

Achieving the Best Outcome

FINAL REJOINDER

Peter Singer

The one central point in all my writing on this topic, from “Famine, Affluence and Morality” onward, has been that the failure of people in the rich nations to make any significant sacrifices in order to assist people who are dying from poverty-related causes is ethically indefensible. It is not simply the absence of charity, let alone of moral saintliness: It is wrong, and one cannot claim to be a morally decent person unless one is doing far more than the typical comfortably-off person does.

Nothing Kuper has said, either in his original article or his reply to my response, contradicts this central claim. His arguments go to the details of how best we can assist people in desperate poverty. Perhaps instead of giving money to Oxfam, he suggests, we should buy goods from suppliers who ensure a fair return to laborers in developing countries. Perhaps we should stop going to Florida and Paris, and instead go on environmentally sustainable and nonexploitative trips to developing countries. Perhaps we should support movements against corruption, or for better terms of trade for developing countries. I’d be very happy if people would do any or all of these things, and if they have nothing left over to give to Oxfam, that wouldn’t trouble me either. I don’t claim to have any expertise in assessing whether these options are better or worse than giving to Oxfam. If someone can convincingly show me that one of them is clear-

ly better than giving to Oxfam, then that’s what I’ll do in future.

Now Kuper writes:

I show that Singer selects and uses facts uncritically precisely because he has no political economy, no political sociology, and no theory of justice. We are seriously misled if we do not draw adequately on the wisdom and tools of these bodies of knowledge.

I’m not sure why Kuper says that I have no theory of justice. It’s no great secret that I’m a preference utilitarian, and so he could have inferred that I believe that goods ought to be distributed so as to maximize the satisfaction of preferences, in the long run. But in writing about the obligation to assist the world’s poorest people, I want to reach people who are not utilitarians, so I don’t rely on utilitarian premises for that argument. I make a simple argument that challenges people to justify spending money on luxuries when that money could be used to save lives. Since there is no consensus about which is the right theory of justice, that still seems a better strategy than relying on one particular theory.

As for political economy and political sociology, it should be obvious why the central claim I sketched above doesn’t require these, beyond the grounds for believing that there is something we can do to help people in extreme poverty. But in any case, I’m skeptical about the extent to which these fields offer a relevant “body of knowledge.”

Kuper writes: “One does not have to sympathize with Marxists to think that telling the bourgeoisie to be more charitable as individual actors is unlikely to produce deep changes.” But what does Marx tell us about how to produce “deep changes”? Join with the proletariat in the class struggle, and the coming proletarian revolution will bring about a better world. No “body of knowledge” there, just a prediction that has proved sadly in error.

Giving to Oxfam is doing something that helps relieve desperate poverty. Maybe it won’t change the structure of things. But until I’m shown how to do that, I’ll settle for making some people better off. If giving more money to Oxfam were liable to “seriously harm the poor,” as Kuper suggested in his article, isn’t it odd that Amartya Sen, who Kuper now describes as one of the “luminaries of genuine poverty relief,” should

have accepted the position of president of Oxfam—a position that presumably commits him to doing exactly what I have sought to do in my writing, namely, persuade more people to donate more money to Oxfam?

When we can’t make deep structural changes, it is still better to help some people than to help none. When Oskar Schindler protected Jews who would otherwise have been murdered, he had no impact on the structure of the Nazi genocide, but he did what he could, and he was right to do so. One can only wish that more Germans had done the same. Fortunately, without risking our lives, we have more options than Schindler. We should do our best to find out what will produce the best outcome, whether it is giving money, buying fair trade products, voting, joining an organization, or all of those things. Then we should do it.