Teaching Philosophy

FROM THE EDITORS

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We welcome our readers to the spring 2015 edition of the *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy*.

In this issue we are happy to present three articles, three poems, and our usual list of books that we have received from publishers.

Our first article, "Two Concepts of Tests," is by Andrew T. Forcehimes of Nanyang Technological University. Professor Forcehimes draws a distinction concerning examinations that, he believes, instructors may not clearly recognize but that is important to acknowledge. The distinction is one between *direct* and *indirect* evidence of a student's competence in the subject area for which the examination is given. He discusses how different kinds of examinations reveal evidence of these different sorts. Examinations on a particular topic that require student-written essays or papers give direct evidence of students' mastery of that topic, though such testing may prove difficult in other than small classes. Short-answer examinations or true/false tests—a means of testing that may be necessitated by large classes—are able to measure mastery only indirectly and, therefore, correct answers on such exams may yield what Forchimes calls "false positive" scores: a high score on such exams may indicate not mastery of the material but memorized information. Professor Forcehimes draws some lessons from this distinction. He discusses how we might minimize the chance of false positives in indirect testing, and reminds us that an instructor has the responsibility to inform students of the nature of the competence in the material he or she is attempting to foster.

The second article, "On Teaching Aesthetics," by Daniel A. Kaufman of Missouri State University, provides a description of a course in aesthetics that he has taught with some success at his institution. The paper begins with a discussion of the constraints imposed on him by the mandate of his institution and the nature of its student body (which tends to be rural and poor—the latter requiring students to work long hours outside of class in order to make ends meet). In order to draw a sufficiently large number of students to the course, Professor Kaufman arranged to have the course opened as an elective to students in the Department of Fine Arts and Design. Although it is a philosophy course, Professor Kaufmann designed the themes, rationale, and content of the course to meet the needs of the majority of students in the course who are not philosophy majors but rather students of Art and Design. Professor Kaufman provides a list of the required readings and the rationale for including the selection of authors he has chosen for the readings of the course. A key point in his paper is the description of his use of the conflict between Susan Sontag in her essay, "Against Interpretation," which challenges efforts to interpret and evaluate art works, and two essays by Arthur Danto, which argue that art is *constituted* by its interpretations. A short bibliography completes the paper.

The third article in this issue of the newsletter is by Peter Murphy of the University of Indianapolis and is titled "So How Much Should I Give? Extending Class Coverage of Singer's Work on Poverty Ethics." Professor Murphy describes a course—or a unit in one—on Peter Singer's arguments regarding what we are morally required to do to alleviate world poverty. In the unit that he describes, students are asked to analyze and respond to Singer's pond analogy, his three-premise arguments, and his response to criticisms aimed at the conclusions of these arguments. Assuming the soundness of Singer's arguments, students speculate upon whether people are morally required to donate for the alleviation of poverty, and, if so, how much persons in what he defines as "absolute affluence" are required to share with people in what he defines as "absolute poverty." Professor Murphy suggests several hypothetical principles—"sharing principles," as he calls them—each of which offers a different formula for determining how much a person should give to alleviate the poverty of others. Professor Murphy discusses the philosophical and economic questions that, inevitably, are raised in the evaluation of each of these principles. The author concludes with some thought on the moral and intellectual benefits of having students struggle with the issues raised by Singer's texts.

We are happy to publish three poems by Felicia Nimue Ackerman of Brown University in this issue. The first two poems, "Proposal to Professor Superstar" and "Professor on Alert," are sure to resonate with some faculty (and we would be happy to hear expressions of that resonance—whether positive or negative). The third poem, "On Shelley's Claim, 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world'," may provoke thought as well.

We always encourage our readers to suggest themselves as reviewers of books and other material that they think may be especially good for classroom use. Though the names of books and other materials that we have recently received from publishers for possible review are listed in our Books Received section in each edition of the newsletter, reviewers are welcome to suggest material for review that they have used in the classroom and found useful. Please remember that our publication is devoted to pedagogy and not to theoretical discussions of philosophical issues. This should be borne in mind not only when writing articles for our publication but also when reviewing material for our publication.

As always, we encourage our readers to write of their experience as teachers for our publication. We also welcome articles that respond, comment on, or take issue with any of the material that appears within our pages.

The following guidelines for submissions should be followed:

- All papers should be sent to the editors electronically. The author's name, full mailing address, and the title of the paper should appear on a separate page. *Nothing that identifies the author or his or her institution should appear within the body or within the endnotes of the paper.* The title of the paper should appear on the top of the paper itself.

- Authors should adhere to the production guidelines that are available on the APA website. For example, in writing your paper to disk, *please do not use your word processor's footnote or endnote function; all notes must be added manually at the end of the paper.* This rule is extremely important, for it makes formatting the papers for publication much easier.

THE FALL 2015 ISSUE OF THE NEWSLETTER
The editors are happy to welcome Katheryn Doran of Hamilton College as our guest editor for the fall 2015 issue of the *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy*. That issue will be devoted to the special topic of teaching philosophy in non-traditional settings, such as hospitals, prisons, assisted living communities, or childhood enrichment classes. We are interested in receiving papers that offer pedagogical information and insights on the particular intellectual challenges these settings present, and, especially, on what you have learned about teaching philosophy, and about philosophy, from your teaching experiences in these contexts.

Contributions for this issue should be sent electronically to guest editor Katheryn Doran via Carolyn Mascaro (cmascaro@hamilton.edu), with "APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy submission" in the subject line.

After an initial vetting, those papers that will be considered further will be forwarded to the general editors, Tziporah Kasachkoff, The Graduate Center, CUNY (tkasachkoff@yahoo.com), and Eugene Kelly, New York Institute of Technology (ekelly@nyit.edu), as well as to the other newsletter reviewers, Robert Talisse, Vanderbilt University (robert.talisse@vanderbilt.edu), and Andrew Wengraf (andrew@welch-wengraf.fsnet.uk). The papers will be anonymously reviewed at all stages.

ARTICLES
Two Concepts of Tests

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In this brief paper, I want to explain an important distinction in the assessment of students. Once made, the distinction is obvious and has immediate pedagogical significance. It is, however, easy for students to overlook.

We use tests to gather evidence. In everyday contexts, gathering evidence can take two forms—direct and indirect. If I want to know if a watermelon is tasty, I can gather evidence concerning its tastiness *directly* by biting into it. However, though we might be tempted, we cannot gather evidence directly when buying a watermelon at the grocery store. Given this, we gather evidence concerning the watermelon's tastiness in a different way: we smell it. If it gives off the right aroma, we have *indirect* evidence of its tastiness. We thus have two tests for watermelon tastiness: the direct taste test and the indirect smell test.

This distinction globalizes. For some tests, we test *directly* for a certain capacity. We design these tests to probe a specific capacity, and, if the test-taker passes, we have direct evidence that she has this capacity. For other tests, we test *indirectly* for a certain capacity. We design these tests to probe a specific capacity, and, if a test-taker passes, we have evidence that she has some other, different capacity.

The crucial difference concerning direct and indirect tests is that direct tests do not leave a gap between *what the test measures* and *what we are testing for*. Indirect tests, by contrast, leave a gap. This gap invites confusion. This confusion, if unchecked, can seriously undermine a teacher's aims. We can make this confusion perspicuous by returning to our watermelon example.

There is more than one way a watermelon might pass our indirect smell test:

a) Our local grocer sprays his watermelons with ripe-smelling perfume.

b) Our local grocer buys ripe, tasty watermelons.

That both (a) and (b) are ways to pass our smell test shows that indirect tests have a special layer of false positives. These false positives result when the test-taker *has the capacity the test measures* without *having the capacity indirectly tested for*. Here is where the trouble emerges.

Suppose we have an Amelia Bedelia-esque local grocer. Seeing his customers regularly smelling watermelons, he mistakes the indirect test for a direct one. What my patrons

are after, he thinks, is good smelling watermelons. In order to ensure his patron's satisfaction, our grocer does (a). The customers' smell test results are, accordingly, misleading. The watermelons pass the smell test but this evidence no longer tracks their tastiness. Our grocer suffers from what we might call

> *Indirect/Direct Confusion*: Confusing the *way to pass a test* with the *thing tested for*, by mistaking an indirect test for a direct test.

Now consider tests for philosophy classes. If the class is small enough, we can give direct tests—essays or papers. Writing papers and essays directly tests students' philosophical skills. Unfortunately, given time constraints, especially when teaching large introductory classes, we sometimes need to use indirect tests. We might, for example, have to use short answer, fill-in-the-blank, or multiple-choice test. The indirectness of these tests allows for false positives. Students could:

c) Memorize and regurgitate the terms, distinctions, and arguments on the handouts and readings, without understanding them.

d) Understand the terms, distinctions, and arguments, and describe them from this understanding.

Given that both (c) and (d) are options, we invite Indirect/Direct Confusion. A student might mistake this indirect test for a direct one, and think that we are asking her to do (c). Of course, this kind of rote memorization is *not* what we are testing for. If tests are learning opportunities, this is a missed one. We want students to pass by doing (d).

On a number of occasions I've encountered the Indirect/Direct Confusion. I once had a student write me the following message: "I'm a little frustrated with the rote memorization required on these tests. Obviously it's important to know the specific language of each of the concepts, but it's difficult to regurgitate everything word for word when we have so many concepts to memorize. […] I tend to worry more about memorizing than actually understanding the concepts."[1] Unlike our local grocer, this instance of Indirect/Direct Confusion is not a product of ineptitude. Philosophy is unlike most disciplines. When confronted with a philosophy class for the first time, one might associate it with a discipline one already knows. Philosophy is, a student might think, just a different kind of history class; it is just the study of what people in the past thought. If students believe this going in, and are then confronted with an indirect test—e.g., a short answer, fill-in-the-blank, or multiple-choice test—it is not surprising that some experience *Indirect/Direct Confusion*. That is, it is not difficult to see how a student might think (c) is a way to pass the test, and since (c) fits with philosophy as a kind of history, the teacher must be testing directly for memorization of the material.

With the distinction between direct and indirect tests and the confusion they invite in hand, we can conclude with two important lessons.

First, direct tests provide an evidential aspirational standard. If we give indirect tests, we should attempt to minimize the false positives produced by the test-taker having the capacity the test measures without having the capacity tested for. That is, we want our assessment, given our constraints, to reliably track students' mastery of the material. For example, if we can either ask for a definition or pose a question that presupposes understanding, we should opt for the latter. This latter option eliminates answering the question through rote memorization. For concreteness, consider two ways of indirectly probing students' understanding of the *Groundwork*:

e) Give Kant's distinction between using someone as a means versus using someone as a mere means.

f) Provide your own, original example where one person uses another as a mere means.

If we ask (e), by merely memorizing the distinction a test-taker could have the capacity the test measures without having the capacity tested for. Accordingly, it is not clear if correct answers to (e) track a student's understanding of the *Groundwork*. However, if we ask (f), we minimize misleading evidence. For providing an original example of using someone as a mere means demands more than memorizing the distinction. The ability to correctly give an example is thus correlated with a broader understanding of the *Groundwork*. Of course, a correct answer to (f) is, by itself, insufficient evidence for showing that the test-taker has this understanding, but it does provide some. And we have the rest of the test to gather more. If a student answered correctly a collection of questions that, like (f), require more than mere memorization, we would then have fairly reliable indirect evidence of this student's understanding of the material. How many more questions and how much they demand beyond memorization will vary based on the aims of the teacher (e.g., the desired depth of understanding) and the resources available (e.g., are teaching assistants available for help grading?). But, even in introductory classes with limited resources, we should aim to eliminate the false positives invited by the indirectness of short answer, fill-in-the-blank, or multiple-choice tests.

Our second lesson is this. We should combat Indirect/Direct Confusion upfront. If we are using indirect tests, we need to be on guard that students recognize what the test is testing for. Even if we carefully design our questions in accord with the first lesson, it should be announced that we are not testing memorization skills. Making this explicit to the students can go a long way in combating needless angst created by confusing a way to pass a test with the capacity tested for. And insisting that students do not conflate the two has the added benefit of making explicit what students should be trying to achieve through studying—namely, an understanding of the material.

These two lessons illustrate the significance of the distinction between direct and indirect tests. It is crucial in assessment design and, perhaps more importantly, in students' understanding of what the course aims to accomplish. As teachers, we should not let students lose sight of this important distinction.

NOTES

1. Used with permission.

On Teaching Aesthetics

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PRELIMINARIES

The editors originally asked me to write up an extended "book review" style piece on textbooks, anthologies, and other teaching materials intended for the teaching of aesthetics. I had to decline, not because I didn't want to share with members of the APA my methods of teaching the philosophies of art and art-criticism (which is how I approach the subject), but because I do not use textbooks, anthologies, or other "teaching-aid" style materials. The readings for my course consist of primary sources and primary sources only. The editors then revised their request, asking me if I might instead write about the primary sources I use and, more generally, about how I conduct my aesthetics courses. I accepted, and here we are.

INSTITUTIONAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CONSTRAINTS

The choices that I have made in terms of course content are only determined in part by abstract considerations as to what constitutes a "serious, credible aesthetics course" and it is the smaller part. My primary consideration has been the type of institution at which I am teaching and the types of students that typically enroll in the course.

Missouri State University is a large, public university located in the southwestern portion of the state, in its third largest city, Springfield. Until recently, it was Southwest Missouri State University, and though it now carries a statewide name, it is still, in many ways, a regional university, serving students from the Ozarks, an area that covers portions of Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. These students are often from rural areas, are often the first in their families to attend college, and are often from the lower strata of the economy. In addition to carrying large course loads—so as to finish early and incur as little student-loan debt as possible—our students commonly work substantial hours at low-paying jobs. In short, they are strapped, both for money and for time.

Though I have never been much of a fan of textbooks—I have always considered *myself* the students' textbook, in the sense that it is my job to mediate between them and the primary source-material—there is no question that my students' poor financial condition played a significant role in my decision to order as few books as possible and

certainly to avoid textbooks and anthologies, whose prices have become what I can only call outrageous (typically in the $50–$60 range, for a *paperback*).

Institutional and demographic considerations have also played a significant role in determining how I design my course. In a geographic area such as mine, serving a population like the one I have described, sustaining a philosophy program, complete with a major and minor, is a challenge. Students overwhelmingly are in college to prepare for practical careers, not academic ones, and so make their major and minor choices under the imperative that they should be able to earn a decent living straight out of college. The university, correspondingly, applies a brutally practical, outcomes-based standard in determining to which programs it should extend its full financial and institutional support, which means that at universities like mine, the liberal arts and humanities find themselves in a permanent "justify yourself" position. In our strongest days—before the 2008 financial collapse—we maxed out at around forty majors, a high from which we have seen a slow but steady decline. We now operate with a skeleton crew of tenured and tenure-track faculty members, supplemented by instructors and "per-course" faculty (i.e., faculty who are hired on a course-by-course basis). The bulk of our credit-hour production is in general education, where we serve hundreds upon hundreds of students a semester.

Given this situation and unlike the elite institutions in which so much of the nation's philosophical talent and financing is concentrated—a lamentable state of affairs in itself—we cannot hope to maintain our upper-division course offerings on the basis of serving our major/minor population but must reach out to and form relationships with those in complimentary disciplines, so as to boost enrollments with students from outside our department. When I first arrived at then-Southwest Missouri State University in 1999, upon surmising the situation, I opened negotiations with then-Head of the Department of Art and Design Martin Rosenberg (now Head of Fine Arts at Rutgers) to permit our department's aesthetics course to count as elective credit towards the BFA and MFA degree. This was accomplished by the next year and, ever since, aesthetics runs annually and enrolls a good 50 percent of that enrollment consisting of BFA and MFA students: painters, photographers, actors, musicians, video animators, graphic designers, and the like. The course curriculum is designed, then, with this population in mind—an evenly distributed mixture of experienced philosophy students with several philosophy courses already under their belts, and studio artists, designers, and performers.

CURRICULUM AND RATIONALES

The course is designed as an upper-division survey of three central themes in the philosophy of art and art criticism. They include the following:

A) The definition of "art";

B) The interpretation of art;

C) The evaluation of art.

Given the greater proportion of studio artists and performers to majors in philosophy, I weight the course in the direction of the philosophy of art criticism both because this is my main area of interest in aesthetics and I have discovered over my years of teaching aesthetics at MSU that the art students find the course most valuable for the way in which it assists them in adopting the position of the art critic (something that is most effectively facilitated through discussion of the material on interpretation and evaluation).

The reading list for the course is as follows (full reference information appears in the bibliography at the end):

1) Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics (I & II)."

2) Aristotle, Selections from the *Poetics*.

3) Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*

4) Clive Bell, *Art*.

5) Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics."

6) Maurice Mandlebaum, "Family Resemblances and Generalizations Concerning the Arts."

7) Terry Diffey, "The Republic of Art."

8) George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*.

9) Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.

10) Arthur Danto, "The Appreciation and Interpretation of Works of Art"; "Deep Interpretation," from *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*.

11) Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation."

12) Daniel A. Kaufman, "Interpretation and the Investigative Model of Criticism."

13) David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste."

14) Immanuel Kant, Excerpts from *The Critique of Judgment*.

15) Arnold Isenberg, "Critical Communication."

Throughout the course, I regularly emphasize that with respect to the arts and their criticism, the role of philosophy is to *describe* the practices of artists and critics and not to prescribe how one ought to make art or engage in art criticism. As philosophers, we try to make some sense of art and critical practice by way of philosophy's distinctive tools, but where such an analysis is impossible or fails to yield fruit, in the form of greater understanding, we leave the practice as it is—i.e., as un-explicated, but well-established. What we do *not* do is deem the practice impossible,[1] allege that its practitioners are irrational, or devalue it (or them) in any other way. For the philosophy

majors in the class, it is important to recognize just what degree of understanding of complex human practices their tools of logical, linguistic, and conceptual analysis can provide, especially those practices such as the making and criticizing of art. At the same time, it is important that artists and performers see what value there *is* in philosophical analysis and the distinctive point of view it provides, with respect to what they do in the studio, the performance hall, and on the stage. It is worth noting that I have found the latter easier to accomplish than the former. That is, my philosophy students have been more likely to be prideful with respect to their discipline, and thus to overextend its reach, while the artists and performers have been more likely to tell me that they have found the ability to reflect on their work from a more abstract, less personally invested position to be quite valuable.

With respect to the ultimate question in the philosophy of art—"What is art?" or, alternatively, "How do we define 'art'?—the story I tell the students is as follows:

i) the conception of "art" that we are trying to define is essentially a modern one, in the sense that there is no concept in Greek antiquity that denotes a class of things (belonging to multiple media) whose primary purpose is to serve as objects of contemplation. Therefore, when we talk about the "definitions" offered by, for example, Plato or Aristotle, we must be clear that we are engaged in a kind of modern appropriation (this is why I begin the course with a discussion of Kristeller's essential "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics," which describes the etiology of the modern conception of art);

ii) the history of theories of art is one in which theory is always chasing art history, rather than the other way around;

iii) what ultimately determines the *adequacy* of any theory of art is whether it can make sense of the word "art" as it is actually used in ordinary language;

iv) for reasons articulated by Wittgenstein and others, the words that can be defined, in the traditional, formal sense, are quite limited, and there are *many* reasons to wonder whether "art" is one of them; and

v) post-Wittgenstein philosophers who continue to believe that a definition of "art" can be found are nonetheless deeply affected by the Wittgensteinian critique, with the result that their prospective definitions share a common and distinctive characteristic: defining "art" in terms of relational rather than perceptible characteristics of artworks. (This is a definition to which art history would have forced them anyway, given the emergence on the scene of the "Readymades" and works of Pop Art, such as Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*.)

Nearly two-thirds of the course is devoted to the philosophy of art criticism, specifically, to questions concerning the interpretation and evaluation of works of art—questions whose raising and answering would appear to be central

to art criticism. I say "would appear" because one of the sources on which we spend a significant amount of time is Susan Sontag, whose magnificent essay, "Against Interpretation," challenges this assumption.

We begin our discussions of art criticism with Arthur Danto, who is far and beyond the best of what I've referred to elsewhere as the "New Wave" of aesthetic theorists, by which I mean those who have followed Maurice Mandlebaum in maintaining that despite the Wittgensteinian critique of traditional, formal definitions, the word "art" *can* be defined, but in terms of relational, rather than exhibited or perceptible characteristics. Danto also provides a natural bridge between our discussions of the definition of "art" and those devoted to art interpretation. Danto believes that interpretation is absolutely necessary because works of art are constituted by their interpretations, and because of this he also believes that interpretation *must* be grounded in publicly discoverable facts—(hence, what I call his "hypothetical intentionalism"—the view that in interpretation we try to identify what the artist intended or, at least, what he could have intended).

Susan Sontag takes a very dim view of interpretation in her well-known essay, "Against Interpretation," and the students and I find her views quite refreshing after all the intellectualism of the preceding parts of the course. That someone should so passionately insist that artworks should simply be *experienced*, that we should allow them to stimulate us—to make us happy and sad and confused and angry, to allow us to experience the sublime as well as the ordinary—comes at this point in the course as something of a revelation to the students. The point about experiencing art rather than "understanding" it through possible interpretations of it is an especially important point for the philosophy students to hear, for it suggests the limits of their own discipline: there may be entire dimensions of human life and experience with regard to which the tools of logical, linguistic, and conceptual analysis provide little illumination. Indeed, Sontag's position raises the question of why one should think of the philosophical point of view as being privileged in any way, and why it should be more important to know and to understand (which is what Danto tells them art is for) than to experience and to feel—which is what Sontag maintains is art's ultimate purpose.

Of course, given that my course is a philosophy course, it is important that all the positions under consideration be given as rigorous a philosophical account as possible. Unfortunately, "Against Interpretation," though it has many virtues, does not count philosophical rigor among them. So I have students read my own piece, "Interpretation and the Investigative Model of Criticism," the main purpose of which is to provide Sontag's arguments with philosophical heft—to make her a philosophically worthy opponent to Danto (as well as to the entire intellectualizing orientation of Analytic aesthetics).[2]

The last topic we take up in the course is the critical evaluation of art. The two most historically significant theories that dominate here are those of David Hume and Immanuel Kant. My central aim is to get students to understand some of the reasons for a number of core assumptions in this area, as well as the relationships between them. Why have so many philosophers construed artistic values as subjective properties and critical value judgments as merely judgments of taste? Why have so many others thought that at least some of our value judgments about works of art carry normative force? What tension is there, if any, between the subjectivity of critical value judgments about art and the normativity of these judgments? If there is a tension between the two, is resolving this tension possible, and if so, what are some ways of doing so?

What's so nice about teaching Hume and Kant in succession is that they approach this tension from essentially the same orientation: each claims that a subjective judgment carries normative force if it is the judgment that an authoritative judge would make; but each gives a very different account of what makes a person an authoritative judge, Hume suggesting (what I would broadly characterize as) a "credentials" based approach and Kant promoting the idea that it is only one whose experiences of beauty and deformity are suitably universal (because sufficiently disinterested) whose judgments carry normative weight.

I close the course with Arnold Isenberg's "Critical Communication" in order to make sure that students understand that the difficulties of justifying critical value judgments persist regardless of how one construes artistic values, that is, whether one conceives of them as being subjective or objective. Although Isenberg deploys his argument against critical value judgments conceived as judgments of taste, the set of examples he employs could just as effectively be used to make that argument against judgments construed as objective.

I have tried to indicate the way in which I teach aesthetics—the subjects I cover, the literature I assign, and some of the main reasons why I do so. I am very grateful to have been afforded this opportunity to share it with my fellow teachers of aesthetics and my philosophical peers. More generally, I hope that what I have shared will be of some use to you in your own work.

NOTES

1. Isenberg claims that any critic who thinks he is justifying his value judgments about art by the giving of reasons isn't and *can't* actually be doing so. For Isenberg, then, the practice of making verdicts and justifying them by means of reasons is impossible.

2. It was only after years of using "Against Interpretation" as a foil for Danto in my aesthetics classes that I decided to write this article as a kind of instructional aide.

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So How Much Should I Give? Extending Class Coverage of Singer's Work on Poverty Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

For over forty years now, Peter Singer's writings on poverty ethics have been widely assigned in undergraduate philosophy courses. They include "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," the classic 1972 essay that has been reprinted in over thirty-five different anthologies; "Rich and Poor," a frequently anthologized essay initially published in 1980 as a chapter in Singer's book *Practical Ethics*; "The Singer Solution to World Poverty," a 1999 essay from *The New York Times*; parts of his 2004 book *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*; and his 2009 book *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*.[1] The popularity of this work in philosophy courses is well justified: Singer's arguments are accessible to beginning philosophy students, those arguments are powerful, and their conclusions mark a deep and disturbing challenge to how virtually everyone in our society lives. It is hard to think of philosophical writing that is as accessible to beginning students and does a better job of illustrating the revisionary power of philosophy and the implications that philosophical reflection can have for how we live.

This paper outlines a unit that builds on the momentum gained by a standard unit on this work. The standard unit that I have in mind is one that covers Singer's pond analogy, his well-known three-premise argument, and his replies to various objections.[2] For my standard unit, I use the opening two chapters of *The Life You Can Save*, but much of the same material is covered in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" and "Rich and Poor," though with different emphases.[3]

I have used the unit that I will outline here in a general introduction to philosophy course and in a first-year seminar on the ethics of poverty.[4] It is also suitable for use in a general ethics course, a survey course in applied ethics, as well as courses on narrower topics such as utilitarianism, consequentialism, and Singer's work.

The focus of the unit that I will outline is a set of attempts to answer the question: Exactly *how much* of our money, including the money that we can raise from liquidating our possessions, are we morally required to share with the world's poorest people? Possible answers, as we will see, differ greatly, ranging from a penny in one's entire life (no matter how affluent one is), to all of one's personal wealth, to all of one's personal wealth plus what one can acquire by theft.

There are at least four important ways that this unit can benefit students. First, it can deepen their interest in poverty ethics. Second, as we will see, it is full of opportunities for students to generate points in favor of and against the sharing principles that are at the core of the unit and to think through the practical implications of these points. Third, along the way students can gain greater facility with some important concepts, such as marginal utility, long-run versus short-run payoffs, and various concepts of significance. And, fourth, it provides opportunities for students to reflect on some key issues in ethics, such as the issue of whether our moral obligations to assist someone are affected by the apathy of others who are also in a position to assist that person.

My presentation of the unit, and some tips for effectively teaching it, begins with a discussion of the question that frames the unit. Then I turn to the five sharing principles, each of which yields a different answer to this question, and offer some remarks about how to effectively cover each principle.

1. THE HOW MUCH QUESTION

A good place to start the unit is with two questions. Each uses jargon from the earlier standard unit. Someone in *absolute affluence* has enough money (or in-kind resources) to cover her basic needs and has money (or in-kind resources) left over for luxury items. Someone in *absolute poverty* does not have enough money (or in-kind resources) to cover her basic needs. Examples of basic needs are proper nutrition, health care, shelter, clothing, and sanitation; in general, basic needs are things without which people are far more likely to die.[5]

Here are the two questions:

1) *The whether question*: Are people in absolute affluence morally required to share any of their money and possessions with people in absolute poverty?

2) *The how much question*: How much of their money and possessions are absolutely affluent people morally required to share with people in absolute poverty?[6]

In my experience, almost all students believe that the correct answer to *the whether question* is a pretty obvious "yes." Whether this response is justified depends in part on what kinds of considerations were covered in the earlier standard unit. My present focus though is on identifying dispositions that students often have (whether they are

justified or not) after completing the standard unit and starting the unit that I am focusing on. The view that we are not under any moral obligation to share our wealth with the world's poorest people, even though they are innocent and they will die horrible premature deaths if we do nothing, strikes many students as selfish, callous, and morally wrong. By the lights of many students, views (most notably libertarian ones) that imply otherwise are thereby reduced to absurdity. By contrast, in my experience, these students find *the how much question* quite pressing since it is not obvious what the correct answer to it is, and since the answer sets the moral bar that we need to meet.[7]

Still it is important to engage students who think the correct answer to *the whether question* is that we are *not* morally required to share any of our resources with the world's poor. One way to do this is to challenge these students to complete the following statement: *if* those in absolute affluence have a moral obligation to share their resources with those in absolute poverty, then the amount of resources that they are obligated to share is X. This will be a familiar exercise in counterfactual reasoning: courses (including non-philosophy courses) are filled with such exercises, as students think through the implications of views other than their own.[8] And there can be a payoff for these students. Once they identify the value for X, they may have the beginning of an argument against Singer's answer to *the whether question*. Most obviously, this will be so if the value of X is objectionably demanding (an issue that I return to below).

One way to begin discussion of *the how much question* is with tithing. A common tithe, in fact the very meaning of the word, requires people to give 10 percent of their income to some cause. Here students might begin by considering the view that each affluent person is morally required to give 10 percent of his or her income to those in absolute poverty. Students can evaluate this answer to *the how much* question as part of a homework assignment, class discussion, or a group exercise. Expect them to identify some possible problems with this approach. One may be that it comes with no justification. *Why* is that the correct amount? Why isn't it higher, or lower? Another possible problem is that the requirement of a *fixed* percentage of a person's income rather than a sliding percentage of it is contentious and in need of support. Perhaps, as is arguably true with an income tax system, those with more ought to contribute a greater percentage than those with less. But this too will have to be supported. A third possible problem is with the focus on income rather than wealth as the determinant of how much one should give. A tithe that applies only to income suggests that a person of wealth but no income is not morally required to share some of his or her resources. But if that person's wealth is enormous, this may strike some as implausible, and in need of justification.

Discussion of the above issues is helpful at the beginning of the unit for it moves students beyond familiar pat answers and it can help to generate some important questions that they can ask of each subsequent sharing principle.

2. THE PRINCIPLE OF NONCOMPARABLE SIGNIFICANCE

It is natural to start with the two sharing principles that Singer devotes the most attention to. Since he discusses these principles in some detail, there will probably be considerable overlap with what I say here and what is covered in the earlier standard unit. Still I hope this discussion includes some novel points.[9]

Singer discusses, and then rejects, a principle that in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", he called "the weak version of the principle of preventing bad outcomes." It is as follows: "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it."[10] Applying this only to money and material possessions, and using a more descriptive title gets us a principle that I call "The Principle of Noncomparable Significance" (PNS):

> **PNS:** Absolutely affluent persons are morally required to donate to those in absolute poverty their money, and the money that can be raised from liquidating possessions, as long as (i) those donations will prevent something bad from happening and (ii) what is donated is not morally significant. Absolutely affluent persons are not morally required to share money or to liquidate possessions that are morally significant.

The key concept here is a thing's being "morally significant." To help students grasp this concept, one can have them identify examples of everyday claims that feature this concept. It shows up, for example, in "it is of no moral significance to me whether we get mushrooms on our pizza," "it *is* of moral significance to me whether we get meat on our pizza," and "my family is of great moral significance to me."

What determines whether something is morally significant?[11] It is worthwhile having students discuss this question in some detail, both because it is important in its own right and because it is crucial for evaluating PNS. Expect a variety of answers to come up. One answer is that whether something is morally significant is a matter of whether it is essential for carrying out one's main life-projects. Another is that it is a matter of whether it is among the things that one most desires. As these (and other) answers are discussed, students can apply them to see what the resulting versions of PNS imply about what we should give to the world's poor. To make this concrete, students can be asked to imagine two baskets, one labeled THINGS ESSENTIAL TO MY MAIN LIFE-PROJECTS and the other labeled THINGS NOT ESSENTIAL TO MY MAIN LIFE-PROJECTS. Students can list a few of their possessions and sums of money that they would put into each, and state why they would do so. They can do the same, now with baskets labeled THINGS I MOST DESIRE and THINGS I DO NOT MOST DESIRE.

It is also important to discuss clause (i) of PNS. Notice that the modifier "morally" is not included in this clause. So this clause covers all bad things, even those that are not morally bad. Students can be asked to work out what falls in this

generic category of bad things. Is it restricted to intrinsically bad things, or does it also include instrumentally bad things? Are there things that are bad but not morally bad? If so, what are some examples of such things?

We now turn to objections to the PNS principle. Here it is helpful to have students—individually, in small groups, or as a whole class—try to identify and evaluate objections to this principle. Expect a variety of objections to be raised to this sharing principle, as well as to the subsequent ones that we will look at.

Students often object to PNS on the grounds that people can *say* anything is morally significant to them. A rich person might *say* her collection of BMWs is morally significant to her. This seems to allow people to rationalize and get themselves off the hook too easily. It is important to point out that PNS is not about what people *can say*; it is about whether something *really is* morally significant to them. These are importantly different.

There is, however, a similar objection that is more serious. It says that on any plausible interpretation of moral significance, there are people who have BMW collections that *really are* morally significant to them. This is so for both the life-project and the strong-desire interpretations of moral significance (as well as for other interpretations that students might suggest). Preserving and expanding one's BMW collection can be among a person's strongest desires, and it can be integral to a person's main life-projects. (Of course, this will not be true of *all* people who collect BMWs. But it will be true of some of them.) The objection to PNS might rest, then, not on the claim that collecting BMWs cannot be morally significant for someone, but rather that even if the having of BMWs is morally significant to a particular person, it would be wrong to collect them when their sale could be used to save the lives of others because owning BMWs is of less moral significance than saving innocent people's lives.[12] The move to the last of these claims might be worthy of further discussion.

A third objection is that sometimes we are not morally required to sacrifice items that may be of significance but not of moral significance. Here is an illustration I have used effectively in class. Suppose a man is wearing a special pair of shoes when he walks by a pond in which a child is drowning. The shoes are the only material things that connect this man to his brother who recently died in a tragic house fire. All of his brother's physical possessions perished in the fire except this pair of shoes (which his brother left elsewhere). The passerby only wears these shoes for good luck and today is such a day as it is his first day at a new job. This is a paradigm case of a material object that is of significance to someone—indeed, of great personal importance to him though we (and he) would not say that the shoes have *moral* significance for him. Suppose the man knows that he can only save the child if he acts quickly and so doesn't have time to take off the shoes if he is to jump into the lake in time to save the child from drowning. He knows that if he goes into the water with the shoes on, they will be ruined. Almost all students think it is pretty obviously wrong for the man to ignore the drowning child in order to preserve the shoes, and thereby let the child die. The man is morally obligated to save the child even if this means his special shoes are ruined. However, since the shoes are (we are supposing) not of moral significance, PNS stands.

Given the objections one might raise to PNS, I then turn to consider some competing principles to see if there is one that fares better than PNS.

3. THE PRINCIPLE OF COMPARABLE SIGNIFICANCE

In "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Singer presents "the strong version of the principle of preventing bad outcomes": "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it."[13] As before, let's just look at the application to money and material possessions and let's use a more descriptive title, namely, "The Principle of Comparable Significance" (PCS).

> **PCS:** Absolutely affluent persons are morally required to share their money, and the money that they can raise from liquidating their possessions, as long as (i) those donations will prevent something bad from happening, and (ii) that money and those possessions are not as morally significant as the bad thing that they prevent. An absolutely affluent person is not morally required to share money or possessions that are as morally significant as the bad thing that the resulting donations would prevent.

Central to this principle is the concept of marginal utility at (ii). A donation crosses the point of marginal utility if, as a result of this donation, the donor falls into absolute poverty. Such donations do not achieve any net gain. It is important for students to recognize that PCS does not require making such donations. Instead, it requires making all of the donations short of this—that is, all of the donations that do not cross the point of marginal utility—that one can. For this reason, PCS does not require persons to put their life at risk—at least not at immediate risk. Still, PCS does demand that people in absolute affluence give until it hurts, then give some more, and then keep giving until they have made all the donations that they can as long as those donations do not cross the point of marginal utility. This means coming right up against, but not crossing over into, absolute poverty.

Students raise lots of objections to this principle. I will review a few that are especially instructive. One says PCS is unrealistic since virtually no one gives as much as PCS says they should. The obvious reply to this objection points out that it confuses normative ethics, which aims to identify how we *ought* to act, with descriptive ethics, which has the quite different task of describing how we do act. So, too, for a related objection, which says that ethics must meet people where they are, that is, with their largely self-interested dispositions, and state what such creatures ought to do. Several issues here are worth discussing. Is it true that we are largely self-interested?[14] If so, is it *inevitably* true that we are largely self-interested? And are self-interested dispositions open to moral criticism as long

as we have the power to overcome them, no matter how difficult it is for us to overcome them?

A third objection charges that PCS's highly demanding nature counts against it.[15] It is important to have students discuss whether the demandingness of a moral claim is a reason to reject it. They can be asked if the inference from *x is very demanding* to *x is not morally required* is valid. Does the answer depend on what, specifically, is required by a principle that is "very demanding"? What might, in particular circumstances, be required by a "very demanding" principle? And is the inference valid no matter the extent of what is required? In the end, does this objection amount to anything more than the thought that acting morally needs to be easier than what would be involved in giving to the point of marginal utility? Students may be asked to consider whether the claim that someone is morally required to do something that is very demanding is best judged by the merits of the specific arguments for and against that claim quite apart from the demanding nature of x. On this approach, if an argument for engaging in a particular demanding course of action in a particular set of circumstances is sound, then we will have discovered that morality, at least in this specific instance, is demanding. And if there is a sound argument that such a course of action is not morally required (where, again, the argument does not turn on whether the course of action is demanding), then we will have discovered that morality, at least in this specific instance, is not demanding.[16]

A fourth objection, one that in my experience is quite popular with students, is that people in absolute affluence have a right to keep enough of their money for insurance purposes to guard against future misfortune that may befall them. On this view, it is permissible to stop giving before one reaches the point of marginal utility so that one can insure oneself against falling into absolute poverty should misfortune strike. This might be done by saving money or by purchasing various forms of insurance.

To evaluate this objection, students can be asked to design a rescue situation that involves similar considerations. Here is one I have used to some effect. Suppose that there is a chance that the ship that I am on will encounter some problem and capsize. My lifejacket is my insurance against my losing my life if this should happen (as it will allow me to survive if my ship does capsize). Now imagine that a nearby ship capsizes, and someone from that ship is in the water, has no lifejacket, and will survive only if I throw him my lifejacket. Is it permissible for me to keep my lifejacket since it is my only insurance against drowning if my ship capsizes? Or am I morally required to throw it to the stranded person?

As students sometimes note, the probabilities seem to matter here. This can be brought out by contrasting two cases. In one, it is very likely that my ship will capsize. In the other, it is very unlikely that my ship will capsize. It seems much more plausible to say that it is permissible for me to keep my lifejacket in the first case than it is in the second case. If this is correct, then the crucial question is this: Is someone in our society who foregoes insurance and gives to the point of marginal utility (without crossing over

it) in circumstances that are more like my circumstances on the ship that is unlikely to capsize, or more like my circumstances on the ship that is likely to capsize? That is, if people do not set aside any money as insurance against going over the brink into absolute poverty (say if they were to lose their job), and instead keep themselves right at the brink, is it likely, or unlikely, that they will encounter something that pushes them over the brink?

A fifth objection, another that students often raise, is that if everyone followed PCS, a huge amount of wealth would suddenly go from the first world to the underdeveloped world, and this would result in a shock to the world economy and great economic calamity.[17] Is the fact that it is exceedingly unlikely that everyone will follow PCS grounds for rejecting this objection? Students can be asked about how this compares to the following: Does the fact that economic calamity would ensue if everyone decided to be a plumber tomorrow—this being as unlikely as everyone following Singer's edicts tomorrow—show anything about the morality of becoming a plumber?[18]

One last objection, perhaps the most compelling, charges that PCS is flawed because it is short sighted. If the spirit behind PCS is that one should save as many people as one can, then one will fail to accomplish this if one pushes oneself to the point of marginal utility. For example, for a college student to reach the point of marginal utility, she would need to sacrifice her education since money she uses to pay her tuition could be used to save lives. The sacrifice of her education means that she will not get a college degree with the result that she will probably make far less money during her lifetime. She will therefore not be in a position to save as many people as she would have been able to had she stayed in college. If her goal is to save as many people as she can, she should take a long-run view, invest in her education, and put herself in a position to help as many people as she can over the course of her entire life.

4. THE MAXIMUM LONG-RUN PRINCIPLE

The next principle explicitly emphasizes that we should do the most we can *over the long run* to lift people out of absolute poverty. The Maximum Long-Run (MLR) Principle captures the basic idea:

> **MLR:** Absolutely affluent persons are morally required to share their money and the money they can raise from liquidating their possessions so as to, over the course of their entire life, bring the greatest number of people out of absolute poverty (without having to cross the point of marginal utility).[19]

What does MLR imply about how much each of us should give? A key issue here is whether we are to take as given various features of our lives before applying this principle. For example, take someone who could have been a high-paid corporate officer, but instead becomes a low-paid school teacher. On one version of MLR, this person is morally required to give the amount that a low-paid teacher gives who, over her entire life, gets the greatest number of

people out of absolute poverty. Contrast this with what is delivered by a stronger version of MLR. It implies that this person is morally required to give the amount that would be given by a high paid corporate officer who, over her entire life, gets the greatest number of people out of absolute poverty. This amount will be significantly greater than the amount demanded by the weaker version of MLR. This person will also fail to meet this stronger moral obligation, but now for the additional reason that she simply never made enough to meet it, though she could have if she had chosen the alternative career path. Similarly, other key choice-points in a person's life besides his or her choice of career can be held fixed (as the weaker version of MLR allows), or not (as the stronger version of MLR requires), for example, where a person lives, whether that person has children, and whether the person indulges in the expensive tastes that he/she has voluntarily cultivated. Students can discuss whether this counts against the stronger version of MLR.

Besides the important distinction between the weak and strong versions of MLR, there is a second complexity. It arises because of the huge number of investing and giving strategies that one might follow. Is it optimal to give as one earns, and donate weekly or monthly? Or is it better to invest one's money, and perhaps save more lives if and when the resulting investment-income gets added to one's donation? When should one divest so as to make the greatest possible donation?[20] The answers are far from obvious.

By taking a long-run, lifetime-policy approach to absolute poverty, MLR addresses a real shortcoming with Singer's Pond Case, which is most naturally interpreted as a one-off case. Unlike the passerby in the Pond Case, a person in absolute affluence faces an enormous number of people who need to be rescued. One may save one person with a donation, but there is another person—hundreds of millions, in fact—who is in equal need of help. It is as if, in surreal nightmarish fashion, life is nothing but a stroll by a pond in which numberless innocent individuals are dying and need one's help if they are to survive. What is the moral life in this surreal nightmare?

MLR delivers a very demanding answer. It deems almost all life-projects other than helping poor people immoral, though there might be exceptions in the form of projects that enhance the larger goal of saving poor people's lives. For example, if you are a popular and good-selling artist, the most effective way for you to save lives might be to create and sell your art. Still, since MLR is going to crowd out almost all of one's other projects and deem them immoral even (as we shall see) one's competing ethical projects, MLR faces objections. Class discussion might take up at least the following two.[21]

First, MLR seems to crowd out the special obligations that we have to those who are near and dear to us.[22] Students should be asked whether full conformity to MLR permits buying a holiday present for one's child, or an anniversary gift for one's spouse. As many students recognize, at first blush it looks like it does not since more lives can be saved by donating the money to others. But what if there

are significant differences between the life in which one donates money to others instead of buying gifts for those with whom one has personal ties, and the life in which one foregoes the donation and buys the gifts? The second life *might* be one in which one enjoys a more supportive and nourishing home environment than one would in the first life, thus enabling one to perform better at work and perhaps earn more money to donate. Even if this is true, though, MLR will only permit one to buy the lowest-price gifts that will allow him or her to achieve the goal of lifting as many people as possible out of absolute poverty—spending any more than that will be a waste. This raises several questions. Does this proposal really recognize special obligations that persons have to their children and spouses? Or does it make those obligations merely derivative from a more fundamental obligation to distant strangers? And is it plausible that they are derivative in this way?

A related objection connects to other themes that might arise, especially in a general survey course in applied ethics. According to this objection, MLR is true only if two other claims are true. One is that absolute poverty is the biggest moral problem in the world. The other is that only the biggest moral problem generates moral obligations that override all others. Both are worth discussing. The first is a fascinating topic that is seldom explored. What other moral problems might compete with world poverty for the title of being the biggest in the world? Expect students to suggest abortion, our treatment of animals, forms of discrimination, global warming, war, sweatshop labor practices, and others. Discussion here naturally leads to the criteria by which we should measure the size of various moral problems. However that turns out, what should we think of the claim that all other moral problems are to be neglected? Of course, it might be the case that even if world poverty is the biggest problem in the world, it is morally permissible to expend resources fighting lesser problems (but clearly not if the strong version of the MLR principle is correct). It is worth asking students what sorts of considerations might support this view. Might an individual have the right to choose the ethical causes that he or she will pursue (even if it is only from a short list of the biggest moral problems)?

The view that there is this kind of leeway can be challenged with a case such as the following. Suppose someone on the way to a rally to protest recent legislation that will exacerbate global warming or to act on behalf of some cause other than one that targets the biggest moral problem in the world walks by a pond in which a child is drowning. Does this person have a duty to save the child even if this means missing the important protest? This case suggests that there might not be such leeway after all, or at least that in some cases there is no such leeway. Does this suggest that there is no such leeway after all?

5. THE SAME ABSOLUTE AMOUNT PRINCIPLE

The three principles covered so far ground how much of us should give in what each of us has as income and whether there are any people in absolute poverty that we can help. The last two principles have it that a third kind of

fact helps to determine how much each of us should give: facts about other people who are in a position to give.

Here it is helpful to have students think of absolute poverty as a problem of a certain size that has to be parceled out to the individuals in absolute affluence. The simplest way of doing this divides the problem evenly among the people in absolute affluence, thus making each affluent person morally required to eliminate the same share of poverty. This is captured by The Same Absolute Amount Principle (SAAP):

> **SAAP:** An absolutely affluent person is morally required to share the amount of money equal to the total cost of raising everyone out of absolute poverty divided by the number of people in absolute affluence.[23]

Since there are about 1.4 billion people in absolute poverty, and about 5.7 billion people in absolute affluence, there are roughly four times as many people in absolute affluence as there are people in absolute poverty.[24] Therefore, according to SAAP, each person in absolute affluence should provide for one-quarter of a person in absolute poverty. At the very most, it costs $1.25 per day to get a person out of absolute poverty, since this is currently the minimum amount needed to count as not being in absolute poverty.[25] One quarter of $1.25 per day is 31.25 cents per day, or $114 per year.[26]

At least two objections to this principle are worth discussing. The first focuses on the fact that people in absolute affluence are not equally positioned to help out the world's poor, and that, therefore, each absolutely affluent person is not morally required to give the same amount. Take some examples at the extremes: Bill Gates is estimated to be worth around $50 billion, while others are just barely above the $1.25 per day mark. SAAP says both are required to give the same amount. The objection charges that the view that each is required to give the same amount is unreasonable on the grounds that Bill Gates will be unaffected by giving $114 per year (in fact, he will probably be unaffected if he gives $114 *million* per year) while those living on little more than $1.25 per day will be *very* significantly affected. In fact, people in this second group will fall into absolute poverty as a result, something that even Singer's PCS does not require of them.

The following parallel pond case can be helpful here. Six children are drowning, this time in rough lake waters, when three adults pass by. One of the adults is a professional lifeguard. But the other two are merely proficient swimmers and each will be at serious risk of drowning if he or she tries to save more than one child. SAAP says each adult is morally required to save two children. But surely respective abilities are relevant. If the good swimmer can easily save four, isn't it more plausible that she is morally required to save four, and that the other two adults are morally required to save just one each?

A second objection says that SAAP runs into a serious problem with apathy since it implies that when some people who are in a position to help are apathetic and do nothing, this has no effect on the moral requirements that apply to others who are in a position to help. This is highly germane to poverty ethics since the vast majority of absolutely affluent people give far less than $114 per year to the world's poorest people.[27] Here is a key question for students to consider: Are those affluent people who are disposed to help the poor morally required to pick up the slack created by the affluent people who, out of apathy, do not give? Another pond case can help start class discussion here. Now there are ten children drowning in a shallow pond and ten adults passing by. All of the adults are perfectly capable of saving at least one child each. SAAP says each adult is morally required to save one child. But suppose that nine of the adults are apathetic and refuse to save any (though they are perfectly capable of doing so). Isn't the tenth person morally required to save more than just one child? What if we add that the tenth adult can *easily* save more than one child, and perhaps even that she can easily save all ten (as it is a shallow pond)? It seems that she is morally required to save *as many as she can*. If this is correct, SAAP is false because it sets the bar too low.

6. THE PROPORTIONAL MEANS PRINCIPLE

The final principle covered in the unit makes the amount that an affluent person is required to give vary according to her means. The greater a person's means, the more she is morally required to give. A simple principle that captures this is the Proportional Means Principle (PMP):

> **PMP:** An absolutely affluent person is morally required to share (the amount of money equal to the total cost of raising everyone out of absolute poverty divided by the number of people in absolute affluence) multiplied by the absolutely affluent person's relative capacity to help.

There are various ways to measure someone's relative capacity to help. One is to peg the person in absolute affluence whose means puts him or her at the median among all who are in absolute affluence, and say that that person is morally required to donate $114 per year.[28] Someone in the 25th percentile—75% of affluent people are richer than this person, and 25% are poorer—would be morally required to donate 0.5 times the median amount, or $71 per year. Someone in the 75th percentile—25% of affluent people are richer than this person, and 75% are poorer—would be morally required to donate 1.5 times the median amount, or $171 per year. And someone in the 100th percentile (namely, the world's billionaires) would be morally required to donate twice the median amount, or $228 per year. This is just one way to measure a person's relative capacity to help. Students can be encouraged to identify, and evaluate, others.[29]

How well does PMP, or at least this version of it, stand up against the two objections that were leveled against the last principle? The first charged that people of far greater means must be morally required to give more than those of meager means. PMP says that what someone ought to give depends in part on what he or she has, and that those with more are required to give more. Still some sliding scales seem to be more satisfactory at capturing this than others. For example, the version of PMP I just sketched might not

be fully satisfactory since the most that it will assign to a person, even the wealthiest person in the world, is a moral obligation to donate $228 per year. To many, this does not demand enough of millionaires and billionaires. Students can be encouraged to identify other versions of PMP with more acceptable implications for the very rich.

What about the earlier apathy objection, according to which one can be morally required to do more when others who are also in a position to help do nothing? Like the last principle, PMP makes no adjustment for the fact that, for reasons of apathy, very few people in absolute affluence give anything close to what they should. So PMP is no better equipped than the last principle to deal with apathy. Close analogs of both PMP and SAAP that cover the resources (e.g., time, physical energy expended, etc.) relevant in pond cases, imply that it is morally permissible to let innocent children drown when it is easy and nearly cost-free to save them, just so long as there are others who can help, but fail to do so.

CONCLUSION

I have outlined a unit that extends coverage of Singer's work on our moral obligations to the world's poorest people. The focus of the unit is the sharing principles. This unit will help students fill out their own views regarding this important moral obligation; it will deepen their interest in poverty ethics; it will help students develop skills relevant to identifying objections and replies; it will help them acquire powerful new concepts; and it will give them opportunities to reflect on some key related issues in ethics. It might also help them take more demanding principles like the Principle of Comparable Significance and the Maximum Long-Run Principle more seriously than they otherwise would.[30]

NOTES

1. The secondary literature on Singer's work on this topic is enormous. Two helpful collections that contain many essays that are accessible to undergraduate students are Aiken and LaFollette eds., *World Hunger and Moral Obligation* (1st and 2nd eds.), and Schaler ed., *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*. As for pedagogical pieces, neither the *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy* nor *Teaching Philosophy*, two leading publications devoted to teaching philosophy, has published a single paper on pedagogical issues relating to Singer's work on poverty ethics.

2. Here is the pond analogy as Singer puts it in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" p. 231:

   "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's three-premise argument, as he puts it in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," pp. 231-32:

   Premise 1: Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.

   Premise 2: If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.

   Premise 3: It is in our power to prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance.

   Conclusion: We ought, morally, to prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care.

For a more recent formulation, see pp. 15-16 of *The Life You Can Save*.

Singer has replied to many objections to his argument. These objections include the claim that physical proximity is morally relevant and his view ignores this; that moral obligation diminishes when there are others who are positioned to help and his principle fails to incorporate this; that disaster would ensue if every affluent person followed Singer's advice; that his view is too far from common sense to be correct; that foreign aid is not the best means to saving poor people's lives; that his argument ignores competing moral considerations based on special ties; and that we do not owe anything to those we have not wronged.

3. "The Singer Solution to World Poverty" is very short and pursues an analogy that is very different from the pond analogy. The chapter from *One World* that is most germane to poverty ethics, chapter five, is largely devoted to arguing against strong forms of partialism, and to identifying our *collective* obligations to help the poorest people in the world.

4. I devote two weeks to this companion unit. But more time, or less time, can be devoted to it.

5. Singer spells out the distinction between absolute affluence and absolute poverty in numerous places, e.g. in *Practical Ethics*, pp. 219–21.

6. Though the focus is on how much of our money and possessions we should share with those in absolute poverty, there are other resources (as Singer is well aware) that we might share with those in absolute poverty, for example, our time, skills, vote, etc. Similar sharing principles can be formulated for each of these resources, though different considerations might bear on their assessment. I won't address any of these issues here. Nor will I say anything about whether we might be morally required to steal from others to save innocent lives. On this, see Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*, ch. 3. This is another fertile area for extending discussion of Singer's work.

7. At some point in class discussion, it might be helpful to distinguish a third question, namely, "What public statement about how much we should give will result in the greatest amount of giving?" Singer discusses this issue in several places; see *Practical Ethics*, p. 228, pp. 245-46; *The Life You Can Save*, pp. 151–54; and most recently in Singer and de Lazari-Radek, "Secrecy in Consequentialism: A Defense of Esoteric Morality."

8. As a referee pointed out, there are challenging issues about how to complete this conditional if one thinks that people in absolute affluence do not have a moral obligation to share their resources with those in absolute poverty. How does one specify the grounds of a counterfactual obligation so that one can determine the value of X? The strategy I pursue in the rest of the paper involves examining a variety of considerations which presuppose that people in absolute affluence have a moral obligation to share some of their resources with people in absolute poverty, and which also bear on the specific issue of how much of their resources they are thus required to share. Keep in mind though that this kind of exercise in counterfactual moral reasoning is familiar, even if the details of it are not obvious. Reflecting on further examples, it is clear that there are good ways, and bad ways, of supporting these kinds of counterfactuals (or at least what people take to be counterfactuals). Consider two more examples that arise in applied ethics courses. People who believe capital punishment is not a morally permissible punishment for murder can evaluate various answers to this question: If capital punishment were a morally permissible punishment for murder, then what forms of it (e.g., lethal injection, public hanging, being boiled alive, etc.) would be morally permissible punishments for murder? And people who believe it is morally wrong to legalize physician-assisted suicide can evaluate various answers to this question: If it were morally permissible to legalize physician-assisted suicide, then what would be the best legal safeguards for this practice?

9. For reasons of brevity, I set aside whether the sharing principles might be supported by various ethical theories, such as versions of consequentialism, deontology, etc. Notice that if such theories are more controversial than the sharing principles, then the theories cannot be used to adjudicate the sharing principles.

10. See Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," p. 231.

11. Singer provides a brief justification for leaving the notion of moral significance unexplicated in *Practical Ethics*, p. 231.

12. Singer's version of Unger's Bob and the Bugatti case in "The Singer Solution to World Poverty" and *The Life You Can Save*, pp. 13-14 is meant to illustrate this.

13. See Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," p. 231. In *The Life You Can Save*, p. 15, Singer defends a principle that is less demanding than this principle but more demanding than PNS. It is: "If it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so." However we don't get much detail about what it is for one thing to be nearly as important as another thing. The most illuminating passage comes on p. 17, where Singer says this principle "leaves some wiggle room when it comes to situations in which, to prevent something bad, we would have to risk something *nearly* as important as the bad thing we are preventing. Consider, for example, a situation in which you can only prevent the deaths of other children by neglecting your own children. This standard does not require you to prevent the deaths of the other children."

14. See Singer, *The Life You Can Save*, pp. 73–78 for a detailed response to this objection. For gripping counterexamples to this view of human nature, see MacFarquhar's "The Kindest Cut" and Parker's "The Gift," two essays that many students find fascinating.

15. Singer discusses this objection in several places, including *Practical Ethics*, pp. 242–6.

16. However, as a referee pointed out, the demandingness of an act might still bear on whether one is excused if one fails to perform it, and whether the moral requirement to perform it is overridden so that the action is not all-things-considered required.

17. Singer discusses this objection at several places: for example, see *The Life You Can Save*, pp. 38-39.

18. If the universalization version of Kant's categorical imperative is covered earlier in a course, students might be asked to think about whether this objection correctly applies Kant's universalization test.

19. Singer recognizes long-run considerations in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," p. 238; in *Practical Ethics*, p. 223; and *The Life You Can Save*, pp. 37-38. But he does not discuss these considerations in detail.

20. Singer discusses some of these issues in *The Life You Can Save*, pp. 37-38.

21. Some of the objections to PCS that I reviewed in the previous section can also be directed at MLR. I will focus on other objections to MLR. One that I do not discuss is the "moral saints" problem raised in Wolf, "Moral Saints." See Carbonell, "What Moral Saints Look Like" for an interesting, and accessible, reply to Wolf that appeals to the life of Paul Farmer.

22. For Singer's reply to this objection, see *The Life You Can Save*, chapter 8.

23. Singer briefly discusses this principle in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," pp. 233-34, and *The Life You Can Save*, p. 141.

24. The present world population is about 7.1 billion. The division of all people into 1.4 billion who are in absolute poverty and 5.7 billion who are in absolute affluence assumes that these two categories are exhaustive. The usual definitions of "absolute poverty" and "absolute affluence" that I reviewed at the beginning of section 1 entail that they are exhaustive. But against this perhaps those that live on exactly (or little more than) $1.25 per day should belong to a third category. On this approach, though fewer people will count as absolutely affluent, the final estimate that I arrive at of $114 per year is still roughly accurate given the compensating high estimate pointed out in the next footnote.

25. This is a high estimate because almost everyone in absolute poverty has some daily income and therefore does not fall short by the full $1.25 per day.

26. For a very different way of calculating how much is needed to eliminate absolute poverty as well as the number of rich people that it would take to do this, see *The Life You Can Save*, chapter 9. It comes to $200-$400 per rich person per year.

27. Singer reports, in *The Life You Can Save*, p. 33, that Americans donate, via government foreign aid and private giving, just 18 cents of every $100 of national income. The figure is based on OECD data from 2007.

28. So the number of affluent people who are richer than this person is equal to the number of affluent people who are poorer than this person.

29. Another sliding scale results if each affluent person is required to sacrifice the same amount of well-being. I have in mind the notion of well-being discussed in ethical theory. Of course, there are substantive disputes about the nature of well-being. But on many views of well-being, the corresponding amount of money will differ considerably from person to person depending on how much wealth a person has and how much a given loss in wealth will affect his or her well-being.

30. Many thanks to four anonymous referees, and the many students in my Introduction to Philosophy course and my Poverty: Near and Far course over the last five years.

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POEMS

Proposal to Professor Superstar

Felicia Nimue Ackerman
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"*Proposal to Professor Superstar*" *first appeared in* The Providence Journal, *July 27, 2014.*

Come marry me! Come be my love
(Or fake it that you love me).
The job I crave is at your school,
But others rank above me.

The old boy system didn't die.
It took a new direction.
Today the favored form of pull
Is marital connection.

To hold you fast when we're a pair,
They'll surely want to hire me.
When I get tenure, we can split --
There's no way they can fire me.

Professor on Alert

Felicia Nimue Ackerman
BROWN UNIVERSITY

"*Professor on Alert*" *first appeared in* The Providence Journal, *May 20, 2014.*

They say "impact adversely," and I tell them to say "hurt."
"Empower" and "proactive" also put me on alert.
And, like, they're, like, tenacious when it comes to saying "like."
I dream that I'm the Dutch boy with his finger in the dike.

On Shelley's Claim, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world"

Felicia Nimue Ackerman
BROWN UNIVERSITY

"*On Shelley's Claim, 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world'*" *first appeared as a letter to the editor on the* Chronicle of Higher Education *website, December 31, 2014.*

If poets influenced our laws,
It mightn't be so good, because
Their views are sometimes less than sound—
Consider Eliot or Pound.

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