Foreign Aid as a Moral Obligation

Presentation of Argument

Every 3.6 seconds someone dies of hunger. Suffering or death caused by hunger and poverty is a horrible misfortune. This statement is hard to attest. It is a common idea that no one should have to die because they are hungry or impoverished. If possible, we should do something to prevent such a bad thing from occurring, but only if it does not result in us having to sacrifice something comparable. “If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing” (Singer 437.)

This analogy is a comparative of what we should be willing to sacrifice in order to do something morally obligatory. Providing a small percentage of our yearly earnings to less fortunate countries is only a small inconvenience for each individual. This alone would significantly help the countries receiving donations. We are fully capable of preventing death and suffering caused by hunger and poverty. If everyone fulfilled their moral obligations and donated money to third world countries, the amount of people hungry and in poverty would greatly decrease. In many countries people live a life of luxury, while in others, people struggle to eat a single meal a day. It is well in our capacity to eliminate spending money on relatively unimportant objects. Instead of spending this money, it should be donated to the less fortunate. We should, as people, prevent hunger and suffering in other countries before we waste our money on frivolous luxuries. In conclusion, because all these things are assumed to be true, each person has a moral obligation to provide countries in distress with a portion of their earnings.

Singer focuses on two principles. There is a stronger one that he believes should be the one followed by everyone, and a weaker one that he believes could be a fallback. The
stronger principle states that if we have the ability to prevent something bad from occurring, without putting ourselves in a comparably bad situation, then it is morally right for us to do so. This means that if we can help another without inflicting a horrible situation upon ourselves or doing something morally indecent, that we are obligated to do it. Singer ideally wants to make everyone in the world equal. This stronger principle suggests that a wealthy person should donate enough money that he may become equal with someone who originally had nothing. The weaker principle states that if we are capable of preventing something bad from happening, without losing anything of moral significance, then it is morally right for us to do so. This means that while we do not have to significantly decrease our status of wealth, we should still donate to help those less privileged. Singer does not truly believe in this weaker principle. However, he understands that people are not readily willing to comply with giving up a large portion of their wealth to those less fortunate. He is realistic, and while he may not agree, he understands. He provides this plan as a fall back.

Objection

In the analogy, someone must save a child's life by going into a muddy, shallow pond to prevent them from drowning. The child is very close by and will drown without immediate help. This analogy is different from providing foreign aid. This situation is right in front of the person. If they do not assist, they instead have to watch a child die. If a situation is that up close and intense, the person is more likely to assist. It is easier to have knowledge of what aide is necessary to provide optimal consequences when the situation is relatively close by. The person sees the child drowning, sees how shallow the pond is, and can ultimately decide what the best plan of action is. However, the people receiving the foreign aid are miles away. It is impossible to know what the best plan of action is when you cannot physically see the situation. In order to
donate, someone must rely heavily on organizations. While there are ways to donate on your own, it is not common. It is also a process that would require research and a lot of time. If a person works hard for their money, they should not have to work hard to donate it. This causes people to trust an organization with their money and hope it will eventually arrive as aide to the people in need it was intended for.

Donating to countries in need also prevents future deaths and suffering, instead of providing immediate help. If people are to donate their hard earned money, they should be able to see an immediate response. They deserve this. With that ability, they can see the good they are doing. However, when helping foreign countries where you do not have the capability to see immediate response, many people may feel as if their money is wasted. This is not fair to the people who go to work every day for their money. They should not have to see it be sent away to a country they will never see and to people they will never meet. They have a right to understand and witness the benefits their money is producing. If anything, this analogy can relate to helping people in the community. People should be donating food and money to their neighbors that are hungry and lacking in money. They may not be in as poor of a condition as people in other countries, but at least you physically see them improve.

You are also more likely to help if you are the only person present. However, if there are millions of other people in the same situation that could provide assistance but do not, then why should any one person feel obligated to go above and beyond what everyone else is doing? It is not fair for few people to harbor the burden of providing a substantial amount of aid to countries because others do not feel obligated as well. If everyone is not going to provide, no one should.

Response
Distance in time and space are not relevant in the determination of what is morally right. It is no less wrong to kill an innocent person from far away than it is to kill an innocent person close by. Distance may affect the likelihood that we will assist. However, it does not affect the fact that we should be assisting. Every country fights for equality. There are groups made to argue that there is no difference between genders, races, and people with different religious affiliations. There is no difference with distance. If we are not to discriminate against any quality that cannot be self-determined, distance should be included. While distance may hinder your knowledge on exactly what assistance a country may need, it is not excuse. There are many new developments that allow helping foreign countries as easy as helping your neighbor.

The time frame of what the help will achieve is insignificant. While the people who need help may not die at this moment without your assistance, death could be inevitable. Someone dying in a year without any aide is just as horrible as letting someone die right now. There is no difference. It would be optimal for people to see the profit in helping others globally. However, this is not always possible. That does not change the obligation. The knowledge that your money is providing help to someone, although you cannot exactly see what that help is, should be enough. You do not need to see something in order to understand its importance. Helping your neighbors is important. However, while they may be struggling and losing some possessions, a family in Africa already has nothing. America and other similar countries implement programs that provide their citizens in need with food, shelter, and money. There are programs for mothers, the disabled, the elderly, etc. In countries such as Africa and Haiti there are no programs such as these. They need help much more than anyone in a country like America.

If everyone is apathetic to the situation, they will always think the next person will help. This would result in no progress. No one can rely on the next person to care for their obligation.
It is your responsibility to provide your own aide, just as it is the next person’s responsibility to provide theirs as well. Everyone is accountable. There may be a difference in the level of what you feel to be your obligation when no one around you is feeling obligated either. However, this is just a feeling. Your moral obligation is unchanging regardless of your feelings. In Chicago, an honors student was beaten to death by a group of kids. There were plenty of people around who could have stopped this fight and saved the boy’s life. Instead, it was videotaped. These people are not innocent, because they were not the ones hitting. They could have easily saved his life, but were apathetic to the situation. Every person there thought it was someone else’s responsibility to stop the fight. Therefore, no one stopped it. A life was lost because of apathy. This is similar to foreign aid. If a person keeps waiting for someone else to help, the countries in need will never be helped, and innocent lives will be lost.