

Summer 2007 Assignment
Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers
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According to Appiah, the Singer principle (from the works of Peter Singer) states: “If you can prevent something bad from happening at the cost of something less bad, you ought to do it.” (p. 160) Peter Unger takes it a step further by stating that it would be immoral not to donate all of one’s wealth to organizations, such as UNICEF and Oxfam, that benefit less fortunate people. Based on these beliefs, Singer and Unger would likely agree that it would be wrong to spend money on the opera if that money could otherwise be used to save the life of a child.

Appiah, however, doesn’t agree with that decision. He believes that Singer and Unger are missing a key piece of morality and human nature: It is illogical—and just plain wrong—to assume that a person values all lives equally. In reality, a person is likely to value the people around them, such as family and friends, and even themselves, over those whom they have never met. That’s not to say that such a person does not care about other, unknown people; it is only to reaffirm the fact that humans prefer familiarity.

Singer and Unger’s principles are vague and without exceptions. They don’t seem to consider all possible situations and they fail to account for human nature. In addition, as Appiah mentions, if everyone spent all of their money to save starving children and none on activities they enjoy, the world would be a “flat and dreary place”. (p. 166) No one would want to live at all if they weren’t able to do things other than saving other people’s lives. People need entertainment and joy in their lives in order to be happy and successful.

As Appiah points out, Singer and Unger seem to imply that all values can be measured in a “single thin currency of goodness and badness” and that decisions should be made based on a comparison of the amounts of this currency for each possible outcome. (p. 166) That theory is a misguided and an inaccurate one, as it fails to account for outside forces. All decisions must be made by considering the many variables involved; this “morality price”, as one might call it, is only one such variable.

As such, Appiah is correct in his conclusions that neither the Singer principle nor Unger’s beliefs should be the sole guiding force in one’s decision-making process. While it

may be appropriate to assign the morality price a heavy weight when it comes to making a decision, it is impossible to force the human mind to think only of such a value. As Appiah argues, doing so would imply that one's own life is, in fact, less valuable than any other; it is not as equal as either Singer or Unger might lead one to believe.

Appiah also makes an argument based on the saying that “the end justifies the means”. Slavery, in and of itself, is wrong; the existence of the pyramids or of the United States, however, is not. Plus, it is unreasonable to assume that giving away all of one's wealth will cause any permanent change. It is more likely that doing so would simply prolong the possibly-dreadful life of a starving child for a set period of time. After that, the living conditions of the child would simply return to their previous state.

It is much more helpful, as Appiah believes, to contribute, in whatever way possible, to a cause that will focus on improving the general living conditions of a location, which, in turn, will eliminate the hunger of the children living there. Providing clean water or a better education system to Third World children will do more for their future than simply feeding them for a day, which, as Appiah points out, may actually be detrimental to the farmers and the economy of the area. And it wouldn't necessarily require all of one's wealth to be donated to the cause in order to make it happen.

In simple situations, the Singer principle or Unger's beliefs may seem like the proper way to make a decision. However, in more complex situations, such as choosing to attend an opera show instead of donating the money to feed starving children, these moral compasses are simply not adequate. Appiah is correct in concluding that human values and decision-making processes should be based on more than just one specific rule—designed by one specific human. The world is merely too complex for one sentence to handle.