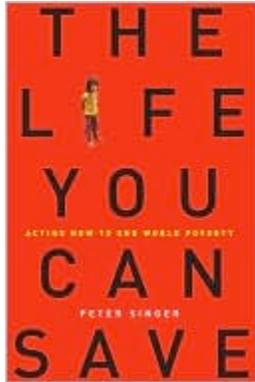




The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty

Peter Singer , Joanne J. Myers

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to thank you for joining us.

Our speaker, Peter Singer, has been described as one of the most innovative, provocative, and prolific philosophers living today. And, even though he was born and raised in Australia, he is perhaps America's most famous specialist in applied and practical ethics.

The topic of this presentation is poverty, and it is based on the 2007 [Uehiro Lecture in Practical Ethics](#) that he delivered at Oxford University. This talk was the catalyst for his book, [The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty](#), and represents Professor Singer's efforts to distill his thoughts about why we give—or don't give—and what we should do about it.

Ethics is about the basic choices we make and speaks to the challenges of what it means to live an ethical life. It is often defined as a good, a right, or a duty, and is considered in terms of the effects it has on the greatest number of people. Therefore, when one speaks about the moral obligation to eliminate global poverty, it is self-evident that the question of how we should approach this issue would arise.

Yet, today, when the subject of money is raised, especially when we are so concerned about our own financial future, it might seem odd to talk about how you should be spending your money. Still, our guest this morning argues that no matter how difficult this economic slowdown is, we are still better off than those who have to struggle day in and day out just to meet their basic needs. He contends that it would take little effort on our part to help those who are desperately poor.

In *The Life You Can Save* Professor Singer uses ethical arguments, provocative thought experience, illuminating examples and case studies of charitable giving to show that our current response to world poverty is not only insufficient but ethically indefensible and needs to change. He says that giving will make a huge difference in the lives of others, lifting them out of despair, without diminishing the quality of our own lives.

Professor Singer approaches the issues raised by global poverty by asking such questions as: Is there one cent that is better defended or more justified regarding these issues than others? He then sets out to answer two very difficult questions: Why people in affluent countries should donate money to fight global poverty; and how much should each of us give.

Professor Singer is no stranger to controversy. He first gained eminence for his profoundly important

early work on animal rights, arguing convincingly for vegetarianism and against the commonplace cruel treatment of animals by large commercial interests. However, he probably has attracted the most notoriety for his defense of abortion rights and certain forms of euthanasia. With such controversial topics, he has pushed the hot buttons of our collective conscience, and it is easy to understand why.

In *The Life You Can Save* he does so once again, as he challenges the moral obligations of citizens of affluent nations to help those living in the poorest countries of the world.

Before I invite you to join me in listening to Professor Singer, be forewarned. This morning's presentation could challenge your definitions of morality and charity, as Professor Singer asks not only what we can do but asks why we don't do more.

Please join me in welcoming our guest, the very distinguished Peter Singer. Thank you for joining us.

Remarks

PETER SINGER: Thank you very much, Joanne. Thank all of you for turning out this morning. It's a pleasure to talk to you.

I know this is a very distinguished audience and many of you already have a lot of knowledge of the area in which I am talking. So I'll just set out very briefly what I'm arguing in the book and then focus on some of the questions that are maybe more difficult about the sorts of things that I'm saying, to acknowledge places where I think the argument can use some support and leads to certain questions, and then I hope we'll have plenty of time for discussion so that I can hear from you.

The book begins with a little story, one that I told many years ago in an article called "[Famine, Affluence, and Morality](#)," which was one of the first articles I published in my academic career, and has been one that has been reprinted many times, and I think is effective at challenging people to think about the issue of global poverty.

The story is that you're walking across a park somewhere, there's a shallow ornamental pond that you see there, and you see that a small child has fallen into it, a toddler. You look around for the parents, the babysitter, but you can't see anyone.

So it looks like if you don't rush into the pond and pull the child out there's a good chance that the child will drown. But just this morning you realize that you put on your favorite pair of shoes, a very expensive pair of shoes that you bought, and if you waded into the pond with them, they're probably going to get ruined. And we'll assume that it takes too long to take them off, so you don't have that choice. You either save the child and ruin the shoes or you don't save the child but your shoes are fine.

Now, when I ask my students, "What should you do in those circumstances?" I'm sure you'll be pleasantly reassured to know that what they say is you should save the child. And, in fact, that's pretty much a universal response that you get to that. Everybody says you can't compare a child's life with a pair of shoes, no matter what designer-brand expensive shoes they might be. I think that's clearly right; that's clearly the way we ought to feel about the situation.

Given that, and given that [UNICEF](#) tells us that there are about ten million children who die each year from preventable poverty-related causes—causes like diarrhea or measles or malaria, things that we could either prevent or, if they get them, we could cure—given that, how is it that we think it's okay, that we think we can still be decent people, ethical people, if we do nothing about that situation, if we don't give even the cost of one expensive pair of shoes, to do something about helping people in extreme poverty or reducing the death toll of children in extreme poverty? That's really the question that the book poses.

And then, it goes into a discussion of some objections that people might make to that parallel. They may

say, "Look, these situations are really different because of . . ." and then various reasons follow. Or some people might say, "Well, the situation is not really that different, but it's a fact that we don't give, and what we should do is explore the psychological reasons why we don't give"—and that's something else that I talk about in the book and that I think is important.

And then, there are other questions about: "Well, if we accept the case that we should be giving something, how much should we be giving, how demanding an obligation is this"; and "How should we give it; how can we make it effective?" So there is a range of practical questions that flow from that.

So maybe I'll just say something about some of these objections that strike me as the more salient ones.

There are philosophical objections to the argument. One of them even, I suppose, really questions whether we have a moral obligation to save the child in the pond. Libertarians may say, "Look, as long as I don't harm anyone else, as long as I respect everyone else's rights, I have done nothing wrong. You may say I'm not a very nice person if I didn't save the child in the pond, but I have not violated any moral obligation. You can't say I've done something ethically wrong." Not many people want to take that view, but there certainly are some.

I don't think that that's a defensible ethical view. I think there are a lot of things that can be said about it, including the fact that we don't get what we get simply by our own efforts; we need a community that enables us to earn our money, to be safe in it, to be secure in it, and I think we can argue that we ought to give something back and acknowledge some responsibilities to others because of that.

It's also too, I think, an interesting way in which facts about the world impinge on what seem to be purely philosophical differences, that it's now much harder to maintain the view that "I do no harm to others," in terms of the world poverty situation, than it used to be before we knew about things like climate change, because it's now the case that if we are responsible for putting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, we are having an impact, some sort of impact, on everyone in the world, and at least some of the poor are going to be harmed by this.

If sea levels rise around the world—you might have seen those maps, you can go online and you can put in the prediction of how much sea level is supposed to rise by a certain year, and you can see which bits of Manhattan are likely to be under water by that year. If you have real estate in Manhattan, that might be an interesting thing. But I'm pretty sure that, given the values of real estate in Manhattan, people are going to build barriers to make sure that Manhattan isn't going to go under water.

But what is going to happen to the delta regions of Bangladesh, where ten or more million people live and they don't have the resources to build barriers everywhere there? So we are clearly harming people in the world. That's just one example.

There are other things we can talk about, including the world trading system and the resource curse, the way we take resources from some nations where we know that the returns, the benefits, don't go to the people of those nations as a whole. There are major difficulties, I think, to maintain the libertarian view that "I can live here a normal life of an American citizen and not be complicit in different ways of harming people around the world." So I think that argument doesn't really work very well.

Other people make arguments about the nature of the responsibility. They say, "We have responsibilities to specific, identifiable individuals but not to masses we can't see." In other words, they want responsibilities to be more personal, more direct.

I don't accept this myself as a moral argument. I do think that it's psychologically significant for most of us, that we see an identifiable victim. There are lots of cases you can refer to where people have responded in that way.

In the book, I talk about the case of a young girl called [Jessica McClure](#), who back in the 1980s fell down

a dry well in Texas. Some of you may remember the case. It took more than two days to get her out. CNN was there all the time, and other media, so it was going around the world. People started donating money to her, although there was no particular reason to think that donating money was going to help to get her out. The engineers were already there doing what they could. But this young woman, as she is now, has a million-dollar-plus trust fund because of the money people donated, because there was one identifiable child that they identified with.

Now, if you believe UNICEF's statistics, in the two days that it took to get her out something over 50,000 children died of avoidable poverty-related causes; and no money, or negligible money, was donated to save those 50,000 children who really needed the money. So there is a problem there. It's interesting, I think, to think about how we can change that situation.

But looking at it ethically, I don't think we're let off the hook by the fact that I don't know if I were to give to UNICEF—or to [CARE](#) or [Oxfam](#) or [Doctors Without Borders](#) or whatever other organization that might be that's doing good work out there—it's true that I don't know whom my donation is going to help, I don't know which child's life is going to be saved, if that's what's going to happen, or which family is going to emerge from poverty because of the support. But it's still a real family, it's not a statistic; it's still a real family and it's real flesh-and-blood people. I think that is the basis for our obligations. There are people we can help, and we can help them at relatively little cost to us. That, I think, is the nature of the obligation.

Let me move to a more practical objection, rather than a philosophical one. I'm sure you're all aware that there has been a fair amount of criticism of aid in recent years. [William Easterly](#), an economist at NYU, wrote a book, called [The White Man's Burden](#), in which he was critical of aid. More recently, we've had a book by [Dambisa Moyo](#), a woman from Zambia, who has experience of living in the developing world and also has worked at the World Bank in finance, and she's got a book, called [Dead Aid](#), which is also critical of aid.

But the aid that both Easterly and Moyo are critical of—and they're explicit about this in the books—is official aid programs. It's things like aid from the [World Bank](#) or interventions of the [IMF](#), and to some extent bilateral government aid, government to government. They are not talking about NGO aid.

Now, I agree that it's really important to try and make aid effective, and there are real questions about some of the World Bank and government-to-government aid—whether it could be made more effective; whether indeed it creates dependence, as Easterly and Moyo would argue; and what we can change about this. And, because that kind of aid is by far the largest part of foreign aid in the world, that's a very important discussion to have.

But even if those criticisms are justified of aid at that level, it doesn't mean that we should not be supporting the nonprofit agencies that are doing specific things in particular countries, not putting money through governments but working with partners in the developing countries, with grassroots organizations, going into villages and towns, poor urban areas, and finding out what people need, what can help them, and actually doing specific, concrete projects that do help, and that help in a way that isn't simply a handout, isn't simply providing food, but is providing something structural that can help in the long term.

It may be providing clean water, safe drinking water, which not only will reduce the incidence of diseases like diarrhea, but very often will save people, usually women, a lot of time. It's usually women who have to go and fetch the water. In some areas, they may have to walk two hours a day, half of that carrying a heavy container of water, in order to provide the family's water for the day, and then that water won't be safe to drink, and they have to either gather enough fuel to boil it or they have to drink it unboiled and risk their children getting diarrhea as a result. So that's something that you can change, something quite concrete.

And there are many other projects of different kinds that are directed towards improving health,

improving education, empowering people to form alliances and cooperatives to help them produce more, to help them to get into the economy in some way. There are micro credit arrangements, of course, that have had a lot of publicity, which certainly have a role in helping some people to escape poverty, to start their own businesses, or simply to smooth out the kind of up-and-down cycle that they go through which otherwise can put them into serious debt.

So I think there are a lot of effective forms of aid. I think those are what we ought to be supporting. Plus we ought to be supporting evaluation of aid, to make sure that what we're supporting is effective and to find out what other effective forms of aid we can have.

I'm pleased to see that there has been a significant move into evaluation both in the NGOs themselves and in other areas. So there is now something called the [Poverty Action Lab](#) at MIT, which is trying to do quite rigorous studies, with randomized controls even, of particular aid projects to really show whether they work or not.

We have the NGO called [GiveWell](#), which you can find at givewell.net, which is offering rewards, offering cash, to organizations that can demonstrate their effectiveness in doing things like saving lives in Africa or reducing poverty, and essentially encouraging them to be more transparent with their figures, with the reasons why they make their decisions, why they fund one aid project rather than another, and to do the hard work of showing that donations to them are actually paying off in terms of the kinds of returns we want to see. I think that's an initiative that also needs to be encouraged.

But this itself costs money. If you say, "Well, we haven't got enough of this evaluation," that's not a reason for not giving. It's a reason for giving because the aid organizations need to use some of their funds—and that's always a difficult decision for them—to say, "Well, can we set up an evaluation unit, or can we get outside auditors to come and evaluate what we're doing?" If what you're doing is evaluating projects in remote rural areas, that involves a significant amount of travel and significant costs, and that increases or adds to the cost of carrying out the project.

So I think we need to do all these things, but we need to be able to provide the funds to do it.

That leads to the other question I mentioned, which is: Well, if we have this obligation, as I've argued, to help people in extreme poverty and to save lives, how demanding is that obligation? You might have thought, "All right, I think that's a good point. I am prepared to give the cost of an expensive pair of shoes to one of these organizations that will help to save lives or help people in poverty."

But once you've done that, you're still probably living very comfortably. Even despite the economic downturn, most Americans are still living comfortably; most Americans are still spending money on all sorts of things that they don't really need and that you couldn't say are of comparable importance to saving the life of a child.

So does that mean that you have to give again, that before you buy something else you have to think, "Oh well, I'm weighing that against a child's life. Do I really need a new flat-screen TV for the bedroom? That can't be as important as the life of a child, so I better not buy that. And there's another few hundred dollars that I give"—and so on, until we've pruned away all of that comfortable layer of luxuries that we take as part of our normal life. Well, that would be an extremely demanding obligation, if we actually had to keep on like that all the way through.

In the book I talk about some people who come close to living that way, who have given most of their fortune, in some cases people who are not even very rich but have given half of their income to organizations helping the poor. Interestingly, many of them find that a very fulfilling and worthwhile way to live.

I think we shouldn't necessarily see this as self-sacrifice. It definitely can be material sacrifice, but in terms of what is it that's good for us, what is it that makes our life fulfilling and rewarding, maybe the

knowledge that we're contributing to helping the world's poor, to helping to make the world a better place, is something that actually is more important to us having a good life than the various luxuries that we might have spent that money on.

But nevertheless, even if that is true, and even if there are a few people who do give very considerably, I have become persuaded over the years since I first wrote about this topic that we need to try to get more people involved—we need to get a lot more people involved—and to make it part of our general culture that it is our responsibility to do something for the world's poor, and not simply to leave it up to the government, which doesn't do a very good job, and, in the case of the U.S. government, doesn't give very much either.

So what I've tried to do in the book is to suggest a much more modest standard, but one that I hope could become part of the general culture. It's a standard that means that for 90 percent of Americans, the lower 90 percent of U.S. taxpayers anyway, I'm suggesting they give only 1 percent of their income to world poverty. So if the median income is \$50,000, it's \$500 a year, which I think most people can afford. It's not huge. Of course, some people may be struggling to pay their mortgage at the moment, and I'm not suggesting that they give right now. But for most Americans in that bottom 90 percent, I think that 1 percent is doable.

And then, if you get up to the top 10 percent, which means you're earning \$105,000 and above, I'm suggesting you move to 5 percent; and in the top 5 percent of American taxpayers, which is \$148,000 and above, you move to 10 percent. The scale goes on progressively and tops out at one-third for those who are earning above \$1.9 million, which puts you in the top 0.01 percent, I think it is, of U.S. taxpayers.

I think that these are scales that are realistic. I don't think they're imposing severe hardship on anyone.

It's true that to some extent they are somewhat arbitrary, but they were calculated with the idea of working out how much money all of this would raise if most people did it. The result is quite surprising: It raises something like \$500 billion, which compares with [Jeff Sachs'](#) estimate of \$189 billion a year to meet the [Millennium Development Goals](#)—and that's from the entire world, not just from the United States. So it's a very sizable sum of money. I think it would be enough—you know, it would actually probably be difficult to spend that much all at once; we'd have to gear up—but it would be enough to make very big inroads into global poverty.

I am putting that out there as a kind of standard to suggest. I'm also encouraging people to talk about it, because I think one of the barriers to giving, or to encouraging people to give and to changing the culture of giving, is that we are reticent to talk about what we are doing.

There is a lot of psychological research that shows that a big factor in whether people give is whether they believe other people are giving. We are very much a herd animal still. So although we may feel not terribly comfortable, we may think it sounds like bragging or being immodest, it's important to discuss this with people.

As one way of making things public, what we do nowadays is we put things on the Internet. So I have set up a Web site with the same address as the title of this book, thelifyoucansave.com, and I have asked people to go to that Web site and pledge to meet the standard. You can give your name—you don't have to give your name.

When I checked yesterday, we were up to over 1,700 people who have pledged to do that basically in the three weeks or so that the book has been out. So that's an encouraging start. But, obviously, we need a lot more.

The Web site has a lot of other information about organizations to which you can give, invites suggestions of other organizations. I would like it to grow as well and become a portal for people to discuss questions

of aid and questions of supporting each other in developing a larger community of people who give and who think about not only how much to give but how to make your gift as effective as possible.

Thanks very much for your attention. I look forward to your questions.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: Thank you very much for your inspiring presentation. One note. When we give for the developing world, it's very important to emphasize not only current hunger problems but building enterprises that can lead to self-sufficiency—the free enterprise, whatever it is, entrepreneurs, people who develop the skills so that they can support themselves.

I wanted to ask you a more general question. Because this is the Carnegie Council, The Voice for Ethics in International Policy, and you are the founding president of the [International Association of Bioethics](#), would you tell us more about bioethics and people who are joining this International Association of Bioethics, because, obviously, if you're at Princeton and in Melbourne and everywhere else, you're probably inspiring many people. You are asking for a worldwide effort. This is one way to enhance this campaign of yours.

PETER SINGER: I am the founding president, or was the founding president, of the International Association of Bioethics. It was founded in 1992. I helped to write the constitution, and I put term limits into it. I think I was president for six years. I am not president now. I am not even a member of the board of directors at present. So it's completely independent of me.

Bioethics is the study of ethical issues relating to the life sciences really. So what I'm doing here, what I was talking about today, is broader than bioethics. It is more what the Carnegie Council is about, ethics in international affairs.

Though bioethics does have one very important aspect of this, and that is to look at global health issues. I think that is very important and has been somewhat neglected.

The focus of so much medical research, for instance, is on the diseases of the affluent world, because that's where, of course, the drug companies are going to make big profits and that's where the political constituency is to say to Congress, "We want more money to go into research that is going to fund prostate cancer, because we know lots of wealthy people, politically influential people, get prostate cancer or breast cancer, and those are the things we want to fund."

But in terms of the global burden of disease, of course, it's things like malaria and diarrhea that are killing a lot more people and are not getting that kind of research going into them. So that's one of the ways in which bioethics, I think, needs to ask questions about can we tilt the direction of research a little bit so that more effort goes into helping those people, the diseases that affect people where there is very little effort going at the moment.

QUESTION: Could you please put your program in the financial context of what is already done? You've estimated an increment of \$500 billion. But people are already giving significant amounts of money either to the causes we're talking about here this morning or to other causes, domestically for example. Is the question clear?

PETER SINGER: Yes. You're wanting some perspective on that.

Well, in fact, we're not giving all that much, at least for international aid. I'm not really talking about domestic poverty. There is a variety of domestic poverty programs. Obviously, we have issues with domestic policy in this country. We should be rich enough to take care of them. But I don't have at my fingertips how much we spend on domestic poverty.

But U.S. official development assistance, which is supposed to be the aid that is going to help the poor, is currently running at about \$22 billion a year. If you add private philanthropy to that, you get somewhat varying figures depending on what you include. But if you look at the [OECD](#) figures, it's maybe adding another \$10 billion to that.

So you might be talking about \$30-35 billion a year. It roughly comes out at about 30 cents, or 25 cents perhaps, only in every \$100 we earn. That's rather little by world standards. The Scandinavian nations and the Netherlands are all giving at least 80 cents of every \$100 they earn. The world average of the industrialized nations is about 45 cents. So we don't really give nearly as much as many people imagine.

So if we were to give \$100 billion, or a couple hundred billion, that would be a very large increase on what we're giving at present specifically for aid to the global poor.

QUESTION: I wanted to ask you two questions. The first is if you could comment on the value of giving to and supporting market-driven solutions in addition to the effective nonprofits working with local CEOs internationally.

Secondly, following on this last question, your comment, my understanding is that our individual collective giving is a relatively small percentage of our average philanthropy. It's something like between 2 and 3 percent of income pretty consistently is given overall to philanthropy, and the international giving is a very small percentage. So if we're looking to meet this suggestion of a 1 percent standard, how do you see promising strategies or opportunities to raise global giving to about 30 or 50 percent of our giving?

PETER SINGER: I support market-based strategies for getting people out of poverty. In a book called [One World](#), I support globalization and bringing people into the global economy, where it does that.

There are some places where people have problems in doing that. They may have problems because governments are not sympathetic to that. They may have problems because the countries perhaps are poor and landlocked and surrounded by poor neighbors; it's therefore hard for them to get anything to global markets, and they don't have enough wealth in the country itself to really generate markets.

So yes, I certainly support it, and I welcome all those entrepreneurs who are trying to do something about this. I think that's terrific.

One thing you can do is if you see fair-trade products—coffee, chocolate, or whatever—you can buy them. That's a kind of market-driving thing. It gives people an incentive to produce a quality product that's ecologically sustainable. So that's one thing that we can all contribute.

In terms of raising the proportion of global giving, you're absolutely right on the figures. Americans give something like 2.2 percent on average philanthropically. The largest slice of that is to religious institutions, and most of that goes simply to support the churches and synagogues and mosques and not really to passing on to the poor. Some of it does, and most of that then is for the domestic poor and only just a small amount goes to international poor. And then comes giving to education (colleges and schools and so on); and then arts and culture. The international giving is pretty low down that list.

I would like to see that increase significantly. How do I do it? Well, I don't know really, beyond talking and writing about it and trying to get people to think about their priorities. I do think people should think about that.

I was speaking yesterday in Philadelphia at the Free Library of Philadelphia. Before the actual public talk I gave, I had dinner with some of the donors to the Free Library. One gentleman there spoke up and said he's a major giver to arts and culture and what do I think about that. I said, "Well, look, you know, it's great that we have people who donate to arts and culture. It helps to enrich the societies in which we live. But I honestly can't see it as a priority that should rank ahead of the kind of things that I am talking

about."

I talk in the book about how the Met [Metropolitan Museum, New York] [spent \\$45 million on a small Duccio](#), which some of you may have seen. It's a beautiful little painting there. But if the Met were on fire and you had a choice between saving a child or the Duccio, which would you save? I think I would save the child. And yet \$45 million could save a lot of children. At a rough estimate, it could save 45,000 children, a football stadium full of children.

So I do question some of the priorities of donating for arts and culture while we're in this situation. If we could sort of do what we can for the poor, it would be wonderful to have people who are generous to arts and culture. But at the moment it seems to me to be not the highest priority.

QUESTION: Let me just make an argument here. What is the real purpose of saving lives in societies that are consistently impoverished or politically and socially self-destructive? [Martin Meredith](#) has made that point in his own book [[The Fate of Africa](#)].

And also, all of this aid to save lives and so on just produces more mouths to feed, more discontent, and quite often more opportunity for violent conflict. That point is also made by [David Rieff](#) in his book, [A Bed for the Night](#).

So really, what is the purpose of saving all of these lives when these people are not going anywhere?

PETER SINGER: I don't think that your life only has value if you're going somewhere. I think that we should not judge other people's lives by our standards. People essentially want to live themselves, they want their children to live, they grieve when their children die. I think we should be able to empathize with that and to say if we were in their situation we would want someone to help us.

Now, you made the point that if people live they tend to have children themselves and population will grow. I accept that there is a real point here that has to be met. We need to work towards a sustainable population worldwide, and the question is how best we do that.

There is no evidence that leaving people in poverty is going to stop population growth, unless of course you are prepared to simply allow attrition to occur. Back in the 1970s, [Garrett Hardin](#) suggested that. He said that a number of countries were over their carrying capacity and there was nothing we could do for them and we should simply allow attrition—death from famine basically he was predicting—to bring their population down to carrying capacity. Among the countries he mentioned was Bangladesh, which actually now has a significantly larger population than it had in the 1970s but does not have more famine than it had then, and definitely has a smaller proportion of its people living in extreme poverty.

So I think some predictions have been too gloomy. I think there is hope that if we get countries up to a better level, a level where they can not only survive but can have some education for their children—one of the things that clearly inversely correlates with reduced fertility is the number of years of education a girl gets. So if we can bring countries up a level where they can educate their girls, that gives us some hope of stabilizing their population. And of course, we could also help them with providing the means of family planning. I think that's a perfectly reasonable part of an aid package.

So I think we need a strategy, not just to say we're going to abandon these people, but rather to say we need to work with you to get you to the point where you can reduce fertility, reduce population growth, and end up with a stable population.

QUESTION: Is it sufficient to talk about moral obligation? Isn't the missing link here, which goes to some of the questions we've heard this morning, about engagement, that it's very difficult to conjure up a moral obligation to help faceless people in other countries if you're not actually engaged with them in some way?

I visit refugee camps in the Sahara, I go to desperately poor places in Somalia. It's not difficult for me to conjure up the concern that you talk about. But I do see that it's difficult for others who don't have that privilege to do so. To talk merely in terms of moral obligation may not be enough to actually trigger the response that you are looking for. Shouldn't be we talking about a broader invitation, or campaign, to get people actually more engaged in foreign relations, which hitherto we've seen very much as the preserve of government?

PETER SINGER: I think that's a wonderful idea. Don't give up the microphone, if you don't mind, because I'd really like to ask you how we do that. You presumably don't want 100 million Americans to travel to Somalia or the Sahel or anywhere else. I don't think that's going to be helpful. Are you thinking about engagement through the media?

QUESTIONER: I think we have a very traditional model of engagement, which is by and large to leave foreign relations up to governments. I entirely applaud your emphasis on individual rather than government giving. One of the phenomena of recent years that disturbs me is something like [Live Aid](#), where people were encouraged to send merely a text message to the [G8 in Gleneagles](#) for them to give more aid. I think that was entirely insufficient. And indeed, the G8's commitments after that campaign were indeed entirely insufficient.

So I agree with the individual emphasis. But somehow we've got to translate that into action, because I think only action translates into a real sense of moral connection.

I would be happy for 100 million Americans to visit Somalia, and I don't think that's a trivial suggestion. I do think face-to-face contact brings a much greater sense of personal concern than an abstract discussion of morals, which for most people—most people feel that they're already moral. It's not, frankly—and I say this in the greatest respect to your argument, which I applaud, and I intend to tell all my friends about your book and to get them to sign up at your Web site—but I don't think it's sufficient for most people, who are already quite content with their own moral structures.

PETER SINGER: Okay. I tend to think, though, that rather than spend \$1,000 or \$2,000 on traveling to Africa, I'd rather they gave some money to help. I think it would actually be more help for them. It's true that if they go there they may get engaged for a lifetime, and if that happens then that's definitely a good thing.

But I think we need to develop other forms of engagement really. I have had some suggestions about using the Web to engage. Somebody said, "Look, why don't we have restaurants where you can choose what cuisine you want to eat and then there's a live webcam to somewhere in that country where there's somebody else that you can actually communicate with who is eating that cuisine and there are ways in which you can think about helping them?"

So I am open to ingenious solutions that use technology.

QUESTIONER: This is the last point I'll make. It doesn't have to be that ingenious. It's not that difficult. I mean there are Somalis living probably within 500 yards of here, or working here perhaps.

PETER SINGER: Driving cabs maybe.

QUESTIONER: You can actually connect to Somalia or Sudan or Djibouti or wherever in your own city. The diasporas of these places are very great. If you found some way to furnish a connection there, that doesn't need to be technologically complicated. It's actually very available face to face.

PETER SINGER: Okay. That's a good point. Thank you.

QUESTIONER: Thank you for your very interesting talk.

I think it's in our enlightened self-interest really to help developing countries from the Western world. But you talked a lot about increasing the aid. I wonder whether it's not so much a question of increasing—and maybe one should increase it—but at the same time it's a question of the implementation of what one does. How do you think, for instance, one could avoid at the official level the government spending some of that money on military procurement, which is totally self-destructive in both ways? Thank you.

PETER SINGER: I think you're right. We do need to talk about implementation. I think we do need to rethink our priorities. If the United States' share of—let's say we take Sachs' figure as roughly right for implementing the Millennium Development Goals of \$199 billion—and we say the United States is a little less than a third of the global economy, so our share might be around \$60 billion.

The Pentagon's budget is around \$1 trillion, I think, if I have the right figure. So what would make the world more secure, taking \$60 billion off that trillion, still spending \$940 billion but doing our share to make the Millennium Development Goals, or leaving the Pentagon with the entire trillion? I think the answer is pretty obvious. But it's hard to move the interests in that budget.

QUESTION: We've alluded to the difference between domestic and international spending. There is truly a lot of poverty in this country, and the problems of poverty obviously have been exacerbated by the fiscal crisis we're in now. Clearly, the poverty in America is insignificant compared to the poverty in other countries and in the Third World. Not too many poor children die of diarrhea in this country. Nevertheless, poverty to a certain extent is relative. A child born in the ghettos life could be blighted in this country much the same way as a child living in a hovel in India can have his life blighted.

What is the argument? What can be said about saying that your obligation—assuming a person is maxed out on his contributions—what is the argument that says you should be sending money abroad when there are such dire needs in this country?

PETER SINGER: The argument is really one of cost-effectiveness. It's one of what you get for your dollars. Your dollars go so much further in other countries. I think helping the child in the ghetto is important, but realistically it is going to cost many thousands of dollars to make a significant difference for that child in the ghetto.

One of the things I talk about in this book is repairs for obstetric fistula. Obstetric fistula is a condition that young women and girls get if they have a child before their bodies have really grown enough, mature enough, to have a child. It causes an opening between the bowel and bladder and the vagina, with consequences that you can imagine. It essentially ruins the girl's life. Her husband throws her out. The family can't really cope with her hygienically. She becomes an outcast for the rest of her life.

There are organizations that for about \$400-500 can repair that fistula and give that girl her life back. I think it would be very hard to imagine anything you could do for a child in the ghetto that would make as life-changing a difference to them for \$500. So I think that's ultimately the argument.

QUESTION: I have a question about the relationship or the impact of organized religions on the sort of work you've been talking about. I'll just give you two examples.

We know that from the point of view of the Vatican they don't burn people at the stake any more, but they still object to abortion. I have very recently, just by chance, managed to read the revised law of Saudi Arabia. It's stimulating to know that the supreme court still has jurisdiction under the Shariah, and to a lesser extent the law of the king, as to death, amputation, stoning, and self-retribution. I'm just curious as to what your experience is or what your thoughts are.

PETER SINGER: Well, that's a big question. If you open up religion, it's very much a mixed area. Of course, to some extent some of the things I'm saying, as people correctly point out, many of the ancient religions have said. That we should tithe for the poor is in both Judaism and Christianity. Islam as well

has the idea that you should give some of your wealth to the poor. So there are some very good things in there.

But you have correctly pointed out some of the very serious problems. It goes back to the question we had here about population and making population sustainable. Certainly, religions that oppose not only abortion but also contraception are a major barrier to slowing population growth.

Even the Roman Catholic Church has been a barrier to the distribution of condoms to prevent HIV/AIDS, which is something I find totally appalling. With all the kind of reverential attitudes that people have had for Pope [John Paul II](#) and the many good things that he did for world peace and so on, he maintains that prohibition, which I can't even see, from my understanding of Roman Catholic theology, as at all necessary in those terms.

They have this doctrine, called the Doctrine of Double Effect, which says you can do something with a good intention, and if it had a bid side effect that you don't intend, that can still be acceptable. I would have thought putting on a condom to prevent giving your partner AIDS is something that has a good intention, and, even if you think it's bad that this blocks the possibility of conception, that should be subordinate to it.

So I really do deplore some of the things that religion has done in this area. I wish it could, rather than look at the letter of some of these things, be truer to what I see as the spirit underlying many religions, which is one of compassionate concern for the poor.

QUESTION: I just have a question about your argument. It's a question about clarification. Maybe I'm conflating your points. You say that individuals by socially contracting together, this sort of pressure, this makes it more successful to contribute to global problems of poverty. So I'm wondering, aren't they helping society because of this sort of herd mentality or this pressure to join in together, rather than because of any felt moral duty? If I understand this to be true, isn't this a consequentialist view?

PETER SINGER: Yes, my view is a consequentialist view, definitely.

QUESTIONER: So irrespective of intention?

PETER SINGER: Well, I'm less concerned about intentions than I am about what the results are, what the consequences are; that's right. That's why, as I said before, I appeal in the end of the book to people's self-interest to some extent. I think people can really often live a more fulfilling and rewarding life if they give. If somebody says, "Oh well, you're not telling them to be altruistic after all, you're just telling us to be selfish, you've just got a broader notion of selfishness than most of us"—fine, I don't mind, as long as people do it.

QUESTIONER: So that gets rid of the self-deception problem.

PETER SINGER: I think so, yes.

QUESTION: What percentage do nongovernmental agencies, such as the [Bill and Melinda Gates philanthropic efforts](#), contribute to helping reduce world poverty, as opposed to governmental aid, such as IMF and World Bank?

PETER SINGER: I'm not quite sure. You're asking what percentage of these?

QUESTIONER: Yes. In other words, is there a great amount of these individual organizations, such as the Gates organization? Do they contribute a great deal, or how does—

PETER SINGER: Okay. So they contribute. Well, according to the OECD's figures, if we're looking at the United States, government aid is about—it varies a little bit from year to year—roughly 20 cents for every

\$100 we earn; and nongovernment aid is about 7 cents for every \$100 we earn, so nongovernment aid is only about one-third, roughly, of the size of government aid altogether. Even despite the fact that, as you say, Bill and Melinda Gates and others put in very large amounts of money, it still doesn't come to nearly as much as government aid.

The Gates organization is mostly geared to reducing the global burden of disease. So it is mostly reduced to world health and it is very much focused therefore on diseases that affect the poor. That's not the only thing they do—they do a little bit about education and computers and so on—but it's the primary thing that they do.

QUESTION: My question—a previous questioner alluded to it earlier—is with respect to your suggestion that the general population, families making \$50,000 median income, which I'm assuming is in gross terms—how do you get them to give 1 percent of their income, the \$500 you mentioned earlier, when they could use that same money to pay for health care for their children?

PETER SINGER: Well, obviously, it does depend on the situation of people. That's why this 1 percent is pretty crude. Some people earning \$50,000 don't have any children, so they don't have to worry about that, and they have a job which provides them with health care, so it may be easy for them. And then, others may be the sole earner, sole support of a family that has children, and perhaps their job doesn't provide them with health care or doesn't provide them with adequate health care, and they may not be able to give. So I agree. It's kind of a crude, across-the-board figure. What I'm expecting is that some people won't be able to give 1 percent, but other people who get closer to that \$100,000 a year may be able to give 2 or 3 percent, and then it will all balance out in the long run.

JOANNE MYERS: I'd like to thank you very much for setting our priorities straight this morning.

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