

SOME MORAL CONCERNS REGARDING FAMINE RELIEF

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IN HIS ARTICLES “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” and “Reconsidering the Famine Relief Argument,” Peter Singer argues for the conclusion that affluent persons are morally obligated to relieve (if not altogether eliminate) world famine if they can do so without making an excessive sacrifice. To answer the question of what constitutes an excessive sacrifice, Singer offers a principle in two forms—one strong, the other moderate. My examination of Singer’s famine relief argument will include an analysis of both versions of his principle, a brief outline of our traditional moral categories, and an exploration of how Singer would have us re-conceive these categories. I will then argue that Singer has overlooked what I will refer to as the category of soft moral reasons. Falling between the categories of obligation and supererogation, the category of soft moral reasons regards all acts that a person has moral reasons to perform, but not an obligation to perform. Finally, I will argue for two conclusions: first, affluent persons are only morally obligated to provide their fair share of famine relief and, second, it will likely be the case that affluent persons should give more than their fair share, even though they are not morally obligated to do so.

Section One

Singer’s famine relief argument consists of three premises and a conclusion. The first premise states “that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are very bad” ([4], p. 784). The typical effects of starvation—suffering, the annihilation of capacities, and death—are inherent evils which could be relieved if not altogether prevented. Singer believes the truth of this first premise will be apparent to most everyone, so he sees no real need to defend it.

Though seemingly uncontroversial when examined cursorily, the second premise of Singer’s famine relief argument is by far the most ambitious and problematic. It consists of two principles, or rather, two versions of the same principle. The first, or strong, version states, “if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it” ([4], p. 784). The second, or moderate, version of the same principle states, “if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing

anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it" ([4], p. 784). An examination and critique of this premise will take up a significant portion of this paper, so I will pass over it for now and continue on to the next premise.

The third and final premise states that because we are affluent, we have the ability to relieve or, if enough people fulfill their obligations to famine relief, even prevent starvation. For Singer, being affluent simply means that "we have income we can dispose of without giving up the necessities of life" ([5], p.69). Our affluence, then, renders us able to help, a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for our being morally obligated to provide relief.

The conclusion to Singer's famine relief argument states that the affluent are morally required to alleviate famine. Depending on which of the two principles we go by, how much affluent persons are obligated to give will vary. If we go by the strong principle, then affluent people are morally obligated to give as much as they can without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance. If we go by the more modest principle, affluent people are morally required to give as much as they can without sacrificing anything of moral significance.

Accepting Singer's conclusion would require that we reevaluate and radically alter the way we think about issues of charity, famine relief, and moral obligation. If his conclusion is true, in most instances giving to famine relief organizations would be morally mandatory. Yet this view is at odds with the way that most of us think about giving aid to famine relief organizations. Most people perceive such donations as supererogatory, that is to say, making such donations is praiseworthy, but there is nothing wrong with not doing so. According to Singer, donating to organizations such as Oxfam and UNICEF should not be considered an act of optional charity, unless those donations entail a sacrifice that is either morally significant or of comparable moral importance to the prevention of famine-related death and suffering (depending on which version of his principle you adhere to). Conversely, according to Singer's argument, the omission of these obligatory donations would merit moral condemnation. One of Singer's most controversial points is that almost any act of purchasing a luxury item is simultaneously an omission of making obligatory donations. It follows from this that buying luxury items is morally wrong in most circumstances.

Now that we have been confronted by Singer's argument, the only way to avoid radically altering our conceptions of charity and famine relief is to demonstrate a significant weakness in one or more of the premises of Singer's famine relief argument. Yet, it seems difficult to

impugn either the first or third premise. Any attempt to deny the first would be morally callous at best. It seems equally difficult to deny the truth of the third premise: that many of us in the Western world have more than we need to survive. We would be hard-pressed to deny the fact that we fit the bill. If Singer's conclusion is to be rejected, it seems one must provide a satisfactory argument for denying the second premise. Before making such an attempt, it will be helpful to develop a deeper understanding of the thought behind both versions of Singer's principle and the implications that go along with each version.

Either version of Singer's principle claims that in certain situations affluent persons have a moral obligation to help those in desperate need, even if they have done nothing to cause or contribute to the misfortune of those they ought to help. Although each version uses different terms to define the level to which affluent people are obligated to provide help, both versions call for a drastic reconfiguration of our traditional moral categories. Roughly put, our traditional moral categories have consisted of (A) a zone of moral obligation, (B) a zone of supererogation, and (C) a zone of moral indifference ([2], p. 20). Under category (A) fall our moral duties, obligations, and requirements (I use the terms interchangeably). If I have a moral obligation to perform an action, my performance of it is right or good and my omission of it is wrong or bad. However, by performing the action, I have done nothing that merits praise, for I have merely fulfilled a duty. Likewise, my behavior is morally blameworthy if I fail to perform a moral obligation.

Category (B) contains all acts of supererogation. If an action is supererogatory, then my performance of it is praiseworthy. However, if I refrain from performing the action, I have done nothing blameworthy. According to our conventional moral scheme, donating time or money to famine relief projects is usually thought of as belonging to this category.

Finally, category (C), or the zone of moral indifference, contains all actions that have no inherent moral worth. These might be said to be amoral actions, that is, they are neither right nor wrong. If an action is an amoral action, neither my performance nor my omission of it deserve moral praise or blame.

In weighing the second premise's implications, it becomes clear that Singer's argument is nothing less than a polemic against our conventional moral views, especially those regarding the relation of charity and moral obligation. If Singer's second premise is true, then "the traditional distinction between duty and charity cannot be drawn, or at least, not in the place we normally draw it" ([4], p. 787). In other words, a large part (if not all) of what we have traditionally viewed as

falling under the zone of supererogation must, according to Singer's argument, now fall under the zone of moral obligation. Thus, whereas the act of giving to Oxfam or UNICEF was once an act whose performance was considered praiseworthy and whose omission was not thought to be blamed, now this same act's performance is not praiseworthy, but its omission is condemnable.

To determine the extent to which our moral categories must be altered with respect to each version of Singer's principle, it is necessary to examine each version individually. Let us begin with the strong version, since this is the one Singer believes to be correct ([4], p. 790). Again, the strong version states that we are morally obligated to prevent something very bad from happening unless doing so would require us to sacrifice something of 'comparable moral importance' or 'comparable moral significance' to the misfortune our sacrifice would relieve. Taken within the context of Singer's argument, we know that affluent persons are at least morally obligated to make sacrifices for the sake of those who are starving, so long as those sacrifices are not of equal or greater moral importance than the moral atrocity of famine-related death and suffering.

Singer suggests that the strong principle requires "reducing ourselves to the level of marginal utility" ([4], p. 790). By this Singer means that, if I am affluent, I must give to the point whereby my dependents and I would suffer as much as the person(s) I help ([4], p. 790). That is, I am obligated to reduce myself "to very near the material circumstances of a Benagali refugee" ([4], p. 790). Of course, it would be easy to imagine mitigating circumstances in which giving that much would decrease the overall amount of help an affluent person is able to provide. It might be the case that the act of quitting my job in order to devote myself wholeheartedly to the cause of famine relief would not be of comparable moral significance to the prevention of famine-related death and starvation. Yet, if I could more effectively prevent death and starvation by keeping my job (and using my salary as a means of contribution) than by quitting my job, then it seems reasonable that I should not quit.

Singer argues that the strong version of his principle leads to marginal utility because the amount of help needed in Third-world countries drastically outweighs the amount of help that is likely to be provided. Were every affluent Westerner to donate a small amount of time and/or money to famine relief, the prevention of unnecessary death and suffering among Third-world countries would not require affluent donors to be reduced to the level of marginal utility. However, since most will not give, those who do must consider the probable failure of others when determining the amount of their donations. Until

a sufficient number of other affluent persons participate in famine relief, those who do ought to keep giving until they reach marginal utility.

According to the strong version of Singer's principle, almost any possible donation to famine relief falls under the zone of moral obligation and not that of supererogation, so long as the donation would not reduce one below the level of marginal utility. Singer argues that the category of moral obligation encompasses many kinds of acts which are generally thought to fall elsewhere in the traditional moral scheme.

It is apparent that the strong version of Singer's principle would greatly affect the types of acts which fall under our traditional zone of moral obligation. However, what we are to do with the zone of supererogation is not nearly so clear. At the least, the strong version would have us redraw the line dividing the zones of obligation and supererogation, whereby a significant number of acts and kinds of acts regarding famine relief contribution shift from the zone of supererogation to that of obligation. Alternately, Singer suggests the possibility that the zone of supererogation will evaporate altogether. If this were the case, there would be no such thing as a charitable act.

The strong version of Singer's principle also contradicts traditional moral views regarding the zone of indifference. According to the traditional moral scheme, most of our actions are morally indifferent. If the zone of moral indifference did not exist, we would have to weigh even the slightest, most trivial matters up against our moral obligations in determining our course of action. But, for most of us at least, morality does not play such a pervasive role in our lives. As with the zone of supererogation, the strong version of Singer's third principle either greatly diminishes the vast size of the zone of moral indifference or eradicates it altogether. For example, according to the conventional moral scheme, if I were to buy a mountain bike, my purchase would be a morally neutral act, falling under the category of moral indifference. If we accept Singer's strong principle, such a purchase is actually a moral failure on my part. If unnecessary famine related suffering exists somewhere in the world, the money I spend on a mountain bike is money I am obligated to donate to famine relief projects. By spending money on a mountain bike, I am simultaneously failing to fulfill my obligation to help famine victims.

Whereas the first or strong version of Singer's principle requires that we make any and all sacrifices that are not of comparable moral importance to unnecessary death and suffering, the second or moderate version of his principle requires that we make any and all sacrifices that are not morally significant. Though he fully endorses the strong

principle, Singer proposes the modest version “only in order to show that even on this surely undeniable principle a great change in our way of life is required” ([4], p. 790). Singer leaves the phrase “of moral significance” undefined, so it seems that he would have the reader come to an understanding of what this is on her own. As a result, the degree to which our conventional moral categories must be adjusted depends highly on one’s interpretation. While one person might believe that only by reducing her family income to the level of marginal utility would her sacrifice become morally significant, another person might believe that this goes beyond what is necessary. The latter might have, in her mind at least, larger zones of supererogation and moral indifference than the former.

As interpretations of the concept of “moral significance” will vary from person to person, so will the lines demarcating obligation and supererogation. Nevertheless, any reasonable interpretation will require a distinction which differs radically from the one drawn by conventional moral views. The zone of moral obligation will greatly expand, while the zones of supererogation and indifference will at least shrink some, and at most disappear altogether.

By now, the weight of the second premise’s implications should be abundantly clear. But on what basis is Singer establishing either of the second premise’s versions? Singer begins his defense with the now famous shallow pond example:

If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing. ([4], p. 785)

Singer argues that, because he can save the child at a relatively low cost, he has a duty, a moral obligation to do so, even though he has done nothing to cause or contribute to the child’s misfortune. If he saves the child, he has done nothing praiseworthy. On the other hand, if he fails to attempt to save the child, he deserves severe moral blame.

Just as a capable passerby is obligated to save the drowning child, Singer contends that affluent persons are obligated to help relieve famine-related suffering in Bengal. He argues that the differences in circumstance between the shallow pond example and the Bengal example are irrelevant in regard to his principle’s applicability. He addresses two points of difference between the two cases which a proponent of traditional or common-sense morality might cite in arguing that affluent persons have no obligation to provide famine relief: (1) the number of people who are in a position to help and (2) the

proximity of those who need help. Singer argues that neither of these differences affect our moral obligation to provide famine relief.

Singer's first point states that his obligation to save the drowning child is independent of the number of people who are near the pond and are capable of saving her. His obligation is the same whether he is the only person there or merely one among hundreds of capable people. Similarly, an affluent person's obligation to provide famine relief to Bengali refugees is the same, whether he is the only person in the world who can help or merely one among millions.

Singer's second point is that the geographical or social distance between Bengali refugees and affluent persons does not affect their obligation to help. Although in the past it was difficult to help a community on the other side of the world, we now live in a "global village." With the passing of time has come certain progress that enables us to help people from all over the world with relative efficiency. Technological advances in communication and travel have, first, enabled the media to keep us informed when such disasters occur and second, aided famine relief organizations in their ability to see to it that our donations reach their intended end.

Singer succeeds in showing that we have the ability to help. Yet "can" does not imply "ought". To ground the moral obligation that this point requires, Singer must assume the existence of a principle of impartiality. Denying such a principle would eliminate the possibility of having general obligations. In contrast to special obligations (those that I have to my family or community but that I do not have to certain strangers), general obligations are those that I have to another person independent of our relationship, prior acquaintance, previous agreements, etc. ([2], p. 25). Once a principle of impartiality is accepted, one can argue that we have a general obligation to help anyone in severe need, so long as we can do so without making an excessive sacrifice. Singer seems to assume a principle of impartiality rather uncritically, thereby making his argument vulnerable to rejection. If one denies the existence of a principle of impartiality, it is possible to reject, first, the existence of general moral obligations, second, Singer's second premise, and finally, Singer's conclusion.

I believe Singer is correct in assuming a principle of impartiality. Many if not most moral positions¹ appeal to an impartial moral perspective when trying to determine moral obligations. As James Fishkin points out in *The Limits of Obligation*, refusing to acknowledge a principle of impartiality would be troubling because "it would seem a denial to our common humanity not to admit some general obligations to perform actions on behalf of any other person, even a total stranger" ([2], p. 33).

Singer is not claiming that “we are all equally responsible for the welfare of everyone in the world” ([5], p. 77). He asserts that his argument would be consistent with a moral system exhibiting both special and general obligations. In many ways, then, my obligations to my family will take priority over my obligations to humanity in general. For example, if I can give one meal to either my starving child or an equally starving Bengali refugee, I am morally justified in giving the meal to my child because my special obligation to provide for my family overrides my general obligations. However, this is not the situation most of us find ourselves in. It is not a question of denying our starving children a meal for the sake of refugees on the other side of the world. Rather, it is usually a question of whether or not to buy our children new cars, stereos, and clothes. Singer argues that in circumstances like these, our special obligations have long been fulfilled and we are neglecting our general obligations to help those in desperate need.

Section Two

Regarding the shallow pond example, I accept Singer’s claim that the passerby ought, morally, to try to save the drowning child. I even accept his claim that the passerby has a moral obligation to do so. In certain circumstances, we should help others who are in desperate need, even if we have done nothing in the past to cause or contribute to their misfortune. Singer’s shallow pond example does a wonderful job of pointing this out. However, Singer is wrong to extrapolate either the strong or moderate version of his principle from the shallow pond example. I argue that both versions require too much from us. His conclusion should, therefore, be rejected.

So in what circumstances are the affluent obligated make a sacrifice if it will relieve famine-related suffering and death?² In an attempt to determine this, I will reexamine our moral categories and argue that there are two kinds of moral reasons: hard moral reasons and soft moral reasons. With this distinction in mind, I will argue, first, affluent persons are morally required to give their fair share and second, affluent persons have moral reasons to give more than their fair share if it is clear that others will not give what they should.

In section (I), I discussed our traditional moral categories. They include (A) a zone of moral obligation, (B) a zone of moral supererogation, and (C) a zone of moral indifference. Singer argues that we need to redraw the lines separating these three zones. In doing so, he fails to recognize an entire category of moral values. I argue that category (A) should in fact be subdivided into two distinct categories. I will call one of these new categories (A1), or the zone of hard moral

reasons, and the other category (A2), or the zone of soft moral reasons.

Category (A1) might be thought of in much the same way as we have thought of category (A) in the traditional interpretation of our moral categories. Hard moral reasons are those that amount to a moral obligation. Let us say that all acts which I have hard moral reasons (i.e., a moral obligation) to perform are ‘hard acts.’³ If X is a ‘hard act’ and if I perform X, while this is good or right, I nonetheless I have done nothing that merits praise since it is my duty to perform X. On the other hand, if I fail to perform X, then I have done something that merits severe moral criticism.

Category (A2) refers to moral reasons of a different sort – soft moral reasons. Whereas the hard moral reasons of (A1) imply a requirement to perform an action, the soft moral reasons of (A2) imply that, while there are moral reasons for me to act in a certain way, these reasons do not amount to a moral obligation. All acts that I have soft moral reasons to perform will be referred to as ‘soft acts.’ If Y is a ‘soft act,’ my performing Y is praiseworthy. However, if I fail to perform Y, this failure deserves moral criticism.

But what are some kinds of ‘soft acts’? In his article “Famine and Charity,” John Whelan describes a situation in which a man can easily open a door for an elderly woman whose hands are full. It is unlikely the elderly woman would experience any ‘very bad’ misfortune if the man fails to open the door for her, so most would agree that he is not morally obligated to help her. Nonetheless, he still has soft moral reasons to offer his assistance. If the man fails to do so, he deserves some moral blame. If he does help her, the man’s actions are morally praiseworthy.

In another example, Whelan contends that if “Blue goes out of his way to do a favor for Green, there is a moral reason for Green to express his gratitude to Blue, but he is not [morally] required to” ([6], p. 151). If Green does not thank Blue, Green’s actions are blameworthy. If Green does express his gratitude, his actions deserve praise.

The following table describes the appropriate moral response for performing and omitting an act of donation as it falls under each of the four moral categories:

	X=‘Hard Act’ (A1)	X=‘Soft Act’ (A2)	X=Supererogatory (B)	X=Morally Indifferent (C)
Perform action X	<i>not praiseworthy</i>	<i>(less) praiseworthy</i>	<i>(more) praiseworthy</i>	<i>not praiseworthy or blameworthy</i>
Fail to perform action X	<i>(more) blameworthy</i>	<i>(less) blameworthy</i>	<i>not blameworthy</i>	<i>not praiseworthy or blameworthy</i>

For the most part, this table is self-explanatory. However, the parenthetical ‘more’ and ‘less’ remarks which appear in some of the table’s cells do require comment. I argue that the omission of X when it is a ‘hard act’ of providing famine relief deserves more (or more severe) moral condemnation than the omission of X when it is a ‘soft act’ of providing famine relief. Likewise, performing X when it is a supererogatory act of providing famine relief is more deserving of praise than performing X when it is a ‘soft act’ of providing famine relief.

By omitting category (A2) from his conceptual moral scheme, Singer fails to recognize that there are kinds of acts which fall between (A1) and (B). I will argue that many of the kinds of acts which Singer claims are morally required are actually acts for which there are soft moral reasons for us to perform.

With these points regarding our moral categories in mind, let us consider the island metaphor L.J. Cohen presents in his article “Who Is Starving Whom?” In this metaphor, two agricultural communities reside on opposite sides of an island which is otherwise uninhabited by humans. Over the span of a year, due to factors such as the differences of climate and soil fertility, one community prospers while the other faces starvation. Having learned this, a member of the richer community calculates the total amount of aid needed by the poorer community to avoid starvation. He then calculates each person’s fair share of the total amount of aid. Although everyone in the richer community realizes the seriousness of the other community’s plight, some give their fair share and some do not. As a result, the poorer community has less than it needs to survive and a number of people starve to death.

Cohen asks, ‘Who is morally responsible for the deaths of the poorer community?’ Is it group (1), those members of the richer community who give their fair share and no more, even though they realize that not everyone will contribute as they should, or group (2), those members of the rich community who know how much they should give, but still give nothing at all? Or is neither (1) nor (2) responsible, since they have done nothing to cause or contribute to the misfortune of the poorer community? Or are both groups responsible, but to varying degrees?

Cohen argues that the fault of the individuals of group (1) is minor and that they should not be held responsible for the death and starvation of the poorer community. The responsibility for the death and starvation, he contends, falls on group (2). While the richer community is collectively responsible for giving whatever amount is

necessary to prevent starvation in the poorer community, each member of the richer community is not obligated to do whatever is necessary to prevent these deaths. Instead, because the necessary rescue-task is a divisible one⁴, each member is only obligated to give his fair share.

Other philosophers disagree with Cohen's divisible conception of duty. One such objection can be found in James Rachels's article "Killing and Starving to Death." Rachels describes a situation in which two bystanders—whom I will call O and A—are confronted by two starving children. Bystander O gives both children nothing. Bystander A, on the other hand, feeds one of the children, but then refuses to feed the second child, claiming that it is O's responsibility to do so. Rachels argues that this example "illustrates the fallacy of supposing one's duty is only to do one's fair share, where it is determined only by what would be sufficient if everyone else did likewise" ([3], pp. 162, 163). So who is right? Cohen or Rachels? It seems that if we side with Rachels, we commit ourselves to the slippery slope leading to Singer's position. On the other hand, if we side with Cohen, we open ourselves up to criticism of the sort presented by Rachels. That is to say, we are arguably callous in claiming we are only morally required to give our fair share, even when doing so allows for unnecessary death and suffering.

The position I offer in this paper is a compromise between Cohen's and Rachels's. I argue that there are hard and soft moral reasons for the affluent to provide famine relief. Affluent persons have hard moral reasons to give their fair share, which is to say, they are morally obligated to do so. Beyond this, they are not required to give anything. The amount of a person's fair share is contingent upon several variables: for instance, factors such as the amount of aid needed to prevent famine-related death and suffering, the number of other people who are in a position to help, and the degree of an individual's affluence relative to the affluence of others will all play a role in making such a determination.

Whatever the actual amount of one's fair share is, it is self-evident that there will be a serious remaining need when enough people do not give their fair share to the rescue-task of famine relief. If this need is not met, human beings will continue to suffer and die. I argue that if I give my fair share to famine relief, but others do not, and the remaining need is serious, then I have soft moral reasons to give more. Even though these moral reasons do not amount to an obligation, I am morally blameworthy to refrain from giving more when I know others will not contribute. If, on the other hand, I act on these soft moral reasons and continue to give, my behavior deserves moral praise.

In actual cases of famine, the majority of affluent persons do not

give their fair share. As a result, there is usually a serious remaining need much greater than one person can satisfy. So the question presses—when do the soft moral reasons for giving more to famine relief cease? When is it permissible to stop giving?

One limit on these kinds of soft moral reasons is determined by the amount a person can give without putting his or her survival at risk. One cannot have soft moral reasons to give away his or her life's necessities. Another boundary on these soft moral reasons is determined by the rescue-task's remaining need. When this need is fulfilled or no longer serious, there are no longer soft moral reasons to keep giving. Therefore, if I am affluent and I know that others will not contribute, I have soft moral reasons to continue giving until at least one of the following conditions is met: (1) the remaining need is either satisfied or no longer serious and (2) I am unable to give more without jeopardizing either my survival or the survival of my dependents.

One might interpret this to mean that whenever famine is present somewhere in the world, affluent people will have to sacrifice every luxury item to avoid moral blameworthiness altogether. While this is correct, its failure to distinguish between the kinds of blameworthiness attending the omissions of 'soft acts' allows for a degree of misunderstanding. A person can refrain from practicing such an ascetic lifestyle and still merit only a trivial amount of moral blame, provided she gives her fair share and then some.

The character of a person's blameworthiness for omitting a 'soft act' is largely context-dependent. In Rachels's example, because A knows that O will not give his fair share, there are powerful soft moral reasons for A to feed the second starving child. This does not mean that, if neither A nor O feeds the second child, their moral blameworthiness will be equal. Whereas A fails to perform a 'soft act,' O fails to perform a duty. Both A and O are to blame, but not equally so.

For a contrasting example, let us return to Cohen's island metaphor. But now imagine that there are a hundred members in both communities. Ninety-nine members of the richer community give their fair share. Though he knows he should, one person does not contribute. His failure results in the death of one member of the poorer community.

As in Rachels's example, the rescue-task in Cohen's example is divisible. I argue that in all instances in which the rescue task is divisible, the blameworthiness is to be divided among those who have committed a moral shortcoming. In Cohen's example, the blameworthiness for failing to complete the rescue-task should be divided among the richer community members. Cohen would disagree, claiming that the blame should fall solely on the shoulders of the

person who did not contribute. I argue, instead, that while this person deserves a majority of the blame, because it was clear that he would not contribute, all other members of the richer community are to a lesser extent morally blameworthy as well.

Conclusion

Singer's argument demonstrates that we need to reevaluate our traditional moral views regarding charity to the distant needy. He also goes a long way toward showing that we do have moral obligations to help such people. However, the requirements set forth by the two versions of his principle are excessive. The fault of his argument becomes clear when we appreciate a crucial distinction between Singer's shallow pond and Bengali famine. Whereas the rescue-task in the shallow pond example is not divisible, the rescue-task in the case of Bengali famine can and should be divided among affluent persons. In contrast to Singer's conclusion, I argue, first, that there are hard moral reasons (which amount to a moral obligation) for us to contribute our fair share to the divisible rescue-task of famine, and second, that there will likely be soft moral reasons to give even more. Failure to give my fair share is a severe moral shortcoming. And failure to fulfill at least some 'soft acts' can be a severe moral shortcoming as well. However, just because there are moral reasons to give beyond my fair share does not mean that I should give every time a 'soft act' presents itself. Rather, it seems that I ought to give beyond my fair share from time to time and in such a way that I am not objectionably selfish. The more I do this, the better person I become.

NOTES

1. Fishkin cites Rawl's "original position," the classical utilitarian's "sympathetic spectator," and the Golden Rule as examples of moral positions which appeal to general obligations and a principle of impartiality.
2. Clearly, there are many 'very bad' things in the world other than famine. However, for the sake of brevity and because famine is a salient case of a 'very bad' thing, this paper will focus only on famine as a kind of 'very bad' thing which we have moral reasons to prevent.
3. I use the word 'hard' in 'hard acts' not to describe the difficulty of performing such an action, but to describe the kinds of moral reasons there are for performing the action. Likewise, I use the word 'soft' in 'soft acts' in the following paragraph.
4. An example of a non-divisible rescue-task is a modified version of the shallow pond example in which there are two bystanders. Here, the task of rescuing the single child from the pond is non-divisible; if neither of the two

bystanders try to save the child then their guilt is not divided. Each of them is just as guilty as he would have been if he were the only bystander.

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