

December 2014

## Charity as a Moral Duty

Erica Graham

*Cedarville University*, [EricaCGraham@cedarville.edu](mailto:EricaCGraham@cedarville.edu)

[DigitalCommons@Cedarville](#) provides a publication platform for fully open access journals, which means that all articles are available on the Internet to all users immediately upon publication. However, the opinions and sentiments expressed by the authors of articles published in our journals do not necessarily indicate the endorsement or reflect the views of [DigitalCommons@Cedarville](#), the Centennial Library, or Cedarville University and its employees. The authors are solely responsible for the content of their work. Please address questions to [dc@cedarville.edu](mailto:dc@cedarville.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Graham, Erica (2014) "Charity as a Moral Duty," *CedarEthics: A Journal of Critical Thinking in Bioethics*: Vol. 14 : No. 1 , Article 3.

DOI: 10.15385/jce.2014.14.1.3

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarethics/vol14/iss1/3>

---

# Charity as a Moral Duty

Browse the contents of [this issue](#) of *CedarEthics: A Journal of Critical Thinking in Bioethics*.

## Abstract

A question many Americans frequently encounter is whether or not they should give money to aid developing countries. We have the opportunity, through a charity, to help fund efforts to feed, clothe, and employ people lacking one of these from no fault of their own. What is the moral duty in this case? Society views these donations as beyond one's moral duty but Peter Singer argues that such giving is a moral duty. This paper will explore Singer's argument regarding this case, ultimately agreeing with Singer that charity is a moral duty.

## Keywords

Moral duty, charity, ethics

## Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarethics>



Part of the [Bioethics and Medical Ethics Commons](#)

## Charity as a Moral Duty

Erica Graham  
*Cedarville University*

A question many Americans frequently encounter is whether or not they should give money to aid developing countries. We have the opportunity, through a charity, to help fund efforts to feed, clothe, and employ people lacking one of these from no fault of their own. What is the moral duty in this case? Society views these donations as beyond one's moral duty but Peter Singer argues that such giving is a moral duty. This paper will explore Singer's argument regarding this case, ultimately agreeing with Singer that charity is a moral duty.

Singer's conclusion is based on the theory that "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable importance, we ought, morally to do it" (1972, p.231). His argument is quite simple; one's duty is to prevent harm to their fellow man when one can do so without harming oneself. People generally agree with this, but consensus falls apart when considering giving to charity, specifically donating to developing countries. Society wants charity to be above the call of duty, or supererogatory. Singer argues against this classification.

Ethical literature extensively defines supererogatory acts. Feinberg and Feinberg identify the essential element as going beyond duty's demands (Feinberg & Feinberg, 1993). Consider the act of starting a new program to provide relief or moving to the area and building a hospital. Society and Singer both agree that these acts are supererogatory, but for less grand gestures consensus crumbles. The disagreement is over what duty is. Barry Curtis defines when duty ends. He explains that "...if the cost or risk is roughly as significant as the moral value of the end, the agent has done something which is 'above and beyond the call of duty'..." (Curtis, 1981, p. 311). The duty, then, is to help until personal sacrifice equivocates the recipients' disparity. Therefore, if the sacrifice is less than the recipient's suffering, then giving is morally obligatory. Curtis also describes supererogatory acts in terms of moral ends: when neither the reason for moral action nor self-interest overrides each other (Curtis, 1981). The moral action and self-interest are not of equal moral value in the considered situation. For the average middle class American, providing food, clothing, shelter, or a job to another human clearly overrides saving \$200. Based on these definitions, three critical aspects must be considered when declaring an act obligatory or supererogatory: moral value of the ends, harm prevention for the recipient, and sacrifice of the actor.

Determining the supererogatory nature of an action requires asking which end has the higher moral value: self-interest or saving another human. Consider Mother Theresa and Father Damien; both made it their life work to help impoverished persons. Their sacrifice was equivalent in moral value to the end they sought: giving a life to save a life. If these are moral equivalents, it is fairly obvious that the self-interest of saving excess money does not morally equal saving a life. As the moral value of the end increases then the value of the self-interest dwindles so much that the moral action becomes more of a duty than a situation of choice that can potentially be supererogatory (Curtis, 1981). This explains why donating money is a moral duty. The preservation of the human race is what Curtis would consider to be a "morally good

end for the sake of which no amount of self-sacrifice would be great enough to be considered foolish” (Curtis, 1981, p.314). This does not completely apply to the considered situation but gives insight. If there are situations where no level of sacrifice is foolish, then cases should exist where the ends are so great that they require some minimal action, the omission of which would be ethically unacceptable. Our situation is one of these; saving a starving person is such a high end that omission of aid is unacceptable.

Common ethical theory agrees that if one can help relieve suffering or prevent further harm to another but does nothing, then one is blameworthy. What qualifies as harm prevention? Mere inconvenience to the victim or harm to property is not significant enough harm to warrant duty for another to help (Smith, 1990). The converse should also be true. Inconvenience should not be significant enough to eliminate one’s duty to help. “It is reasonable to think that sacrificing a bit of inconvenience to correct a situation of extreme peril is the least we can do” (Smith, 1990, p.26). Donating money qualifies as a minor inconvenience for the average middle class American. It is clear that this sacrifice is minimal compared with the moral value of saving human lives, making it a duty rather than a supererogatory act.

I will now consider ethical arguments against Singer’s thesis based on the larger circumstance, proximity, and the theory’s extreme nature. Smith argues that emergencies create a duty to help, but chronic problems or what she calls “chronic emergencies” do not warrant aid because they are not discrete events directed at individuals (Smith, 1990). However, so-called chronic emergencies are simply made up of smaller discrete emergencies. The existence of small emergencies within a chronic emergency should not change its moral status because death is still inevitable. When considering monetary donations, there should be no moral difference if a victim is a resident of a suffering country or a non-suffering country.

Some argue that such duty cannot exist because of the lack of proximity to the person in crisis. Smith argues that in order for it to be a moral duty one must be presented with a discrete, unique event solely directed at an individual. Singer refutes this claim because of the current state of the global community as intertwined through technology (Singer, 1972). This argument stands because persons can be essentially present with each other through the Internet, and physical confrontation is not necessary to incur duty (Smith, 1990). Smith also counters with the argument that it is a societal duty, and that the minimum duty has been fulfilled by the persons making people aware of the problem. This is unsound because every member of society has a minimal duty to support the organizations responding to societal problems.

Others would say that making charity morally obligatory is too extreme to demand of people as a part of the basic moral code. A basic moral code should not be “too far beyond the capacities of the ordinary man” (Singer, 1972, p.237). The duty of charity is not beyond the average man’s means. What a man considers within his reasonable capacities often depends more on his environment than his true capabilities. America highly values comfort, so the capacities of citizens are recognized as what feels comfortable. Therein lies the fallacy: equivocating comfort with capacity, resulting in giving below our moral duty in the weight of the moral end presented.

Yet, many are still uncomfortable with this conclusion. Why is this? I would propose that it is due to selfishness, not the ethics. Moreland and Geisler claim moral values are more evident from what a man wants done to him than from what he will do for someone else. In other words, our discomfort and noncompliance do not negate the duty, but might actually prove its existence.

We would want someone to give money to a charity to feed us if we were starving. Therefore, according to Moreland and Geisler's logic, helping in our considered case is a morally valuable act. Defending our discomfort relies on the ethical theory of subjective preference utilitarianism, which declares that moral acts ought to maximize the satisfaction of individual desires and preferences. This theory readily disintegrates into relativism and should not be used to morally defend ourselves (Geisler & Moreland, 1990).

The act of charity we have considered cannot be classified as supererogatory because the moral value of the end is greater than that of the small sacrifice of the giver. The desire to classify donating to charity as a supererogatory act stems from selfishness, not sound ethics. Therefore, charity is a mere social contract centered on comfort that masquerades a moral obligation as a supererogatory act. Singer is correct. Charity is a moral duty.

## Bibliography

- Curtis, B. (1981). The Supererogatory, The Foolish and The Morally Required. *Journal Of Value Inquiry*, 15311-318.
- Feinberg J. S., & Feinberg P. D. (1993). *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton: Crossway.
- Geisler, N. L., & Moreland, J.P. (1990) Ethical Theories and Ethical Decision Making. In F. J. Beckwith Editor, *Do the Right Thing: a Philosophical Dialogue on the Moral and Social Issues*. (39-52). Belmont: Cengage Learning, Inc.
- Singer, P. (1972). Famine, Affluence, and Morality. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*.1229-243.
- Smith, P. (1990). The Duty to Rescue and the Slippery Slope Problem. *Social Theory & Practice*, 16(1), 19-41.