

Briefly Noted

The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty, Peter Singer (New York: Random House, 2009), 224 pp., \$22 cloth.

The Life You Can Save opens with its author's famous thought experiment, first issued in 1972, in which the reader is invited to weigh the pros of saving a child drowning in a shallow pond against the cons of dirtying one's shoes in the process. The story is intended to help us think about the moral relationship between the global rich and global poor, and the level of moral responsibility that "we," as well-off individuals in developed countries, have to contribute to the prevention of poverty-related death and suffering in the world at large. Despite a shared moral intuition about the importance of helping the needy, most of us spend incomparably more on luxuries—if not pleasure boats, then soft drinks—than we donate to aid agencies who make it their business to wade, on our behalf, into the muddy waters of world poverty.

While the thought experiment and Singer's accompanying utilitarian argument bear revisiting, the purpose and value of the book lie, first, in its efforts to face down common objections to this line of thought

(which finds that "if you do not donate to aid agencies, you are doing something wrong"), such as the idea that we should be entitled to spend the money we earn on ourselves or that we in the developed world are already generous enough. Here Singer engages not merely the philosophical reactions to his work, but also the opinions of friends, audiences, students, letter-writers, and journalists.

With this wide circle of interlocutors, the book is geared toward fostering broad debate and concrete social change. Singer works to explain and roll back some of the barriers that prevent even those who might be inclined to buy into his general stance from taking the commitment seriously. Through discussions of the moral psychology and public culture of giving, through laying out inspirational real-world examples of givers (and discomfiting examples of hoarders), and even by appealing to our self-interest in feeling good about ourselves, Singer hopes to nudge developed societies toward a culture of philanthropy.