Beliefs and Actions

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A few weeks ago, I argued that, when faced with two contradictory beliefs, we ought to reject one of the beliefs that cause the contradiction. We ought to do this, I argued, because if we don’t, we are forced to believe anything whatsoever. Specifically, I argued that most of us have deeply held ethical intuitions that conflict with ethical relativism and that, since our intuition about the ethical status of suffering (i.e., that suffering is bad) is strong and plausible, we ought to reject relativism. This week, I’d like to consider what actions we might be committed to given our strong ethical intuitions about suffering.

Bioethicist and philosopher Peter Singer has argued that, if we hold the strong intuition that suffering is bad, then we ought to attempt to prevent suffering whenever we can, as long as it doesn’t cause suffering of equal or greater magnitude. Singer’s claim prompts some important questions: What suffering can we prevent? How do we compare the magnitude of different types of suffering? How far must we sacrifice our own happiness in order to lessen the suffering of someone else?

There is no doubt that these are difficult questions, and in many contexts, they are without answers. But the fact that they may not have answers in every case is no reason to think that there aren’t some cases where we can answer these questions definitively. For example, we are often in the position to prevent the suffering of others with little sacrifice. There are hungry people and living on the streets of Denver; surely we are in the position to offer a meal to these folks, with little sacrifice of our own. The money that we spend on fancy clothing or alcohol can be put to better use feeding someone who would otherwise go hungry. In this case, the answers to these questions are pretty straightforward: We can prevent the suffering caused by hunger in Denver,¹ and the suffering caused by hunger is much worse than the suffering you or I would endure if we spent a night in without alcohol (or without some other ‘luxury’).

There are other cases where the answers to these questions are not as straightforward. For example, our energy intensive lifestyles are changing the Earth’s climate (this may sound like a controversial statement among some company, but to the overwhelming majority of scientists and ethicists, it’s not. We may bet against them, but it’s a risky bet, usually motivated by profit rather than evidence.). It is estimated that rising temperatures and sea levels will cause harm and suffering to millions. Can we prevent this suffering? Do we have an obligation to prevent suffering of future generations at the expense of our own happiness?

Here’s another example of a not-so-straight-forward ethical choice: It is well documented that we cause serious and unnecessary suffering to animals, especially

¹ As an aside, we can prevent hunger across the world by donating to efficient aid organizations like Oxfam America.
farm animals. We can certainly prevent this, but at what cost? Do we have an obligation to adopt a vegan diet? Do we have an obligation to slow the growth of urban sprawl in order to preserve the habitat of sentient animals?

I believe that the answer to all of the questions posed in the previous paragraph is 'yes'. But, what do you think? If we have strong intuitions about suffering, how ought we act to prevent suffering? Please feel free to respond with comments online, with a letter to the editor, or to me directly at bzaharat@mines.edu.