

Hong Kong Catastrophic Risk Centre Online Research Seminar

Rescuing Ourselves from the Pond

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Singer famously argues that when we spend money on seemingly ordinary pleasures for ourselves, we are doing something gravely wrong. His argument proceeds from general principles, but in the process he draws an analogy between spending money on small pleasures and not saving a child drowning in a pond when you could easily do so. There have been many attempts to reply to Singer, and several might succeed in rejecting his general principles. But we argue that these replies fail to explain where the pond analogy goes wrong. Instead, they actually give ideas that only work if there is a prior independent explanation. This reveals that responding to the analogy is a different and more fundamental task than people have understood. We cannot get out of the analogy and its implications - as many seem to think - by developing a more plausible conception of morality than Singer's. Instead, the development of a plausible conception of morality depends on being able to break the analogy in a prior way. In the final part of the paper, we sketch what we think is the right way to break the analogy. We argue that the focus on Singer's principles has led people astray; in order to show why the analogy fails, we need to challenge a seemingly innocuous auxiliary hypothesis at the core of the argument. We then suggest that a broader version of our account underwrites, much more generally, the difference between perfect and imperfect duties.

Venue: Zoom Seminar

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