

## **Famine Relief: Ethics or Politics?**

### **I. Ethics or Political Philosophy?**

The distinction between an *ethics* and a *political philosophy* is the central idea in Kuper's critique of Singer. Kuper argues that Singer takes famine to be an ethical problem, i.e., one that we should address as individuals; instead, he maintains, it is really a political problem and should be addressed by a *political economy* (which "charts the causal dynamics of the global economy), a *theory of justice* (provides normative ideals and principles), and a *political sociology* (identifies the roles of individuals and institutions in achieving the just ends). (Kuper, 114)

### **II. Sen and Entitlements**

Why should we take global hunger to be a matter of politics? Isn't it just about having enough food? Sen argues not. Although there are cases of natural disasters and such that call for emergency aid, the majority of hunger in the world is chronic, and is not necessarily an issue of poverty, i.e., the poorest are not always those who suffer from chronic hunger. Why not?

Sen suggests that the issue is *food entitlements*. A person's food entitlement is "roughly, the food that that person *actually has the ability to acquire*." (52) There are three elements of the system to consider:

*Endowments* – land, labor power, wealth

*Direct entitlements* – what can be acquired directly from one's endowments

*Exchange entitlements* – what can be acquired from exchange/trade of one's endowments and direct entitlements.

If one owns no land and has no wealth, everything depends on the exchange of one's labor power, or what one earns from the exchange of labor power. "The actual command over food that different sections of the population can exercise depends on a set of legal and economic factors, including those governing ownership, transfer, production and exchange. It is, thus, quite possible for some groups, e.g., a particular occupation group such as landless rural labourers, to have a sharply reduced food entitlement even the overall availability of food in the economy is unaffected or enhanced." (77) Can you give a scenario where this might happen? (E.g., see p. 53)

Because the issue isn't directly about food production and food supply, but about food distribution and entitlements, the discussion of hunger has shifted to the issue of *food security*, "where food security is understood primarily as a matter of how *reliably* people have the actual ability – physically and economically – to acquire *proper nutrition*." (54)

### **III. Cosmopolitanism?**

In his book *Cosmopolitanism*, Kwame Anthony Appiah's discusses several principles relevant to our global responsibilities:

*Global Community Principle*: We belong to a global community and have [moral] obligations to all other humans.

*Cultural Equality Principle*: Cultures organize themselves in different and (mostly) in equally valuable ways, with different and (mostly) equally valuable practices.

On Appiah's version of cosmopolitanism, a kind of partiality towards one's family and compatriots is permissible:

*Individual Partialism*: It is morally permissible in deciding how to act to be somewhat partial towards one's near and dear, and to conform one's behavior to the morally acceptable norms of one's society.

We should distinguish, however, *individual partialism* from *state partialism*:

*State Partialism:* It is morally permissible for a state to be partial towards some proper subset of its citizens and to conform its decisions to norms of some sub-groups of citizens over others.

State partialism is arguably contrary to the demands of justice. However, state partialism should be distinguished from *State Isolationism*, the extreme version of which states:

*State Isolationism:* A state is responsible for its own citizens, and is not responsible for the citizens of other countries.

Singer seems to hold a very strong form of *ethical cosmopolitanism*. As Singer puts it in his reply to Kuper:

*Strong Cosmopolitanism:* The interests of all persons ought to count equally [in an individual's decision about how to act], and geographic location and citizenship make no intrinsic difference to the rights and obligations of individuals. (121)

It seems that Kuper wants to agree with Singer on strong cosmopolitanism, and their disagreement lies in whether we can be good cosmopolitans without relying on political philosophy in order to make the right decision. As Singer sees it, the disagreement between them is really about the facts: which course of action will make the most positive difference. Kuper suggests that individual action is likely to be harmful without a full appreciation of social structures and their interdependence. Singer can allow this, though he thinks that Kuper is wrong about the facts. Singer believes that it is very clear that some direct charitable giving *will* make a positive difference, even if it doesn't solve the problem in the long run.

What exactly, then, is Kuper asking for (115-6)?

- 1) Appropriate ideal ends. (theory of justice, political economy)
- 2) Coordination of collective action. (political sociology, politics)
- 3) Sustainable development strategies over the long run. (political economy and sociology, also effective global organizations and policies?)
- 4) Criteria for distinguishing fair from unfair unequal distributions. (theory of justice)
- 5) Realistic limits on our idealism. (political economy)
- 6) Respect for the poor as agents. (maybe relevant to Duflo et al?)
- 7) Identification of the proper agents of justice and aid: who bears responsibility for the poor? (theory of justice)

### Questions:

- Singer seems to maintain that he does not need fancy political theories to provide answers to these questions. (1, 4, and 7) are answered by his utilitarianism. (2, 3, 5) are answered by the agencies he recommends (Oxfam, etc.). (5) is provided by both. So how do his recommendations fall short?
- Kuper seems to hold that state action is ultimately required in order to solve the problem of hunger relief. Does Singer disagree?
- Does Kuper's list (1-7) really address the issue of food security? How?
- Does Kuper really endorse strong cosmopolitanism? What should I *as an individual* do if I take my obligations to the hungry seriously? Buy clothes from fair-trade organizations? Go on holidays to countries that depend on tourism? Lobby my government to give aid? Oppose corporations that are exploitative of the global poor? Is this enough? Does it take my obligations seriously enough?
- Do you think that the issue of food security is just about the facts? Or are there *normative* moral and political issues to be addressed? If so, what are those issues?

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.03 Good Food: The Ethics and Politics of Food Choices  
Spring 2017

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.