Facts, Theories, and Hard Choices

REPLY TO PETER SINGER

Andrew Kuper

The main thrust of my argument was that ad hoc suggestions of charity cannot replace a systematic and theoretically informed approach to poverty relief. Charitable donation sometimes helps—and sometimes harms—but is no general solution to global poverty, and can be positively dangerous when presented as such. We need to consider, and often choose, other routes to helping the poor—including ethical tourism and fair trade in luxury goods. We will not be able to invest in such feasible routes if we give away all our extra income, as Singer recommends. Sticking to donation above all, when a combination of other strategies is necessary, is highly likely to harm the poor.

Singer doesn't really engage my argument. Instead, he caricatures our "fundamental disagreement":apparently, Singer rejects various policies because he takes into account the "facts"; whereas Kuper is the one seeking a "faith," a "political philosophy. . . immune to refutation on the basis of evidence." Anyone who has read my article (pp. 107-20) must find this puzzling. The article explains at length which kinds of background theories help us to discern and responsibly consider the relevant facts. I show that Singer selects and uses facts uncritically precisely because he has no political economy, no political sociology, and no theory of justice. We are seriously misled if we do not draw adequately on the wisdom and tools of these bodies of knowledge. Some facts are just the tip of the iceberg.

Take any one of his examples: He tells us that a $17 donation from you or me will save the lives of children who suffer from the six leading child-killing and maiming diseases. In light of this "fact," Singer thinks it wrong to express concern about throwing money at the problem of poverty. But is donation really a general solution? If brute amounts of money were the issue, the World Bank or United Nations could stop the awful yearly deaths of 11 million children tomorrow. After all, $187 million is a small sum by World Bank and UN standards. The Bank and UN must be foolish or evil if saving children is so easy. Alas, the problem of poverty is just more complicated than that.

Children starve, suffer, and die because of political and economic arrangements. Above all,they starve, suffer, and die because of the unaccountability of people with the power to rule, exploit,and exclude the poor. This has been demonstrated time after time by luminaries of genuine poverty relief such as Amartya Sen, who happens to be the president of Oxfam. Sen insists that unless attention is paid to transforming these deep institutional factors, aid agencies will have only limited victories in a losing battle against the sources of poverty. It is for these reasons that I wrote, "We need NGOs, but we need good government and better mar-

kets even more. This is a direct result of our interest in sustainability."

One can't help asking why Singer knows better. I can find only one, very limited argument in his response to my article that might defend his contrary position:

> There are, however, some very poor people who cannot be helped through fair trading. Rural villagers may live too far from transport to get their goods to international markets, or they may lack the raw materials to produce goods that anyone in rich nations wants to buy. It is therefore my belief that generally the donation will do more good than the purchase of goods of equivalent value.

Singer doesn't ask why these rural people are excluded from the economy; he just takes it as a fact. Yet building roads and transport networks is a paradigmatically political decision. And when a government decides to assist some producers but not others, it is strongly influenced by the relative political power and economic clout of those groups. So "fair trading" isn't just about existing producers, it also requires a concerted push to level the playing field and include all in the game. NGOs like Oxfam have an important role, but they lack the ongoing capacity to build roads, generate large-scale growth, and regulate markets—and they suffer intrinsic problems of accountability. We can't just "leave it to Oxfam." So we need institutional reform above all: through activism, through consumption and production decisions, and yes, sometimes through donation to NGOs. Which of these strategies is most effective in various contexts is not determined merely by noble intentions or high emotion. It is determined by careful analysis—underpinned by rich and responsible political theories—of what actually works.

From this perspective, we can immediately see the basic logical flaw in Singer's argument: He claims "X may be better than Y depending on Z factors (donation X may be better than fair trade Y depending upon a lack of transport, and so forth)," but then immediately concludes "X is therefore generally better than Y." He has said almost nothing about these factors and their underlying causes. Are the factors prevalent, persistent, and the main sources of poverty in most contexts? Why, for instance, does Singer assume that charity is generally best for those masses of the urban poor who are part (often an exploited part) of the world economy? Again, I am not against charity in all instances. But to answer these questions, we need not brute assertion of facts, nor vain hopes—reiterated by Singer in his Response—that no counterevidence will be presented. We need deeper theories that promote thorough empirical analysis, leading to strategies that deal in complexity rather than denial.

Finally, Singer asks why I am directing criticism at him,since we both want change. The answer is that his individualist language of selfishness versus sacrifice, and his rigid refusal to seriously explore alternatives other than charity, weaken our realistic case for reform. It would be far better if he focused on how to create political and economic institutions that include the poor in the ongoing benefits of social cooperation. Singer is an eloquent and influential advocate. I will not give up hope of provoking him to think more about sustainable poverty relief, about how we can move reliably from high principle to effective action.