Short Essay

Singer’s *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* proposes the claim that since those reading his paper are affluent enough to be able to sacrifice money to those who are suffering in Bengal (due to lack of shelter, food, and medical care), they have a moral obligation to do so—up until they were to sacrifice anything morally significant. The reasoning is that if everyone gave £5 the problem would essentially disappear. However, not everyone does give money and because of that others tend to give more than the £5.

The main problem with Singer’s argument from many intellectuals is his use of the word obligation. Many feel like if they are obligated to do something then they are required to do whatever they are obligated to do—which is a perfectly reasonable claim because obligation and requirement are definitionally similar. They feel that using this language while also saying that some do not give money is disingenuous; therefore, his claim is false because he provides his own counterexample to the perceived obligation. This argument however does not consider the meaning behind his use of the term “moral obligation”. Singer uses moral obligation to say that one ought to give money to charity rather than to go out and buy new clothes. He argues that it is the difference between duty and charity (similar to an argument against the utilitarian) which make his claim stand. An obligation is a duty to act in a certain way, in this case to contribute money to a relief fund. Then it would follow that many are presently neglecting their moral duty to help others.

This counterargument is correct in some of its points and false in others. Saying that the obligation to give money to a charity is your duty and you should not be commended for your generosity, as Singer puts it, is partially correct. It is correct in the claims it puts forth; however, it is not true in the premise from which it stems. The premise which supports this claim is that we have a moral
obligation to give to charity up until we sacrifice anything morally significant. This premise can be split into two halves to better understand the argument. The first being we have a moral obligation to give money to charity; the second being that we should give up until we sacrifice anything morally significant. I would agree with Singer that this first part of his premise is true. However, I would not concede that the second has any bearing on how humans perceive their own morality. If one were told that they must give all their money to a charity up until they would be impoverished themselves, they would completely dismiss the idea (as they ought to even according to Singers weaker statement). The problem that humans have with any talk of obligation at all, is that humans do not like being told what they must do—unless it is by their own free choice, meaning if they make a requirement for themselves to do something. Human agency is a peculiar thing. Being compelled to do a certain thing is just to be convinced that it is the one being compelled’s own thought. Singer’s argument thus uses the least true form of argument as long as human agency of choice is taken into account. Such that one giving money to charity is their own decision and the choice to do so is completely free.