being saved by him. In Rescue at the Lake, things are different, since in this instance Rescuer's mission risks killing not some member of a group of people that are under threat, but other people. Unlike the people who are at risk of drowning, none of the people standing on the dock has reason to agree to run the risk of being killed by him. They are in what might be called the same “risk zone” (Øverland 2005). Risk zones can be individuated in terms of the probabilities that accidents of different sorts will occur in them, and the particular activity creating the risk. Because the people in the lake are in the same risk zone, they have reason to accept risk-sharing—in this case the risk of harm by rescuers. The people on the dock are not in the same risk zone and do not have such reasons. One might of course question why it is that risks should not be transferred from one risk zone to another. Under some circumstances—where some occurrence that poses a very large risk of severe harm to many people in one zone can be transferred to another zone where there is a small risk of harm to few people—it seems plausible that they can be transferred. In general, however, people have weighty reasons not to accept rules that remove an opportunity for them to avoid accidents by avoiding zones in

which they would be exposed to high amounts of risk. Hence, people have a reason, *ex ante*, to forbid the transfer of risk from within a relatively high risk zone (in the lake far away from the shore), to those in relatively low risk zone (standing on a dock).

These considerations suggest that thinking about the permissibility and desirability of interventions to assist the poor may therefore depend crucially on the risks posed both to the beneficiaries of the proposed intervention (those within the same risk zone) and to third parties (those in other risk zones). These are complex issues, but we think Singer would be on fairly solid ground in asserting that those who risk being harmed by aid interventions would have a reason, *ex ante*, to run such risks if but only if it could be shown that these interventions were likely to do much more good than harm overall (Barry and Øverland 2009). We conclude that, while not an implausible standard, Singer's RSG requires more robust empirical support than is provided in *The life you can save*.

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