

## Why Then Should We Give?

At first glance, an essay on heaven and an essay on poverty would have nothing to do with each other. Yet the themes in “The Weight of Glory” by C. S. Lewis and “The Singer Solution to World Poverty” by Peter Singer interact remarkably well. Although Lewis wrote sixty years before Singer, the topics that both men address—charity, how we should treat our fellow human beings, and our moral responsibilities—are timeless. In fact, the beginning of “The Weight of Glory” could have been written in direct response to Singer’s proposal. Lewis says:

If you asked twenty good men today what they thought the highest of the virtues, nineteen of them would reply, Unselfishness. By if you had asked almost any of the great Christians of old, he would have replied, Love . . . the negative idea of Unselfishness carries with it the suggestion not primarily of securing good things for others, but of going without them ourselves, as if our abstinence and not their happiness was the important point. (25)

Singer is certainly one of those nineteen as he urges people to give away, “whatever money you’re spending on luxuries, not necessities” (395). This is a number that he sets as any income over \$30,000 a year. Throughout his essay, Singer focuses on “our abstinence” (Lewis 25) rather than what effect the reader’s charity would have. He asserts, “That’s right: I’m saying that you shouldn’t buy that new car, take that cruise, redecorate the house or get that pricey new suit. After all, a \$1,000 suit could save five children’s lives” (Singer 395). Notice the negative emphasis of his language on “shouldn’t.” Tellingly, in this quote alone, five words focus on the positive goal of our charity, but eighteen words focus on the negative of what we have to give up.

While they have a lot to say to one another, Lewis' and Singer's views of the world are very far apart; Singer is a self-proclaimed "utilitarian philosopher" who "judges whether actions are right or wrong on their consequences" (390). Meanwhile Lewis is one of the best-known defenders of Christianity writing on a specifically Christian topic. How does that difference affect their actions, arguments, and motivations towards being charitable?

The opening words of Lewis' essay give a clue to one of the key differences in their motivations. Lewis thinks that "love" and "their [other people's] happiness" (25) is of paramount importance. He says later in the essay that, "our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner—no mere tolerance or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment" (46). Lewis is writing from the Christian viewpoint in which giving money is a mere corollary that flows from a deeper attitude towards our fellow human beings. To understand Lewis, it is important to understand the Christian worldview that says that the thing that makes us who we are, our souls, live on after death. When explaining why the life of others is valuable, Lewis notes that, "Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat" (46). The logical conclusion to this way of understanding of the universe is that it is individual people who are vitally important. They are worth everything. "There are no *ordinary* people," Lewis says, "You have never talked to a mere mortal...it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit...next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses" (46).

If people are "holy" and "immortal", they are worth far more than any income above 30,000 dollars a year, and it is from this attitude towards humanity that the call for "real and costly love" that we "must" (46) have for one of another comes. But by what right does Lewis

demand so much of his readers? He is certainly demanding more than Singer, who merely wants the contents of our wallets; the charity that Lewis urges us towards requires not just monetary investment, but emotional and personal investment as well. For Christians, the ultimate authority is Jesus' words as recorded in the Bible. Lewis reasons from biblical commands such as, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). Christians believe that the love God had for them was incredibly costly, to the point of His life. To love as He loved means loving sacrificially; and because God loves people while they are imperfect and essentially unlovable, Lewis urges his audience to look steadily at people and love them anyway "with deep feeling for the sins" (46). In short, he is echoing the call of the Bible to become like Christ.

In comparison to this, despite his grand words about how giving so much is "extremely arduous" (395), Singer takes the easy way out. His charity requires no emotional commitment or cost, nor does it leave him vulnerable to being hurt by other people's ungratefulness or greediness. By focusing on the giver and urging them to donate, as he does, to people they will never meet, Singer insulates himself from the dangers of loving people sacrificially. While both authors want us to put ourselves in the way of risk, Singer advocates going as far as the risk of material discomfort and no further. Lewis sees a need to go as far as the risk of being hurt, perhaps even as deeply as God was hurt by His love for people.

Although Lewis is not specifically urging people to give money in this essay, that is part of the sacrificial love he is defending. He urges us to "conduct all our dealings with one another" with "the awe and circumspection proper to them" (46) and, of course, money is a huge part of how we relate to other people.

In contrast, Singer's arguments about why people should give huge portions of their incomes away lean heavily on guilt. He says to "judge yourself"(392) for not giving to charity, and implies that going to fancy restaurants is equivalent to "selling the kid to the organ peddlers" (391). He tells us that "if we value the life of a child more than going to fancy restaurants, the next time we dine out we will know that we could have done something better with our money...if we don't [donate], then we should at least know that we are failing to live a morally decent life" (Singer 395). When he uses the strong imagery of judgment and selling a child, it creates a strong reaction in the reader—but not a positive one. Instead, people feel attacked; it seems that Singer wants to condemn his readers to a lifetime of guilt.

In the worldview that Singer presents, salving a guilty conscience becomes the main reason to donate. But does he rely solely on his strong emotional rhetoric? No; and neither is Lewis wholly logical. Because both devices are necessary to a compelling argument, they are both used in the essays. And Singer's argument does indeed appear to be logical. The move from premise A (Americans make more money than they need) to premise B (overseas children need money) to conclusion C (Americans should give away their excess money—all of it) is smooth—on the surface. He anticipates certain arguments, such as whether or not he is asking people to do too much, and answers them. However, there is an inherent contradiction to his argument that is easy to miss. When Singer tells us that "We should know that we are failing to live a morally decent life" (394), what are his morals based on? His utilitarianism has rejected any absolute right or wrong. In his philosophy, the supposed base of his argument, moral right and wrong is determined subjectively by an action's consequences. Well, the consequences of not giving to charity may be bad for an overseas child, but they are good for the potential donator. By saving their money, they can secure good things for themselves and their own

children—for instance, a better education or the advantages of living in a safe neighborhood. Surely your own comfort and the comfort of your children have a higher claim than those of strangers? By what authority does Singer declare that donating to overseas charity is a high, and in fact objective good, when he moments before disavowed objective good?

When he uses rhetorical devices to elicit a reaction of guilt, the common reader potentially won't stop to wonder why, in fact, they are guilty, and that disguises the deeper weakness in the essay. He proclaims that people “should be doing much more” (394)—meaning giving more and more money. The next word after this quote could be “because.” He could argue, for example, that we need to donate because children are necessary for the continuation of society, or because having enough to eat is a fundamental human right we need to protect. But instead he continues the sentence to proclaim that people who give ten percent of their income aren't doing enough to be able to criticize anyone else. He never tells us a deeper reason why we should judge ourselves for not giving everything we have to the poor.

Singer assumes—for the most part, correctly—that his readers will acknowledge that they should give, and tries to stir them to act on that feeling. Yet Singer's words that those who only donate ten percent of their income cannot criticize others are ironic because he himself does not ascribe to the radical lifestyle he advocates. The first thing that you want to know after reading Singer's proposal is whether he practices what he preaches. According to Paul Zielbauer reporting for the New York Times, Singer does donate a fifth of his income to world poverty. That is certainly a generous amount; however, it is interesting to note that in the introduction to an interview with Singer in Reason Magazine the author mentions that, “[Singer] is certainly living on a sum far larger than 30,000 dollars a year” (Bailey par. 4).

His actions don't live up to his words, yet Lewis, who wrote several best selling books including "The Chronicles of Narnia," "The Screwtape Letters," and "Mere Christianity," actually came very close to doing what Singer proposed. Lewis gave away huge portions of his income—in fact, almost all of the royalties that he received from his books, and lived solely on the modest income of an Oxford professor.

Why should Lewis, or anyone, give greater precedence to another's good over his own, especially to an extent so extreme that even Singer does not practice it? Singer has to rely on guilt to motivate his readers because in the logical conclusion to his worldview, there is no other reason why each person should not live their own happiness, since happiness is good and his confession of judging only the ends of actions means that how we achieve that happiness does not matter.

Though Lewis' deeper reason relies on the validity of Christianity, in "Christian Apologetics" he freely admits that "Christianity...if false, is of *no* importance, and, if true, of infinite importance" (101). This weakens his argument for someone who does not believe Christianity; yet at the same time his argument has a clearly traceable root. Lewis looks at the essentials of how he believes the world is ordered, and goes from there, and you can see the base of his reasoning for yourself. If you don't agree with him about how the world is laid out, then you can reject the resulting argument with a clear conscience.

Of course, Lewis uses emotional rhetoric as well. Just as Singer uses imagery such as child slavery to get a gut reaction, Lewis appeals to what he calls, "the inconsolable secret in each one of you" (32), which is the desire for heaven and "transtemporal, transfinite good" (31). The imagery of heaven, love, and immortality also brings out strong positive reactions, especially love. Lewis' and Singer's arguments both makes us stop to think in part

because love and guilt are equally powerful motivators, and appeal to our inherent tendency to want to at least appear benevolent.

This basic ground level difference of love versus groundless guilt is the real root of the contrast between Singer and Lewis. Charity, for Lewis, is about loving people as they are, warts, self-inflicted poverty and all because of the enormous worth and “possibilities” (46) that he believes God created in them. While Singer focuses on the giver, Lewis’ focus is on the people who receive, and that makes all the difference.

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