

SINGER'S SHALLOW POND THOUGHT EXPERIMENT AND VIRTUE ETHICS

ABSTRACT

Peter Singer's shallow pond thought experiment is often used to argue that we have a moral obligation to provide aid to others, regardless of factors such as proximity and number of bystanders. Critics claim that Singer's thought experiment fails to capture key features of global poverty and should thus not be applied to analyses of global justice. I argue that this use of the shallow pond thought experiment can be maintained only if we reconsider the thought experiment as entailing a virtue ethics principle of moral obligation. I support this conclusion by introducing a modified 'never-ending' shallow pond thought experiment.

JACK RAGAN

I. INTRODUCTION

Peter Singer's 1972 article *Famine, Affluence and Morality* is seen as being of significant importance in the field of global justice, contributing to discussions on poverty, global aid, and morality.¹ In the article, Singer develops following the shallow pond thought experiment:

On your way to work, you pass a small pond. On hot days, children sometimes play in the pond, which is only about knee deep. The weather's cool today, though, and the hour is early, so you are surprised to see a child splashing about in the pond. As you get closer, you see that it is a very young child, just a toddler, who is flailing about, unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond. You look for the parents or babysitter, but there is no one else around. The child is unable to keep his head above the water for more than a few seconds at a time. If you don't wade in and pull him out, he seems likely to drown. Wading in is easy and safe, but you will ruin the new shoes you bought only a few days ago and get your suit wet and muddy.²

Singer uses the shallow pond thought experiment to argue that in certain cases we have a moral obligation to act and provide aid to others, and this moral action should not be confined by factors such as proximity and number of bystanders.³ The shallow pond thought experiment is generally interpreted by both critics and proponents of Singer's work as an argument for a utilitarian solution to global poverty and issues of global justice.⁴

In this paper, I argue that Singer's shallow pond thought experiment is best interpreted as an argument for a virtue ethics solution to global poverty and issues of global justice. To support my thesis, I will first provide a modified version of Singer's shallow pond thought experiment, with the modifications providing reasons as to why we should interpret the thought experiment as arguing for virtue ethics. Secondly, I will discuss the theoretical implications of interpreting the shallow pond thought experiment as an argument for virtue ethics, as well as how this interpretation better reflects the cyclical nature of poverty. I will address how it provides a more practical solution to the bystander effect which commonly arises in global aid and crisis

1 Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 231-233, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2265052>.

2 Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save* (Random House, 2009), 3.

3 Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," 231-33.

4 Andrew Kuper, "More Than Charity: Cosmopolitan Alternatives to the Singer Solution," *Ethics and International Affairs* 16, no. 1 (2002): 109.



resolution efforts.⁵ Accordingly, I argue that the principle developed through my modified shallow pond thought experiment, if implemented, would result in greater helping behaviors compared to Singer's original principle, since my principle better reflects the global material conditions (e.g., severity and nature of global injustices) and relevant social relations and phenomena (e.g., the bystander effect) that fail to be captured by Singer's shallow pond thought experiment.⁶ To support this line of reasoning I will draw upon psychological and philosophical research in the field of applied ethics.

II. SINGER'S SHALLOW POND THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Before presenting a modified shallow pond thought experiment it is important to better understand the common interpretations of the original shallow pond thought experiment. Singer interprets the shallow pond thought experiment as presenting a utilitarian argument or principle: that we have a moral obligation to help others, or prevent something bad from happening, so long as we are not sacrificing something of comparable moral importance.⁷ In the context of global poverty, this means that the drowning child represents the global poor and the shallow pond represents the negative and potentially deadly impacts of poverty. Singer argues that we are morally obligated to save the life of the child or provide aid to the poor so long as we are not sacrificing something of comparable moral importance. In the case of the thought experiment, this means dirtying our clothes and, in the case of global poverty, donating a small amount of money to provide famine relief.⁸ While Singer's article focuses on other mod-

5 Johnathan Wolff, "Poverty," *Philosophy Compass* 14, no. 12 (2019): 4–5; Jon Mills, "The Global Bystander Effect: Moral Responsibility in Our Age of Ecological Crisis," *Journal of Future Studies* 25, no. 2 (2020): 67–68; Eliezer Yudkowsky, "Cognitive Biases Potentially Affecting Judgement of Global Risks," in *Global Catastrophic Risks*, ed. Nick Bostrom and Milan M. Ćirković (Oxford University Press, 2011), 110–12.

6 Emiliano Barrera et al., "Examining COVID-19 mortality inequalities across 169 countries: Insights from the COVID-19 mortality inequality curve (CMIC) and Theil index analysis," *Healthy Policy* 157 (2025): 5; United Nations Development Programme, "2021/22 Human Development Report," United Nations Development Programme, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://report.hdr.undp.org/intro>. Although global wealth inequality is decreasing, events like the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate that this perceived increase in equality of wealth and income is neither fixed, nor necessarily correlated with well-being. Furthermore, although income inequality between countries is improving, the income equality within countries is worsening.

7 Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," 231.

8 Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," 235.

erators to moral obligations like proximity and number of bystanders, the shallow pond, experiment, as interpreted by Singer, primarily provides an argument for a utilitarian principle which serves to guide ethical decision making.⁹

Many of Singer's critics agree with the philosophical implications of the thought experiment, with much of the criticism of the shallow pond thought experiment being politically oriented. Critics argue that shallow pond thought experiment fails to provide a complete picture of the systemic and structural causes of global poverty, arguing that the shallow pond thought experiment oversimplifies global poverty and creates a white or western savior narrative.¹⁰ While there are a number of ways to understand the distinction between western savior and grassroots movements, in this paper I will employ the following two-fold distinction: Firstly, there is an epistemic difference between western savior movements and grassroots movements. Western savior movements employ a 'top-down,' expert-driven approach, which seeks to reinforce, either directly or indirectly, dominant and oppressive structures and narratives while failing to take into account the diverse epistemologies and standpoints of the very groups and individuals they are attempting to aid.¹¹ Conversely, grassroots movements do seek to overcome these dominant and oppressive structures and narratives by involving the local communities and groups which they are attempting to aid through a 'bottom-up' approach, thus ensuring that diverse ways of knowing and unique lived experiences are given 'deference' or epistemic and normative authority.¹² Secondly, and arising from this previous distinction, western savior movements differ from grassroots movements in their practical effectiveness. Western savior movements fail to interrogate or dismantle oppressive structures and systems; thereby, they are unable to create long-term change. Conversely, grassroots movements are able to create long-term change through their involving the unique standpoints of local communities, groups

9 Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," 240–41.

10 Scott Wisor, "Against shallow ponds: an argument against Singer's approach to global poverty," *Journal of Global Ethics* 7, no. 1 (2011): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2010.548819>.

11 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South* (Routledge: 2014), viii–x.

12 Ann Hill, Justin See and The Grassroots Collective, "Grassroots modalities of learning: creating and maintaining pluriversal knowing, being and doing for collective survival," *The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability* 30, no. 7 (2025): 831–34; Laurence Thomas, "Moral Deference," in *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate*, ed. Cynthia Willett (Blackwell, 1998), 372–78.



and individuals, as evidenced by the success of a number of grassroots movements.¹³

If we are to interpret the shallow pond thought experiment exactly as Singer has, these issues become evident. In the thought experiment, the western individual, who is positioned to provide aid to the global poor, is depicted as the sole agent capable of providing aid to the drowning child. The global poor are depicted as small children, unable to lift themselves out of poverty.¹⁴ In response to these criticisms, philosophers like Monique Deveaux provide competing models for addressing poverty, with Deveaux valuing grassroots movements and input from the global poor in order to shape solutions to global poverty.¹⁵ Singer's shallow pond, as well as much of *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*, ignores these criticisms of Singer's approach to poverty and solutions to global poverty as being grounded in a western savior narrative and a 'top-down' approach, rather than a grassroots 'bottom-up' approach.

However, it is important to contextualize the shallow pond thought experiment as being focused on developing an ethical principle, which can then be applied to political issues. While there are many grounds for political objections to Singer's shallow pond, it is important to remember that ethical claims, specifically that of having an obligation to prevent harm if we can do so by sacrificing something of lesser moral importance, are what grounds Singer's political thinking in *Famine, Affluence and Morality*.¹⁶ Therefore, if we object to the political implications of the shallow pond argument, we also object to some of the ethical claims which ground the argument. In order to refute the political implications of Singer's shallow pond we must provide objections to the original and grounding ethical claim. When critics object to the depictions of poverty and the savior narrative present in *Famine, Affluence and Morality*, they are, at a fundamental level, objecting to the utilitarian philosophy of Singer, which is not concerned with these wholistic accounts of poverty, aiming solely to provide guiding principles which describe our moral duties to maximize the good generated by our actions.¹⁷ The inability of utilitarianism to provide complete accounts of moral decision making and

its political context is present in the shallow pond argument.¹⁸ In the following section, I argue that the shallow pond thought experiment should be interpreted as providing a virtue ethics principle to guide moral decision making, which better reflects the political and cultural agency of the global poor.

III. THE NEVER-ENDING SHALLOW POND THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

The primary philosophical objection to Singer's shallow pond is that it presents a moral duty to aid in a situation which consists of a singular interaction or problem, with only one child drowning who must be saved.¹⁹ Many individuals would be quick to save this child, or in the case of global aid, donate five dollars to the global poor, if it meant no further action was required. However, when discussing global poverty, we must remember that there are hundreds of millions of people who require aid; therefore, it is useful to revise the shallow pond thought experiment with the modified never-ending shallow pond thought experiment:

You save the child in the original shallow pond thought experiment and continue on your walk to work. Several minutes later, you pass a second pond in which another child is drowning. Unfortunately, there are several hundred million ponds on your walk to work, all with children drowning who require your assistance. Furthermore, once you reach the end of the hundreds of millions of ponds with drowning children, there are several billion ponds filled with children, who are not drowning, yet are unable to climb out of the pond and are stuck, in an uncomfortable, and miserable state.

This never-ending shallow pond thought experiment provides a more complete and accurate account of issues of global justice. It demonstrates the complexity of global aid and poverty, reflecting the reality of the several hundreds of millions of people suffering from immediate danger due to famine, disease and war.²⁰ Furthermore, as the thought experiment suggests, even if we save all of these individuals "drowning in ponds" through global aid efforts, there are still billions suffering

13 Herdi Sahrasad, Al Chaidar, and Maksum Syam, "A reflection on a peripheral movement; The "Save Aru" social movement 2013-2015 from a historical perspective," *Wacana* 20, no. 3 (2019): 560-82.

14 Wisor, "Against shallow ponds," 21.

15 Monique Deveaux, "Philosophical Misframings of Poverty," in *Poverty, Solidarity, and Poor-Led Social Movements* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 56-57.

16 Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," 239.

17 Deveaux, "Philosophical Misframings of Poverty," 56.

18 Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Consequentialism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, October 4, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism/>.

19 Travis Timmerman, "Sometimes there is nothing wrong with letting a child drown," *Analysis* 75, no. 2 (2015): 208, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24671242>.

20 United Nations, "Human Development Report."



from complex problems, reducing their quality of life.²¹

Intuitively, we cannot expect one individual to spend their entire life saving children from ponds. While it seems reasonable to save a few children and continue on our way, Singer's principle suggests that we should continue saving children until we die. The only thing which holds greater moral significance than a life is another life. Once we consider that we could sacrifice our time by spending it saving children from ponds, it becomes difficult to assert that we are giving up something of comparable moral significance compared to the many thousands of lives that could be saved.²² In the case of the never-ending shallow pond thought experiment, Singer's stringent utilitarian principle can be reduced to an absurd demand.

Ultimately, we want our moral principles to, in some way, reflect our moral intuitions.²³ That is not to say we should ground moral arguments on intuition. Rather, the demands of Singer's original principle violate our moral intuitions in such a way that it reduces the principal's utility and legitimacy. If Singer's argument aims to demonstrate our moral obligations to provide aid to the global poor, there are other approaches that satisfy this demand, while providing a principle that is less stringent and takes into account the previously discussed political objections to the original shallow pond thought experiment.

The never-ending thought experiments provide evidence for a virtue ethics principle, describing our moral obligations in regard to global aid. This principle can be formulated as such: We have a moral obligation to help others so long as it is in a virtuous manner. Virtue ethics often discusses virtue as a matter of degree, with virtuous behavior or action being the mean between excessively "good" and "bad" behavior and action.²⁴ In the case of the never-ending shallow pond thought experiment, it would be morally impermissible to pass by all the drowning children leaving them to die. However, it seems that one would be displaying an excess of virtue by spending their entire lives dedicated to saving the drowning children, when they could instead address the root causes of the problem, by teaching children to swim or providing barriers around the ponds. These solutions would address the problem of drowning children in a more meaningful way and, if implemented correctly, would likely save more children than

if one were to simply continue lifting them out of ponds. Ultimately, this approach would allow the virtuous individuals to, at a certain point, stop directly helping the never-ending succession of drowning children but still demand that we have a moral obligation to help in some way aside from immediate aid.

In the context of the never-ending shallow pond thought experiment, the virtue ethics principle does not seem to be as demanding as Singer's principle, aside from some amount of helping behavior. I would like to briefly acknowledge a possible objection that arises from the flexibility of the virtue ethics principle. Proponents of the utilitarian principle, including Singer, may argue that by not specifying when exactly we are no longer required to provide aid to the drowning children, the virtue ethics principle is too vague to be of normative use. There are two senses in which the proponent of the utilitarian principle might claim that the virtue ethics principle is vague. The first is what I call theoretical vagueness, or that the virtue ethics principle is formulated in such a way that does not distinguish it from other theoretical positions. Consider how a 'goodness' principle demonstrates this potential shortcoming: We have a moral obligation to do good. In response to this principle, the utilitarian might claim that the principle is in fact compatible with the utilitarian principle and, since it is too *practically* vague, we should reject it in favour of the utilitarian principle. Here, by practical vagueness, I mean roughly that the principle does not provide a sufficiently complex standard or guide for action, as should be illustrated by the 'goodness' principle which is a paradigmatic case of a practically vague principle.

Accordingly, in response to this objection the proponent of the virtue ethics principle must demonstrate that their principle is importantly distinct from the utilitarian principle and thereby not theoretically vague, in addition to providing a sufficiently complex standard or guide for action to avoid the charge of practical vagueness. Ultimately, after considering the theoretical and practical applications of the virtue ethics principle, in the context of global aid and global poverty, it seems that although the virtue ethics principle may be practically vague at times, it is still more practical than Singer's utilitarian principle. Below I discuss the theoretical and practical implications to provide further justification for my virtue ethics principal interpretation of the shallow pond thought experiment.

21 United Nations, "Human Development Report."

22 Timmerman, "Sometimes there is nothing," 211.

23 Phillip Stratton-Lake, "Intuitionism in Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, May 15, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/intuitionism-ethics/>.

24 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1985), 1107a1.



IV. VIRTUE ETHICS AND PROVIDING AID TO THE GLOBAL POOR

If we are to interpret the shallow pond thought experiment as supporting a virtue ethics principle, we must explore how this principle applies to poverty and other issues of global justice. In order to virtuously help the global poor, we must apply careful thinking to understand what the most effective course of action is in order to aid those suffering from the negative effects of poverty. There are similarities between Singer's original principle and this virtue ethics principle, namely that we attempt to do the most possible good through our actions. However, the virtue ethics principle does not imply that self-sacrifice is needed to achieve this good. Perhaps the virtuous individual will reflect and realize that by donating some insignificant amount of money they could save several lives; therefore, the virtue ethics principle would suggest that this is morally obligated. However, if one is so poor that they are unable to monetarily contribute to global aid efforts, perhaps this virtuous individual could participate in global aid efforts in other ways. The flexibility of this principle appears to be its strength and a response to the political objections that Singer's critics raise.²⁵

For instance, consider the case of an individual living in extreme poverty, Singer's principle does not seem to assign this individual a role in providing solutions to global poverty.²⁶ Generally speaking, this individual would have very little of moral significance that they could sacrifice in order to provide aid to others, or even themselves. Singer's principle does not appear to recognize that the global poor have agency and a role to play in developing and implementing solutions to global poverty.²⁷ This is not to say the global poor are responsible for the harm they are enduring, but rather they should have real and significant agency over potential solutions to poverty.²⁸ By obligating that individuals must act in a virtuous manner, the virtue ethics principle suggests that we should take into account the perspectives and voices of those we are aiding, and not impose our values or solutions onto the global poor. Virtuous solutions imply a process of collaboration when it comes to addressing poverty. To superimpose systems which do not reflect the cultural values or the agency of those we are attempting to aid is arrogant and prejudiced. It is not virtuous. Therefore, the virtue ethics principle not only addresses the issues raised by the never-end-

25 Wisor, "Against shallow ponds," 27–28.

26 Wisor, "Against shallow ponds," 21.

27 Deveaux, "Philosophical Misframings of Poverty," 56.

28 Deveaux, "Philosophical Misframings of Poverty," 56.

ing shallow pond, but also the core political objections to Singer's shallow pond.

Furthermore, the virtue ethics principle suggests that helping behaviors and principles which guide helping behaviors, can exist independent of morality. While morality and virtue are concepts that share similarities, virtue seems to transcend morality in ways that may be practically useful. Consider, for instance, the distinction that Bernard Williams employs between ethics, as being the broad domain which focuses on the study of the question of how one should live a good life, and morality which is the specific narrow modern subdiscipline of ethics which focuses on questions of moral responsibility, and universal or impartial rules.²⁹ As Williams asserts, those philosophers who focus too closely on morality often seem to lose any real interest in the perspectives of the human beings who must actually live with a moral problem.³⁰ In this sense, the virtue ethics principle may not be a moral principle, at least following the distinction provided by Williams. Instead, the virtue ethics principle may be an ethical principle which helps to guide us towards living a good life, while ensuring that others are able to lead these kinds of good lives.

Accordingly, this emphasis that the virtue ethics principal places on broader human flourishing may allow it to transcend morality in ways that are personally rewarding and practically advantageous. To illustrate, consider how, similar to deontological ethical theories, virtue ethics is primarily concerned with the actions of the agent, or the character of the agent, rather than the consequences of their actions.³¹ Moral psychologists have found that increased moral reasoning often results in an increased capacity for helping behaviors.³² That is, when we learn about morality, and consider what is moral and immoral we gain an increased capacity for and increased likelihood to engage in helping behaviors.³³ Virtue ethics seems to promote this capacity in greater ways than utilitarianism, especially in the context of global aid. Virtue ethics encourages individuals to look inwards and consider which actions are necessary in order to develop a virtuous character and be a "good" person. By contrast, utilitarianism is often concerned with external results and consequences.

29 Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Fontana Press, 1985), 4–8.

30 Donald McDonald, "The Use of Philosophy," *The Center Magazine*, November/December 1983, 40–49.

31 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b16.

32 Cristina Villegas De Posada and Elvia Vargas-Trujillo, "Moral Reasoning and Personal Behavior: A Meta-Analytical Review," *Review of General Psychology* 19, no 4 (2015): 416–17, <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000053>.

33 De Posada and Vargas-Trujillo, "Moral Reasoning and Personal Behavior: A Meta-Analytical Review," 418.



In the case of global poverty, it can be easy to ignore these negative consequences, especially for individuals who are not directly exposed to the reality of extreme poverty.³⁴ However, the internalized nature of virtue ethics forces individuals to consider that a lack of action not only presents negative consequences but also reflects an unvirtuous character. Individuals will be more likely to internalize moral action and reflect on which course of action is moral and correct if we teach and apply a virtue ethics principle. By forcing individuals to internally reflect on morality, we are forcing them to examine and consider their own behavior on a more frequent basis, which as studies have demonstrated, should lead to increased helping behavior.³⁵

V. CONCLUSION

Upon considering the theoretical and practical reasons for interpreting the shallow pond thought experiment as an argument for a virtue ethics principle of moral obligation, this approach provides a compelling middle ground for both Singer and his critics to consider. The virtue ethics principle provides a more complete and accurate account of global poverty and our moral obligations to act, suggesting that we have a moral obligation to help others so long as it is in a virtuous manner. The original shallow pond has now outlived its utility, and in an era where issues of global justice are becoming increasingly interconnected and frequent, it is evident that we must develop new approaches which reflect the complex nature of issues of global justice.³⁶ A virtue theory of ethics provides compelling answers to these problems and as demonstrated by the never ending shallow pond thought experiment, allows us to not only describe our obligations to the global poor but also to create solutions to issues of global justice.



Jack Ragan is a fourth-year philosophy student at Carleton University. His primary philosophical interests lie at the intersection of metaphysics and ethics. Jack is set to pursue a master's in philosophy at Carleton University, with his research focused on applying the capabilities approach to the ethics of AI.

34 David J. Franz, "Is Applied Ethics Morally Problematic," *Journal of Academic Ethics* 20, (2022): 359–74, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-021-09417-1>.

35 De Posada and Vargas-Trujillo, "Moral Reasoning and Personal Behavior," 416–17.

36 Jonathan Wolff, "Method in Philosophy and Public Policy," in *The Routledge Handbook of Ethics and Public Policy*, ed. Annabelle Lever and Andrei Poama (Routledge, 2018), 17–23. See for example, the development of "Engaged Theorizing" or "Engaged Philosophy" movements, whose principles reflect those of the virtue ethics principle I propose.

