

**Short objection essay: Comparable Importance Principle**

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## Author's note

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Prof. Andrew pointed out after marking my paper that I made a mistake: if someone else is already attending to the child, or will attend to the child before me, I do not have the power to help the child. That is, when someone is sufficiently attended to, when the situation has been resolved, I no longer have the power to help in the situation.

My class reacted strongly when Prof. Andrew covered Singer's CIP in class. Personally, I felt in denial (emotionally, not rationally) that moral obligations exist to such demanding degrees. Of course it does. That is why some moral philosophers push back via counter arguments.

What was interesting to be beyond this assignment was the inequality of moral obligations. Morality seems to hold us hostage to itself. Singer's CIP perfectly captures why inequality is a problem for everyone, everywhere, and not just an isolated issue for those who are directly suffering from inequality. At the same time, it also makes me question whether we, individuals, ordinary people, have the power to combat inequality. Yes, we do have the power to do good. But do we have the power to resolve the systemic issues that cause and perpetuate inequality?

I do not stand by this counter-example. It is weak and does not stand. Moral caps are enticing merely because it panders to our desires to be free of moral obligations.

## Short objection essay: Comparable Importance Principle

Before I begin, I note the following: Singer's Comparable Importance Principle relies on the following: (1) moral good exists (i.e. ethical truths exist), (2) we should promote moral goodness, (3) we have the power to bring about moral goodness. If one of these is false, then the Principle can be called into question. However, the exploration of these is beyond the assignment's scope.

Counter-example — Suppose in Singer's lake, there are three people: the drowning child, me, and a firefighter. The firefighter and I are equidistant from the child. Both of us are in motion, in the process of getting to the child and saving them. Both of us see each other and conclude that there is someone else there to save the child. Would it really be impermissible for me to stop dead in my tracks and let the firefighter do the saving? Yes, I am compelled to save the child, I still ought to, but I argue I am also permitted to be a bystander.

Singer argues that morality compels me to complete my action. But why?

This tension arises because the Principle is agent-neutral, temporally neutral, and method-neutral (i.e. the method is trivial as long as goodness is promoted reasonably).

I argue that because of agent-neutrality, I ought to be permitted to simply exist, to be a bystander, when sufficient good is being done. There is only so much good one can do for a specific situation. For example, there is a sufficient amount of good that can be done for those affected by the Kahramanmaras earthquake. If 50 units of goodness is all that is needed (sufficient), then why should anyone do more?

Abstracting this, there is a sufficient amount of good that can be done, and when it is reached, no more needs to be done.

However, Singer argues that even if we have attained universal sufficient goodness, it remains our obligation to continue doing good. I disagree.

Consider a modification to my counter-example — Suppose there are a thousand people around a single lake, with a single drowning child. All of us are in motion. All of us are equidistant from the child, with the intention to save the child. Surely, some of us are permitted to be bystanders, even though we have the power to save the child.

This modification highlights the following questions: Are everyone's moral duties the same? Is there a division of moral labour that we can follow to fulfil our moral obligations? Is it necessary to do good when a sufficient amount exists?

I admit my conclusion assumes that situations have moral caps: there exists a sufficient amount of goodness that needs to be done in order for situations to be sufficiently resolved. I argue that this is a reasonable assumption, seen from Singer's lake, which is reasonably extended to complex situations such as the Kahramanmaras earthquake.

Thus, I argue that Singer's Comparable Importance Principle does not apply to certain scenarios.

### References

- Singer, P. (2017). Famine, Affluence, and Morality. In Cahn, S. M. & Forcehimes, A. (Eds.), *Principles of Moral Philosophy: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Normative Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780190491000.
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