Each year, millions of children die from starvation, malnutrition or easily-treatable illnesses. UNICEF estimates that in Niger and West Africa alone over a million children need to be treated for life-threatening malnutrition. It is relatively cheap to help: “Just £5 will help UNICEF feed a child for a week. With the right treatment, a child can recover in six weeks.” (http://www.unicef.org.uk Accessed 13.02.2012). If we take these figures at face value, then it seems as if we can save a child’s life for £30.

How should we respond to this fact? This may be one of the most important questions in applied moral philosophy. While few of us actually have to choose whether to kill in self-defence or when to go to war, if you are an ordinary member of an affluent nation, you face this question. How you respond is, quite literally, a matter of life and death. In addition to its huge practical import, the issue is of great philosophical interest. To answer it, we must confront apparent conflicts between some of our most firmly held moral beliefs. Our commonsense understanding of this issue seems to be full of contradictions.

The Extreme Demand
In November 1971, a young philosopher called Peter Singer wrote a very famous paper, “Famine, Affluence and Morality” (Philosophy & Public Affairs, Vol. 1, No. 3: 229-243). Singer argues that we need to radically revise our response to the facts about preventable death noted above. A typical person living in the West is morally required to respond to these facts by giving away around half of her money and assets to organisations like UNICEF. This is not something that it would be “nice” or “admirable” for us to do. It is not an optional extra.

Singer argues that we need to radically revise our response to the facts about preventable death noted above. A typical person living in the West is morally required to respond to these facts by giving away around half of her money and assets to organisations like UNICEF.
It is a moral duty and we are doing something very wrong if we fail to live up to that duty.¹

Singer's conclusion is radical, but his argument is relatively simple. He claims that we all intuitively agree with the following principle: "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (Singer, p. 231). I'll call this Singer's principle. Singer claims that his principle is supported by the following case:

Pond: You are on your way to work when you see a child drowning in a pond. If you do not stop and pull her out, she will die (Singer, p. 231).

You clearly must pull the child out of the pond. You are required to do so even if this will be quite costly to you. You must save the child even if you will ruin your expensive new shoes, miss an important business meeting or even risk some physical harm, such as a broken leg. These costs pale into insignificance when compared to what the child stands to lose - his life.

The life of the child dying of poverty is no less important than the life of the child in the pond. So you are morally required to save him too, even if it costs £30. But then there is another child to save, and another, and another. You must keep giving away money and saving children until you stand to lose something of comparable moral importance. You must give away most of your money. This has come to be known as the Extreme Demand.

Of course, if everyone in the West gave away most of their money, this might cause more harm than good. Singer is looking at what an individual must do in the current situation, knowing that most people are not going to do much to save the starving. Because most people do so little, the morally conscientious individual must take up the slack.

Singer's argument was later developed by Peter Unger (Living High and Letting Die, Oxford University Press, 1996). Unger noted that many people are unconvinced by Singer's appeal to the Pond case. Although the Pond case seems to support Singer's Principle, other cases seem to contradict it. Consider:

Envelope: you receive a letter from UNICEF asking you to place as much as you can in the handy return envelope and donate it to be used to save the lives of children who will otherwise die soon (Unger, p. 9).²
According to most people, you don’t do anything wrong if you throw the letter straight in the bin. This suggests that we do not intuitively believe Singer’s principle. Unger concludes that Singer’s argument is incomplete. To complete the argument, we must show that our intuitive reaction to the Envelope case is wrong.

Unger attempts to do this by arguing that there is no morally relevant difference between Pond and Envelope. If there is no morally relevant difference between the cases, then the same moral requirements should apply in both cases. If you are required to help in Pond, you are required to help in Envelope – and in all the subsequent Envelope cases. Those who want to deny Singer’s conclusion must say that you are not required to help in Pond. Almost no one is happy to say that.

Unger considers which features we might appeal to when trying to explain why we are required to help in Pond but not in Envelope. Some people appeal to proximity: “The child in Pond is right there in front of you!”). Others suggest that it matters whether you are the unique potential saviour or one of many potential saviours: “You’re the only one who can save the child in Pond!”

Unger uses two strategies to convince us that each candidate distinction is not morally relevant – and thus cannot ground a difference in our obligations. First, he appeals to our intuitive reactions to particular cases. Second, he appeals to what he calls our “general moral common sense”, our views after reflection about whether the feature in question should make a moral difference (Unger, p. 28).

As Unger goes through a long list of candidate distinctions, I cannot consider all his arguments. I will focus on his discussion of proximity.

**Proximity 1: Intuitions About Cases**

In Pond, the child is very close; in Envelope, he is far away. Could this explain why we think you have to help in Pond but not in Envelope? To try to show that proximity cannot explain the difference in our intuitive reactions, Unger asks us to consider a Pond-type case where we are far away from the person who needs help:

- **CB Radio**: The child is drowning in a sinking boat ten miles away. He manages to get through to you on your CB Radio. You are able to determine his location and could drive to him and rescue him (Unger, p. 34).
I will argue that proximity is morally relevant. The core of my argument is that this moral relevance must be assessed from within an understanding of the need for a restricted requirement to aid.

Intuitively, you are still required to save the child—even if this will be quite costly to you. Unger also asks us to consider an Envelope-type case where the people who need help are close to you.

Bungalow Compound: You arrive at your holiday bungalow to find an appeal from a local charity, accompanied by a handy return envelope, asking for money to save the sick children next door (Unger, p. 34).

Unger suggests that, intuitively, Bungalow Compound is just like Envelope. You do not have to help the children.

So, Unger says, it cannot be proximity that explains the difference between our reactions to Pond and Envelope. In a Pond case without proximity you are still required to help. In an Envelope case with proximity, you are not required to help. Our intuitions about cases treat proximity as morally irrelevant.

I do not think that Unger has shown that our intuitive reactions to cases treat proximity as morally irrelevant.

First, there might be more than one morally relevant factor. In CB Radio, even though you are far away from the drowning child, you have spoken to him. You have had a personal encounter with him. Perhaps you have to aid if either you are close by or you have had a personal encounter with the victim. CB Radio does not show that distance is morally irrelevant.

Second, I do not think Unger is right that Bungalow Compound is intuitively morally equivalent to Envelope. It is not okay to sit beside your pool, sipping a piña colada, knowing that the children are dying next door and doing nothing to help. However, I think that the requirement to help is affected by the fact that there is an ongoing stream of nearby children who need your help. The case is equivalent to a version of Pond in which you see a drowning child every time you step outside. You are not required to keep making big sacrifices every time you face this kind of appeal. But you do have a stronger obligation to help these children than you would have had if you had stayed at home.

Proximity 2: General Moral Common Sense
I have suggested that Unger has failed to show that our intuitive reactions to cases are not affected by proximity. However, Unger believes that many of our intuitive reactions to particular cases are unreliable. What matters is whether a factor should make a difference to our obligations.

Unger suggests that reflection will show that proximity should not make any difference to our obligations: "... unlike many physical forces, the strength of a moral force doesn’t diminish with distance. Surely, our moral common sense tells us that much" (Unger, p. 33).

It does seem strange that proximity should make a moral difference. Why should the fact that someone happens to be far away mean that we do not have to help him?

I will argue that proximity is morally relevant. The core of my argument is that this moral relevance must be assessed from within an understanding of the need for a restricted requirement to aid. Unger has misunderstood the moral significance of factors like proximity. Unger seems to start from an assumption that there is a default obligation to aid in all cases and then ask how that obligation could be diminished by features such as physical distance. This is misguided.

I suggest that morality needs to contain a requirement to make substantial sacrifices to aid in some, but not all, cases. Given the need for such a restricted requirement to aid, we need a criterion to distinguish between cases where agents are required to aid and cases where the agent is not required to aid. I suggest that proximity is appropriate to form such a criterion.

Why does morality need to contain a restricted requirement to aid? The reason that morality should contain a requirement to aid is obvious. It matters morally that children are dying. If a person can prevent a child’s death, she has a strong moral reason to do so. If morality did not contain any requirement to aid, it would fail to recognise the importance of human life.

So why must this requirement be restricted? Why can’t we accept Singer’s principle: "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (Singer, p. 231).

Philosophers have given several different arguments that the requirement to aid must be restricted. Some appeal to demandingsness. Morality cannot, as a matter of course, require us to make substantial sacrifices for others. A morality that makes such extreme demands as part of everyday life is simply too hard to live up to.

When considering this argument it is important to remember that we are talking about moral requirements not supererogatory acts. We are looking at what we are required to do to aid others, what it would be wrong to fail to do. We are not looking at what a morally perfect person would do. Singer and Unger claim that we behave wrongly if we do not live up to Singer’s principle.

Moral requirements should be something that it is generally reasonable to expect people to live up to.

My own argument for the restricted requirement is slightly different. It is based on what is needed for a person’s body and other resources to genuinely belong to her. Suppose that before using “my” car I must check to see if anyone else needs it more than me. In this case, it is not really my car. For
a resource to genuinely belong to me, it must be, substantially enough, at my use and not at the use of others. This applies to my body as well as to other resources.

This does not mean that I can never be required to use my body or other resources to prevent harm. A car can still belong to me if I must use it to drive someone to the hospital if they have a heart attack right in front of me — even if this will seriously damage the car. But if I am routinely required to give up the use of my car in ways that are very costly to me, then it is not really my car. For example, a requirement to spend all my time acting as an ambulance service whenever anyone in Hampshire has a heart attack does not treat my body or my car as genuinely belonging to me. Such a requirement treats my body and my car as common resources.

I suggest that a requirement to make substantial sacrifices to save in all cases like Envelope does not treat my body and other resources as genuinely belonging to me. Under such a requirement, I can expect to regularly have to give the use of my body and resources to others, even though this is very costly to me. My body and others' resources are not substantially enough at my use. However,
a restricted requirement to aid, in which we are required to make substantial sacrifices to aid only in certain rare cases, does leave my body and other resources substantially enough at my use.

I have not argued here that morality must recognise that a person’s body and other resources genuinely belong to him. Until this is established, the conclusion is conditional: if morality is to recognise that a person’s body and other resources belong to him, then the requirement to aid must be restricted. Nonetheless, the claim that this is my body in a morally significant way is very appealing. To show that my opponent must deny this is an important step forward.

This argument suggests that there should be a stringent duty to aid, and only in a small subset of cases. This should be a set of cases that we are likely to encounter rarely, if at all. However, if an agent does encounter such a case, she will be required to aid even if this will be very costly to her. We need some way of picking out the set of cases in which the agent is required to make such substantial sacrifices.1

I suggest that it is morally appropriate for the agent to be required to make substantial sacrifices to save strangers in those cases in which he is close to the victim. That a victim is near the agent makes the victim’s need strongly associated with the agent. As Frances Kamm observes, “we are locatable beings, positioned at the centre of our world” (Frances Kamm, Intricate Ethics, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 387.) This fact about our nature affects the way that we relate to the world, making what is physically close to us psychologically close too. These cases stand out from the general mass of opportunities to aid strangers because the agent seems strongly connected to the victim and his needs. It makes sense for the criterion for stringent duties to aid to be based on the connection between the agent and the victim or need. In taking such a criterion, morality shapes itself around the agent’s point of view.

I have looked at proximity, but as suggested earlier, I believe that there are other morally relevant differences between the Pond case and the Envelope case. I suggest that the agent will be required to make substantial sacrifices to aid in those cases, and only those cases, where he is strongly connected to the victim or need. Proximity is one factor that creates a close connection. Other factors, such as having had a personal encounter with the victim, may have the same effect.

I have argued against Singer and Unger. The Pond case cannot be used to show that a typical person living in the affluent West is morally required to give away around half of her money and assets to organisations like UNICEF. There are morally significant differences between Pond and Envelope. However, I do not want to argue for complacency. A requirement to make a non-trivial regular contribution in response to ongoing need is compatible with the arguments for the restricted requirement to aid. This requirement is not overly demanding. It leaves your resources for the most part at your own use. There are strong moral considerations in favour of such a requirement – for it could save lives. The issue is also complicated in that a significant part of the responsibility for the plight of many in extreme poverty can be laid at the door of more affluent nations, whether through the imperialist actions of the past or our current contributions to climate change. Thus efforts to prevent poverty-related deaths may be more properly seen as reparations than aid. Overall, it is likely that most of us should do far more than we currently do. My argument is simply that Singer and Unger fail to show that the Extreme Demand follows from the simple fact that there are preventable deaths. I include some useful contact details, for those who wish to increase their regular contributions to preventing deaths.

Useful Contact Details
- Singer’s organisation: The Life You Can Save (www.thelifeyoucansave.com)
- GiveWell (http://givewell.org/)
- UNICEF UK (www.unicef.org.uk)
- OXFAM (www.oxfam.org.uk)

Notes
1Singer’s work has not only generated huge amounts of philosophical discussion, it has also had an astounding real world impact. In the month after Singer gave this argument in the New York Times, UNICEF and OXFAM claimed to have received a total of about $660, 000 more than they usually took in from the phone numbers given in the piece. The estimated running total pledges of his organisation, “The Life You Can Save” at 17:41 GMT on 13th February 2012 stood at $62, 741 848.00. (www.thelifeyoucansave.com).
2I have made some adjustments to Unger’s original presentation of the case.
3The suggestion is that not each person should have to sacrifice a set, limited, amount over her lifetime to aid others. The sacrifices we can be required to make in Pond cases are greater than the total lifetime contribution to e.g. UNICEF required of most people. The requirement to make such substantial sacrifices in Pond cases is acceptable because most people are unlikely to ever encounter such a case.