

Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence by Peter Unger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) pp. xii + 186.

FRED FELDMAN

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

Peter Singer's 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' appeared in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* in 1972. It is a thoughtful and direct essay. Singer claims that a certain moral principle is true. He claims that it implies that affluent people such as ourselves ought to give very substantial assistance to the poverty-stricken victims of natural disaster in East Bengal. He goes further; he claims that 'the way of life that has come to be taken for granted in our society' needs to be altered. He anticipates various objections to his argument, and states his replies. He closes with a short discussion of the extent to which professional philosophers ought to try to influence public policy. The paper has been widely reprinted, and has become a sort of modern classic. I think it deserves this status.

The moral principle to which Singer appeals is roughly this:

SP: If we can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, we ought to do it.¹

The principle seems plausible: if you see a child drowning in a shallow pond, and you could easily save him, then you ought to do it. The fact that it would ruin your nice suit can hardly excuse you. Preserving your suit is not of comparable significance. Since the death of an innocent child in East Bengal is clearly a bad thing, and affluent people like us can prevent quite a few such deaths merely by writing a check, we ought to do it. If we receive a request from UNICEF, it would be wrong for us simply to toss the envelope into the trash. The fact that writing the check and sending it in would require us to sacrifice an evening at the ballet can hardly excuse us. An evening at the ballet is not of comparable moral significance.

Though SP seems quite plausible at first glance, further reflection might lead to doubts. Some people apparently feel that there are important differences between the case of the child in the shallow pond and the case of the children in East Bengal. Their moral intuition tells them that we have a duty to give aid in the case of the shallow pond; but their moral intuition does not tell them that we have a duty to give aid in the case of the envelope from UNICEF. They agree that the suffering of the children of East Bengal is very bad, and they

see that we could do something to prevent it. However, in this case, as they see it, we have no real *obligation* to help them. Helping them would be a good thing; but not something morality *requires* of us. (Perhaps they think it would be supererogatory.) Thus, they reject SP and so are not convinced by Singer's argument.

In *Living High and Letting Die*, Peter Unger describes Singer's conclusion as 'importantly correct', but he says that the argument is 'inconclusive' (8). He indicates that he will provide the needed improvements. He furthermore indicates that his improvements flow from a novel moral theory—"Liberationism". In an astonishing passage he says:

After years of working on this endeavor, there's the Liberationist volume now in your hands. As is my hope, after reading the book some will agree that, between the whole Liberationist approach and anything else on offer, there's no real contest. If that happens, then perhaps one or two people, with communicative talent far greater than mine, will engage in some aptly effective verbal behavior. Perhaps partly as a result of that, the nonverbal conduct of many may change so greatly for the better that, without much further delay, so many millions of folks won't needlessly suffer so terribly. (23)

Before I proceed, I want to emphasize the extent to which I agree with Singer about our obligations to assist suffering strangers. I too believe that most of us ought to give far more than we in fact give. My judgment on this is not based on SP. It is based upon my conviction that each of us has a moral obligation to make the world as good as he can make it. I have discussed this view elsewhere, and will not discuss it further here.

A Puzzle About Unger's View

After reading the first six chapters of Unger's book, one will naturally think that Unger's central thesis is that we ought to give much more to prevent suffering and misery among the innocent children of distant parts of the world. In their reviews of the book Colin McGinn, Brad Hooker, and David Lewis all say that this is the main point Unger is trying to make.² Unger himself makes it seem that this is his goal when he says at the outset

In this book, I'll argue that [it's seriously wrong not to do anything to lessen distant suffering] and that, far from being just barely false, [the idea that it's quite all right to do nothing about distant suffering] conflicts strongly with the truth about morality. (7-8)

It is clear that *Singer* was arguing for something like this conclusion, and since Unger represents himself as extending Singer's project, it's natural to suppose that he is intent upon defending the same conclusion.

Recall the case of The Envelope: you have received a letter from UNICEF asking for a donation. The money would be used to provide aid for thirty innocent children in a distant land. If you don't send in \$100, those children will die soon. You toss the envelope into the trash. The first six chapters of *Living High and Letting Die* seem to contain arguments designed to show that this is true:

C: Your behavior in The Envelope is wrong.

But then something very strange happens in the final chapter of the book. In that chapter, we discover that Unger does not think that those who judge, in ordinary circumstances, that it is morally permissible for them to toss away their envelopes from UNICEF are in any way mistaken. Unger explicitly says that in ordinary contexts of discussion he too would make a “lenient” judgment concerning the Envelope; he too would say that it is morally permissible to toss the envelope away. He goes on to say that

...conduct like the Envelope’s *correctly* gets reckoned as morally acceptable. So my lenient ordinary judgment of such unhelpful conduct *is correct*. (167, emphasis added)

Since the views expressed in Chapter 7 are so strikingly at odds with what appears to be the main thesis of the rest of the book, and since others who have written about Unger’s book have paid so little attention to Chapter 7 [aside from Hooker, who says it is ‘less developed’, and that the metaethics is ‘not clear’ (p. 26)], it may be useful to give an account of what Unger says there.

In Chapter 7, Unger sketches his “multi-dimensional context-sensitive semantics” for evaluative talk and thought. (162) He claims that a normative statement such as:

C: Your behavior in The Envelope is wrong.

is to be understood in accordance with an “indexical” semantics. (163) The indexicality has two main elements. First, whenever a person makes a statement such as C, he makes it in a conversational context in which some normative scheme is presupposed. The normative scheme might be a legal scheme, such as the legal code of some jurisdiction, or it might be an entirely prudential scheme, or it might be some sort of moral scheme, such as a version of utilitarianism or Kantianism or common sense morality.

Unger suggests (164) that we might represent this indexical feature of a sentence like C by rephrasing it in words such as these: ‘With respect to the standards *prevalent in this very context* (of use or understanding), your behavior does not rate highly.’ Unger mentions a variety of standards any of which might be “prevalent” in a context. He describes his semantics as ‘multi-dimensional’ because each of these standards represents a possible “dimension” along which the behavior might be evaluated.

The second indexical aspect concerns *degree of stringency*. As we have seen, when uttering something like C in a context, some standard of evaluation is presupposed. According to that standard, some sort of behavior is evaluated as best. A very stringent application of that standard will insist that only such best behavior is acceptable; a more relaxed application of the same standard will allow that other behavior is acceptable *if it is sufficiently close* to the best. The second indexical aspect is an indication of how close to ideal a bit of behavior must be in order to be “close enough” to be acceptable. Unger suggests (165) the following as a more explicit formulation of the thought expressed by C: ‘With respect to the standards *prevalent in this very context* your behavior in The Envelope does not come *close enough to being in complete conformity to be considered to be acceptable*.’

Suppose there is such a thing as Everyday Morality. Suppose we are in a context that sets Everyday Morality as the relevant normative scheme. Suppose furthermore that this context sets the standards of evaluation only moderately high. Then for a piece of behavior correctly to be judged right within this context, that piece of behavior needs to be no more than pretty close to ideal behavior as determined by Everyday Morality.

If we believe (as Unger clearly does) that Everyday Morality does not condemn us for tossing away our envelopes from UNICEF, C would be judged to be *false* if uttered in a context in which Everyday Morality is the presupposed standard, and a typically lenient degree of stringency is the presupposed measure of “nearness”. In any context relevantly like that, C is false, and the following statement is true:

S: Your behavior in The Envelope is perfectly all right.

Unger is alluding to all this when he says (167) ‘conduct like the Envelope’s gets correctly reckoned as morally acceptable’.

Let’s consider another possible context. We can imagine a form of “social proximity utilitarianism”. The view is a maximizing theory much like ordinary act utilitarianism, but the system for calculating utilities is modified. We count the pleasures and pains of those socially near to us more heavily than we do the pleasures and pains of those socially more distant. The pleasures and pains of my immediate family count very heavily; those of distant starving children in Bangladesh hardly at all. The theory is designed to reflect intuitions such as the intuition that other things being equal, I have a greater moral obligation to guard the welfare of my own child than I have to guard the welfare of some unknown, distant child.

Suppose you and I believe in Social Proximity Utilitarianism. Suppose we are talking about our moral obligations in cases such as The Envelope. We most likely are in a context in which C is false, and S is true. Unger’s semantical remarks are designed to insure this.

Unger believes that participants to a conversation have the power to “set a context”. Although he makes use of this notion throughout Chapter 7 as well as elsewhere in the book, he does not discuss it in detail or at length. An explanation can be found, however, in his ‘Contextual Analysis in Ethics’ (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LV, 1, March 1995; pp. 1–26). There he indicates eight ways in which a manipulative conversationalist can bring it about that a new context has been “set”. Indeed, in the first section of that paper Unger makes a lot of conversational moves that serve to set a context in which the relevant standards are highly consequentialist moral ones, and the stringency level is very demanding. Some odd-looking sentences come out seeming to be true. Immediately afterward, in the second section of the paper, Unger gives his account of how he manipulated the context, so as get his readers into a new “uncommonly high” context in which the sentences are true.

Thus, in light of what he says both in Chapter 7 and in the PPR paper, it appears that Unger’s real view is that this judgment:

C: Your behavior in The Envelope is wrong

is true in uncommonly high, very demanding contexts, but not in normal, less demanding contexts. He recognizes that the demanding contexts are ‘unusual’. (167) It seems to me that by endorsing this metaethical view, Unger undermines the central point of the book. That is, he undermines the idea that those who think it is morally permissible to toss out their envelopes from UNICEF are making some sort of moral mistake. The central point of the final chapter is that such people are making no mistake at all. When they judge that C is false, and S is true, they are entirely right.

Unger’s actual view is that *relative to a very demanding context* in which the standards of stringency are set *very high*, C is true and our obligations to starving children are

correspondingly onerous. I think it is important to recognize that even the stingiest tightwad can happily agree to this. Such a tightwad can agree that *according to a strict application the very most strict and strictly consequential and impartial principles* you ought to give to starving strangers till it hurts. It is perfectly consistent with this (as Unger himself points out many times) to say that *according to more familiar principles* and on *more forgiving applications* of those principles, C is false and relative to such principles you have no such onerous obligation.

The appearance of this “multi-dimensional context-sensitive semantics” raises serious questions about what’s going on in this book. Does Unger believe, as he strenuously said repeatedly in the first 150 pages, that we absolutely ought to give till it hurts? Or does he believe, as he seems to say in the final chapter, that it’s all relative; that if you presuppose certain sorts of moral principles, then it will be correct to say that we ought to give, but that if you presuppose principles of a different sort, then it will be correct to say that it’s perfectly OK not to give?

This also raises a question about the relation between Unger’s book and Singer’s argument. The evidence of Chapter 7 and the PPR paper strongly suggests that Unger is not trying to enhance, or support, or supplement Singer’s argument. Rather, that evidence suggests that Unger’s deeper aim is to reveal the conversational moves that Singer used to reset the context, and thereby lure his readers into thinking (falsely) that they previously were mistaken when they judged that it was OK to give nothing to aid distant children.

There is a fundamental conflict between Singer’s position and Unger’s. In ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’, Singer maintains that ordinary people are *wrong* when they make lenient judgments of their reactions to famine in East Bengal. Singer says

the way people in relatively affluent countries react to a situation like that in Bengal cannot be justified; indeed, the whole way we look at moral issues—our moral conceptual scheme—needs to be altered, and with it, the way of life that has come to be taken for granted in our society.

Unger, on the other hand, repeatedly insists in Chapter 7 that when people in relatively affluent countries say that it is permissible to toss their envelopes, what they say is *correct*. Their statements and beliefs *can be justified*—Unger himself provides the justification. Clearly, then, Unger’s view is dramatically at odds with Singer’s.

So we are left with a question: what is going on in *Living High and Letting Die*? Is Unger genuinely trying to establish that we have a moral obligation to give very substantial amounts to aid distant starving children? Or is he merely claiming that if we happen to be in an unusually demanding context, then it will be correct to say that we have such obligations; if we are in normal contexts, then it will be correct to say that we have no such obligation? Or does he have some other aim entirely?

An Attempt to Mitigate the Relativism

There are a few passages that suggest that in spite of the apparent relativism of the final chapter, Unger nevertheless wants to say that the stricter standards are somehow “better”. I found three pieces of evidence to support this claim. Two are in the book, and one is in ‘Contextual Analysis in Ethics’.

(a) In Section 6 of Chapter 7 (pp. 172-3), Unger claims that though ordinary lenient judgments are correct when made in ordinary lenient contexts, it’s a bad idea to persist in

getting ourselves into contexts in which such judgments are true. The problem with setting such contexts is that they serve as “barriers to moral progress”.

Unger says:

Even if I manage to have my [lenient] everyday judgments of such [tossing away of UNICEF envelopes] come out correct, when making those judgments won't I myself then do something to reinforce a barrier to moral progress? Yes, I will. So, there may be something immoral about my making the conservatively oriented moral judgments. Even so, those judgments may be true, or correct. (173, with alterations. the actual passage involves a different example, but has the same point.)

As I understand him, what Unger is saying here is this: when ordinary affluent people judge in typical circumstances that they have no obligation to give huge amounts to aid distant starving children, their judgments are correct. Those people, in those contexts, in fact have no such onerous obligations. If they remain in those contexts, they will continue to have no such onerous obligations. However, it is immoral for them to remain in those contexts. Remaining there is a barrier to moral progress. They ought to get themselves into more stringent contexts, wherein their lenient judgments will be false. Relative to such stringent contexts, they do have onerous obligations. If they move “up” to the more stringent contexts, they will be making moral progress (which presumably they should do).

It seems to me that this appeal to “moral progress” is problematic in light of Unger's contextualism. Notice that in the quoted passage Unger makes use of the terms ‘moral progress’ and ‘immoral’. Surely these are useful moral terms. Surely they too are subject to the multi-dimensional context-sensitive semantics. Thus, if Unger's remark in the quoted passage is to be counted as “true” or “correct”, it must be understood as indexically relativized to some context. Relative to the context set in the final pages of a book purporting to advocate greater financial assistance to children in distant lands, Unger's remark may well be true. If we properly expand it, so as to make the double relativization explicit, Unger's claim turns out to be something like this:

Relative to a strict application of the strict set of standards set by this very context, it is correct to say that it's “immoral” to set contexts in which it is permissible to toss UNICEF envelopes; it is correct to say that setting such contexts is a “barrier to moral progress”.

In its actual context, the remark seems to be correct.

However, Unger's contextualism seems to imply that the remark about moral progress would *not* be correct relative to a more familiar context. Suppose we are in an everyday context in which we are presupposing more typical moral norms. Suppose I say ‘there is nothing immoral about setting lenient contexts in which it is correct to say that it is permissible to toss UNICEF envelopes into the trash. Setting such lenient contexts will not be a barrier to moral progress’. Properly expanded according to the requirements of Unger's multi-dimensional context-sensitive semantics, my remark is seen to mean something like this:

Relative to a lenient application of the lenient set of standards set by this very context, it is correct to say that there's nothing “immoral” about setting contexts in which it is

correct to say that it is permissible to toss UNICEF envelopes; it is correct to say that setting such contexts is not a “barrier to moral progress”.

My statement is true (in its context).

Unger’s remarks about the “immorality” of setting lenient contexts, and his claim that doing this will be a “barrier to moral progress” might be understood to suggest that he reserves to himself some higher set of standards by which he can judge the standards imposed by various other contexts. This is wholly unexplained and apparently inconsistent with the general drift of Chapter 7. Does he mean to suggest that there is some special overarching context that provides a standard by which we can evaluate the standards presupposed in “lower” contexts? There is not a word about any such thing, and its introduction would be an obvious and important revision of the official contextualism, for if there is such a context, it would seem to make best sense to say that all serious moral talk should be evaluated relative to the standard presupposed by that context. In this case, the contextualism would be irrelevant to ethics.

I mentioned earlier that there are three bits of evidence bearing on Unger’s apparent waffling on relativism. I identified the first as ‘(a)’. Here is (b). On the penultimate page of the book, Unger says:

While there may be *some* sense, or way, in which our ordinary moral judgments accord better with morality than do my Liberationist assessments, in the most important senses, and ways, it’s the reverse that’s true. (175)

It should be obvious that there is something fishy about Unger’s claim that certain senses are “more important” than others, or that when taken in these senses, evaluative judgments “accord better with morality”. ‘Important’ and ‘morality’ are terms of evaluation; surely they must be understood in accord with Unger’s multi-dimensional context-sensitive semantics. Relative to some contexts (including the one in which it occurs in the book) the last-quoted remark might well be true. Relative to other contexts (such as everyday life) the remark is false. In itself, outside of any conversational context, it is supposedly without truth value.

(c) The final bit of evidence appears in Section 8, (pp. 23–5), of ‘Contextual Analysis in Ethics’. In that passage, Unger explicitly replies to the charge of relativism. He discusses the notion that his contextualism implies that ‘there is nothing that can make it better for us to favor some [contexts] and to avoid others’. (25) He claims that this is a big mistake:

Contextualism or no contextualism, if you strongly care about being very ethical, then, as a sensible person, you’ll take care more often to set for yourself ethically demanding contexts, and not allow yourself to be, so very often, in quite lenient contexts. In this way you can, ... , manage to foster behavior that’s conducive to satisfying your highly ethical desires and to promoting your highly ethical values. (25)

Notice that in the quoted passage Unger makes use of some loaded evaluative terminology—‘very ethical’, ‘sensible’, ‘highly ethical desires’, ‘highly ethical values’. These are “useful ethical terms”. If Chapter 7 is taken seriously, then these terms must also

be understood in accordance with the multi-dimensional context-sensitive semantics. Once this is done, we see that Unger's last-quoted remark is possibly true *relative to the context in which it appears*. However, there is no reason to suppose that it will be true in all other contexts.

Suppose my wife and I are checking the day's mail. Suppose there is a letter from UNICEF, requesting aid for suffering children in a distant land. Suppose I toss the envelope into the trash and say 'We've already given plenty to charity this year. We should use this money to attend the ballet.' My wife (having read Unger's book) might then recognize that my statement is true in its context, but she might wonder whether setting such a context "promotes my highly ethical values". I could reply that "my highly ethical values" actually *require* me to set this context. 'It is *perfectly all right* for me to do this. Stop worrying about the distant children. They are not our problem.' If interpreted according to Unger's multi-dimensional context-sensitive semantics, my reply might be entirely correct.

Another Hypothesis: It Was All A Mere Illustration

I want to mention another hypothesis about what's going on in *Living High and Letting Die*, based in large part on some things that Unger says in his PPR paper. In order to make this point, I will have to say a few more words about the content of the paper.

In the paper, Unger starts out by giving some detailed factual information about the terrible suffering of children in certain poverty-stricken parts of the world. He gives the address of the UNICEF office in New York, and asks his readers to consider how much they could painlessly give to prevent the suffering and death of those distant children. He says that in light of his own economic circumstances, it would be wrong for him to give any less than twenty dollars.⁽⁷⁾ After a few pages of discussion, he reaches the conclusion that '...throughout most of our lives, our behavior has been wrong.'⁽⁹⁾ This is a "harsh judgment". It conflicts with the more typical "lenient judgment" that we are inclined to make in ordinary life. All of this will seem quite familiar to anyone who has read *Living High and Letting Die*.

But in the second section of the paper (pp. 9–13), Unger reveals how he manipulated his readers into thinking that the harsh judgment is true, and the lenient one false. He claims (9) to have done this by "setting a new and demanding context" for the judgments. He did this by employing eight tactics. He lists these as follows:

1. Calling our attention to some intuitively appealing principles that are generally quite removed from our attention, but which would require giving more to UNICEF.
2. Describing the manner of giving in such a way as to make it seem as if sending money to UNICEF would be a case of "saving lives" relevantly like ordinary cases of "saving lives"—as for example when you pull a child from a shallow pond.
3. Explicitly using the words 'what you do would be morally wrong'. Following David Lewis' rule of accommodation,³ the reader naturally is inclined to reset the context so as to make the words come out true (relative to the new context).
4. Starting out by asking for a small contribution (\$5) and then gradually working up to a much bigger one.
5. Avoiding insulting the reader.
6. Forming a tiny group (Unger and his reader) in which one (Unger) admits that he has obligations to give to UNICEF. This naturally makes the other (the reader) more willing to reset the context so as to make it correct to say that both of them have obligations to give to UNICEF.

7. Giving specific, practical information about how to give the money.
8. Describing the plight of the children in such a way as to make it vivid and horrible.

In subsequent sections of the paper, Unger makes further claims about the manipulation of context. He says, for example, that once you get someone up into a more demanding context, it is hard for him quickly to slide back down into a less demanding context. (15) He also says that as time passes, the manipulative tricks just listed begin to lose their force. (15) People hoisted into a higher context will, if given enough time, gradually sink back into their normal context. (Presumably, that's why a high-pressure fundraiser insists that you write a check *immediately*.) He also says (15-16) that merely telling a person about the eight manipulative tricks will lessen the power of those tricks to reset context.

Thus, in the paper Unger first briefly employs and then analyzes a strategy by which he says he can get unsuspecting people to reject a moral judgment they formerly thought to be true. He does not think that such people were making a mistake when, in the past, they took the judgment to be true. Rather, he thinks that when, in the past, they judged it to be true, they were in a lax context in which it was true. But Unger thinks he has the power to get such people into a new context in which the judgment is false. Naive people may think that they formerly were *wrong*. Of course, they were not. They were formerly in a more lenient context and their former lenient thoughts were *true relative to their former lenient context*.

Unger's central aim, when he discusses all this in the paper, seems to be to provide a vivid illustration of context shift, to be explained by his semantical theory. His aim thus seems to be primarily to illustrate a theory in *semantics*, not to establish a thesis in *ethics*.

What has all this got to do with *Living High and Letting Die*? One hypothesis is that the first six chapters of *Living High and Letting Die* are intended (like the first few pages of the PPR paper) to be nothing more than a vivid illustration of the upcoming "multi-dimensional context-sensitive semantics". Perhaps Unger thought that readers would have a deeper appreciation of his semantical insights if they have just been victimized by them. Perhaps he thought that his semantical insights are so important that he is justified in misleading his readers for 150 pages in order to get them to grasp these insights.

It is interesting to note that if this was Unger's aim in presenting the argument about the envelope from UNICEF, then his book has been almost universally misunderstood. Reviewers, commentators, and readers have consistently assumed that Unger's claims in the first six chapters were not merely displayed as examples, but were to be taken at face value. Furthermore, Unger himself has repeatedly insisted (in personal correspondence) that they are not just illustrations of a semantic thesis. It's hard to believe that six chapters (of this seven-chapter book) contain nothing but pretense.

A Third Hypothesis

There are other possible explanations for the shifting of stance between Chapter 7 and the rest of the book. One such explanation involves a claim of intellectual compartmentalization. The suggestion here would be that when Unger thinks about normative ethics, he is inclined to believe in a demanding sort of realistic absolutism. (He seems to say something like this on p. 22.) On the other hand, according to this suggestion, when he reflects on issues in metaethics, Unger is inclined to believe in a form of contextualism that commits him to a thorough-going relativism. Perhaps when he wrote the book, Unger simply hadn't given much serious thought to the question whether the relativistic metaethics undermines the impact of the normative claims.

I am not qualified to judge whether this third hypothesis is plausible.

Unger's position, taken as a whole, suggests the position of a man who first insists that nothing is flat and nothing is known, and gives strenuous arguments for these claims, but then acknowledges that, if we use these terms in their ordinary senses, it is perfectly correct to say that lots of things are flat and lots of things are known.⁴

Notes

1. There are actually several principles stated in Singer's paper. This one is from Unger's paper. Nothing of substance turns on the details of the principle.

2. Brad Hooker, "The Limits of Self-sacrifice" *TLS* (4896, January 31, 1997): p. 26; David Lewis, "Illusory Innocence?" *Eureka Street* (vol. 6, no. 10; December, 1996): pp. 35–6; Colin McGinn, "Review of Unger's *Living High and Letting Die*" *The New Republic* (vol. 215, no. 16; October 14, 1996): p. 54.

3. For discussion of this rule, see 'Scorekeeping in a Language Game' in Lewis' *Philosophical Papers* vol 1, pp. 233–249.

4. A number of friends and colleagues read drafts of this critical study and gave helpful comments and suggestions. I am grateful to all of them. Earl Conee, David Lewis, Owen McLeod, and Ted Sider were especially helpful.