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ASKING TOO MUCH

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I: The Severe Demand

Most of us think that it can be wrong not to help someone in chronic need — someone whose life you could easily save, say. And many of us find it hard to see how the remoteness of needy people, either physical, social or psychological, should make a difference to this. Maybe it makes a difference to how wrong it is not to help, but it is hard to see how it can make a difference to whether not helping is wrong.¹

This line of thought is unsettling. I think it is one of the main reasons why many of us feel uneasy about enjoying plenty in a world in which there are large numbers of people in desperate poverty. Of course, there are many ways in which it might be challenged.² I

¹ The seminal presentation of this argument is Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence and Morality". For a different version, see my "International Aid and the Scope of Kindness", *Ethics* 105 (1994). In my view, the force of the argument does not depend on accepting a version of consequentialism: a criticism of Singer made by e.g. Colin McGinn, "Our Duties to Animals and the Poor", in Dale Jamieson (ed.), *Singer and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp.150-61.

² It might be held that remoteness does make a difference to whether not helping someone is wrong: see F.M. Kamm, "Famine Ethics: the Problem of Distance in Morality and Singer's Ethical Theory", in

think that all these challenges fail. However, I am not about to argue this here.³ Instead, I shall ask this: How demanding is the conclusion to which it leads?

It can seem that that conclusion is very severely demanding indeed. After all, if I have saved one person's life, but then come across a second who needs to be saved, it does not seem that I can excuse myself from helping the second by appealing to what I have already done for the first. As long as the cost of saving the second person is small, failing to save him would involve just the sort of callousness that would have been displayed in failing to save the first. Thus, it seems that I can only properly refuse to help a person when the cost of helping *that person* would be large enough to make it too much to ask of me. And if making a small donation to an aid agency really is morally comparable to saving someone's life directly, we should apply the same reasoning there. I am morally permitted to stop giving money – or time – to aid agencies only when I have given so much away that making one more life-saving contribution would by itself be a serious sacrifice for me — serious enough to excuse a refusal to save someone's life.⁴

Let us call the conclusion generated by this line of thought:

Jamieson, *op.cit.*, pp.163-208. Or it might be denied that giving money to an aid agency really should be thought of as helping distant people. Good starting-points for the literature on this second issue are George R. Lucas and Thomas Ogletree (eds), *Lifeboat Ethics: The Moral Dilemmas of World Hunger* (New York, Harper and Row, 1976), and William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette (eds), *World Hunger and Moral Obligation* (2nd edition, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall: 1996).

³ I have responded to the first of these challenges in "International Aid and the Scope of Kindness", and the second in "The Life-Saving Analogy", in Aiken and LaFollette, *op.cit.*, and "Pooled Beneficence", in Michael J. Almeida (ed.), *Imperceptible Harms and Benefits* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000).

⁴ Something is "morally permitted", I shall say, when doing it would not be wrong; it is "morally required" when not doing it would be wrong.

The Severe Demand.

I should continue to contribute to aid agencies increments of time and money each of which is large enough to allow those agencies to save a life, until either:

- (a) there are no longer any lives to be easily saved by those agencies, or
- (b) contributing another increment would itself harm me enough to excuse my failing to save any single life directly at that cost.

This is asking a lot of me. True, moral "common sense" seems to suggest that once a sacrifice is comparable to a serious long-term injury, it could be too much to ask of me, even to save someone's life. But, given how little the aid agencies tell us is needed to save a life, I would have to be extremely poor before giving up that amount would itself be comparable to a serious long-term injury.⁵ Indeed, the Severe Demand seems severe enough to make the pursuit of practically all sources of personal fulfilment morally impermissible.

The severity of this conclusion might make you reconsider the analogy from which it begins. But even if you think (as I do) that the analogy is forceful, you might still challenge the argument from it to the Severe Demand. You might claim that the moral requirement to help people at a distance applies to us *collectively*, and that I am individually required to do no more than discharge my fair share of that collective

⁵ *How little?* Oxfam has advertised \$40 as the cost of feeding one person in various countries in sub-Saharan Africa for six months. The cost of responding to easily treatable or preventable diseases is much smaller than this, as Peter Unger emphasizes in *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), Ch.1.

requirement.⁶ Or you might claim that the limitations of what we can be motivated to do limit what we can be morally required to do.⁷

In this article, I offer a different, and I think better, response. I argue that the Severe Demand ought to be rejected, even if these other objections to it fail. More importantly, I spell out the conclusion I think we ought to accept instead.

II: Impartial Rejectability

My case against the Severe Demand will be that it can be rejected from an appropriately *impartial* point of view.

It is not difficult to see how showing this could undermine the argument in favour of the Severe Demand. That argument makes an accusation of selfishness: it says that someone who fails to meet the Severe Demand is failing to give sufficient consideration to others' interests in comparison to her own. However, suppose it could be shown that the Severe Demand can be rejected from a point of view that is appropriately impartial between the interests of everyone affected by it — in particular, between my interests and those who stand to gain from my help. If so, I would be in a strong position to deny that, when I refuse to meet the Severe Demand, there is anything inadequate in the

⁶ See e.g. L. Jonathan Cohen, "Who is Starving Whom?", *Theoria* 47 (1981), pp.65-81, Dan W. Brock, "Defending Moral Options", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51 (1991), pp.909-913, and Liam B. Murphy, "The Demands of Beneficence", *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (1993), pp.266-92 and *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁷ See e.g. James Griffin, "Review of Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*", *Mind* 99 (1990), pp.129-31 and *Value Judgement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp.87-92.

consideration I give to others' interests. I may be giving them less consideration than my own; but I am not giving them inadequate consideration.

What is an *appropriately* impartial point of view for evaluating standards of consideration for other people's interests? Clearly, we need to go beyond the minimal sense in which we can say that a rule is impartial when it can be endorsed without intending to favour any particular affected party.⁸ (After all, outright egoism passes *that* test.) But how much further we should go is controversial. Equal Weighting Views say that my treatment of someone is impartially acceptable provided that form of treatment could be accepted from a point of view that weights everyone's interests equally.⁹ According to Priority Views, by contrast, impartiality requires us to give priority to the interests of the worst off.¹⁰

⁸ For this minimal definition of "impartiality", see the discussion of "pure impartiality" in John Cottingham, "Impartiality", *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London, Routledge: 1998), Vol.4, p.716; and Bernard Gert, "Impartiality", in Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker (eds), *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, 1st edition (Chicago: St James Press, 1992), Vol.I, p.600.

⁹ Many versions of consequentialism offer different Equal Weighting Views; Rawls is presenting a non-consequentialist variant in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹⁰ See Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), esp. pp.12, 65-74; and, for discussion, Derek Parfit, "Equality or Priority?", The Lindley Lecture (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1991), T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp.223-9, and David Brink, "The Separateness of Persons, Distributive Norms, and Moral Theory", in R.G. Frey and Christopher Morris (eds), *Value, Welfare, and Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.252-89.

My approach in what follows is to sidestep this debate. I shall argue that, on *any* plausible conception of the kind of impartiality appropriate to assessing standards of consideration for others' interests, the Severe Demand can be impartially rejected.

It might seem that this is bound to fail. If impartiality required giving priority to the interests of the worse off, wouldn't the only impartially acceptable policy be even stricter than the Severe Demand requires, requiring me to give away my resources until there is no one worse off than me? But it is important to see the question I am asking. Certainly, someone who refuses to meet the Severe Demand is not himself impartial between his own interests and those of others. But my question is whether that level of partiality is itself impartially acceptable. (Thomas Nagel calls this a "Kantian" question about impartiality.)¹¹ And to *this* question, I shall argue that the answer is Yes.

III: Reasons for Saving Life

Let me start by asking this: What is it about other people's lives that makes them worth saving, and makes it appropriate to demand that we should be concerned to save them? The argument for the Severe Demand relies on a straightforward and obvious answer to this question. It is in other people's interests to have their lives saved. What makes it wrong not to help other people at small personal cost is the disparity between what is at stake for me and what is at stake for them.¹²

¹¹ *Equality and Partiality*, pp.15-17 and Ch.5.

¹² According to a second kind of answer, life should be respected and preserved, independently of the benefits it brings to its possessors. Although the argument for the Severe Demand is committed to the first answer, it is not opposing this second one.

Next, let us ask this: What gives a person an interest in life? The simplest answer is that life is in itself something it is good for a person to have. However, this is not the only answer, nor, for most of us, the most important one. What is more important, for most of us, is that our lives are a means to the fulfilments that a well-lived life can contain. These fulfilments are the ones gained through possessing what we can call “life-enhancing goods”: goods whose possession makes a life better for the person who lives it.

Moreover, it is clear that other people’s interests in fulfilment give us reasons to help them independently of whether their lives are threatened. The fact that poverty threatens to kill some people is a powerful reason to help them. But it is not obviously more powerful than the fact that poverty stunts people’s lives, rather than merely shortening them. At least *part* of the morally compelling reason we have for responding to poverty is the way in which it damages the relationships, accomplishments, self-expression and other fulfilments that life offers.

Thus, the reasons we have to respond to others’ need – whether life-threatening or not – importantly include their interests in leading fulfilling lives. The case for the Severe Demand is grounded in this sensible claim. However, when it is conjoined with other claims to which the Severe Demand is committed, there is a serious problem.

IV: The Cost of the Severe Demand

The Severe Demand, I have said, makes the pursuit of practically all sources of personal fulfilment morally impermissible. Let us now examine the reason for this in more detail. The sacrifice involved would amount to more than just forgoing the extra enjoyments you

could have in spending more money on yourself. More seriously and significantly, it would mean compromising those “life-enhancing” goods that are the most important components of our lives: our friendships, participation in the life of our community and culture, our dedication to projects of understanding and personal achievement, and our development of personal excellences and skills beyond those which are instrumental to serving others' interests.

To appreciate this, ask yourself how your aiming to satisfy the Severe Demand would affect your commitments to such goods. It would mean governing those commitments with a distinctive – and, for most of us, distinctively damaging – form of self-surveillance. Consider your friendships. According to the Severe Demand, you are morally required to restrict your relationships until any further incremental restriction would itself be too much to ask of you to save a life. Although you could allow yourself to exhibit partiality towards your friends, you would have to be vigilant for opportunities to restrict these relationships. Any small restriction you could make, which would not by itself compromise these relationships substantially enough to excuse refusing to save a life, is one you would be committed to making. It is true that aiming to meet the Severe Demand would not itself commit you to the de dicto aim *to restrict my friendships as much as possible* — rather, it would give you the de dicto aim *to restrict my spending until any further incremental reduction would itself compromise the goods in my life enough to excuse refusing*. But having *that* aim would mean adopting an attitude of vigilant self-constraint towards your friendships, asking yourself whether the little time and money you are spending on them could be further restricted without significant sacrifice.

This point extends to other important sources of personal fulfilment, such as achievements. The sort of commitments to projects that are most life-enhancing involve dedication to a pursuit. No doubt, enjoyable pastimes qualify as life-enhancing goods, since enjoyment is life-enhancing. But achievements can also be life-enhancing in a different and fuller way, through filling up and defining a person's life. The attitudes that characterize a person who possesses goods of this fuller sort involve an aspiration to expand her contact with them, rather than to contract it as much as possible, in the way she would be doing if she were aiming to comply with the Severe Demand. This would not mean that she would be unable to live a life of personal endeavour at all. But it would deprive her of a kind of relationship to her endeavours that many of us think of as the one most worth having.

The kind of self-surveillance that would have to characterize the life of anyone who was aiming to follow the Severe Demand would give it a distinctive kind of structure. I shall refer to such lives as “altruistically-focused”. An altruistically-focused life is not one that precludes personal satisfactions and fulfilments altogether: the Severe Demand doesn't require that. But it is more than simply one in which personal commitments are constrained by overriding other-regarding goals. Rather, I have an altruistically-focused life if a guiding aim of mine is to constrict my pursuit of my own fulfilment as much as I bearably can, for the purpose of benefiting others. Lives that are not like this – those that have an overall non-altruistic focus, and those that lack a single overall focus (as most lives do) – we can call “non-altruistically-focused”.

For most of us, an altruistically-focused life would be less fulfilling than the non-altruistically-focused lives we actually lead. However, I doubt whether that is true of everyone. There are some people whose lives are orchestrated around projects of aid,

public welfare and community service to such an extent that their lives are altruistically-focused already. There is nothing preventing someone's life from containing goods of all of the life-enhancing kinds we have identified, focused around the core project of improving the lot of the worst off.¹³ Moreover, even for the majority of us for which living an altruistically-focused life would mean sacrificing our own fulfilment, *that* will not by itself be an objection to the Severe Demand. After all, surely we *are* required to make sacrifices in response to others' life-threatening need. So we have not yet stated the objection to the Severe Demand. However, we now have the materials to do so.

V: The Rejection of the Severe Demand

In the previous two sections, we have seen that the Severe Demand requires us to live altruistically-focused lives, and that it derives the case for this requirement from the importance of responding to others' interests in life. And we have seen that when we ask, "What gives a person the sort of interest in life to which we ought to respond?", one good answer is: "Her interest in the fulfilments of a well-lived life." But now let us ask this. Which kinds of life are such that other people's interests in the fulfilments they contain give me morally compelling reasons to help them – reasons that it would be morally

¹³ Elizabeth Telfer makes the point that it seems a necessary condition of friendship that it involves various kinds of shared activity, and not merely mutually appreciated benevolence: "Friendship", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 71 (1971), pp.223-4. (In doing so, she seems to advance beyond Aristotle's definition at *Nicomachean Ethics* 1155b28-56a5.) My point is that nothing prevents this shared activity from having the altruistic focus of many aid workers.

wrong for me not to act on? In particular, we can ask whether an interest in the fulfilments contained in a *non-altruistically-focused* life provides such a reason. This question generates a serious problem for the Severe Demand.

Suppose we say that other people's interests in the fulfilments contained in a non-altruistically-focused life do provide us with morally compelling reasons to help them. This leads to the following problem. According to the Severe Demand, it is *wrong* for us to lead a non-altruistically-focused life, given the current state of the world. So if the case for requiring us to save others' lives is grounded in the importance of responding to their interests in the fulfilments of a non-altruistically-focused life, it is invoking others' interests in getting what it is *wrong* to have as the reason for imposing this requirement on me. But that cannot be right. Someone else's interests in getting what it is *wrong* for him to have cannot be a good reason for requiring me to help him. If a gangster's gun jams, I ought not to help him fix it. Why not? Because the interests he needs help to further are not interests it is morally acceptable for him to further; and given this, they cannot be interests that it is morally acceptable for me to further either. They are the wrong kind of interests to count morally in favour of the actions that promote them. If the Severe Demand is committed to holding that leading a non-altruistically-focused life is wrong, then it must say the same thing about promoting someone's interests in leading such a life.

So consider the other alternative. Suppose a proponent of the Severe Demand holds that others' interests in the fulfilments of a non-altruistically-focused life do not provide morally compelling reasons for me to help them. It might still be claimed simply that we are required to respond to other people's interest in living as such, or to their interest in the fulfilments contained in an altruistically-focused life. What is wrong with this?

To this, the objection is simpler. Surely people's interests in the fulfilments of a non-altruistically-focused life *do* provide us with morally compelling reasons to help them. On a view according to which only the fulfilments of a non-altruistically-focused life give compelling reasons for us to help others, very few of the actual projects, aspirations and relationships of other people qualify as appropriate grounds for beneficent action. And that is absurd. Suppose that, by making some small effort – passing on a piece of information, say – I could reunite the members of a long-parted family. Or suppose some small effort of mine will determine whether a gifted student is able to pursue a musical career. Surely, the morally compelling reason I have for helping does not disappear if I know that the lives of the family members, or the music student, are not (as almost all people's are not) altruistically-focused.

The point I am making here is not simply that, if I help the family or the music student, they will go on to lead a life that, according to the Severe Demand, includes wrong actions. After all, on any plausible moral view, all lives include wrong actions. Rather, the objection is that the interests of other people to which clearly we ought to respond by helping them are themselves interests that the Severe Demand tells us it is wrong to pursue. And *that* is seriously problematic. I can be morally required to help people who are engaged in doing things that are wrong. I can even be morally required to help people to get the things they need in order to do what is wrong.¹⁴ But your interests

¹⁴ Example: I might have a duty to disclose a piece of information to you, even if you are going to use it to humiliate someone. (But if so, it is not *your interest in humiliating him* that gives me the morally compelling reason to help you – it is whatever grounds my duty.)

in doing something that is wrong are not the right kind of interests to provide me with morally compelling reasons to help you.

The result is a dilemma. A proponent of the Severe Demand cannot sensibly deny that non-altruistically-focused fulfilments provide morally compelling reasons for helping people: denying this would mean rejecting almost all of the actual requirements we recognize to respond to others' interests. But it cannot sensibly accept this either: as we have seen, that would mean violating the principle that another person's interest in obtaining what it is wrong to have cannot be a good reason for morally requiring me to act in that person's favour. So, either way, the Severe Demand must be rejected.

My argument against the Severe Demand has relied on the claim that *aiming* to comply with the Severe Demand would mean living an altruistically-focused life. This might look vulnerable to the following objection. Maybe aiming at fulfilling the Severe Demand is not the best way to fulfil it. What is to stop a proponent of the Severe Demand from simply accepting the argument I have given as an argument for not *aiming* at meeting the demand, while insisting that the demand itself is correct?

The point to notice about this objection, though, is that it does not challenge our substantive conclusion. That conclusion is that the case for the Severe Demand cannot provide good grounds for requiring us to live an altruistically-focused life. Suppose that, surprisingly, it could be shown that, although *aiming* to comply with the Severe Demand would mean imposing an altruistically-focused life on ourselves, actually *complying* with it does not. All that would show is that our label for this demand is a misnomer – that “the Severe Demand” does not in fact require a severe self-restriction. Our substantive conclusion would remain unaffected: other people's interests cannot provide morally compelling reasons for requiring us to lead altruistically-focused lives.

VI: Extending the Argument

We have reached a negative conclusion: the Severe Demand should be rejected. But our overall aim is to defend a positive one. What *is* morally required of us in responding to other people's interests?

We can answer this question by drawing on the argument so far. We have considered an extremely demanding standard of moral requirement, and have given grounds for rejecting it. Let us now ask this. What is the *least* demanding standard which can be rejected on the same grounds? How far can the earlier argument be extended?

I shall tackle this question by dividing it into two subsidiary ones. In this section, I shall ask which goods it is morally permissible or impermissible to pursue. In the next, I ask how much it is permissible to spend on those goods.

What does our argument against the Severe Demand tell us about the goods it is morally permissible to pursue? According to that argument, if other people's interests in living a certain kind of life are to ground requirements on us to prevent threats to their lives, then living lives of that kind must be morally permissible. It is easy to see how this kind of argument might just as readily be used to draw conclusions about the kinds of goods it is permissible to pursue, as about the kinds of lives it is permissible to live. If other people's interests in pursuing certain goods ground requirements on us to prevent threats to their lives, there will be the same argument for thinking that pursuing those goods must be permissible. However, if the pursuit of a certain good gives you an interest in continuing to live, then that good must be a life-enhancing good. Therefore, it is only

the pursuit of life-enhancing goods that is shown to be permissible by an argument of this kind.

However, that does not mean that spending on every life-enhancing good can be defended in this way. Remember: the Severe Demand has been rejected on the grounds that refusing to comply with it is impartially defensible. Thus, if there are any life-enhancing goods whose pursuit is not impartially defensible, the same strategy of argument will not succeed in defending them. The goods whose pursuit can be defended by means of an argument of this kind will be a subclass of life-enhancing goods: those whose pursuit is impartially defensible.

Without this restriction, we would seem to be heading towards a strikingly permissive conclusion. After all, it seems that, for someone who has structured his life around some expensive pursuit — amassing a great art collection, travelling the world exhaustively, amplifying the family fortune, or whatever — a fuller engagement with it will tend to make his life better. Allowing that the pursuit of every life-enhancing good is morally permissible would leave us with no effective upper limit to defensible personal spending — at least for those with enough personal ambition to fill their lives with expensive pursuits.

However, the pursuit of goods such as these is not impartially defensible. To see this, consider a common situation: you could pursue either of two different life-enhancing goods, but could not pursue both of them fully. Now suppose neither of the two would be better for you than the other, but one would be more expensive than the other. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to see how it can be impartially acceptable to permit you to choose the more expensive of the two. The alternative, after all, is to choose the cheaper of the two goods and use the excess resources to help other people. And, as far as I can see, the art collector and the custodian of the family fortune cannot credibly claim

that there is no alternative, cheaper alternative occupation which would be equally good for them.

This response to the permissive suggestion may seem to invite a challenge from the opposite direction. Does it not lead to the conclusion that the only defensible personal achievements are the very cheapest — or at least, those that allow one to do the most for other people? In particular, why does it not lead to the conclusion that the only form of achievement around which it is defensible to structure one's life is the saving of other people's lives — and that enjoyment, understanding and friendship are morally defensible only insofar as they are focused around this activity? Unless I wish to deny that a life of dedicated altruism can be just as rich in life-enhancing goods as others, am I not committed, in virtue of my rejection of the permissive proposal, to the claim that this is the only kind of life that is morally defensible?

No: this challenge has been answered already. It simply returns us to the proposal that we are morally required to lead an altruistically-focused life. And that must be rejected, for the reason I gave in arguing against the Severe Demand. This proposal must either absurdly ground the requirement to help other people in their interest in getting what it is wrong for them to have; or it must absurdly deny that others' interests in non-altruistically-focused forms of fulfilment fail to provide morally compelling reasons to help them.

Thus, we arrive at a two-part answer to the question which goods it is morally permissible and impermissible to pursue. An altruistically-focused life is morally defensible. However, given a choice between two rival altruistically-focused goods, I cannot defend choosing the more expensive if pursuing the cheaper would be no worse for me.

This conclusion needs one qualification. We can be morally required to replace expensive achievements or enjoyments with cheaper ones that are no worse for us.

However, this is much less plausible as a claim about goods such as friendship. A willingness to replace my friendships with cheaper ones that are no worse would involve a very unattractive detachment from my friends. Presumably, a relationship that involved this kind of willingness could involve a mutual affection that was enjoyable, and therefore good. But a willingness to abandon my friends for cheaper ones would deprive my relationship to them of the dimension of reciprocal *commitment* that characterizes a distinctive, further kind of life-enhancing good. If this is right, then our earlier argument suggests that a willingness of this kind cannot be morally required of us. Provided friendship of this fuller kind is itself permissible, then it must be permissible not to take that attitude towards one's friendships.

VII: Iterative versus Aggregative Approaches

We have a description of the goods on which some spending is morally defensible. Obviously, the next question is: How much? After all, even if there were only very few goods on which personal spending was permissible, there is no apparent limit to the amount of spending on those goods that could be of life-enhancing value to a person. Why not say that, for any life-enhancing good that it is morally defensible for me to pursue, *any* personal spending on it that increases its life-enhancing value to me is defensible?

We should not say this because it would allow me to refuse to give up any resources at all to save another person's life, as long as I could find some life-enhancing personal use for them instead. And nothing has been said here to support *that*. Although we have rejected the Severe Demand, we have done nothing to undermine the common-sense assumption at the start of the paper: that refusing to make any personal sacrifices to save

another person's life is morally wrong. There is no credible case for thinking that the requirement to save someone's life at small cost could be rejected from any impartial point of view that is appropriate to thinking about concern for others.

Moreover, nothing has been said to challenge the claimed analogy between saving a life directly and contributing to an aid agency. Instead, what has been shown is that we should not approach this analogy by iterating it until we reach the Severe Demand – that is, by holding that, for each needy person, it would be wrong for me not to help unless the cost of helping *that person* is large. The Severe Demand is the view that results from treating each person I could help as though he were the *only* person I could help. But we have seen that requiring me to go this far in responding to other people's interests is requiring me to live an altruistically-focused life; and that is something it does not make sense to require of me in responding to others' interests.

So: if we allow that there is a moral requirement to help very needy people at small cost, and if we allow that remoteness is morally irrelevant, but we deny that this requirement should be approached in the iterative way that generates the Severe Demand, how should we approach it instead? The alternative is to take what I call an “aggregative approach”. This denies what the iterative approach asserts: namely, that the overall sacrifice that can be required of me to help several people is the sum of the separate sacrifices that could be required of me to help each individual person on his own. On this second approach, we should ask not about the size of the sacrifice I need to make to save each person, but about the size of the aggregate sacrifice that would be involved in helping them collectively.

When we began, it looked hard to see how to justify taking the aggregative rather than the iterative approach. How, it was asked, can what I have done for others be relevant to what I can be required to do for the next person? But the argument presented above has given us an answer: to require me to regard this as irrelevant is to require me to

forgo goods that must be permissible if life is to be worth saving. The defensibility of pursuing these goods is itself the justification for rejecting the iterative approach, and accepting an aggregative approach instead.

This gives us the following answer to the question how much personal spending is morally defensible. We should accept the analogy between contributing to helping people indirectly through an aid agency and giving them direct life-saving help, and we should approach that analogy aggregatively. Thus, when my *overall* sacrifice, in contributing to aid agencies, is large enough to excuse refusing to save lives directly, my remaining personal spending is morally permissible.

How large is that? To answer this, I do not propose to go beyond the broad “common sense” view reported in the opening section. Small monetary sacrifices can be demanded of us, it is common to think, but not a permanent, life-impairing injury. Of course, to say that there is broad agreement on a “common sense” moral claim is not to defend it. Maybe further argument could refine it; maybe it should be rejected altogether.¹⁵ But I shall not pursue those possibilities further here. To see why that makes sense, step back and consider the overall structure of this discussion. We have been asking what conclusion is generated if we accept the assumption that it can be wrong not to save someone’s life directly at small personal cost – where this is understood in the broad “common sense” way – and we add that remoteness is morally irrelevant. Rejecting the Severe Demand, I have argued that we should not treat this “common sense” view as specifying the amount I am required to sacrifice to save each one of many needy people. Rather, I have argued, we should treat it as specifying the amount I am required to sacrifice in helping them collectively.

¹⁵ To appreciate how such an attack on “common sense” moral opinion might be developed, see Unger, *Living High and Letting Die*.

VIII: Conclusion

We should reject the Severe Demand. The conclusion I have argued we should accept instead can be summarized as follows:

I should continue to contribute to aid agencies increments of time and money each of which is large enough to allow those agencies to save a life, until either:

- (a) there are no longer any lives to be easily saved by those agencies, or
- (b) my overall sacrifice, with respect to those non-altruistically-focused life-enhancing goods that can impartially be defended as permissible, is significant enough to make it justifiable for me to refuse to save a life directly at that cost

— where a non-altruistically-focused life-enhancing good can impartially defended as permissible when either

- (i) there is no cheaper non-altruistically-focused alternative that it would be no worse for me to pursue, or
- (ii) a preparedness to abandon this good in favour of a cheaper alternative that is no worse would itself be life-impoverishing.

Notice the restricted scope of this conclusion. It is a conclusion about what we are morally required to do in response to other people's chronic need. I am not claiming that this is the *only* moral constraint that applies to our spending on life-enhancing goods. Far from it: there are many other moral constraints — constraints of justice, honesty, loyalty, gratitude, and so on — all of which we morally ought to observe as well. Moreover, notice that there is no obstacle to thinking that the constraints that are defensible in this

way might impose severe demands on us. (Consider, for example, the requirement to give up your life in a just defensive war.) The needs of other people are not the only source of moral requirements on our conduct. Moral requirements from other sources are not limited by the arguments given here.

How ought we to put this conclusion into practice? It might seem that I end up recommending a very unattractive life. Am I proposing that whenever someone walks around a supermarket, he should be pestering himself with the question whether forgoing this purchase in favour of a cheaper alternative would make his life significantly worse? That seems intolerable. A life consumed by thinking in this niggardly way would be thoroughly repellent.

It is important to see that the repulsion of this outlook is precisely why my argument does not entail it. For having this outlook would itself be life-diminishing. This is most obvious in relation to friendships, as we have already observed. The same point applies to the idea of constantly evaluating every purchase to decide whether it is dispensable. The problem with allowing this to monopolize your thoughts is that it would impair your receptiveness to genuine goods. Of course, that is a large part of the tragedy of poverty for the many people whom it afflicts. But that only strengthens the case for denying that it can be morally required of anyone.

My argument does not require a puritanical self-vigilance in relation to money; but if not, what deliberative policy does it require? The alternative is to assess your overall level of spending on yourself periodically, rather than continually. Doing so annually, for instance, would seem as sensible as any other interval. In doing so, you ought to review the amounts you have spent on yourself and given away over the past year, and ask yourself whether your life is being significantly compromised by your restriction in spending on yourself — focusing when you ask this on goods the pursuit of which is impartially defensible. "Significantly" means significantly enough to justify refusing to

save someone's life directly. If the answer is Yes, then there is nothing morally wrong in reducing the amount you give away. If it is No, it would be wrong not to give away more next year.¹⁶

It is true this asks more of us than most of us find comfortable. It is a demanding conclusion. But its demands are moderate, not severe. I cannot see how it could be asking too much.¹⁷

¹⁶ What about the possibility that you have spent exactly the amount required of you and no more? The unlikelihood of that will always make it unreasonable to believe. It will always be more reasonable to reduce your spending for the following year, and then assess whether this has made your life any worse.

¹⁷ Earlier versions of this essay have been presented at the Universities of Aberdeen, Adelaide, Dundee, Pennsylvania, CUNY Graduate Center, the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the ANU, and the 1999 Quotidian Ethics conference at the University of Cape Town. I am grateful to many members of these audiences for their comments (too many to list!), and to Brad Hooker, Keith Horton, Ian Hunt and Thad Metz for extremely helpful further discussion and correspondence.