Singer’s Argument for the Moral Duty to Give to Famine Relief

1. If it is within your power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, you ought, morally, to do it.

2. People are suffering from lack of food, shelter, and medical care around the world, and this is bad.

3. Others are not donating enough money to famine relief to prevent this suffering; however, if you donated all (or most) of your disposable income to famine relief, this would prevent this suffering.

4. By donating all (or most) of your disposable income to famine relief, you do not cause anything comparably bad to happen, or do something that is wrong in itself, or fail to promote some moral good.

5. Therefore, you have a moral obligation to donate all (or most) of your disposable income to famine relief (i.e., you are behaving immorally if you don’t do this).
Moral Duty vs. Supererogation

• You are **morally obligated** to do X means that if you do X, you do what is morally good, and if you don’t do X you do something morally bad. E.g., you are morally obligated to drive your car with care when pedestrians are around. If you drive with care when pedestrians are around, you do something morally good; if you don’t drive with care when pedestrians are around, you do something morally bad.

• Doing X is **supererogatory** means that if you do X, you do something morally good, but if you don’t do X, you don’t do something morally bad. E.g., if you give someone a lift in your car to the supermarket, you have done something morally good, but if you don’t give someone a lift to the supermarket, you haven’t done anything morally bad.
Where to Draw the Line between Moral Duty and Supererogation

Standard division

**Duty**
- Not to commit murder
- Giving disposable income to famine relief/charities

**Supererogation**
- Sacrificing one’s own life to save a stranger

Singer’s division

**Duty**
- Not to commit murder
- Giving disposable income to famine relief/charities

**Supererogation**
- Giving disposable income to famine relief/charities
- Sacrificing one’s own life to save a stranger
Objections to Singer’s Argument

- **Objection**: We are not morally obligated to help those who are not members of our community.

- **Singer’s reply**: there is “no possible justification for discriminating on geographical grounds.”

- **Objection**: Simply because others are not doing their ‘fair share’ doesn’t mean I am morally obligated to do more than my fair share.

- **Singer’s reply**: “Should I consider that I am less obliged to pull the drowning child out of the pond if on looking around I see other people, no further away than I am, who have also noticed the child but are doing nothing?”

- **Sidgwick/Urmson objection**: Morality should not oblige what is beyond the capacity of ordinary people, for otherwise there will be a general breakdown of compliance with the moral code. A morality fit for saints will not be followed by ordinary people.

- **Singer’s reply**: (a) the possibility that requiring everyone to give much (if not all) of their disposable income to famine relief will cause a general breakdown of moral behavior is “remote”; (b) and even if this shouldn’t be require of everyone, it doesn’t mean that “we ourselves” are not required to give much (if not all) of your disposable income to famine relief.