Are We Obligated to Give to Charity?

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Abstract

It is a common assumption that it is a good to give money to charity, which leads to the belief that we should give to those in need. However, I will be arguing that whether it is good to give money to charity depends upon the likelihood that the money will help those most in need. Drawing on Zizek, I will consider a different use of the word 'charity' based off its root in the Latin *caritas*. Using Zizek, I will emphasize the importance of structures in countries being stable for giving money to charity to be effective. As such, I conclude that we *do* have a moral obligation to give money to *only* those charities which challenge unjust structures, even if libertarians such as Nozick and Narveson would disagree with me.

1. Introduction

We ordinarily believe that giving to charity is good (or brings about good results), and that therefore we may have *some* moral obligation to give to charity. Giving money to charity facilitates the wealthier providing help and support towards the more vulnerable, especially individuals lacking access to basic needs such as shelter or food. Peter Singer represents this ordinary view, only argued to its logical conclusion: giving money to charity is always required insofar as it is at least minimally effective at alleviating suffering. Thus, in his "Famine, Affluence and Morality," Singer writes, "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought, morally, to do it."[1] This is illustrated in his drowning child and starving child thought experiment through which he argues there is a moral requirement to donate money to alleviate suffering globally, where it is possible to help others from a distance.[2]

Although those including Peter Singer argue that giving to charity is almost always a good, it must be conceded that not all donations are *necessarily* good, even in the utilitarian sense. Giving money to charity can be associated with several problems, including mismanagement or corruption, increased dependency within communities or exacerbating existing conflicts. Utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham would analyze the certainty of how probable it is that the money would benefit the people receiving it/who it is meant for as this is a criterion of the Hedonic Calculus—a charity's management and track-record become critical to the 'certainty' and 'fecundity' of any pleasure generated by money given through charity.[3]

Thus, one needs to look at where the money goes as a factor that could influence whether money should be donated. Charities could be disreputable or mismanaged; there have been numerous instances where significant sums have been raised but it is unclear where the money went. An example where giving money to charity has not resulted in positive outcomes is when the American Red Cross raised nearly $500 million towards earthquake response efforts in Haiti in 2010, however the majority of this did not reach the civilians in need; only six permanent homes were built, and the vast proportion of money was unaccounted for.[4]

2. Charity as *Caritas*

But, even putting issues of mere efficacy aside, charity can be argued as a superficial solution

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[1] Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 231, http:/ww.jstor.org/stable/2265052.

[2] Additionally, Singer has co-founded the organization "The Life You Can Save" which facilitates giving money to charities fighting extreme poverty, available at https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/.

[3] Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Dover Publications, 2007).

[4] Justin Elliot and Laura Sullivan, "How the Red Cross Raised Half a Billion Dollars for Haiti and Built Six Homes," *ProPublica*, June 3, 2015, https://www.propublica.org/article/how-the-red-cross-raised-half-a-billion-dollars-for-haiti-and-built-6-homes.

which creates a vicious cycle perpetuating the unjust systems which engender and bolster the exact conditions that the charitable act aims to alleviate. Indeed, Slavoj Zizek's argues that charity only masks the underlying exploitation and inequality in societies, so the true meaning of charity is that it plays the role of a 'moral bandage.' Per Zizek, in modern society, the true meaning of charity has evolved, suggesting that it is more commonly a mechanism which plays the role of soothing the guilt of the wealthy without directly addressing systemic injustices. He argues that the most loving and *charitable* thing to do is to directly challenge the unjust hierarchy and describes this as 'violent love.'[5] Here, Zizek derives love from the Latin *'caritas*,' also often translated as 'charity.' Reclaiming *caritas*, Zizek reframes charity not as a 'moral bandage' of giving money, but as an act of disrupting unjust hierarchies which seek to oppress those most in need and which would appropriate any piecemeal donations. In this light, merely giving money is not necessarily obligatory and, in fact, possibly impermissible when it prevents more substantive change. Rather, if we are to have a duty to charity at all, it *must* be to that charity, properly understood, which challenges underlying systemic injustices rather than being a moral bandage.

This dovetails with John Rawls' view as demonstrated in his *A Theory of Justice* about charity and being a way to promote social justice and reduce inequality. Here, Rawls does not unequivocally outline an argument for a moral obligation to charity, however his framework implies that a just society would ensure the basic needs of all citizens are met by redistributing resources in a way that benefits the least advantaged in society. Therefore, those whose basic needs are not met (such as those without shelter or food) should be assisted by those in society who are living in affluence and can afford to give (they have a duty to give): "Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantage."[6] Thus, Rawls suggests we should create more just structures through an equity-driven approach and agrees with Singer that we have a moral obligation to help all, yet says to give help to those who need it more.

3. Do We Have *Any* Duty to Give?

On the other hand, agreeing with the statement and saying we are not morally obliged to give money, Jan Narveson, in his essay "We Don't Owe them a Thing!" presents a libertarian viewpoint that we do not have a responsibility to those we haven't harmed: "We are certainly responsible for evils we inflict on others, no matter where, and we owe those people compensation… Nevertheless, I have seen no plausible argument that we owe something, as a

[5] Slavoj Zizek, *The Parallax View* (The MIT Press, 2006), 282.
[6] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 266.

matter of general duty, to those to whom we have done nothing wrong."[7] Similarly, in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Robert Nozick writes, "Taxation of earnings from labor is on a par with forced labor."[8] He introduces a libertarian approach, where individuals have the right to their property and *any* forced redistribution (including charity under coercive systems) is unjust. Nozick argues that while voluntary charitable giving is commendable, there is no moral obligation to do so. Charity, as part of a coercive system and forced redistribution, is therefore wholly unjust. Ultimately, both Nozick and Narveson raise emphasis on personal freedom and choice in ethical matters such as the one presented. Accordingly, there is no requirement for abstract duties to strangers.

However, while Narveson holds that we do not owe anybody anything unless we have harmed them, the existence of certain unjust structures means wealthy consumers *are* doing indirect harm to exploited producers. What, though, about Nozick's libertarian view that humans have no moral obligation to give any of their money to charity to help those in need if they have earned it legally? Money could be earned 'legally,' but not necessarily 'morally' if it is on the back of systems which are unjust. Thus, even holding Narveson's (or Nozick's) libertarian position, we *still* may have an obligation to give to charity. Precisely by intertwining Zizek's critique of charity with Narveson's, we end up with an *increased* burden not merely to donate to charity in general, but to follow Zizek specific call to improve the structures in order to ameliorate the indirect harm we have done. Here, indirect harm means harm caused by purchasing from unethical sources where producers are exploited, or citizens harmed by allowing money to be accumulated by oppressors. On Narveson's own logic, consumers who have purchased from any business or supported any organization which is oppressive owe something indirectly to the oppressed.

However, as mentioned earlier, directly giving charity in the form of money may exacerbate existing problems, and so it might not be a good act. Nevertheless, there are other charities which could operate outside of the spheres of influence of the oppressors who are seeking to challenge the unjust power structures. It is to these charities that consumers, particularly those who have done indirect harm, owe their moral obligation of giving money to charity. Organizations such as Trócaire, with their Access to Justice program, seek to "empower women and men to challenge unjust power structures that keep them in poverty."[9]

4. Conclusion

[7] Jan Narveson, "We Don't Owe Them a Thing! A Tough-Minded but Soft-Hearted View of Aid to the Faraway Needy," *The Monist* 86, no. 3 (2003): 419, https://doi.org/10.5840/monist200386323.

[8] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Blackwell, 1974), 169.

[9] "Access to Justice," Trócaire, accessed October 18, 2024, https://www.trocaire.org/our-work/access-to-justice/.

In conclusion, while Peter Singer would support giving money to charity and giving to all, Slavoj Zizek holds that money is a means by which the wealthier in society can feel less guilty by giving money to charity and that instead we should challenge unjust hierarchies. Taking both these views into account, I argue that the money given to charities may not even reach the vulnerable who the money is raised for due to problems such as corruption, and that this should be considered through the criterion of 'certainty' from the Hedonic Calculus for Utilitarians. So, giving money to charity is not necessarily a good as it avoids, and potentially feeds into, systemic injustices and perpetuates the problems it is trying to solve. It can only be a good if corruption and systemic injustice in a country is very low to non-existent, meaning that the money will have a high likelihood of yielding positive consequences for those who need it the most. Regarding the second component of the statement focusing on one's moral obligation to give money to charity, Peter Singer claims we are all morally obligated to give. Rawls aligns with this in saying that we should give to those whose basic needs are not met, as a just society would ensure necessities for all citizens. Sharply contrasting with this, Nozick argued that people are entitled to their holdings they earn justly, thus there is no moral obligation to give money to charity. Nozick and Narveson share some libertarian elements, but Narveson suggests we do not have a moral obligation to charity if we have not harmed the individuals the charity is set up to benefit. Nevertheless, where better off citizens have indirectly supported oppression, such as purchasing goods or services which have exploitation at their root, then they are obligated to give to charity to atone. As there are charities which sit outside yet challenge systemic injustices, so we must choose to give to these charities to ensure the aid gets to the people it is intended for. Thus, we are morally obligated to give to charities to reduce global suffering and inequality.

Assuming that the social, economic, and political structures are just, and that the money donated will not likely be appropriated by an oppressive or corrupt individuals, government, or other organizations with excessive power in relation to the rest of the country's citizens, it is good to give money to charity. Therefore, I disagree with the statement that we are not morally obliged to do so where we have directly or indirectly supported unjust structures which perpetuate exploitation. We have a moral responsibility to one another as members of society.

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