

Save (some of) the Children

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Abstract In “Save the Children!” Arturs Logins responds to my argument that, in certain cases, it is morally permissible to not prevent something bad from happening, even when one can do so without sacrificing something of comparable moral importance. Logins’ responses are thought-provoking, though I will argue that his critiques miss their mark. I rebut each of the responses offered by Logins. However, much of my focus will be on one of his criticisms which rests on an unfortunately common misunderstanding of Singer’s argument in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.” My response, then, is important not only because it salvages my positive argument, but also because it identifies, and corrects, this misunderstanding.

Keywords global poverty · famine relief · Peter Singer · global justice · shallow pond

1 Introduction

In “Save the Children!”, Arturs Logins responds to my argument that, in certain cases, it is morally permissible to *not* prevent something bad from happening, even when one can do so without sacrificing something of comparable moral importance. Logins’ responses are quite thought-provoking and merit discussion. Although, I will argue that his critiques miss their mark. In this paper, I rebut each of the three responses offered by Logins. However, my primary focus will be on Logins’ second criticism because it rests on an unfortunate, but understandably common, misunderstanding of Singer’s argument in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.”¹ My response, then, is important not only because it salvages my positive argument, but also because it identifies, and corrects, this misunderstanding. I’ll first provide a very brief exposition of my argument before reviewing, and rebutting, Logins’ objections.

¹More specifically, it rests on a misunderstanding about the scope of the second premise of Singer’s argument in his (1972) and (2009), as well as part of the case he makes for effective altruism in his (2016).

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2 A Brief Exposition of my Argument

In each of his major works on global poverty, Peter Singer argues that we are obligated to donate money to effective charities whenever we can do so without sacrificing anything nearly as important as the life we can save with our donation. The crucial moral premise (CMP) of Singer's argument is "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 1972: 231–3; Singer 2009: 15–16). Singer motivates this premise by analogy, imagining a case where you come across a child drowning in a shallow pond, who you can rescue at the cost of ruining \$200 worth of clothes. Since the near-universal intuition in this case is that it would be wrong *not* to sacrifice your clothes to save the child, Singer expects his readers to accept that commonsense morality is committed to CMP (Singer 1972: 231; Singer 2009: 3–4).

In my "Sometimes There is Nothing Wrong with Letting a Child Drown" (2015), I argued that there is an overlooked, plausibly relevant, asymmetry between Singer's *Drowning Child* thought experiment and the position we are in with respect to aid those living in extreme poverty. Although the description of *Drowning Child* is ahistorical, people implicitly assume that it is an anomalous event. So, when they imagine the case, they assume that they have not constantly sacrificed their clothes to save children in the past and that they will not need to constantly do so in the future. Giving to aid organizations is, in this respect, unlike *Drowning Child*. Every individual in an affluent nation, so long as they have some expendable income, will always be in a position to save the lives of people living in extreme poverty by donating said income. It may be quite clear that one has a moral obligation to sacrifice \$200 worth of new clothing a single time to prevent a child from drowning. It is much less clear that one is morally obligated to spend one's entire life making repeated \$200 sacrifices to constantly prevent children from drowning. In the paper, I illustrate this point by revising Singer's *Drowning Child* case to more accurately reflect the position we are in to aid those living in extreme poverty. I do so by giving the following case.

Drowning Children: Unlucky Lisa gets a call from her 24-hr bank telling her that hackers have accessed her account and are taking \$200 out of it every five minutes until Lisa shows up in person to put a hold on her account. Due to some legal loophole, the bank is not required to reimburse Lisa for any of the money she may lose, nor will they. In fact, if her account is overdrawn, the bank will seize as much of her assets as is needed to pay the debt created by the hackers.

Fortunately, for Lisa, the bank is just across the street from her work and she can get there in fewer than five minutes. She was even about to walk to the bank as part of her daily routine. On her way, Lisa notices a vast space of land covered with hundreds of newly formed shallow ponds, each of which contains a small child who will drown unless someone pulls them to safety. Lisa knows that for each child she rescues, an extra child will live who would have otherwise died. Now, it would take Lisa approximately five minutes to pull each child to safety and, in what can only be the most horrifically surreal day of her life, Lisa is repeatedly faced with the choice of rescuing children or stopping the hackers.

Things only get worse for poor Lisa. For the remainder of her life, the hackers repeat their actions on a daily basis and, every day, the ponds adjacent to Lisa's bank are filled with drowning children (Timmerman 2015: 208-209).

I used this case as a basis for a negative and a positive argument. My negative argument aimed to establish that Singer's *Drowning Child* case actually fails to justify the truth of CMP by his readers' own lights. People's intuition that they are obligated to save the child in *Drowning Child*, as they imagine it, does not provide substantive reason to think they're committed to CMP. My positive argument aimed to establish that the *Drowning Children* case also provides positive (defeasible) reason to reject CMP. If it is intuitively morally permissible for Lisa to take one break to experience theatre one last time in, say, the remaining 80 years of her life, then we have (defeasible) reason to reject CMP. Logins attempts to refute my positive argument with three criticisms. Because his second and third criticisms rest on a misunderstanding of both Singer's argument and my argument, I'll address them first. In showing where they go wrong, I intend to clarify the dialectic and, I hope, discourage Logins' (and others) importantly mistaken reading of Singer's work.

3 Dedicating One's Entire Life to Helping Others is a Real Sacrifice

Although I'll address each of his objections, I'll start with Logins' second criticism, which aims to show that Lisa *is* intuitively obligated to spend the rest of her life rescuing children, so long as she can do so without *ever* having made a collective sacrifice nearly as important as a single child's life. Logins' argument consists of an empirical component and a philosophical component. For the empirical component, Logins cites studies indicating that people who dedicate large portions of their life to humanitarian causes end up making very significant sacrifices (e.g. they often develop severe psychological health issues). He then concludes that because "Lisa is apt to suffer from serious psychological diseases...we may question whether it is correct to say that Lisa's 80 years of sacrifice are not nearly as important as a child's life" (Logins 2016: 421). This, however, misunderstands my thought experiment, which is meant to illustrate just how serious a sacrifice CMP would require of Lisa, a consequence that is obfuscated by the one-off nature of *Drowning Child*. Lisa's 80 years of constant sacrifice might very well be nearly as important as a child's, indeed many children's, lives. That's the point. *Drowning Children* illustrates that we have some reason to accept that it's permissible (and that commonsense morality permits) Lisa to go to the theatre one time in 80 years precisely because of the astronomical sacrifice she is making over the course of her entire life.

Logins takes the empirical studies to be relevant for the philosophical part of his argument because of his interpretation of Singer's CMP. He thinks that CMP can only require Lisa to sacrifice the remaining 80 years of her life if the total act-set of <constantly saving children for 80 years > does not require a sacrifice nearly as important as a single child's life (Logins 2016:420–421). So, Logins takes the empirical studies to show that CMP is unlikely to require anyone in the actual world to make the sacrifice Lisa did. This is because Logins believes that if CMP can require Lisa to spend her whole life saving children, then doing so is "totally safe and carries no risk whatsoever" (Logins 2016: 3). This makes him question whether Lisa dedicating her entire life to saving children "would constitute a sacrifice at all" (Logins 2016: 421).

Of course, I grant that Lisa is intuitively obligated to dedicate the remainder of her life to saving children if she can do so without making a collective sacrifice nearly as important as a single child's life, and this is especially clear if she can do so without making any "sacrifice at all." So, here Logins and I agree. But that is not what is at issue in the debate since CMP requires much more of Lisa. CMP actually requires Lisa to sacrifice the remaining 80 years of her life so long as each individual act of <saving one child > does not require a sacrifice nearly as important as a single child's life. Crucially, there is no limit to the number of individual sacrifices CMP requires. Since CMP can require Lisa to make any number of *individual sacrifices* (each comparably less important than a child's life), it can require her to make a *collective sacrifice* that is much more important than many children's lives.² Here is an oversimplified illustration of this consequence of CMP.

Films and Sacrifices: Suppose that Lisa tends to spend all of her money on tickets to see films and that each ticket costs \$10. Furthermore, suppose that Lisa can save a life for \$200 (the cost of 20 tickets). For the sake of simplicity, imagine (falsely) that the joy Lisa gets from watching 100 films is as important as saving a life.

Now, CMP does *not* entail that it is permissible for Lisa to see 100 films instead of saving lives. Why? Because Lisa only sacrifices seeing 20 films for each life she saves and the joy she gets from seeing 20 films is not nearly as important as saving a single life. Lisa choosing to see 100 films comes at the cost of saving five lives and the joy she gets from seeing 100 films is not nearly as important as saving five lives. So even though large subsets of Lisa's collective sacrifice are of comparable moral importance to saving a single child's life, CMP still requires Lisa to make that collective sacrifice because each of the individual sacrifices she makes are not nearly as important as saving a child's life.

To drive the point home, imagine that Lisa will live for trillions of years and has a momentary well-being level of 10 whenever she is watching a film. If she were to watch films for her entire life, her total well-being would be positive and in the quintillions. Suppose furthermore that Lisa's momentary well-being level drops to -10 whenever she is rescuing children. Finally, suppose each child she rescues accrues 200 units of goodness over the course of their life. This means that for every 20 units of well-being Lisa sacrifices saving children, she provides a child with 200 units of well-being. So long as each individual sacrifice required to rescue each individual child is not nearly as important as that child's life, Singer's CMP actually requires Lisa to give up one of the best lives imaginable (total well-being in the positive quintillions) for one of the worst lives imaginable (total well-being in the negative quintillions).

4 Another Intuition Pump

Relying on his interpretation of CMP, Logins proceeds to offer his readers an intuition pump meant to illustrate that, given commonsense morality, Lisa acts wrongly if she takes a single theatre break during her life. Logins attempts to elicit this intuition simply by asking us to imagine certain details of the case, including the fact that each child has "their own unique traits and individual faces, families that will suffer from their loss, and police who will

² Singer explicitly states this in his (2009: 18). I also make note of this in my (2015: 207).

investigate their death” (Logins 2016: 4). Furthermore, let’s imagine that Lisa opts to take one five-minute theatre break instead of rescuing a child. Remember that, contrary to how *Drowning Children* was meant to be understood, Logins is imagining that Lisa is able to “save every drowning child...without compromising her own life” (Logins 2016: 421). Given this stipulation, Logins expects his readers to think it reasonable were the unsaved child’s parents to become “terribly angry with Lisa,” once they learn that she could have saved their child, but didn’t. Furthermore, he takes this to provide good reason to think that Lisa acts wrongly by taking a five-minute theatre break once in her life (Logins 2016: 421).

A few points are worth making here. First, I agree with Logins that commonsense morality entails that Lisa acted wrongly if she could have saved all the children, including the child in question, without having to “compromise her life.” So, the disagreement between Logins and myself may be much thinner than it appears. Recall, however, that I use *Drowning Children* to make the case that we have some reason to accept that it is permissible, and that commonsense morality permits, Lisa to go to the theatre one time in 80 years precisely because of the astronomical sacrifice she is making over the course of her entire life.³

Second, grief-stricken parents’ attitudes are an exceedingly unreliable guide to the deontic status of Lisa’s actions. It would be expected, and perfectly understandable, for grieving parents to be angry at Lisa for not rescuing their child. This is so even if Lisa isn’t acting wrongly, and for reasons I’ve already given, she doesn’t seem to be. Nevertheless, it’s understandable why grieving parents would react in this way even if their reaction is no more fitting than the parents of a deceased child who lived in extreme poverty lashing out at Bill Gates for not doing even more than he already is doing. For what it’s worth, the fittingness of each of these attitudes seems, to me at least, on a par. In brief, Logins is assuming that if it is understandable for the parents to blame Lisa, then we should think Lisa acted wrongly. But this doesn’t follow. It is perfectly understandable that grief stricken parents would blame Lisa, though this doesn’t imply that she acted wrongly (or even that she *deserves* blame).

5 The Intervention Test

Logins’ final criticism of my positive argument is that commonsense morality appeals to the idea that Lisa’s actions are blameless, yet are nevertheless morally impermissible because they fail the *Intervention Test* (Logins 2016: 420).

Intervention Test: If we judge that intervention to prevent someone from doing *X* would be permissible, that suggests that this person’s doing *X* would not be permissible (Logins 2016: 420).

Logins’ suggestion is that it would be intuitively permissible to deprive Lisa of her one break in 80 years in order to force her to save another child from drowning. Given the *Intervention Test*, Logins infers that it would be morally wrong for Lisa to ever stop making sacrifices to rescue children in *Drowning Children*.

³ This commonsense judgment is supported by what Portmore refers to as the “basic belief.” See (Portmore 2011: 153–159).

My response to this objection is twofold. First, I am skeptical that the *Intervention Test* really supports Logins' conclusion. In *Drowning Children*, Lisa gives up almost everything, dedicating the remaining 80 years of her life to pulling children from shallow ponds. She only stops for necessities, barely sleeping or eating and anticipating the day she will have five more minutes of joy in her life before she goes back to spending all her expendable time and income rescuing children. When the case is imagined with these details in mind, it seems to me morally impermissible to force Lisa to skip the theatre.⁴ If this doesn't already seem clear, consider the fact that this commonsense judgment is reflected in widely shared intuitions about the supererogatory nature of charity. With the exception of impartial consequentialists, few would think a Doctors Without Borders volunteer is acting wrongly if she visits her family for the holidays rather than doing additional charitable work. Most people would think it impermissible for a third party to deliberately cause the Doctors Without Borders volunteer to, say, miss her flight in order to ensure she misses her holiday and is instead forced to do even more charitable work. Logins does not argue for his claim that Lisa's actions fail the *Intervention Test*, only writing that it "seems, to [him] at least, that we should intervene" (Logins 2016:420). So, this may come down to a difference of intuitions. Logins' intuitions, however, appear divergent from commonsense intuitions for the aforementioned reasons. Consequently, his suggestion that "according to common-sense morality, Lisa is not permitted to indulge in a morally insignificant good" is likely mistaken (Logins 2016: 420).

Second, even if the *Intervention Test* supported Logins' conclusion, it is a poor heuristic for determining the deontic status of acts.⁵ On a weak reading, it might be thought to generally pick out a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for impermissible acts. But this would not help Logins, as he needs to appeal to a particularly strong reading (i.e. one that requires that the *Intervention Test* is a sufficient condition for wrongness) if his argument is going to succeed. However, this strong formulation of the *Intervention Test* is demonstrably false.⁶ It will frequently generate the wrong verdict by the lights of any plausible normative ethical view. Since Singer is a consequentialist and since almost any normative ethical view can be represented in consequentialist terms (i.e. 'consequentialized'), I'll discuss the *Intervention Test* in terms of consequentialism broadly construed.⁷ I'll assume that goodness (UG = units of goodness-that) can be

⁴ Though, I grant that it's intuitively permissible to force Lisa to save another child if it comes at no cost to her, as Logins appears to be imagining the case.

⁵ One issue is that, as formulated, it is subject to troubling counterexamples on which no one would bite the bullet. For instance, in a basketball game, it is surely permissible for one player to block the shot of a player on an opposing team. But it would be incorrect to infer from this that it was wrong for the other player to take the shot and try to score points for his team. I presume Logins would want to offer a more fine-grained formulation of the *Intervention Test* to avoid these problems. Although it is unclear to me how this could be satisfactorily done without appealing to ad hoc principles.

⁶ The problem with understanding the *Intervention Test* to provide a sufficient condition for wrongness can easily be seen by considering its contrapositive. "If a person's doing x is permissible, then preventing someone from doing x is impermissible." Though this may be generally true, it's not true in every possible case. See Heller's (2003: 5) for another counterexample to the *Intervention Test*.

⁷ This includes any view that can be consequentialized. For more on consequentializing, see Portmore's (2007, 2009), and Dreier's (2011). For the purposes of my argument, it doesn't actually matter whether the consequentializing project succeeds. But I'll proceed as if it does because it will make the presentation of my argument clearer. If the consequentializing project fails, deontologists can give a parallel response to the one I give here (see fn. 8).

represented numerically, though this assumption is unnecessary for the purposes of my argument. Now, consider a case in which the agent's and the potential intervener's available act alternatives differ as follows.

	Perform x	Perform $\sim x$
Agent (A)	10 UG	9 UG
	Allow A to x	Force A to $\sim x$
Potential Intervener (PI)	9 UG	11UG

There are many cases that fit this model. Here's one. Let's suppose that x -ing is volunteering at a soup kitchen today. Suppose that if A x 's of her own volition (without interacting with PI), then she would be glad she did, though she wouldn't find the work meaningful enough to do again. On the other hand, if A $\sim x$'s of her own volition, she would opt to volunteer at the soup kitchen a few months later on an even slower day. She wouldn't find the work meaningful enough to do it again. Now, PI knows that soup kitchens are only busy on certain days. If PI prevents A from x -ing today, A would instead go to the soup kitchen tomorrow (a busy day) and find the work meaningful enough to continue going on a regular basis. On the other hand, if PI tells A to go today, A would go, but would still not find the work meaningful enough to go again. PI would feel remorse for causally contributing to A's x -ing.

Here's the important point. A can do the most good (or enough good on a satisficing account) by x -ing, yet PI can do more good (or enough good on a satisficing account) by forcing A to $\sim x$. According to the *Intervention Test*, however, since it's permissible for PI to force A to $\sim x$, we should infer that it's impermissible for A to x . But that is the incorrect result, so the *Intervention Test* fails. Now, on a charitable reading, the *Intervention Test* merely provides defeasible reason to believe an act is impermissible. However, even this weakened reading of the *Intervention Test* could only be a somewhat useful heuristic if the relative goodness of A's available act-alternatives is generally co-extensive with the relative goodness of PI's forcing A to perform each of these act-alternatives. I'm quite skeptical that there is a correlation strong enough to be informative. In the absence of evidence of such a correlation we cannot assume there is one.⁸

I also believe there is good reason to doubt that there would be such a correlation. One reason why is that the set of PI's available act-alternatives will necessarily be different from the set of A's available act-alternatives. PI's forcing A to perform an act is likely to affect the relative goodness of the act type being performed. For instance, Logins forcing Lisa to miss out on one last opportunity to experience theatre could result in Lisa resenting the fact that her autonomy was thwarted. Context-sensitive factors such as these are likely to be present in most, if not all, cases in the actual world. For these reasons, one should think both that (i) the *Intervention Test* doesn't support Logins' conclusion and (ii) even if it did, it is an ineffective guide to the deontic status

⁸ A parallel response can be given by Kantians who want to resist describing their views in consequentialist terms. The *Intervention Test* cannot be a reliable heuristic for Kantians unless there is a sufficiently close correlation between A's x -ing violating the Categorical Imperative and PI's forcing A to $\sim x$ being in accordance with the Categorical Imperative. For similar reasons, I am skeptical that there is a strong enough correlation between these acts for the *Intervention Test* to be informative.

of acts. Finally, even if there were a correlation strong enough to be informative, and even if the *Intervention Test* actually supported Logins' conclusions, arguments appealing to the *Intervention Test* could be outweighed by countervailing arguments, such as those I gave in my (2015).

6 Conclusion

Logins offered three criticisms of the positive argument I gave in "Sometimes There is Nothing Wrong With Letting a Child Drown." I rejected two of his criticisms because they rested on a common misunderstanding of Singer's CMP. I argued against his third criticism on the grounds that it appeals to a very strong, and demonstrably false, version of the *Intervention Test*.⁹

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