

Health, Development & Human Rights

Limits of Obligation?

As you read the material for our next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.

Reading

- James S. Fishkin, “The Zone of Indifference” and “The Famine Relief Argument”.

Questions

1. Explain the three basic assumptions (given at the top of page 24) that James Fishkin will assume throughout his essay. What reasons does he give in favor of the third assumption, the “robust zone of indifference”?
2. What problem of accumulation does Fishkin see with the “Singer solution” to world poverty, even when only assuming the correctness of Singer’s “weaker” premise (and not Singer’s “stronger” one)?
3. What is the difference between strict and weak consequentialism? Why does strict consequentialism have a problem in understanding limits of obligation that the weak version does not?
4. In the end, Fishkin admits that he does not have a “defensible solution” to the problem he has found for the principle of minimal altruism. Do you agree that there is no solution? If it has no solution, what does this mean for addressing world poverty?