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### The trouble with teaching ethics on trolley cars and train tracks

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# The trouble with teaching ethics on trolley cars and train tracks

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In this study, I investigate the beliefs of privileged adolescents about their obligations to those contending with hunger and poverty as well as the impact of ‘trolley problems’ upon these adolescents’ beliefs. To consider the attitudes of the young adults in this study, I draw upon their student writing from a course on social issues as well as survey and interview data collected at the start and conclusion of this course. I found that, for the privileged adolescents in this study, their consideration of a particular trolley problem actually decreased their sense of responsibility for countries and individuals contending with hunger and poverty.

## Introduction

In 2007, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) published a study (Kiesa *et al.*, 2007) that found many young Americans to demonstrate a lack of knowledge about how the political system works and uncertainty about how they could play a role in influencing political issues. The report concluded with a call to increase the availability of coursework on social issues at the secondary and post-secondary levels. In reaching this recommendation, the report’s authors observed that America’s adolescents and young adults ‘are hungry for a particular kind of conversation that is serious and authentic, involves diverse views, but is free of manipulation and spin. They want discussions that are open-ended in the sense that everyone is truly trying to decide what should be done’ (p. 32). In this paper, I report on a social justice course that offered its adolescent participants just such an opportunity for serious and authentic discussion. In so doing, I consider the impact of a particular pedagogical strategy—‘trolley problems’—upon the political engagement of these participants. Trolley problems are thought experiments in ethics that involve a runaway trolley bearing down upon an innocent victim or victims. A more thorough description of trolley problems is offered in this paper’s literature review and the utility of such problems is the focal point of this paper.

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## Research context

While Kiesa *et al.* (2007) called for more coursework on social issues, the scholarship on the effectiveness of such coursework is mixed. On the positive side, Torney-Purta (2002) reported that a study of adolescents across 28 countries revealed that, ‘The extent to which...elections and voting were emphasized in school classes and curriculum was a significant predictor of the likelihood of voting’ (p. 209). These findings supported earlier research by Almond and Verba (1963) across five different countries that found adults with the highest levels of political efficacy to be those exposed to discussions and debates of political issues during their schooling. Likewise, Galston (2001) reported that civic knowledge is a consistent predictor of civic participation and Niemi and Junn (1998) found civics courses to have a positive impact upon the civic knowledge of high school students.

Another group of scholars, however, report few lasting effects from such courses. Boss (1994) found college ethics courses to have little effect upon students’ moral development. In the USA an evaluation of National Educational Longitudinal Study data, collected between 1988 and 2000, Hart *et al.* (2007) reported that the relationship between civic knowledge and civic engagement is ‘relatively weak’ as is the relationship between civic knowledge and the amount of social science coursework taken in high school. These scholars concluded that civics courses were not a ‘cost effective’ means of promoting civic engagement.

Other scholars have focused on the most effective pedagogical strategies *within such courses* for increasing students’ political engagement. Goodman (2000) described the value of presenting students with statistics and data about institutional and cultural oppression. Hoehn (1983) detailed the power of perspective-taking through memoirs, biographies and novels. Ehman (1980) found that participants in multi-perspective social studies classes described higher levels of interest in politics and a higher sense of political efficacy than did students in single-perspective social studies classes. Finally, Niemi and Junn (1998) reported on the importance of discussion-based (rather than lecture-based) teaching strategies.

Another pedagogical tool used increasingly in courses on ethics and social issues are so-called trolley problems. The original trolley problem is attributed to British philosopher Phillipa Foot (1967) and reads as follows:

A trolley is running out of control down a track. In its path are five people who have been tied to the track by a mad philosopher. Fortunately, you could flip a switch which will lead the trolley down a different track to safety. Unfortunately, there is a single person tied to that track. Should you flip the switch? (pp. 8–9)

Variations of this original trolley problem have been offered by Thomson (1976), Unger (1996), Singer (2000) and countless others over the past 25 years. However, the research involving trolley problems has focused almost exclusively on understanding individuals’ *existing* moral intuitions rather than on the ability (or inability) of these trolley problems to *influence* individuals’ moral beliefs or actions (Appiah, 2008; Hauser, 2006). Investigating the influence of these trolley problems is a worthwhile endeavour because, in the past decade, philosophers such as Unger and Singer have published textbooks, journal articles and Op-Ed’s in which they draw

upon trolley problems to support their assertions about moral obligation. Several of these pieces have become mainstays on the syllabi of secondary-level and university-level courses on ethics, social issues and civics (Singer, 2000; Thomson, 1976; Unger, 1996). With this study, I consider the effect of such trolley problems upon individuals' beliefs about moral obligation.

## Research design

### *Site*

Glennview, USA<sup>1</sup> is an upper-middle-class suburban community located 15 miles southwest of Boston, Massachusetts. Glennview has a population of almost 14,000 people; a median family income of \$98,600; and the median home value is \$670,800. Glennview High School enrolls approximately 750 students between the ages of 13 and 18 years old and more than 90% will go on to enrol in university. Twelfth grade (17–18 years old) students at Glennview High School fulfil their English Language/Arts requirement by choosing two semester-long courses from among the English department's five course offerings: Creative Writing, Humanities, Youth in Contemporary Literature, African-American Literature and Literature and Justice. Students are randomly assigned by computer to take one of these selected courses during the fall semester and the other during the spring semester. Each of these courses has 20–30 students and is taught by a member of the Glennview High English department. The Glennview High School course catalogue offers the following description of the Literature and Justice course:

In this course students will examine the question, 'How do we determine what is just and unjust in the world in which we live?' Topics will include prison policy, juvenile justice, issues of poverty, such as homelessness and hunger, and illegal immigration. Students will explore issues of ethics, justice and obligation to others through various fiction and nonfiction works.

As is made evident in the short course description above, Literature and Justice sought to expose students to a number of social issues as well as to various political and philosophical perspectives on addressing these issues. However, the course did not advocate a particular philosophy, ideology or worldview. Rather, Literature and Justice sought to allow participating students to draw their own conclusions about the ethics of various social issues.

### *Sample and participants*

This study's experimental group consisted of the 40 Glennview High School students enrolled in two sections of the Literature and Justice class during the fall semester of the 2006–2007 school year.<sup>2</sup> All 40 students were 17- and 18-year-olds from the town of Glennview. All 40 were white and identified themselves as belonging to either the middle class or upper class. There were 21 males in the sample and 19 females. Twenty-five of these students identified as Catholic; five as Protestant; three as Jewish; two as Muslim; two as 'other'; and three as religiously unaffiliated.

This study's control group consisted of 43 Glennview High School students who had elected to participate in Literature and Justice but were randomly assigned to sections scheduled for the spring semester of the 2006–2007 school year. Thirty-seven students in the control group identified as white; one as African-American; and two as Lebanese-American. There were 23 males and 20 females and, like the experimental group, all 43 identified themselves as belonging to the middle class or upper class. Twenty-six students in the control group identified as Catholic; three as Protestant; four as Jewish; two as Muslim; two as 'other'; and six as religiously unaffiliated.

All 83 students in the experimental and control groups filled out initial and follow-up surveys. Additionally, I selected a purposeful sub-set of 21 students—10 Literature and Justice students and 11 control group students—to participate in interviews at the beginning and conclusion of the fall semester. In selecting these 21 students, I strove to construct an interview pool in which the two groups were highly similar to one another as well as representative of the larger sample in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation and class status. All students in this paper are referred to by pseudonyms.

#### *World hunger and moral obligation unit*

The Literature and Justice curriculum focused for approximately four weeks on the topics of world hunger and moral obligation. During this time, students examined statistics on infant mortality rates across the globe; viewed a documentary on poverty in Tanzania; and explored the website of a hunger relief organisation called Heifer International. Students also read pieces by philosophers Peter Singer and Ayn Rand on the issue of obligation to the less fortunate. Singer's essay was entitled '*The Singer solution to world poverty*' and Rand's was entitled '*The virtue of selfishness*'. Glennview students debated the perspectives of these two philosophers in class discussions and drew upon these texts and discussions to write their own 'philosophies of obligation'.

Singer and Rand represented opposing viewpoints on the issue of moral obligation. In *The virtue of selfishness*, Rand (1964) argues that individuals bear little or no obligation to people outside their inner circle of family and friends. She contends that affluent individuals will never be able to achieve their own goals if these goals 'must be sacrificed to any misfortune happening to others' (p. 33). In contrast, Singer (2000) asserts that individuals *do* have a moral obligation to reduce the suffering of others both nearby and faraway. To support this point, Singer offers a trolley problem he calls 'Bob and the Bugatti', paraphrased below:

Bob is close to retirement and has invested his savings in a Bugatti, which he has not been able to insure. One day Bob parks the Bugatti near the end of a railway siding and goes for a walk up the track. As he does so, he sees that a runaway train, with no one aboard, is running down the railway track. Looking farther down the track, he sees the small figure of a child very likely to be killed by the runaway train. He can't stop the train, but he can throw a switch that will divert the train down the siding where his Bugatti is parked. Then nobody will be killed—but the train will destroy his Bugatti.

Thinking of his joy in owning the car and the financial security it represents, Bob decides not to throw the switch. The child is killed.

Singer notes that most people condemn Bob's decision but that, 'Bob's situation resembles that of people able but unwilling to donate to overseas aid' (p. 120). From this analogy, Singer arrives at the 'inescapable conclusion' that individuals with wealth beyond their essential needs should be donating most of their income to organisations that 'help people suffering from poverty' (p. 123). He concludes his essay with the statement that, 'If we don't do it, then we should at least know that we are failing to live a morally decent life' (p. 124). In short, then, Rand argues that individuals bear no particular obligation to help others in need while Singer argues forcefully for such an obligation.

### *The literature and justice instructor*

Nancy Allington<sup>3</sup> was the instructor of the Literature and Justice course. The 2006–2007 school year represented Mrs. Allington's sixth year as a teacher at Glennview High School. She had graduated as an English major from a highly competitive American university and received a master's degree in English Education from another highly competitive American university. After her third year of teaching at Glennview High School, Mrs. Allington was awarded 'professional status' (or tenure) by the Glennview Public Schools, an indicator of significant confidence on the part of the school system in Mrs. Allington's expertise.

In an interview, Mrs. Allington explained that she hoped Literature and Justice motivated students 'to take action in their lives, whether it's some service or donating time or donating money or standing up for injustice, whether it's personal injustice or collective injustice.' Mrs. Allington also explained that one of her primary goals as the course's instructor was to ensure the course offered students a diverse set of viewpoints and perspectives. She asserted that, 'It's my intention to keep my views to myself as they relate to these issues.' According to Mrs. Allington, although students in Literature and Justice often questioned her about her views on the course topics, they had difficulty determining when she was expressing a personal viewpoint and when she was playing 'devil's advocate'.

As described in greater detail under the heading Data collection, I conducted 13 observations of the Literature and Justice course. My field notes from these observations support Mrs. Allington's claim that she both offered her students multiple perspectives on social issues and generally withheld her own beliefs on these issues. For example, in a class I observed on 21 December 2006, Mrs. Allington asked her students comprehension questions to ensure that they understood the previous night's reading from Ayn Rand's *The virtue of selfishness*:

- Allington: According to Rand, helping other people can interfere with your own goals. How?
- Student 1: It can stop you from making money.
- Student 2: Might need to put your own goals on hold to help someone else first.

- Student 3: What if your goal was to help others?  
 Allington: What would Rand say to that?  
 Student 3: She'd say you have low self-esteem.  
 Allington: Rand says we have a responsibility to ourselves. If we are concerned with helping strangers, we threaten our own morality. What does that mean?  
 Student 4: If you really want to help others, do what you really should be doing.  
 Allington: She says love and friendship are profoundly personal, selfish values. She says sacrifices for those you love are selfish. How?  
 Student 5: Selfish because you're doing it to help yourself.

In this discussion, Mrs. Allington practised what Simon (2001) referred to as 'pedagogical neutrality'. She worked to ensure that her students understood the thrust of Rand's philosophy rather than offering her opinion on the philosophy itself.

Mrs. Allington also sought to practise pedagogical neutrality during a class discussion on 18 December 2006. Preceding this discussion, students had watched a documentary about poverty and illness in Tanzania and Mrs. Allington then assessed her class's comprehension of the issues raised in the documentary:

- Allington: So just to reiterate, what's causing the deaths?  
 Student 1: The main reason is poverty.  
 Allington: Anyone remember how much they spend on healthcare per person in Tanzania?  
 Student 2: \$2 a day.  
 Allington: What causes diarrhoea/hunger?  
 Student 3: Mothers only have time to feed their children once a day.  
 Allington: What else?  
 Student 4: Lack of clean water.  
 Allington: All our water is highly filtered, but we'd get sick if we just drank from a nearby lake or river. What was the average income in Tanzania?  
 Whole class: \$250 a year.  
 Allington: What would it take to fix some of those health problems?  
 Student 5: \$20 million dollars. \$5 per kid a year.  
 Allington: What did the Red Sox sign their new pitcher for?  
 Student 6: \$100 million.  
 Allington: Interesting that in the film they juxtaposed hunger and the military. Why doesn't hunger get more media attention?  
 Student 7: Makes people feel bad. The tiniest water fountain could be like their holy grail. Makes me feel bad, spoiled.

Mrs. Allington's neutrality slipped a bit at the tail end of this discussion. Specifically, her question about the salary of a pitcher for the Boston Red Sox seemed to reveal her belief that more aid could be directed towards struggling countries such as Tanzania. Nonetheless, these field notes generally confirm Mrs. Allington's characterisation of herself as a moderator rather than a lecturer; she intervened at times to ensure that students comprehended the material, but generally sat back and allowed learning to take place through classroom discussions and debates.

*Data collection*

All 83 participants in this study completed surveys at the start of the fall semester in mid-September and again at the conclusion of the fall semester in late January. The survey consisted of demographic questions as well as questions intended to ascertain students' attitudes on the various social issues covered in the Literature and Justice curriculum. Each unit of the course constituted one section of the survey and each survey item utilised Likert scales in which 1 represented strong disagreement with the given statement and 7 represented strong agreement with the given statement. The survey items themselves were adapted from items on more than 15 existing surveys including the World Values Survey Questionnaire (Institute for Social Research, 2002), Americans on Foreign Aid and Hunger (Program on International and Policy Attitudes, 2001) and the International International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement Civic Education Study (1999). Both the pre- and post-surveys were administered in hard copy form during Literature and Justice class sessions and took students approximately 20 minutes to complete.

I also selected a diverse group of 21 students to participate in in-depth interviews. I interviewed each student twice in order to allow for prolonged engagement with each subject. The first interview took place at the start of the fall semester in mid-September and focused on students' attitudes towards a number of social issues including world hunger, global poverty and moral obligation. The second interview took place at the conclusion of the fall semester in late January. In this second interview, participants were asked again about their attitudes towards a variety of social issues. Additionally, the 10 Literature and Justice participants discussed what impact they believed Literature and Justice to have had upon these attitudes. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

I also collected copies of the writing assignments completed by Literature and Justice participants at the end of each of the course's units. Most relevant to this study was the three to four page writing assignment completed by 38 Literature and Justice participants at the conclusion of the World Hunger and Moral Obligation unit. In this assignment, students first analysed the perspectives on obligation offered by Singer and Rand and then explained their own beliefs about whether (and to what extent) individuals possess obligations to others.

Finally, I conducted 13 observations of the Literature and Justice class. Conducting a classroom observation entailed recording the subject matter discussed during the class period as well as scripting the comments, questions and observations offered by the course's instructor and students.

*Qualitative data analysis*

The transcripts from all 42 interviews were coded using etic and emic codes drawn from the scholarship on adolescent development, emerging adulthood, civic engagement and social justice education. I checked the reliability of my codebook and coding process by enlisting a colleague trained in qualitative methods to code 20% of the student interviews. In comparing our inter-rater reliability, we achieved a

Cohen's Kappa (unweighted) of .85, which is considered to be a 'very good' strength of agreement (Fleiss, 1981). Upon completing the coding and categorising of the transcribed interviews, I constructed matrices that juxtaposed the themes and patterns emerging from the data with the relevant scholarship (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

I also utilised this codebook to analyse the 'philosophy of obligation' essays completed by 38 Literature and Justice participants as well as my field notes from 13 observations of the Literature and Justice course. I then grouped these codes into categories in order to allow patterns, themes and analytic questions to emerge (Maxwell, 1996).

### *Quantitative data analysis*

This paper focuses on students' shifts in attitude about humanitarian aid and moral obligation (see Seider [submitted, 2008, 2009] for analyses of participants' beliefs about other social issues). The Humanitarian Aid section of the survey consisted of six survey items adapted from items on three earlier surveys developed by the Program for International Policy Attitudes (2001, 2005) and the Institute for Social Research (1999). To consider the core underlying construct tapped by these items, I conducted a Principal Components Analysis (PCA) on this study's pre-treatment survey data regarding humanitarian aid. The PCA indicated that one key construct appeared to be measured by these items, the first component accounting for 62% of the standardised units of variance (eigenvalue=3.08). The composite showed good internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ =.84).

Next, I fit a taxonomy of multiple regression models to consider the impact of the Literature and Justice course upon Glennview students' beliefs about global poverty and humanitarian aid. I first specified a baseline covariate model to control for any confounding effects of students' gender (GENDER), religiosity (RELIGIOUS), class status (CLASS), academic achievement (GRADES), participation in community service as a high school student (HICOMSER) and parents' participation in community service (PARCOMSER). Given the statistically null findings for my control variables on the outcome, I removed them for parsimony in subsequent models. I then specified a 'residual change' model by adding pre-treatment scores (PREATTITUDE) as a predictor, along with the treatment variable (LITANDJUS). It is a model of 'change' in that the treatment variable (LITANDJUS) is predicting only outcome variance not accounted for by the pre-test (PREATTITUDE). I determined the effect size of the treatment variable (LITANDJUS) using Cohen's *d*.

## **Results**

Analyses of this study's qualitative and quantitative data revealed that the majority of Literature and Justice participants reacted with resistance and antagonism to Singer's (2000) assertions about moral obligation. Here, I consider these data in turn.

*Beliefs about obligation*

Of the 38 teenagers who completed the ‘philosophy of obligation’ writing assignment, 13 (34%) expressed their belief that affluent citizens have a responsibility for the wellbeing of those who are less fortunate. Twenty-five Glennview students (66%) argued that no such obligation exists.

None of the 13 teenagers who described an obligation to help the less fortunate matched Peter Singer’s claims about the extent to which such an obligation exists. Kelly, for example, acknowledged an obligation to help those in need but set the bar very low in terms of how much support should be offered. Specifically, she suggested that, ‘Everyone should be obligated to donate some portion of his or her salary whether it is five dollars or thirty-thousand dollars’. Here, Kelly unequivocally cited an obligation to help others but asserted that this obligation could be met by as little as a \$5 annual donation.

A few Glennview teens acknowledged Singer’s argument that the money affluent Americans spend on luxury items could be better spent combating poverty in the developing world. The student who expressed this viewpoint the most strongly was Annie. She wrote:

If you are planning to buy yourself a \$1,000 high definition plasma screen TV even though your current TV works fine, you should buy yourself that TV and then donate \$500 to charity. If you have enough money to spend \$1,000, you would also be able to afford to give up \$500. Or even better, you could wait to buy the TV until a year later when it wouldn’t be as expensive, and then donate the extra money you saved.

Here, Annie came closest among the 13 students to arguing that purchases of luxury items should be considered in the context of other, more altruistic ways in which such money could be spent.

In contrast to Kelly and Annie, the majority of teenagers enrolled in Literature and Justice asserted that affluent individuals have *no* responsibility to alleviate the suffering of those in the developing world. However, these 25 young adults offered several different rationales for this perspective. Nine teenagers asserted that affluent individuals who have worked hard for their wealth have a right to spend it on themselves. For example, Lucy wrote, ‘If someone wants to buy a new car, they should. If someone wants to redecorate their house, they should and, if they need a suit, get it. They work for their money and have the right to spend it on themselves’. Eight other students argued that a moral obligation to help others extended only to one’s family. For example, Evan explained that, ‘There is no reason to be giving away money that I have worked hard for to people I don’t know’. Finally, a third cluster of Literature and Justice participants argued that the charitable contributions mandated by Peter Singer subvert the spirit of capitalism. For example, George explained that, ‘The only logical way to better human life is to form a competitive environment where some people will win and others will lose’. He added dramatically that, if the Singer solution to world poverty were ever carried out, the lack of competition would lead ‘all of the world economies [to] fall face first into the mud and gradually the world would regress to approximately the year 1600’. In short, the majority of Glennview teenagers enrolled in Literature and Justice offered

strong objections to the perspective on moral obligation put forth in ‘The Singer solution to world poverty’.

### *Animosity towards Peter Singer*

As described in the preceding paragraphs, many of the 25 teens who cited no obligation to help the less fortunate made this point by critiquing ‘The Singer solution to world poverty’. Evaluating the robustness of these critiques goes beyond the scope of this paper. What is of interest, however, is that a number of these students expressed not only their disagreement with Singer’s (2000) perspective but offered a vehement emotional response as well. For example, Brittany wrote, ‘At the extreme and polar opposite view of Rand is Peter Singer, who I believe to be quite insane and moronic’. A second student, Frank, wrote that Singer’s arguments ‘made me mad’. In an interview with Frank, he referred to ‘my hatred for Peter Singer’. Perhaps most vehement of all was Michelle who wrote, ‘The fact that Singer would even propose this idea is literally disgusting’. With these words, Michelle offered a violent rebuke to Singer’s assertion that the wealthy have obligations to alleviate the suffering of others around the world.

Two other students reacted vehemently to Singer as well. Douglas wrote of Singer: ‘I think he just likes to hear himself talk and say how great of a person he is and the rest of us don’t help out enough. He should not have the right to tell people what to do’. Another student, George, argued that both Rand and Singer ‘should not be given the opportunity to write their opinions to the American public’. Both Douglas and George appeared to resent that Singer’s essay implicitly questioned whether they and their families were living ‘morally decent lives’.

### *Considering Bob and the Bugatti*

Several other students described misunderstandings of the argument Singer put forth in ‘The Singer solution to world poverty’. Recall that Singer (2000) compared the choice affluent Americans face in considering charitable donations to a trolley problem involving Bob and a Bugatti. In reacting to this trolley problem, one Glennview senior, Sophie, offered the following opinion:

One should put helping someone before personal possessions. An example of this would be the Bugatti example; one should save the child not the car. The car can eventually be replaced, but a human life once it is taken can never be replaced or brought back. We should never put any sort of possession like a car or a TV before a human life.

Here, Sophie asserted that individuals should never prioritise possessions over human life. However, in considering Bob and his Bugatti, Sophie seemed *not* to understand Singer’s argument that affluent Americans are making an analogous decision every time they purchase non-essential items instead of donating that money to overseas aid. Sophie possessed a strong opinion about Bob’s decision to prioritise his Bugatti over the life of a child, but she failed to grasp the larger point that Singer was trying to make.

The same can be said for another student in the Literature and Justice course, Nathan, who wrote that the ‘scenario with Bob and the Bugatti is extremely unrealistic and no one would ever find themselves in that situation’. Nathan was correct, of course, that such a scenario is an unrealistic one; however, Nathan’s comment also seemed to reveal his failure to comprehend that Singer used this trolley problem to make a broader argument about affluent Americans and overseas aid.

The comments offered by these students suggest that, at least for several Glennview teenagers, their attitudes towards philosopher Peter Singer and possibly the issue of moral obligation were influenced by their failure to fully understand Singer’s trolley problem. This is *not* to say that teenagers reading ‘The Singer solution to world poverty’ could not offer legitimate and logical critiques of Singer’s perspective. Rather, I demonstrate here only that several Glennview teenagers seemed genuinely confused by Singer’s use of a trolley problem as an analogy for humanitarian aid.

### *Shifts in attitude towards humanitarian aid*

The shifts in attitude demonstrated by Glennview students on the humanitarian aid composite revealed a statistically significant *negative* relationship between participation in Literature and Justice and students’ post-semester attitudes about humanitarian aid. The Glennview students in this study’s control group began the semester with a mean attitude towards humanitarian aid of 4.75 units along a seven-point scale (SD=1.40) and concluded the semester with a mean attitude of 4.61 units (SD=1.27). This represented a negligible decline in support for humanitarian aid of .14 units. In contrast, the Glennview students participating in Literature and Justice began the semester with a mean attitude towards humanitarian aid of 4.60 units (SD=1.03) and concluded the semester with a mean attitude of 4.20 units (SD=1.26). This represented a decrease in support for humanitarian aid of .40 units, a decline almost four times the size of that demonstrated by the control group.

Table 1 reports on the model fitted for the humanitarian aid composite. Conducting Ordinary Least Squares regression on the outcome variable (POSTATTITUDE) against participation in Literature and Justice (and controlling for PREATTITUDE) revealed there to be a statistically significant difference between the Literature and Justice participants and control group students on the humanitarian aid composite ( $\beta_{\text{LITANDJUSTICE}} = -1.85, p < .03$ ) and evidence of a small-to-medium effect size (Cohen’s  $d = .26$ ). In other words, Literature and Justice participants described a significant decline in their support for humanitarian aid over the course of the semester in comparison to their peers in the control group. This finding is considered in the upcoming Discussion.

## **Discussion**

In this paper’s introduction, I cited a CIRCLE study on the political engagement of American teenagers that called for educational institutions to provide adolescents

Table 1. Taxonomy of regression models describing the relationship between a students' post-semester beliefs on the humanitarian aid composite and participation in Literature and Justice programme ( $n=83$ )

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4*
INTERCEPT	3.40**	1.37**	.94~	2.08***
GENDER	-.53~			
CLASS	.13			
RELIGIOUS	.11			
GRADES	.10			
HICOMSER	.02			
PARCOMSER	.05			
LITANDJUS			-.31	-1.85*
PREATTTITUDE		.65***	.64***	.53***
LITANDJUS $\times$ PREATTTITUDE				.33~

Notes: ~ $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

with more opportunities to engage in authentic discussions of social issues (Kiesa *et al.*, 2007). Such a recommendation seems reasonable, yet the privileged teenagers in this study came away from just such a discussion of world hunger and poverty with a decreased sense of responsibility for the welfare of countries and people suffering from these maladies. Such findings are, initially, both surprising and counterintuitive. Here, I consider several possible explanations for these teenagers' reactions.

#### *'Extreme' arguments may be counterproductive*

Near the conclusion of 'The Singer solution to world poverty', Singer (2000) pauses a moment to ask, 'Isn't it counterproductive to ask people to do so much? Don't we run the risk that many will shrug their shoulders and say that morality, so conceived, is fine for saints but not for them?' (p. 122). However, Singer then shrugs aside this concern, arguing that individuals who are failing to live 'a morally decent life' need to 'face that fact head-on...because knowing where we should be going is the first step toward heading in that direction' (p. 124). From the perspective of moral philosophy, Singer's conclusion about the importance of facing facts head-on may be a reasonable one. The question of how a philosophical principle is justified, however, is not necessarily identical to the best way to teach this principle (Doris & Stich, 2005).

Recall that a majority of the affluent teens in this study reacted to Singer's perspective with tremendous resistance; one teen labelled Singer 'insane' and 'moronic' while others referred to their 'hatred' for Peter Singer and to his proposal as 'disgusting'. Learning about what might be characterised as an 'extreme' viewpoint towards world hunger and moral obligation did not nudge these privileged teens towards a middle-of-the-road perspective on these issues, but rather towards a less empathetic position than the one with which they entered Literature and Justice

on the first day of school. Why is this? Research by Monin (2007) and Monin and Minson (2007) on ‘do-gooder derogation’ predicts these teenagers’ reaction to ‘The Singer solution to world poverty’. Specifically, Monin reported that, ‘Moral behavior can constitute a threat when it suggests to the perceiver that she is not as moral as she could be’ (p. 57). He added that such a perception can trigger resentment, denying of virtue and trivialisation. All three of these reactions are evident in the responses of Glennview High teens to ‘The Singer solution to world poverty’. Monin and Minson (2007) explain that such reactions are ‘an attempt to defuse this perceived threat by putting down the would-be judge and therefore making the judgment embedded in their choice irrelevant’ (p. 5). For example, by derogating Peter Singer as ‘insane’ or ‘moronic’, Glennview teens seek to render irrelevant his assertion that living a ‘morally decent life’ requires one to give up a substantial portion of one’s wealth.

It is important to note that, in describing these privileged teens’ reaction to ‘The Singer solution to world poverty’, I intend neither to criticise nor affirm the soundness of the ethical arguments Singer (2000) presents in this essay. Such an analysis goes beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I have sought to report that, as measured by quantitative survey data and qualitative analyses of student work, Singer’s ‘extreme’ argument for moral obligation had the opposite of the desired effect upon this study’s privileged teenagers. Drawing on work by Monin (2007) and Monin and Minson (2007), I suggest that the explanation for this reaction may lie in the Glennview teens’ desire to derogate an author they perceived to be a moral threat.

#### *Trolley problems may have limited effectiveness as a teaching tool*

In ‘The Singer solution to world poverty’, Singer based his argument about the obligations of affluent Americans upon a trolley problem entitled ‘Bob and the Bugatti’. At face value, Singer’s strategy of representing global poverty as a small child trapped on train tracks seems like a sound one. A substantial body of research has found that individuals become less committed to addressing social problems when they perceive those problems to be overwhelming or beyond their control (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Goodman, 2000, Seider, 2009). For this reason, Singer is shrewd to depict global poverty as a single, powerless child whom an affluent adult (‘Bob’) has the agency to rescue. However, the reaction of this study’s participants—both in their qualitative ‘philosophies of obligation’ and quantitative survey data—revealed that ‘Bob and the Bugatti’ failed to convince these young adults of Singer’s perspective. Possible explanations for this failure may lie in the workings and limitations of the adolescent mind.

First, as described earlier in this paper’s findings, several Glennview teens seem to have misunderstood Singer’s use of ‘Bob and the Bugatti’ as a symbol of the relationship between affluent and poor citizens of the world. Even the teens who understood the trolley problem *and* Singer’s larger point about obligation, however, may have had difficulty incorporating this larger point into their existing worldviews.

In 'The difficulty of imagining other persons', Scarry (1998) wrote that, 'The human capacity to injure other people has always been much greater than its ability to imagine other people. Or perhaps we should say, the human capacity to injure other people is very great precisely because our capacity to imagine other people is very small' (p. 45). In other words, Scarry argued that scholars such as Peter Singer overestimate the ability of their audience to imagine the suffering experienced by those in the developing world, even when represented symbolically by the small child on the train tracks.

Other scholars have considered this challenge from a cognitive perspective. Specifically, Karcher and Fischer (2004) and Fischer and Bidell (1998) have characterised adolescence as the developmental period in which individuals progress through four micro-developmental steps: focusing, substitution, compounding and inter-coordination. Each of these micro-steps represents an increased ability to carry out abstract thinking and to understand more complex representational systems. Understanding Singer's use of a trolley problem to make a larger point about moral obligation (and then integrating this understanding into an existing worldview) requires higher-level thinking skills that many of the Glennview teens enrolled in Literature and Justice may not yet possess. Difficulty with abstract thinking was evident in the writing of students such as Sophie and Nathan who described clear misunderstandings of Singer's use of 'Bob and the Bugatti'. Even Glennview students who fully understood Singer's trolley problem, however, may lack the abstract thinking skills necessary to integrate Singer's points about world hunger and moral obligation into their existing worldviews.

### *Limitations*

I have sought in this paper to demonstrate the challenge of utilising trolley problems to deepen adolescents' sense of social responsibility; however, there are a number of important limitations to this study. First, a relatively small sample of American teenagers from a single affluent community is far too limited to enable broad generalisations about the beliefs of teenagers from other socioeconomic, cultural or ethnic backgrounds. More research is necessary to consider whether adolescents in other types of communities—and from other types of backgrounds—react similarly to the use of trolley problems. A second limitation is the relatively short time frame of one year within which this study was conducted. It is possible that students exposed to arguments like Singer's initially react with resistance and hostility, but that this exposure paves the way for deeper reflection on these issues in the future. In recognition of this possibility, I intend to contact and re-interview Literature and Justice participants in their final year of university (the 2010–2011 school year) in order to learn whether their beliefs about moral obligation have shifted and, if so, what factors catalysed these shifts. Finally, this study's most significant limitation is the fact that all of the Literature and Justice participants were taught by a single teacher. As a result, one could argue that the findings outlined in this paper are the result of teacher effects rather than of students' reaction to trolley problems.

However, in this paper's research design I sought to demonstrate Mrs. Allington's competence and capabilities as a teacher through a description of her professional background as well as through field notes that captured the teaching and learning in her classroom. As these field notes demonstrate, Mrs. Allington sought to practise 'pedagogical neutrality' in her presentation of the complex social issues raised in the course and characterised herself in an interview as a moderator rather than a lecturer. Future research in this domain would, of course, be well served by a study design involving multiple instructors; however, this study's qualitative data can reduce concerns about the difficulty of disentangling teacher effects from curricular effects.

## Conclusion

While more research is needed to confirm this study's findings, educators committed to teaching for social justice might do well to bear the following three points in mind. First, it is important to expose students to readings and activities that they do not experience as morally threatening. Imagine if the privileged teenagers in this study had simply read a first-person account of the suffering caused by poverty in the developing world rather than (or in addition to) Peter Singer's (2000) chastisement of affluent Americans who are failing to live 'morally decent lives'. It seems likely that such an account—if told powerfully—could enlist far more of these privileged teens as allies in the struggle against global poverty than did 'The Singer solution to world poverty'. This is not to say that essays like Singer's should not be assigned, but rather that such assignments need to be balanced by pieces that are less likely to trigger resistance in the form of resentment, denial of virtue and trivialisation (Monin, 2007).

Second, Singer's (2000) use of a trolley problem to comment on global poverty and moral obligation may simply have been too abstract a vehicle for the majority of this study's teenage participants. Hoehn (1983) has argued that engaging young adults in issues of social justice must rely heavily upon stories, narratives, biography, film, photographs and other media that allow 'the voice of the other person...to become as loud as possible to drown out the blaring noise of self-centered consciousness' (p. 159). This point echoes scholarship by Hoffman (2000) that has found moral development to be inextricably tied to the development of empathy. In other words, convincing individuals of their moral obligations must rely not only on logical arguments, but also on fostering an individual's sense of connection and kinship with those who are in need (Stocker, 1976; Williams, 1985). Or as Appiah (2008) observed, it is 'our recognition that each person is engaged in the ethical project of making a life that reveals to us our obligations to them' (p. 203).

Finally, in *Changing minds*, Gardner (2004) characterised representational re-description as the most important lever for changing the minds of students. Representational re-description refers to the use of many different formats to convey a lesson or idea. Gardner argues that, 'The sought-after tipping point is most likely to be reached if a teacher uses several formats flexibly and imaginatively' (pp. 140–141).

As noted earlier, cognitive development in adolescence involves progressing through a series of steps in which adolescents increase their ability to think abstractly and understand complex representational systems. Because different adolescents progress through these steps at different rates, they will experience differently the activities and readings assigned by an instructor. For example, some adolescents will be powerfully affected by the memoir of a Sudanese child soldier; others will be most impacted by a film or song exploring the same subject matter; still others are most influenced by an abstract ethical argument like Singer's. Gardner's point is that it is crucial to respond to this diversity among adolescents with a similarly diverse offering of readings and activities about the topic at hand. Appiah (2008) once observed that, for many individuals, contemplating ethical actions via trolley problems 'is like trying to find your way around at night with a laser pointer' (p. 194). With this study, I have sought to provide educators with additional insights into the process of brightening the lights that can guide their students forward.

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### Notes

1. A pseudonym.
2. By 'two sections', I mean that the course was taught to two different groups of students during the fall semester by the same instructor.
3. A pseudonym.

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