

Applied Ethics

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Concern for Others – Charity, Justice and Equality

1. Concern for Others

A common feature of all moralities seems to be that we should show concern for others. It's central to Christian morality – 'You should love your neighbour as yourself' - and is to be found in the moral codes of all the great world religions. Often it takes the form of some version of the Golden Rule: 'Treat others as you would want them to treat you.' And concern for others is built into all three ethical theories which we looked at in the previous session – utilitarianism, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics.

If this were a course on ethical theory, we might want to examine critically the assumption that we ought to show concern for others. We could ask *why* we should do so, *why* it is assumed to be a central feature of morality – and there's a lot that could be said about that. But for the purposes of this course I suggest that we accept it as a given, and in this session we're going to look at its practical applications. *Which* others should we show concern for, how far should it go, and what form should it take?

In practice, at any rate, the prevailing attitude would be something like this: that we should care for our nearest and dearest, help our friends in times of need, and lend a hand to passing strangers if the occasion arises. But is that enough? Christians and other religious believers often imply that their morality demands more than that, and they sometimes claim that their religion motivates them to a greater degree of altruistic concern than worldly moralities would promote. But the question remains, how much? When asked by a rich young man what he should do, Jesus replied 'Go and sell all that you have and give to the poor'. A few sincere Christians take that literally and apply it to themselves, but it does not appear to be standard practice, and most Christians seem more inclined to say that this was advice for one particular individual in particular circumstances, and that Christians have to decide for themselves what love for one's neighbour requires of them. So, as always, religious doctrines provide no shortcut to moral conclusions. Believers and non-believers alike have to do some moral thinking and look at the arguments.

2. Global Duties

2.1. I mentioned in the previous session the views of the philosopher Peter Singer about how we should respond to the problem of global poverty and hunger. He first set out these views in an article published in 1972 called 'Famine, Affluence and Morality'. More recently he has expanded his ideas in a book *The Life You can Save*, published in 2009.

At the beginning of the 1972 article he uses this example:

If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing.

Note that he doesn't just say that it would be nice of you to save the child. You *ought* to do so, you have a *duty* to do so, and if you don't, that is a moral failing for which you can be properly criticised. Singer assumes that we will agree with this judgement, and it is the starting point for the argument that follows.



Peter Singer

“People with more than enough have a moral obligation to help those who, through no fault of their own, are living in extreme poverty. It's not hard to do.”

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/a-life-to-save-direct-action-on-poverty>

One thing which seems to follow is that we cannot take refuge in what is sometimes called ‘the acts/omissions distinction’. We can be morally criticised not only for our wrong actions but also for our failures to act. If it is wrong to kill, so also it is wrong to fail to save someone’s life when one can do so. If I walk past the pond without rescuing the child, I cannot escape moral criticism by saying ‘I didn’t *do* anything wrong.’ Note how a *consequentialist* approach enters into the picture here. Whether I kill someone or simply leave someone to die, the consequence is the same and just as bad – the person ends up dead.

On the strength of the example, Singer formulates two principles, a ‘strong’ principle and a ‘weak’ principle. The strong principle is:

If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.

The weak principle is:

If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it.

Look carefully at the small differences between the two principles. We’ll come back to these.

2.2. Singer now proceeds to apply the principles to the facts of global poverty and hunger. The facts are that in other parts of the world people are dying from preventable poverty and disease and malnutrition, and we – those of us, that is, who are relatively well-off in the richer countries of the world – could do something to prevent it. If we were to donate money, which most of us could afford, to a charity such as Oxfam, we could save lives. So if we don’t donate, we are failing to prevent something very bad from happening, and this is as wrong as it would be to walk past the pond and fail to pull out the child.

Note the other assumption which Singer says he is making here: that *distance* makes no moral difference. The child in the pond is there before your eyes. The people dying of disease and starvation are thousands of miles away and you can't see them - but why should that make any difference? Their suffering is just as bad, even though it is a long way away. So if we have a moral duty to pull out the child, then we have a moral duty to donate. We normally think of giving to a life-saving fund such as Oxfam as 'charitable', as 'beyond the call of duty'. But according to Singer's argument it is *duty*, not charity. We ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so.

2.3. *How much* do we have a moral obligation to give? This is where the distinction between the weak principle and the strong principle may come into play. According to the weak principle I ought to donate as much as I can 'without sacrificing anything morally significant'. What would be 'morally significant'? Well, of course, people will assess that in different ways. If giving more would mean I couldn't pay for the family to have a holiday, perhaps that would be morally significant – I'll be letting them down and making them unhappy. But if giving more would mean going without new clothes or a new car when the old clothes or the old car are perfectly serviceable, that can hardly be counted as a 'morally significant' sacrifice. So I ought to give more.

The strong principle is more demanding. It says that I ought to give as much as I can 'without sacrificing anything of *comparable* moral importance'. So it requires us to *weigh up and compare* the good or bad consequences of giving against the good or bad consequences of not giving, to see which is the greater. How do I do that? Again it depends what moral values I employ to assess what is good or bad. Singer himself inclines to a utilitarian view of how we should do the weighing up: comparing amounts of happiness and suffering. As he says, this would mean

...that we ought to give until we reach the level of marginal utility – that is, the level at which, by giving more, I would cause as much suffering to myself or my dependants as I would relieve by my gift. (LaFollete p.578)

In other words, so long as I can do more good – relieve more suffering – by donating money to famine relief rather than spending it on myself and my family, I should go on doing so. This is a startling conclusion which, as he says, would require radical changes to our standard moral thinking and practice. Our concern for others ought, it seems, to be very far-reaching indeed. He claims to have reached this conclusion from a starting-point which most of us would accept, by steps which most of us would find it difficult to disagree with. Has he?

2.4. Discussion questions:

1. Do you agree with Singer that there is no morally significant distinction between acts and omissions – that our moral obligation not to let people die is as important as our moral obligation not to kill? Can you think of examples which challenge Singer's position?
2. Can you come up with good reasons for thinking that distance **does** make a difference – that we have stronger moral obligations to those who are in some sense 'closer' to us?
3. Do you accept Singer's conclusion? If not, which step in his argument do you reject?

3. Social Justice

3.1. We've seen that Singer distinguishes between 'charity' and 'duty', and says that we have a duty to contribute to famine relief and help to end world poverty. There is a related but separate distinction which many of the aid agencies make. They often say that the fight against global poverty is 'not charity but justice'. We should now have a closer look at the idea of 'justice'. The word is used in various ways, and there's a standard distinction made between 'retributive justice' and 'distributive justice'. The discussion of *retributive justice* is about what it is for someone to be *justly punished* – for those who have broken the law to 'get their just deserts', as we might say. *Distributive justice* is concerned, roughly speaking, with people 'getting their fair share'. It's what is also often referred to as 'social justice'. And the word 'social' is important. We

typically think of justice as something that applies within a society. If we came across aliens on another planet and they were sufficiently like us for us to understand that they were suffering, we might take pity on them and want to help them, but our response to them would not be a matter of 'justice'. We think of justice as something which ought to exist within a society. If that is so, can we meaningfully talk of justice across different societies? Is the existence of global poverty, however bad it may be, really an 'injustice'? We will come back to that question later, after first looking at various views of what 'a just society' is.

3.2. We've already linked it with the idea of 'fairness' – a just distribution is one in which everybody gets their fair share. But what's a fair share? Suppose a friend gives your three children a box of chocolates for Christmas and tells them to 'share them fairly'. What would that mean? I think that the natural interpretation would be that they should share them *equally*. Not necessarily, of course – one of them might not like chocolates (and we'll come back to the implications of such a possibility later). But normally, if one of the children takes more than the others, we'd expect the others to protest 'That's not fair!' So here's a suggestion to consider: a just society is one characterised by *equality*.

Now to many people (to you?) this may sound absurd. It's all very well to talk about dividing equally a box of chocolates, but how can everyone in a whole society be equal? What is it supposed to mean? That everyone earns the same amount of money? That's implausible enough, but it gets even more ridiculous. Everyone to get the same amount of medical treatment, whether or not they need it? Everyone to get the same housing, whether or not they want it? Everyone to get the same amount of education, whether or not they can make use of it?

Let's try to formulate the idea of equality more plausibly. Of course people's tastes and preferences differ, of course their needs differ. Equality doesn't mean that everyone gets the same. Perhaps what it means is something like this: that the benefits and burdens of social cooperation are distributed in such a way that everyone benefits equally overall. That may seem to capture more successfully the intuitive connection of equality with justice and fairness. A society of equality is one in which people are not exploited and no individual or group benefits at the expense of others. Does that sound more plausible?

3.3. If it does, it may still be open to serious objections. Here are two.

First, the 'liberty' objection. However desirable equality in this sense may be, any attempt to achieve it would be at the expense of people's freedom. In anything other than a very simple society, differences between people will quickly emerge. Some people will be more successful than others because they are more talented, or more hard-working, or luckier. So maintaining equality would require constant interference in people's lives to counteract these inevitable tendencies, to take from the more successful and redistribute to the less successful.

Second, there's what has been called the 'levelling-down' objection. We could aim for equality by reducing everyone to the same low level. But who would want that? Don't we all benefit from the fact that some people are more successful than others? Take the case of economic incentives. People will be encouraged to work harder, or to develop their skills and talents and use them to the full, if they can earn more as a result. Everyone can thereby benefit from their efforts, their enterprise and their efficiency. If we refused to allow such incentives, and to insist that everyone should earn the same, we'd all be worse off.

3.4. Now let's look at a theory of justice which tries to take on board these objections. It's the work of the American political philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002). His book *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971, has been enormously influential. Roughly speaking, his approach is this. As far as the 'liberty' objection is concerned, any society will require restrictions of some sort on people's freedom, so let's identify the most important liberties – say, freedom of speech and expression, freedom of movement and association, and political rights such as the right to vote and take part in political life, and let's insist that these basic liberties should not be overridden. Let's recognise also that everyone will benefit from some kinds of inequalities, but

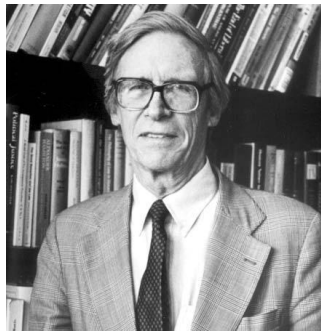
let's insist that they are acceptable *only* if everyone benefits from them. That means in particular that economic incentives, pay differentials and bonuses and the like, are acceptable from the standpoint of justice only if all *including the least well off* are better off as a result. If that condition is met, it would be perverse to rule out such differentials and make everyone worse off. And we can also add that if such jobs and positions are better rewarded than others, this is compatible with justice only if everyone has an equal opportunity to get to the top.

That's the thinking which lies behind Rawls' formulation of what he sees as the two fundamental principles of social justice:

Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.

Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged..., and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

(*A Theory of Justice* p.302)



John Rawls

'Injustice is simply inequalities that are not to the benefit of all.'

(*A Theory of Justice* p.62)

The first principle, Rawls says, must take priority over the second. So any economic measures of redistribution, such as progressive taxation, or government intervention in the economy, are acceptable only if they leave the basic liberties intact. The second principle is what Rawls calls 'the Difference Principle'. It allows some inequalities, but because of its requirement that the least well-off must benefit, and its requirement of equal opportunity, its underlying character is egalitarian. We'll return later to the discussion of global poverty, but note for now what Rawls' theory of justice says about poverty within a society. It might be said to allow for 'relative poverty' in the sense that some people will be better off than others – but only if the conditions of the Difference Principle are satisfied.

3.5. Discussion questions:

4. Does Rawls' theory of justice successfully capture what is attractive in the idea of equality?
5. Does it meet the objections to simple equality?
6. Would it allow **too much** inequality?
7. If it were applied to our own society, what changes would it require?

4. Do some people deserve more than others?

4.1. A broadly egalitarian conception of social justice, perhaps as developed and modified by Rawls, seems to be supported by our intuitions about fairness. But there's another common idea which pulls in a different direction – the idea that *people should get what they deserve*. Some at least of the inequalities in our society, it may be said, are justified, because some people deserve more than others. Captains of industry are enterprising and talented, doctors work long hours, top surgeons have special skills, and their higher incomes and status are a just reward for their talents and abilities. If everyone were to benefit equally in a society, then some people would get more and some less than they deserve.

What are we to make of this idea? Accepting it doesn't of course mean accepting that our society has got it right. You might think that nurses and care workers deserve a lot more than they get, and that bankers and financiers and business executives deserve a good deal less. But if that's what you think, you're still accepting the idea of 'desert' as an appropriate way of thinking about justice.

Should we do so? To help us in assessing the idea of 'desert', I'm going to distinguish between various different interpretations which could be given to the idea. I'm going to identify two weak versions of the idea, and distinguish them from a strong interpretation of it. They don't necessarily exclude one another, of course, and you may decide that all three should be accepted – or rejected.

4.2. First, I suggest, there is the idea of desert as *compensation*. The idea here would be that if some people have to work particularly long hours, or have to do especially difficult or dirty or onerous work, they should be rewarded more to make up for it. We might extend this to the idea that if some occupations require particular long periods of prior study and training, then higher rewards in due course again serve to make up for the time they have had to put in. Why might we think that such compensation is called for? I would suggest that an obvious answer can be found in the broadly egalitarian approach to justice which we've previously been looking at. Recall my earlier suggested formulation of the core idea of equality: that the benefits and burdens of social cooperation are distributed in such a way that everyone benefits equally overall. That implies that if some people have to shoulder extra burdens, they should also receive extra benefits so as to bring them up to the level of equal overall benefit. In that sense they can be said to deserve the extra rewards. But notice that if that's the best way to understand it, then this version of the idea of reward for desert, as compensation, is not a rival to the egalitarian approach. It sits neatly within it.

4.3. The same goes for a second weak version of the idea of desert. You'll remember that Rawls's more complex theory of justice allows for the idea of *incentives*. If differential rewards act as incentives which encourage people to work harder and use their skills and abilities to the full, and *if* everyone benefits from such a system of differential payments, then that can be accepted as just. Now of course if a society does have a structure of differential rewards as incentives, then there's a sense in which those who play the game and get to the top deserve the rewards. They have earned them by meeting the conditions and so they are entitled to them. If the system, for instance, says that those employees who sell more goods will get a bonus, and if some of them do sell more goods, then they have successfully met the conditions and so in that sense they 'deserve' the bonus. You may or may not think that such a system is a good idea – you might, perhaps, worry about encouraging competitiveness because it fosters a spirit of rivalry rather than cooperation. Or you might think that such competitiveness is a good idea – it keeps everyone on the toes and so everyone benefits. But whichever way you go, the point is that this weak version of 'desert' is again not opposed to the ideas of justice we looked at previously. It fits into Rawls's theory.

4.4. That's why I've referred to those two versions of the idea of desert – as compensation and as incentives – as 'weak' versions. Now contrast what I'm calling the *strong* version. Someone might say something like this: "It *doesn't matter* whether differential rewards bring people up to an overall equal level of benefit. They may do more than that. They may simply and straightforwardly leave some people substantially better off than others. And it doesn't matter whether or not the differential rewards benefit everybody in the long run. The

fact is that such inequalities are not unjust, they are deserved. Some people are more talented or hard-working than others, and if they are, then they deserve more *simply for that reason.*"

Here we really do come to a parting of the ways. We now have an irreconcilable conflict between the egalitarian approach to justice (including Rawls's complex but broadly egalitarian theory) and the idea of justice as giving people what they deserve. So what are we to make of this strong notion of desert? This is what Rawls says.

It seems to be one of the fixed points of our considered judgments that no one deserves his place in the distribution of native endowments, any more than one deserves one's initial starting place in society. The assertion that a man deserves the superior character that enables him to make the effort to cultivate his abilities is equally problematic; for his character depends in large part upon fortunate family and social circumstances for which he can claim no credit. (*A Theory of Justice* p.104)

The thinking here is that no one deserves the talents and abilities he or she happens to be born with, and so no one deserves to be rewarded for using them. The distribution of talents and abilities, including the qualities of character which make some people more hard-working or conscientious, are a result of what has been called a 'natural lottery'. They are an accident of one's genes, or of one's birth and family and upbringing. Some people are lucky – but that is no good reason for making them even luckier.

That's the strong notion of 'desert', then, and that's an objection to it which you need to think about. I introduced the discussion of 'desert' by saying that it has an intuitive appeal. So is that appeal sufficiently accounted for by the ideas of 'compensation' and 'incentives', or is there more to it than that?

4.5. Discussion questions:

Do some people deserve more than others? If so, why? Does it mean that some inequalities can be just? If some people are more talented or more hard-working than others, are they merely lucky?

5. Global Justice

5.1. Let's retrace our steps. In the first part of this session we looked at the suggestion that our moral obligations to care for others and relieve suffering should extend beyond our immediate circle. We looked at Singer's argument, that if we have a moral duty to prevent great suffering, then that includes a duty to do what we can to prevent people dying and suffering from poverty and disease and malnutrition in other parts of the world, people whom we do not know and do not encounter in our daily lives. And we saw that Singer's strong principle – which perhaps leads us in the direction of some version of utilitarianism – implies that this is a very strong duty indeed. It is a duty to do what we can to combat poverty and hunger, up to the point where doing more would create more suffering for ourselves and those close to us than the suffering we can relieve.

We then turned to a different way of thinking about the problems of poverty and hunger and the disparities between the lives of the well-to-do and the very poor – that they are *unjust*. This has led us into a discussion of the idea of social justice, and of different ways of interpreting that idea. From the standpoint of simple equality, the existence of extremes of wealth and poverty in our own society is clearly unjust. The same conclusion might well be reached from the standpoint of Rawls's more complex theory of justice. That would depend on the application of his Difference Principle, and we'd have to look at the facts and ask whether the worst off in our society are nevertheless better off than they would be with any other distribution of social goods. You can form your own view, but it's unlikely, I suspect, that the answer is 'Yes'. If you think that the idea of 'desert' should play a role in our thinking about justice, then the question of the injustice of poverty will be complicated in a different way, but again I suspect it's implausible to suppose that the very poor in our society are all poor because they deserve to be. I haven't raised the question of what we ought to do about it if the extremes of wealth and poverty are an injustice in our own society. I'll leave you to think about that.

5.2. I want now to take us back to the question of *global* poverty. Does it make sense to describe this as an 'injustice'? Some would say not. We've been looking at justice as a *social* concept: it addresses, we said, the question of how the benefits and burdens of social cooperation are to be distributed. Does that mean that questions of justice can only arise *within* a society? If so, it might seem to follow that we cannot meaningfully talk about justice or injustice *across* societies, and it would then make no sense to describe it as unjust that people in other parts of the world are much less well off than people in our own society.

There are two ways in which we might go here. One would be to challenge the assumption that justice is a uniquely social concept. If some people are much less well off than others, then you might want to say that that is quite simply unjust, whether or not the two groups are members of the same society. I'll leave you to think about this. You need to look at how we ordinarily use the word 'justice', and whether we would rob it of its distinctive use if we used it in that way.

5.3. The other way to go would be to consider whether we can talk about a *global society*, a society larger than the societies constituted by individual nation-states. It is sometimes said that we are all *global citizens*, and that we all have responsibilities to combat global injustice. Here are some of the reasons which have been given for talking in this way.

- There is a global economy. The majority of the inhabitants of the globe are part of this global economy to some degree. We are interdependent. A large proportion of the food we eat and the goods we buy in our own society come from overseas and are produced by the labour of farmers and workers who are often much less well off than we are and may be living on the margin of extreme poverty.
- The global economy is regulated by international agreements governing the terms of trade, including trade between rich countries and poor countries. We in western Europe benefit from these terms of trade, arguably at the expense of producers in many countries in Africa and Asia and Latin America.
- The most influential economic institutions are multinational companies whose wealth and power is greater than that of the majority of national economies.
- Global investment by western or multinational companies often deprives local populations of their own countries' resources.
- Economic institutions and practices in poor countries are often the legacy of imperialism.

Do these and other considerations add up to a case for talking about a global society and about global justice and injustice? I leave you to consider that question, and to think of reasons which might be adduced for rejecting that way of talking. The topic of global justice has been one of the most hotly debated topics among philosophers in recent years. Rawls himself rejected the idea that his theory of justice could be applied at the international level, but other philosophers (for instance Charles Beitz and Thomas Pogge) have drawn on Rawls' work to develop theories of global justice. See what you think.

5.4. Discussion questions:

8. Is it fair that we are able to buy cheap food and cheap clothing produced by farmers and workers in Third World countries who receive low prices or low wages and live in poverty? If you think it is unjust, why is it?
9. Could Rawls's theory of justice be applied at the international level? Or some other theory of justice?
10. If we did think in terms of global justice, what would be the practical implications for how we ought to live? Would it require changes to our lives?