

# Buying Luxuries and Saving Lives

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Since luxury may be considered either as innocent or blamable, one may be surprized by the preposterous opinions, which have been entertained concerning it.

-David Hume (189)

There are certain things that I treat myself to. For example, I sometimes take a helicopter to travel to my farm, but I don't live a luxurious lifestyle.

-Jeff Koons, commenting on his *Luxury and Degradation* series  
(quoted in Neuendorf)

Philosophers like to begin by defining their terms, but the definition of “luxury goods” is somewhat elusive. Of course, a typical economics textbook definition reads something like the following: *X is a luxury good if and only if it has high income elasticity of demand.* In other words, a luxury good is a good such that the rate at which one demands this good rises faster than the rate at which one’s income increases (Mankiw 90). But Hume’s remark that “Luxury is a word of uncertain signification,” seems a wiser response, so I will not attempt to define “luxury goods” in this paper. In lieu of a definition, I will simply say that I use the expression to denote those goods that tend to cluster at the far end of this spectrum. Examples include (but are not limited to) tourbillon watches, Bentley Mulsannes, bespoke suits from shops on London’s Savile Road, high-end jewelry, penthouse apartments along New York’s Central Park, mansions, yachts, and works of fine art by masters of the craft.

It certainly seems morally impermissible to purchase and enjoy luxury goods for oneself if one could instead use that money to save or to improve significantly the lives of others. This appears true even if one has no personal connection to these people. Peter Singer's shallow pond thought experiment (which I will, hereafter, refer to as "Shallow Pond") is a well-known illustration of this idea. Yet might there be circumstances in which one is morally obligated to purchase a luxury good instead of saving others now—and precisely because of the greater amount lives that one might save by purchasing it? In this paper, I argue that there are, and at least some of us might actually be in those circumstances. In the process, I try to clarify what importance, if any, the fact that something counts as a luxury good has on our moral intuitions in cases like these.

Let me begin with a brief reminder of Shallow Pond. Singer asks us to imagine the following situation:

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 her head above the water for more than a few seconds at a time. If you don't wade in and pull her out, she 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. By the time you hand the child over to someone responsible for her, and change your clothes, you'll be late for work. What should you do? (Singer, *The Life You Save* 3)

The answer to the question posed at the end of Shallow Pond is obvious. You should wade into the pond and save the child from drowning, even though doing so ruins your shoes, dirties your clothes, and makes you late for work. The lesson of Shallow Pond seems to be that we have a standing obligation to prevent great suffering and even death as a result of a lack of these goods, if we can do so without giving up anything that is equally important.

Though few if any of us will find ourselves in the circumstances of Shallow Pond, Singer puts the lesson of the thought experiment to work. Obviously, great suffering and even death as a result of a lack of such goods as water, food, shelter, and basic medical care are bad. Singer contends that we can prevent such evils by donating to highly effective charities, which include such GiveWell mainstays as the Against Malaria Foundation, the Malaria Consortium, Helen Keller International, New Incentives, and the Schistosomiasis Control Initiative.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Singer maintains that we can donate in ways that involve little sacrifice

on our part, sacrifice that is more-or-less on a par with the costs associated with saving a drowning child in Shallow Pond. Singer concludes that “if you do not donate to effective charities, you are doing something wrong” (Singer, *The Life You Save* 15-16).

In a moment, I will tweak the parameters of Shallow Pond in order to explore further some of our ethical intuitions. But, before I do so, I want to underline the way that Singer often contrasts donating to highly effective charities with using money in order to purchase and enjoy luxury goods.

[F]or conspicuous waste of money and resources it is hard to beat a luxury yacht. As *Business Insider* reported in 2017, ‘It has become normal for the world’s wealthiest individuals to drop millions, even billions, on lavish superyachts.’ Billionaires compete to be the owner of the largest private yacht—a title held at the moment by Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Emir of Abu Dhabi and owner of Azzam, which at 180 meters long, edged out the previous largest, Eclipse, owned by the Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich. Azzam is estimated to have cost \$400 million. It has accommodation for 36 guests. (Singer, *The Life You Save* 10)

Nor is Singer’s focus on contrasting, on the one hand, helping others with, on the other hand, purchasing luxury goods unique to him. For instance, Peter Unger often makes the comparison between saving lives and enjoying luxury goods (24, 52, 124). I return to Unger later in this paper. Though Singer’s tone is measured in the passage above, it is hard not to feel indignation—and more—toward the super-rich for wallowing in luxury, when even paltry amounts of restraint on their part could save and improve many lives.

However, it is not only the luxury goods of the super-rich at which Singer takes aim. In the same breath, he points out that members of the North American and European middle class spend thousands and even tens of thousands of dollars on watches by Rolex, Patek Philippe, and Omega, despite the fact they are no more accurate than a \$50 quartz timepiece. And, if most of us are not high-end chronophiles, it is likely that we sometimes spend money on other luxury goods, money that is quite literally a matter of life and death for others.

Singer occasionally makes remarks that are aimed at softening this blow, at least to some extent. He writes, “Of course, we all have our little indulgences. I am not arguing that every luxury is wrong” (*Ethics in the Real World* 310-312). At first, this claim might seem inconsistent with the lesson of Shallow Pond. To the extent that we are trading off luxuries for ourselves with the lives of others, it is difficult to accept Singer’s interpretation of his own argument. The indignation that goes around, comes around, at least for many of us—myself included.

So what gives? Perhaps the most plausible reason to accept Singer’s interpretation is rooted in our own less-than-heroic qualities as moral beings. Here

the thought is that by compromising and allowing ourselves certain luxury goods now and again, we'll be more likely, over the course of our entire lives, to be more charitable than if we tried to be unremittently austere and spartan.<sup>2</sup> I will return to this point later in the paper.

At the moment, I want to consider a variation of Shallow Pond that will add some interesting complications to our thinking about the relationship between our duty to help others in dire need and our possession and enjoyment of luxury goods. In this thought experiment, you again pass by a knee-deep pond in which a youngster is drowning, and no one else is nearby to help him. But there are some differences. In this case, you are not on your way to work. Rather:

You are on your way to an auction at which a painting that you are certain is Leonardo's lost *Salvator Mundi* is being sold. For reasons that are beyond your control, you have no time to spare, and if you do not arrive on time, you will be unable to purchase the painting. Just before arriving at your destination, you see a child drowning in a shallow pond. You can either proceed and purchase the painting or save the child, but you cannot do both. What should you do?

Call this thought experiment Painting-1.

Before I discuss the answer to the question at the end of Painting-1, I need to provide two pieces of context. First, it is worth noting that, in fact, Leonardo's lost *Salvator Mundi* really was sold at auction only 15 years ago (in, as it so happens, my current home town). Its new owners, who realized what was up for bid, paid a little more than \$9,000 for it. In contrast, the *Salvator Mundi* resold for \$469,700,000 in 2017.<sup>3</sup> Here is the second piece of context for Painting-1. If you stop and fish the child from the pond, you will have saved one life, and good on you for it. But, before concluding that this is the best course of action, consider your opportunities if you purchase the painting instead. Let us say that, during your lifetime, you will have it restored and hung in your house, where only your friends and you will enjoy it. However, you will also direct that the painting be sold after your death with the proceeds going to the world's most effective charities. Of course, estimates vary concerning the marginal cost of saving a human life (understood in terms of, say, a certain period of quality adjusted life years) in the poorest parts of the world. GiveWell claims that "As of November 2016, the median estimate of our top charities' cost-effectiveness ranged from ~\$900 to ~\$7,000 per equivalent life saved."<sup>4</sup> The fact that the range of uncertainty covers an order of magnitude underlines the fact that these estimates can be difficult to make, but we should also keep in mind the fact that the marginal cost of saving a life will differ considerably because of market fluctuations and perturbations, including, for example, world demand for nylon, which is necessary for making mosquito nets. Nevertheless, \$2,500 is a reasonable figure (Singer, *The Most Good*

and *The Life You Save* as well as MacAskill).

At that rate, the sale of the *Salvator Mundi* would result in about 188,000 lives saved. Hence, it seems that your path is as clear as it is disturbing: You should let the child die and purchase the luxury good. Of course, Singer sometimes calls out the extraordinary sums paid for works of art, lamenting “the capacity of the art world to co-opt works of art, irrespective of their creators’ aims” which can “turn them into items of consumption for the rich” (*Ethics in the Real World* 179-181 and *The Life You Save* 124). But if art can be co-opted as luxury consumption, it is at least possible that the grotesque proceeds of this process can be put to good use—in this *extraordinarily* good use.

Yet even if you find the answer I have proposed to the question at the end of Painting-1 plausible, you might also think it is just a typical philosopher’s fanciful edge-case, which can—and perhaps should—be humored and then ignored. But I wish to push back on this response in two ways. First, consider a related thought experiment that I will call Painting-2:

You are at an auction and about to make a bid of about \$9,000 to purchase a painting that you are certain is Leonardo’s lost *Salvator Mundi*. However, you could instead donate that money (the \$9,000) to the Against Malaria Foundation. If you make the donation rather than purchase the painting, it is reasonable to expect your action will save the lives of 3 or 4 people. What should you do?

It seems to me that the person who purchased the *Salvator Mundi* was actually in the circumstances of Painting-2. Of course, I am not claiming that the purchaser *knew* that she was in these circumstances, though she might have. My concern here is with the rightness or wrongness of action, not with its praiseworthiness or blameworthiness (Parfit 31-37). Moreover, these circumstances are closely analogous to those of Painting-1, in which you can choose between either saving a low number of lives by forgoing the purchase of the painting, or you can purchase the painting and save far more lives. As a result, if the purchaser had the charitable intentions described in Painting-1, then it would be right for her to forgo the present donation to the Against Malaria Foundation in order to save vastly more lives later. I find it equally compelling that, if the purchaser lacked any such charitable intentions, then it would be wrong of her to decline to donate the money at the cost of her private enrichment. It is worth noting that it would have been a simple matter for the person who purchased the *Salvator Mundi* to reveal the nature of the painting. This work of art need not be lost again if it were not purchased at a bargain-basement price, and the world need be no worse off aesthetically as a result.

Suppose that you agree that Painting-1 and Painting-2 are sufficiently analogous and, therefore, that the former is not quite as fanciful as it might have

appeared. Nevertheless, you might still think cases like Painting-1 and Painting-2 are sufficiently rare and should be politely dismissed. You certainly would not be wrong that the two cases are unlikely, though that is true of Shallow Pond and many other philosophical thought experiments as well (see Dennett). But my point here, as in Shallow Pond, is to try to put the lesson to work. I grant that many luxury goods are remarkably poor investments. For example, a bespoke suit made by a brilliant Savile Row tailor—glorious as it is—will be close to worthless after a decade of use. The extravagant luxury goods that Singer discusses—superyachts and such—are essentially bonfires of cash. Indeed, their owners likely know this and likely count on others knowing it too, since it is meant to enhance their social status by showing that they are not only rich, but so wealthy they can afford to set money ablaze (see Wang and Vlasas as well as Kastanakis and Balabanis).

Yet not all luxury goods are likely to depreciate like these. For example, many brands of high-end chronographs—especially vintage examples—tend to appreciate with age, including those mentioned earlier by Rolex, Patek Philippe, and Omega. Ironically, one might do more good in the world by ignoring Singer’s advice not to buy one of these luxury watches, even though doing so means we can’t use the same resources to help others now, precisely because we will be able to save more lives later.

Obviously, my purpose here is not to walk the reader through a series of wise investments in luxury goods, something which I would be especially poorly equipped to do in any event. If philosophers have any wisdom to offer, it is not in this corner of the world. Rather, I want to try to say why doing something this like this might make sense. Recall Singer’s claim that “[W]e all have our little indulgences. I am not arguing that every luxury is wrong.” I said a moment ago that the most plausible interpretation of Singer’s claim is that by compromising and allowing ourselves certain luxury goods, we’ll be more likely, over the course of our lives, to be more charitable. Suppose that I am right about this interpretation and that certain luxury goods are likely to appreciate over time. Such goods could be used carefully, and the proceeds from their sale after our deaths could save more lives than we could have saved if we took the austere path and denied ourselves any luxuries at all.

Of course, circumstances like these are rather quotidian when compared to those in Painting-1 and Painting-2, but for that reason some of us might be in them right now. If we are, it seems like the right thing to do is buy the luxury goods, even though we can save lives right now if we don’t make these purchases. Yet, if this conclusion is not as disturbing as that in Painting-1, it still leaves me uneasy.

One way to bring out that sense of unease is to consider another kind of luxury good that can - and often does - appreciate, namely: a certain class of automobile. This fact also carries with it a modicum of irony. In a thought experiment that is almost as famous as Singer’s Shallow Pond, Peter Unger puts his readers in the position of 70-year-old Robert R. Roberts, who is known to one-and-all as “Bob.”

In this thought experiment, Bob must choose between saving the life of a child and saving his Bugatti, into which he has poured all of his savings and on which he is relying for a comfortable retirement. If this seems unwise, Unger casually notes that the Bugatti can be “expected to appreciate at over 20% per year” (135). If so, it is a fantastic investment in a luxury good. As Unger frames the matter, Bob must choose between his comfortable retirement, which will result from his selling the car, and the child’s life. Unger concludes that, if Bob chooses to save the Bugatti rather than the child, then his action would be “monstrous” (136). It is hard not to agree.

Nevertheless, if Bob’s intention were to sell the vehicle and donate the money to a highly effective charity, he could save far more lives than that of a single child. Writing 25 years ago, Unger imagines Bob buying the vehicle “for the bargain price of just under \$3 million” (135). In 2019, the most expensive Bugatti ever sold went for \$19 million.<sup>5</sup> Its sale would provide enough money to save 7,600 lives, using our earlier estimate of \$2,500 per life. Even if the imagined worth of the vehicle is off by a factor of 7, Bob would still be saving 1,000 times as many lives by choosing the Bugatti over the child. By analogy with Painting-1 and Painting-2, it would seem that Bob should do the “monstrous” thing and allow the child to die, if by doing so he will save thousands later.

However, if this is the right thing to do, it is also, as I said above about Painting-1, disturbing. And, as I have already noted, this quality manifests itself as unease in the more realistic cases of buying luxury goods too. What explains this? Clearly, many hypotheses suggest themselves. But the subject of this paper is luxury, so I want to conclude by considering this very possibility. More exactly, I want to ask whether the reason I feel this sense of disturbance in some cases and unease in others is a result of the fact that I imagine us enjoying luxury goods, even though the result is a greater savings of lives.

In order to test this idea, consider a final thought experiment, which I will call Copper Mine.

You are on your way to an auction at which a piece of land in the Rocky Mountains is up for bid. On this piece of land is an old copper mine. For reasons that are beyond your control, you have no time to spare, and if you do not arrive on time, you will be unable to purchase the piece of land. Just before arriving at your destination, you see a child drowning in a shallow pond. You can either proceed and purchase the land or save the child, but you cannot do both. What should you do?

Before answering, note that in Copper Mine, as in Painting-1, only you know the real economic value of what is at stake. Everyone else believes that the copper mine has been exhausted, but you know that it contains vast quantities of the metal, which has increased in value per unit by 2 orders of magnitude over the last 60

years and is likely to continue to appreciate rapidly because of its use in advanced technology. You will be able to purchase the land for \$2,500, even though it is worth tens of millions. Moreover, you will leave the land untouched during your lifetime and direct that it be sold (with a full disclosure of its value) after your death with the proceeds going to GiveWell, where it will be used to save thousands of lives.

My reaction to Copper Mine is much like my reaction to Painting-1 and Painting-2. On the one hand, it seems to me that you should allow the child to drown, and, on the other hand, this conclusion chills me. But note that this response is informative. Copper mines are not luxury goods, and they are unlikely to be the kind of thing that one gains an intrinsic pleasure from owning. That suggests that the claim that my feelings of ambivalence about Painting-1 and Painting-2 are not a function of the fact that luxury goods were involved. Whatever it is that bothers me about these cases is not to be found in the subject of luxury goods.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

1. GiveWell's top charities change somewhat from year-to-year. See "Our Top Charities." *GiveWell*, [www.givewell.org/charities/top-charities](http://www.givewell.org/charities/top-charities).

2. This interpretation involves coming down squarely on the possibilism side of the actualism/possibilism debate. While I think that is more than likely how one should come down, I cannot defend that claim here. See Goldman as well as Jackson and Pargetter.

3. Reports of the painting's precise sales price differ slightly but all are astronomically high. See Holland.

4. See "Cost-Effectiveness." *GiveWell*, [www.givewell.org/how-we-work/our-criteria/cost-effectiveness](http://www.givewell.org/how-we-work/our-criteria/cost-effectiveness).

5. See Valdes-Dapena. Of course, this only provides us with an upper bound for the worth of the vehicle, but we do not require a great deal of precision here to make the point at hand. It is worth noting that this price is more than an order of magnitude lower than would be expected if Bob's vehicle were appreciating at 20% per year. If there is a lesson to be learned, then it is to take investment advice from philosophers with a grain of salt!

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