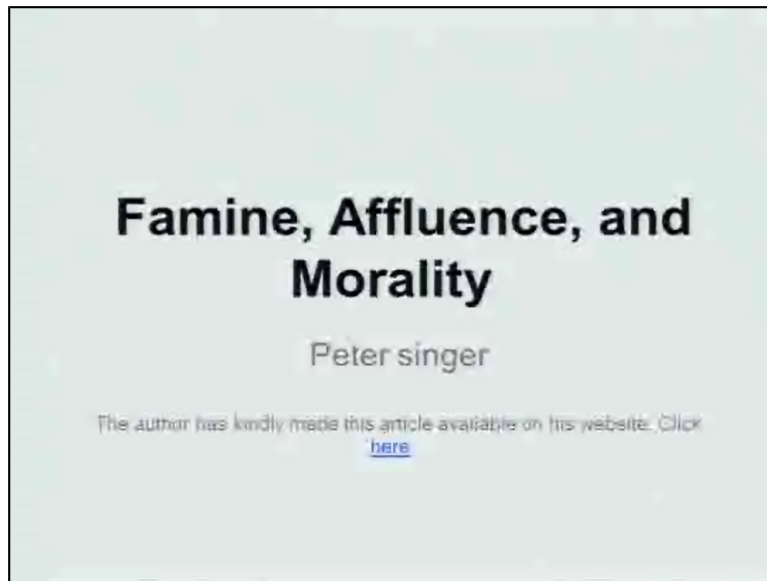


**Ethics**  
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**Module No. #01**  
**Lecture No. #32**  
**Some Ethical Issues. (Applied Ethics)**  
**Discussing Peter Singer's 'Famine Affluence & Morality' - Part - I**

Today, we will talk about, very influential article of Peter Singer's, Famine Affluence and Morality.

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Now, when you have been doing Philosophy, there has been this urge, that well, where does it connect to the world out there. So, particularly in Ethics, when we been talking about, a lot of moral theories, but where does this connect to the world out there.

And, this essay is a crucial example of, how a philosopher's work, in the philosophical domain has influenced the, world out there. So, it was a very crucial article. And, it did, get in a lot of funding and resources. And, unlike the criticism, that well, many philosophical articles end up in their journals, without moving anything in the world.

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## The context:

- Written in 1971 - famine in East Bengal (Now Bangladesh)
- Formation of Bangladesh, independence from Pakistan
- Constant poverty, cyclone & civil war
- A sudden high intensity demand on a fledgling government with very limited resources and located in one of the resource starved regions of the world.
- In no way, the author understands the situation to be fatalistic.
- What do the others do? What ought to be done by others? In individual & collective capacity.

So, the context of this article is, well, it was written in 1971. This is a situation, there is famine in East Bengal, or now Bangladesh. There was this formation of Bangladesh independence from Pakistan, constant poverty, cyclone, and civil war. So, a sudden high-intensity demand on a fledgling government, with very limited resources, and located in one of the resource starved regions of the world. In no way, the author understands, the situation to be fatalistic. And, so what do others do?

What is the crucial point, what others do? Okay. Now, before we take on, since we have had a preliminary reading of this article, let us come up with, what has been your, or how moved have you been, with this piece. What difference has it? What do you think it is? It is a jolt to the world community, to individuals everywhere, to start donating for this situation, that we have in 1971.

**“Professor - Student conversation starts”**. How would you react to it, if this is a situation, then and there? How would you react, reading this article, if you were in 1971? (Vocalised voice 02:43 to 04:23) okay. Right. Okay. Let us take this situation, one-on-one. Would you like to add, something to this? Okay. Not now.

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## The situation then

- At the individual level, people have not responded in the magnitude required. Some exceptions.
- At the governmental level, assistance has not come at the massive levels required for sustained assistance.
- A comparison of the expenditure of the governments; and that is taken as the indicator of the reflection
- Generally, this emphasizes the almost perpetual situation of the world where there is suffering and affluence co-existing with not enough transfer of resources taking places. The relatively well resourced prioritize the utilization of their resources and Singer finds fault with this prioritization – both at the individual and collective level.
- What the well-resourced owe to the ill-resourced, if anything at all?

Now, what few crucial questions, that are being raised by Singer, is that, what do the affluent if at all, owe anything to the lesser affluent, or tragedy struck. Now, as a Philosophy student, what would you think that, is this a question, that is relevant. Or, when asked to a philosopher, or is this just clarion call. Or, what do the affluent owe to the, lesser affluent, or the tragedy struck. (Vocalised voice 05:07 to 05:48)

Okay. Interesting. Now, which is not raised by Singer in this article. But, if you would like to read into it, that well, Singer takes a starting point. The starting point being that, well, there is a tragedy in a particular part of the world, and there is affluence in a particular part of the world. And that, the affluent therefore, what is the rationale that goes behind them to, donate to the one's work, tragedy struck.

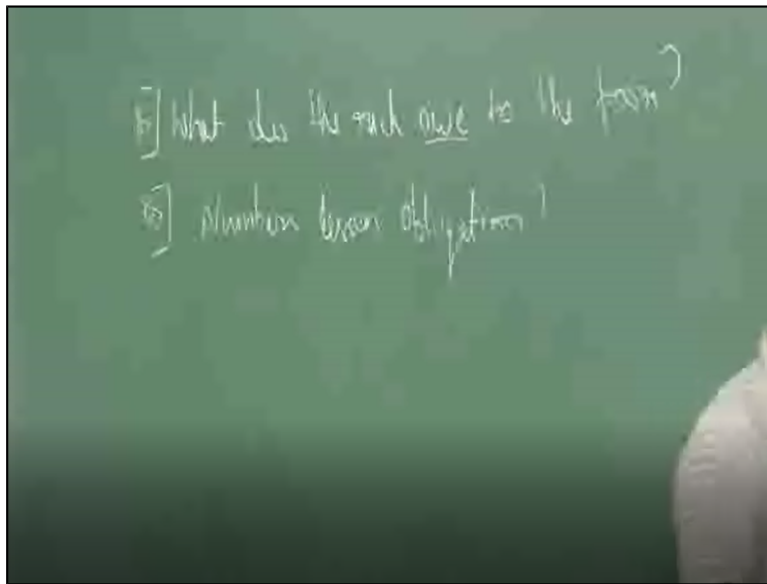
Interesting. Now, if you trace the genealogy, or the history of affluence, one very dominant worldview is, that well, the resources in the world are finite. And, that is been just skewed distributed, in a skewed manner. And therefore, it is just a matter of earlier utilisation of ancestors, that certain resources have accumulated in one part of the world, and thereby causing a scarcity on the other part of the world.

Now, to this worldview, there is also retort, that well, affluence is also a result of human effort. And, where effort has been more, and where this say, thinking has been cherished, and ways of

affluence have been realised, there has simply been much more affluence, than in regions which have not exhibited, these traits in societies. How would you react to that? Okay. (Vocalised voice 07:23 to 09:27)

Okay. But, let us tackle one question by, one by one. The first question, that well, your claim is that well, fundamental question being is, what do the rich owe to the poor. Okay. Let us have that, so that, our focus remains on that.

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The first question, that I would read in as, what Singer asks, that well, what do the reach owe to the poor. Now, one view is, that well, this notion of owe is, actually a notion of a repayment. Because, somehow, the affluence has accumulated, by starving certain regions of the world. And therefore, it is not a moral owing, but actually almost a legal owing. Because, the affluent have cornered in, more of the resources, than the less affluent.

This is one way of perceiving the world, that where resources are finite. Right. Because, this is in fact, almost the border of on economic thinking. That, there are two ways of perceiving the economy. One is that, the world has a fixed resource economy. And, it is only a game of distributing the resources, from one region to the other. The other way is that, resources or goods can be generated.

So, it is not that, the net wealth of the world, remains the same, and it is distributed. But, anyone exhibiting on entrepreneurship, and knowledge, skills, and traits, that are valued, generates resources, and therefore generates the affluence. So, we have had one view, would you agree with it, or you. (Vocalised voice 11:32 to 11:53) but, why should one, or the affluent, think of the welfare of the society. (Vocalised voice 11:59 to 12:16)

What is the basis of that responsibility? Because, one view is that, the basis of that responsibility is because, the affluence has come from starved regions. But, what if, we hold a worldview, that well, everyone has generated their own affluence roughly. And therefore, there is no legal owing in that manner. What is the basis of the moral owe? (Vocalised voice 12:40 to 12:50) but, what is the basis of that should. Because, what do you hold, that the world order has fixed in the resources, which is distributed, or we generate our own resources.

(Vocalised voice 13:01 to 13:22) or that, you have become rich, at the co-expense of somebody else. (Vocalised voice 13:27 to 13:38) True. True. But, what first question, we are dealing with, is that, how did a nation, or a culture, or a country, become wealthy. They did become by stealing, or starving another region of the world. Or, wealth can be created, independent of a relative poverty. The second one, interesting. We have two parallel views, here. That of course, we need to engage with, each of these views.

Because, this will determine, whether this rich owe to the poor, is either a legal owing, or a moral owing. Okay. (Vocalised voice 14:16 to 14:41) Alright. Okay. If you take a look at the slide right now, that it basically describes a situation, that is on. That well, that particular time, which was that, an individual level, people have not responded in the magnitude required. There were some exceptions of course. At the governmental level, assistance has not come, to the massive levels required for sustained assistance.

And, a comparison, of the expenditure of the governments, and that is taken as the indicator of the, reflection about their policies. So, if you remember the example of the concord that, how the British government spends more on the development of a supersonic jet, than the alleviation of suffering. So, these were the relative standards given.

But, the general questions, that are raised as I see, is that well, there is almost a perpetual situation of the world, where there is suffering and affluence coexisting, with not enough transfer of resources taking place. So, there is suffering, and there is affluence. Both existing at the same time, in the same world. But, enough transfer of resources, not taking place. That is the prick, that has made Singer, right almost at article, in a very aggressive tone.

And, targeted not just to philosophical audience, but to the world at large. And, the relatively well resourced prioritize the utilisation of their resources. And, Singer finds fault with this prioritization, both at the individual and the collective level. So, those who are relatively well resourced, they find a problem. Let us have the slide on. Yes. They find fault with this prioritization, both at the. (Vocalised voice 16:28 to 16:52)

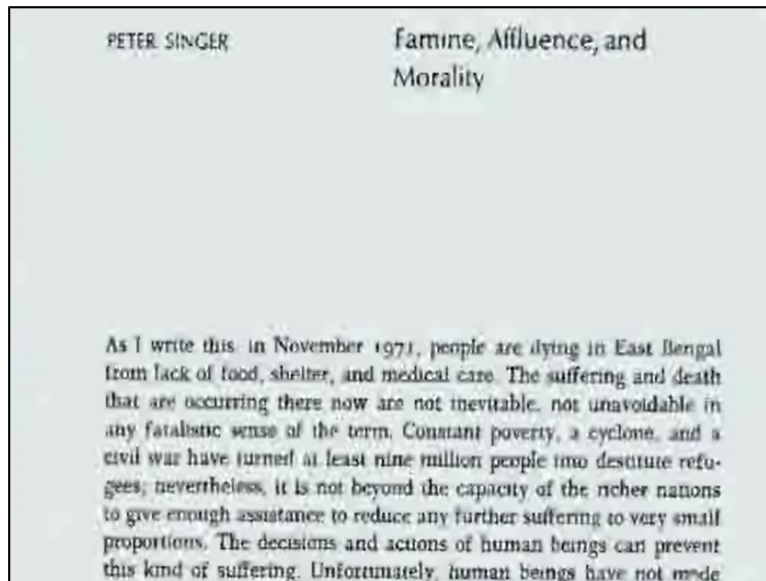
Yes. But when they are talking about the situation of the world, so as a world order, as a world community, as a citizen of the world, you have pockets of affluence, pockets of scarcity. And perhaps, the situation has not changed, since the time of recorded history. There has always been, almost an extreme existing. So this difference, so even for prosperous first world country, there is also a, food starved third world country.

So, that is what, Singer wants us to reflect that, why is it not triggering the kind of reaction, it should trigger. What he expects to trigger, that well. There is affluence. And, you value your supersonic jet, more than the alleviation of poverty. That is where, the question arises. So, well, first question, what do the rich owe to the poor. We can find, well, two strains of answers. That, one that they legally owe. And, another is that, they owe on human grounds.

Because, they share a common humanity. And, it is because, our fundamental nature, to be touched by, the suffering of the other. By catharsis, or by whatever means, that we ought to be concerned. Because, if you notice, well, Singer starts his article by saying that, suffering is an evil. And, those who disagree with it, he does not even engage with that.

So, in fact, he takes a very rigid, applied, or in the world tone, in this article. He does not enter,

or he closes the possibility of discussing about, any esoterical or metaphysical claims about, why the other world, or how starving or death, is not really an evil. And, there have been many



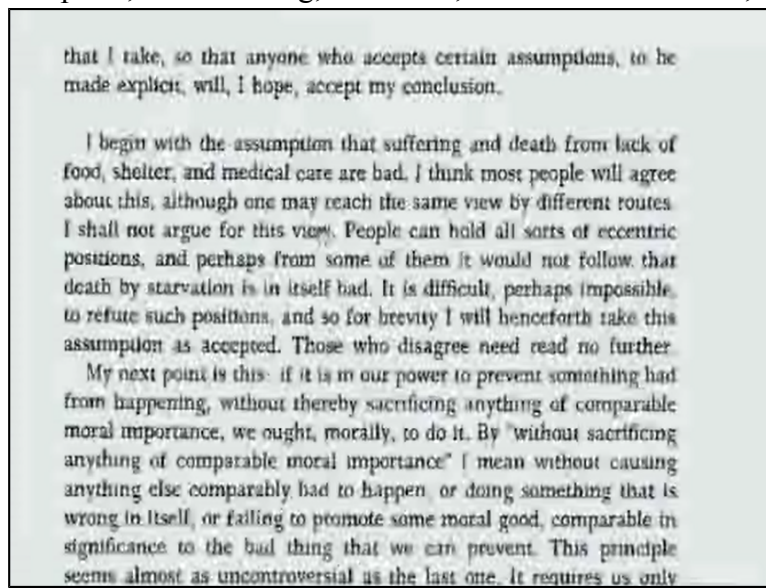
philosophical views about it. This clearly rules it out of, this one of the article.

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So, when he talks about, this fundamental assumption that, I begin with the assumption, that suffering and death, from the lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad. So, this is, I think most people will agree. And, he does not bring this into a, contextual view. But, as a Philosophy student, what do you think, if you want to contest the claim over here. What would you like to possible reason at all? What would you read into it?

(Vocalised voice 19:30 to 19:46) yes. But, we are just questioning this assumption. That, for the sake of questioning that, what reads on the first line of the paragraph, starting in this page is that, I begin with the assumption, that suffering, and death, from the lack of food, shelter, and medical



care, are bad. (Vocalised voice 20:04 to 20:11) well. About the generic assumption that, suffering and death from, lack of food, shelter, and medical care, are bad.

Is that a bad? That is a moral claim, that these are bad. (Vocalised voice 20:26 to 20:49) yes. They are obligated. But, I am asking that, if somebody wants to question this assumption. Or, how do you debate this assumption. How do you problematize it? I think. What is he denying? (Vocalised voice 21:02 to 21:10) he is saying that, suffering and death are bad. (Vocalised voice 21:13 to 21:36) okay. (Vocalised voice 21:37 to 22:00)

What is per say wrong with, suffering and death coming from this. Well. Okay. Let me just briefly put that, what he is perhaps, and what I can read that he is denying, is that, he engages in no talk about fatalism. That, when fatalism claims, that well, and esoteric theories, that well, we all go through a necessary. Because, all religions, I would read a very antireligious view, in this claim that he is making. That well, all suffering, that we encounter, are not sufferings that we deserve.

And, death is not a liberation from that suffering. So, he keeps the, entire box of such esoteric, metaphysical, or religious claims, out of the situation. He takes, life as finite. And, he takes human actions, that can make a difference. So, I would read into this, as a complete denial of fatalism. That, if there is suffering and death, from the lack of food, and shelter, and medical care. They are bad, because they are preventable. And, they are not the result of my previous or earlier actions. And, they are not definitely, not a test for me to overcome. (Vocalised voice 23:08 to 23:16)

The standpoint, does Singer mentions. (Vocalised voice 23:18 to 23:19) Yes. Yes. It is to be welcomed. I am just saying, what by refusing to argue, which line does he stop arguing. So, if you read, he does not deny, that there will be any problems with this assumption. But, he does not find it, worthwhile. So, I want to bring to light, what are these possible problems. So perhaps, most of us would not agree with it. But, there can be exceptions. And, these are the kind of exceptions, that come out to be. Okay.

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## Assumptions

- suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.
- 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.
- The above principle is crucial, apparently appealing but implying great changes, if applied.
  - Proximity, (both in spatial or relational terms) from the event becomes immaterial
  - The actions (assumed or actual) of others, 'similarly placed' ought not to make a difference to one's actions

(Vocalised voice 23:48 to 24:06) Okay. Now, if it is, two ways of looking at it. First is the suffering, the effect of a prior cause, one. And, second is, human free will granted. So because, if human free will is granted, then one can try to alleviate sufferings. But, on the other hand, if human free will is not granted, then it is almost a completely fatalistic order, where suffering is inevitable. And, it is the result of prior actions.

I can see a very strong critic of, Indian religious views that occur, which say that well, whatever is happening, is a result of your past actions. So one is critic ((action)) (24:50). And second, a tragedy, or famine, affluence, and natural disasters, and man-made problems, why do they occur in certain part of the worlds, and not in the other part of the world. Why is the basis of affluence, is not chance? The basis of affluence is effort.

So, it is a very positivistic reading of the world order. That well, implicitly, if I read into it, is that, the world order, the way it is, the division between affluence and poverty, is not random. It is a result of human action. And thereof, so just as fatalism, there is bad fate, there it can be good fate. So, it is either way. So, what the resources have, the prosperous, have implicitly comes from their own efforts. And, the tragedies that are faced, are also to be sorted by, the world community at large. Okay. So, let us, yeah.

(Vocalised voice 25:56 to 26:30) yes. (Vocalised voice 26:31 to 27:23) one being natural

resources. And, what would you like to term the other. Wealth. Okay. Well. Of course, Singer does not make any exclusive claim about it. But, if I am to read into it, well, he is perhaps not making, such a clear distinction. He is in fact, finding one leading to the other. So perhaps, natural resources and wealth are tied up. But, then perhaps, that is from my reading of Peter's, or Singers, or others works

From this particular work, I think, we cannot draw any claim about, what he is trying to put forth. (Vocalised voice 28:06 to 28:54) okay. (Vocalised voice 28:55 to 29:00) okay. But of course, there are exceptions, where affluence has been attained over places and cultures, which are very scarcely blessed with natural resources.

So, that can of course be seen, that this continues. But, in certain cases, and certain places, blessed with natural resources, are still not affluent enough. But anyway, I think for the purpose of this article, because he makes no implicit claim about it in this article, we can let it be for the time being, and get into, what problematic claims are made in this article.

So, if you take a look at this slide, about assumptions, well, the first one, we just talked about. And, we seem to be, very intuitively binding claims. But, let us see, how and why, these are binding, or why do then not translate into action. So, if you look at the second assumption, that is listed, that well, 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.

This is a clearly a, absolutely a, utilitarian claim. That well, if we can prevent something, in fact prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance. So, there is a kind of a moral calculus here. I give you some time, to go through it. (Vocalised voice 30:46 to 31:02) yes, also a mild version of the state of affairs. (Vocalised voice 31:06 to 31:12)

Yes. (Vocalised voice 31:13 to 31:30) okay. Can we proceed. Okay. Right. So, well. What is the problem here? The problem, when you see Singer makes this claim, that well, this seems to be very intuitively obvious. And probably, most of us would agree to it. But, why this supposedly

obvious claim, does not bring in actions. When we talk about, that well, 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.

So, this is the moral calculus, that the utilitarian talks about that, if you weigh the positive good, that the goods that come out of a decision. And, if it outweighs the suffering or evil, that comes out of it, that you choose an action, that brings about overall happiness over suffering. So, that is the generic principle of which, this is a version, where it talks about, preventing something bad from happening, instead of generating happiness.

So, when Singer says, that well, to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything. So, this is where, the moral calculus is. Because, when you are transferring resources, there is a scarcity, that you are voluntarily embracing. And that, anything should be of comparable moral importance. And therefore, we ought morally to do it. This is perhaps, the principle that he talks about initially.

Now, would we find any, that this principle again appeals, but it implies great changes, if applied. So, what are these changes. First, these changes are changes of proximity. That, the factor of proximity. That, if a suffering takes place, both physically close to me, or to a person closely related to me, then it should not make a difference, in my judgement. So, my proximity to a person, or the suffering, whether it is spatial proximity, or relational proximity, will not make a difference on my effort, or on an individual or an agent's effort, to alleviate that suffering.

Now, let us look at this first, little consequence of a very almost an obvious principle, that proximity is irrelevant. How irrelevant is proximity. Now, there are various examples, if you look into the world out there. Let us say, beggars. Now, if a beggar comes to you, and asks for alms. Depending on the state of the beggar, he gets, or does not get the alms, or whatever you decide to do. Now, you know that, there is a similar scarcity and problems, in other parts of the world, or other parts of the place, you live in.

But perhaps, most of us do not make an active effort, to contribute. Now, let us have the slide,

please. If we agree at the principle, that Singer is putting forth, why do we find that, in application, proximity should not matter, but perhaps does matter. That is how, views on this, proximity. For anything, that how much you would support for, suffering family member, and to a stranger.

Is there some error in the principle? Or, is there something, which the hidden component of the principle, that is not palatable with the way human beings work? (Vocalised voice 35:10 to 36:16) so perhaps, human decision-making, does a factor in proximity. But, should it. Yes. But, that is the whole question. That well, in the same city or town, you have very affluent pockets, and we have a very poor pockets.

So, penury and affluence, simultaneously existing, and no matter, how much distance there be. So, when you talk about neutrality, what Singer is asking is that, there should be absolute neutrality. So, you are neutral to the sufferings of, not only people proximate, or places proximate to you, but also places, which are far away, both spatially and relationally to you. So, why does the common attitude, that well, a suffering in my region, I will contribute more, and a suffering somewhere else in the world, perhaps I will contribute less, if not nothing.

(Vocalised voice 37:09 to 37:34) So, would Singer call that, moral or immoral. (Vocalised voice 37:38 to 37:39) he would call it, amoral. Yes. Yes. Go ahead. (Vocalised voice 37:43 to 38:11) who is proximate to us. (Vocalised voice 38:14 to 39:11) okay. So in fact, I see this as, Singers paradigmatic following of the Kantian paradigm, that where neutrality even to the point that, you hold a known person, at par with an unknown person. And, you just value the suffering, that is to be elevated, and not whose suffering.

So that. (Vocalised voice 39:38 to 40:14) that is correct. Okay. That is an interesting observation brought about. That well, the principle may appeal to us rationally. But, being psychological animals, proximity cannot be underestimated. So, we are bound to have a neutrality, is almost a mechanistic notion. Whereas, we are psychological beings, and proximity does matter to us.

In fact, if you look at the entire domain, of seeking charity, and campaigning for charity, we try

to put hard-hitting images, that will elicit some response from the viewer. Whereas, text describing the detail of the situation, will not elicit that kind of a response. So, we put in hard-hitting images, that will bring about, or elicit in that some kind of a psychological connect, with the potential donor to bring out a donation.

So here, Singer is not taking into account, the psychological characters, or tendencies. (Vocalised voice 41:20 to 42:19) okay. Interesting. That is in fact, a powerful trend in explaining human behaviour by the biology, we are based on. So, even evolutionary Ethics for that matter, survival Ethics, all tend to seek a biological explanation, for our behaviour. But, that is interesting. For the year spent together, will that not nullify our neutrality for a person, with whom we have spent years together, or known for a long time, versus a person, whom we do not know.

So, rationally we want to be people, who alleviate suffering, depending on the quantum of suffering. But psychologically, we value, or we are more concerned, or a hurt by suffering of proximate people, than people whom we are not approximate with. An essential factor, that perhaps Singer is not of course, may be aware of, but is missing out in, what is the claim of this article.

But perhaps, Singers answer to this would be that, this is exactly what we need to overcome, if you want to have better world order. So, anything more on proximity, that you would like to add. (Vocalised voice 43:37 to 44:12) okay. That, yes. That, if we over affluence to others, and therefore, we over support in the times of need, then it is. (Vocalised voice 44:25 to 44:29)

Yes. Connected or not, and that further nullifies, makes it almost a legal requirement. Yes, that it makes. It need not even, go to the level of the moral call. But, it goes to the level of a simple quid pro quo legal call. That well, it is like an employer looking into the, health benefits of an employee. Would you like to see that as? (Vocalised voice 44:55 to 45:53) okay. (Vocalised voice 45:54 to 45:57)

It is not simply legal. Okay. It also has a pervading moral basis. But, it is not restricted to, being a moral call only. Okay. It is to be legal also. You would like to opine. (Vocalised voice 46:09 to

46:42) the world as one community. (Vocalised voice 46:44 to 46:47) okay. Interesting. Because, this also raises the whole question of, why do governments give aids? Why do world bodies give aids?

So, there is, so much of world aid taking place. Now, there have been, various readings of, why should any country, or government, or collective, aid another. So, it can be both, at the level of nations. It can be at the level of societies, at families, at individuals, at country level, why does one assist the other. (Vocalised voice 47:18 to 47:25) so, does its call come from, we being the citizens of common world, or perhaps it comes from common human nature, or it comes from in the sense of owing. (Vocalised voice 47:41 to 48:27)

In fact, not just society. Well. He would be calling, well, humanity, per say. Because, if you look at the second, little implication that comes from Singers principle, that the actions assumed are actual of others, similarly placed, ought not to make a difference to one's actions. So, that is again, a call for impersonal or neutrality, that well, if there is a problem. And, the example that he talks about, suppose there is a child, drowning in a pond.

Now, if you are the only one passing through, that increase your obligation, when compared to various people, passing by the pond. You have the same. But again, what would you opine on it. That, according to Singer, that this other similarly placed, should not affect your decision making. So, as Modern Behavioural Economist, would to try to bring forth that, what you choose, is essentially influenced by, how many people are there around you, and how many people, what choices they make, and that crucial influences you.

So, Singer's demand, that well, there is something, that we negate the others around us, in making a choice. Is it, almost an inhuman claim. (Vocalised voice 49:50 to 50:16) okay. (Vocalised voice 50:17 to 50:45) yes, keep going. (Vocalised voice 50:47 to 51:18) so, continuing factor should not play a role. (Vocalised voice 51:24 to 52:25) okay. Okay. So, the very claim, that he makes is that, numbers lessen obligation. I think, that is how, he puts it over here. That, do numbers, actually lessen obligation. (Vocalised voice 52:38 to 52:58)

Or, whatever problem, there is. (Vocalised voice 53:00 to 53:05) okay. (Vocalised voice 53:05 to 53:14) okay **“Professor - Student conversation ends”**