

Giving Sophistry a Bad Name

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Giving Sophistry a Bad Name Princeton's Peter Singer, baffled by charity by Peter Berkowitz

IN RESPONSE TO SEPTEMBER 11, people from many walks of life performed their jobs with spirit and guts and aplomb. Exhibiting a high degree of seriousness and professionalism, the police and the firefighters, the doctors and nurses, the ground zero construction crews and the media, the mayor and the president, and the military and their man Rummy in the Pentagon have risen to the occasion. Alas, if Peter Singer's latest offering is in any way representative, the same cannot be said of academic moral philosophers.

Singer, the reader may recall, is the Ira W. DeCamp professor of bioethics and fellow at the Center for Human Values at Princeton University, best known for his writings on behalf of animal rights, in defense of euthanasia, and in support of the right of parents to have their severely handicapped newborn children killed. He favors massive global redistribution of wealth, having argued in the New York Times that American households have a moral obligation to live on \$30,000 a year or so, enough to cover necessities, and give whatever remains of their income to the world's poor. And sex with animals, he maintained earlier this year in a breezy essay for the online sex magazine *nerve.com*, is fine so long as the act does not injure the animal. Singer has sold more books than any other living professor of philosophy. He is often praised as a brave and iconoclastic thinker, willing to follow the logic of an argument wherever it may lead. What his arguments frequently reveal, however, is their author's imperviousness to reasoned inquiry, insensitivity to evidence and opposing points of view, and odd unfamiliarity with fundamental features of moral and political life.

True to form, in a piece posted in Slate on December 12 and headed "Who Deserves the 9/11 Cash Pile?" Singer sets out to debunk the conventional wisdom about how funds raised for the families of the victims of the terrorist attacks should be distributed. His analysis is a minor miracle of compressed incoherence.

Understandably, the grieving families differ on how the more than \$1.3 billion that the public has thus far donated should be spent. Do the families of police officers and firefighters deserve more charity than other victims' families because their loved ones died in the course of saving others? Or do the families of all casualties in the attacks deserve equal treatment? A classic moral dilemma pitting the claims of desert against the claims of equality, right?

Not by Professor Singer's lights. For him there is no dilemma because the answer is transparently clear:

| It makes sense for the community to reward the families of those who die while bravely trying to save others, for doing so both recognizes and encourages acts of great benefit to the community. This is not a matter of equity or distributive justice but sound social policy.

Put aside the questionable empirical assertion (for which Singer offers no evidence) that giving more money to the families of those who died seeking to save the lives of others would in fact encourage more of the same. Put aside as well Singer's failure to consider the cost of unintended consequences --- whether, for example, giving more money to a few families would spark resentment among the vast majority of the families, whose loved ones were not struck down in the line of duty, and whether unequal giving would promote the undemocratic and illiberal idea that some lives are worth more than others.

Put aside also Singer's failure to give any moral weight to the fact that it was not social policy but the choices of private individuals and non-governmental organizations that resulted in a disproportionate amount of donations on behalf of police and firefighters. The root problem with Singer's reasoning is that his conclusion --- that in this case, the claims of desert triumph over the claims of equality --- is based on a false distinction between "equity or distributive justice" and "sound social policy." Actually, one of the factors that makes social policy sound is its success at reconciling incentives that benefit the community with the claims of equal treatment.

As if these flaws in his thinking were not bad enough, Singer proceeds, abruptly and without explanation, to reverse course in the remainder of his article, arguing, on the basis of the same false distinction, that the question of how to distribute funds to those in need is not a matter of sound social policy after all, but rather a matter of equity and distributive justice.

When one, Singer says, takes a larger view and places the loss of life in New York and Washington in global perspective, then one is forced to ask, "How can we justify giving such huge sums to the families of the firefighters and police when we do so little for people in other countries whose needs are much more desperate?" Difficult as it is to wrap one's mind around this question while American parents and widows and children continue to grieve and struggle to rebuild their broken lives, Singer's question is a real one. The mind-numbing numbers of the desperately poor across the globe do present a baffling challenge to the moral conscience.

Professor Singer, however, is not baffled. Once again, the answer is to him crystal clear --- only it's the opposite of the answer he proffered five paragraphs previously:

| We would be a better nation if our generosity was more closely related to need and less closely tied to whether someone is a fellow citizen, or a victim of terrorism, or even a hero.

Contrary to the unequivocal reassurance he gave his readers a few short steps earlier in the argument, he now asserts that the decisive criterion in determining how to spend the charitable contributions in the aftermath of September 11 is not desert but rather equal

treatment. Moreover, in characteristic fashion, Singer casually derogates or excludes from his calculus relevant considerations, such as the moral worth of the human attachment to one's own, one form of which is care for one's fellow citizens, or patriotism.

Singer's simple language and laconic style create the illusion of clarity even as they sow confusion by obscuring genuine complexities. He formulates hard questions which give the impression of intellectual seriousness, but his one-dimensional answers imperiously ignore competing principles and goods. One is tempted to say that it is not philosophy or even academic moral philosophy but rather sophistry to which Singer's arguments in *Slate* give a bad name. Thankfully, Singer's failure to perform his job well has not hampered the many upon whom we have relied since the September 11 attacks in the performance of theirs.-

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