

Famine Ethics

Rubin, Olivier

Published in:
Food Ethics

DOI:
[10.1007/s41055-019-00047-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s41055-019-00047-3)

Publication date:
2019

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Rubin, O. (2019). Famine Ethics. *Food Ethics*, 4(2), 123–138. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41055-019-00047-3>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact rucforsk@ruc.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Famine Ethics

Olivier Rubin

Professor (MSO)

Department of Social Sciences and Business

Roskilde University

Affiliated with the Copenhagen Center for Disaster Research (COPE)

Email: rubin@ruc.dk

For the Special Issue on “Food Security in the SDG Era”

Food Ethics

Edited by Professor Dan Banik

Keywords:

Famine Relief Argument, philanthropy, famine attention, famine criminalization, ICC.

Abstract:

This paper revitalizes the debate of an ethics of contemporary famine. Famine constitutes a distinct development challenge that has only received moderate public and academic attention. Singer’s Famine Relief Argument from 1972 emphasizing a strong obligation of charitable benevolence towards victims of famine, for example, continues to constitute the dominant ethical principle of famine. The paper argues this revisionary principle still constitutes a strong and convincing ethical argument. However, the dynamics of contemporary famine makes it necessary to expand this ethical obligation outside the realm of pure philanthropy. Concretely, the paper argues for the obligation of criminalizing famine and prosecuting the perpetrators of famine that have either callously allowed famine to unfold or have intentionally created and exacerbated the conditions for famine. While such an obligation is not void of ethical dilemmas, a famine ethics relying on obligations of charity as well as obligations of criminal prosecution constitutes a superior ethical principle for the alleviation of famine.

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to Howard-Hassmann for detailed comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Famine Ethics

Introduction

Famine continues to haunt the world. Approximately a quarter million people perished in the 2011 Somalia famine, and in 2017 the UN formally had to declare a famine once again, this time for the northern-central parts of South Sudan (Checchi & Robinson 2013; UN News 2017). Despite these recurring incidents, I argue that famine has not received the kind of public or academic attention that it deserves. As a case in point, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are conspicuously silent when it comes to the elimination of famine (UNDP 2019). No targets address this most extreme and absurd manifestation of humanitarian apathy where hundreds of thousands of people succumb to starvation and death despite an abundance of food in the world. The limited attention to famine is also evident in ethical debates. Singer's Famine Relief Argument from 1972 – emphasizing a strong obligation of charitable benevolence towards victims of famine – still appears to constitute the dominant principle around which scholars position themselves by either criticizing the principle or pointing to its continued relevance. I argue that there is a need to reengage with famine ethics. While some version of Singer's Famine Relief Argument still appears to be a sound moral principle, I will refocus the ethical debate in the light of recent developments in famine research where legal scholars have been particularly active in advocating for the criminalization of famine. My main argument is that famine ethics need to extend beyond obligations of charitable benevolence to include obligations of prosecuting famine crimes.

1
2
3
4 The paper is structured as follows. First, the analytical difference between investigating
5
6 famine and investigating hunger is laid out, and it is argued that an ethics of famine is likely
7
8 to be distinct from food (security) ethics. Second, the paper makes the case that famines in
9
10 this century have not received much attention neither in the public discourse nor in
11
12 academia. In that sense, famine almost rivals hunger as a silent emergency. This also holds
13
14 true for philosophical discussions where famine ethics is still primarily rooted in Singer's
15
16 Famine Relief Argument (Singer 1972). The paper continues by discussing the validity of
17
18 this principle, arguing that the changing dynamics of contemporary famine necessitate
19
20 going beyond this moral principle of charitable benevolence. One major recent contribution
21
22 to famine research that carries substantial ethical implications is the argument for the
23
24 criminalization of famine. The paper concludes by discussing the ethical arguments for
25
26 including the obligation of famine criminalization in an ethics of famine.
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35

36 **The Distinctness of Famine**

37
38 When contributing to a special issue with a focus on food security and hunger, it appears
39
40 particularly pertinent to emphasize how famine constitutes a distinct humanitarian
41
42 challenge that cannot simply be absorbed in studies of hunger and food security. Hunger
43
44 usually refers to the prevalence of undernourishment in a population where the dietary
45
46 consumption is less than the minimum energy requirements deemed necessary for a healthy
47
48 life (usually 2.100 calories/day) (IPC 2012; FAO et al. 2017). A state of chronic hunger
49
50 can persist for years and might lead to child stunting and wasting, inhibit cognitive
51
52 development, increase infant and maternal mortality, and increase susceptibility to
53
54 infectious diseases (Martins et al. 2011). Famine, on the contrary, is most often understood
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 as an idiosyncratic event identifiable by a sudden excess in mortality caused by mass
5
6 starvation and diseases; an understanding shared by most scholars of famine (Sen 1981;
7
8 Howe & Devereux 2004; Devereux 2007; Ó Gráda 2009; De Waal 2018). The important
9
10 academic debates in famine research relate to the dynamics of famine: what are the main
11
12 causes and processes behind such an extraordinary spike in mass starvation? Although
13
14 scholars of famine have somewhat diverging explanations on the causes of famines, there
15
16 is consensus that these explanations differ from those causing chronic undernutrition and
17
18 hunger. There are *qualitative* differences between studies of famine and studies of hunger.
19
20 Hence, ethical considerations regarding the alleviation of chronic hunger and improving
21
22 food security cannot be directly translated to an ethics of famine. Famines are much more
23
24 closely related to complex emergencies and protracted disasters than they are related to
25
26 chronic hunger. In his most recent monograph on famine, De Waal (2018) explicitly
27
28 emphasizes the need to distinguish famine from (chronic) hunger and malnutrition, arguing
29
30 instead for a closer association with mass atrocities. Similarly, Banik (2010: 224) also
31
32 emphasises the need to “distinguish between acute (famine) and chronic (endemic hunger)
33
34 forms of deprivation and our responses to these.” Famines, therefore, should not be
35
36 understood as the final cataclysmic outcome of a linear trajectory characterized by
37
38 continued deterioration of a country’s nutritional status but as a synergistic outcome of
39
40 complex, long-term and short-term, indirect and nonlinear socio-political dynamics (Howe,
41
42 2018; De Waal, 2018). The flipside of this decoupling is that the ambitious SDG goals
43
44 (UNDP 2019) – aiming to improve productivity and income for small-scale farmers,
45
46 ensuring equal access to land, implementing sustainable food production practices and
47
48 increasing assistance to the agricultural sector – might drive down levels of undernutrition
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 but might not suffice for the eradication of famine. The close association of famine with
5
6 complex emergencies and even pogroms will be subject to greater scrutiny later in the
7
8 paper. Empirically, the dissociation between hunger and famine can be exemplified by
9
10 looking at global trends. More than 800 million people still suffer from chronic
11
12 undernutrition. This level has remained relatively stable (and lately slightly increased)
13
14 throughout this century (FAO et al. 2017). The most recent UN report (FAO et al. 2019)
15
16 even talks about a reverting trend after 2015 from a steady decline for decades to a slow
17
18 increase in the number of people who suffer from hunger to an estimated 820 million
19
20 people. Contrast this to the fact that only around 20 million people today are considered
21
22 vulnerable to famine (U.S. Mission to the UN Agencies in Rome 2017; Mercy Corps 2017).
23
24 Famines have gone from being a recurrent threat in most developing countries to being
25
26 restricted to small enclaves in the developing world – mainly in fragile states in Sub-
27
28 Saharan Africa (Ó Gráda 2009; De Waal 2018). Unfortunately, this is not the case with
29
30 hunger, which remains endemic across most regions even in the face of a general increase
31
32 in development: the undernutrition prevalence rates stand at 20 percent in Sub-Saharan
33
34 Africa, 15 percent in South Asia, 8 percent in the Middle East and North Africa, and 7
35
36 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean (World Development Indicators, 2018). There
37
38 are fewer famines today and less people succumb to them than at any other time in modern
39
40 history (both in relative and absolute terms) (Rubin 2019). This, of course, does not
41
42 diminish the catastrophic impact of any one famine. The 2011 Somalia famine constitutes
43
44 one of the most lethal disasters of the 21st century. It does, however, suggest that the
45
46 eradication of famine does not necessitate great strides human development or putting an
47
48 end to chronic hunger. Amartya Sen makes the point that famines are in fact extremely
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 easy to prevent from a policy perspective (Sen 1995: 7). Preventing famine demands such
5
6 a limited redistribution of resources in a contained period of time that even very poor
7
8 nations should be able to lift the burden, not least when aided by international humanitarian
9
10 organizations. More than twenty years ago, De Waal made the ethical argument that there
11
12 has been no excuse for famine for almost a century (De Waal 1997: 7). Ethically, this only
13
14 places an additional premium on the eradication of famine: we could essentially eradicate
15
16 famine without necessarily having to solve the problem of chronic hunger and extreme
17
18 poverty. Famine should evoke a moral response that is more direct and compelling than
19
20 the ethical arguments in favour of development assistance (Thompson 2010: 209). Part of
21
22 the explanation for our failure to eradicate famine can be ascribed the limited attention to
23
24 famines.
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32

33 **Famine – A Whispering Emergency**

34
35
36 The over 800 million people suffering from daily hunger is a silent catastrophe and the
37
38 belated progress in this field is a stain on otherwise impressive humanitarian achievements
39
40 during the last two centuries. However, this paper will present evidence to suggest that full-
41
42 blown famines can almost rival hunger emergencies in terms of deficiency of international
43
44 attention. Sen has famously argued that governments in democracies primarily react to
45
46 famines because of their high visibility in the media and public discourse (Sen, 1999).
47
48 Thus, politicians have incentives to react promptly to sudden famine disasters where
49
50 fatalities are concentrated in time and space in contrast to low visibility challenges such as
51
52 widespread hunger. This, according to Amartya Sen, would help explain why India has
53
54 successfully alleviated famines since independence in 1943, while still being tormented by
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 multiple starvation related deaths each year. India has effectively prevented large-scale
5
6 famine for more than 75 years but still has the largest number of hungry people in the world
7
8 (Banik 2016). The strength of the link between democracy, media attention and famine
9
10 mitigation has been subject to some debate (Rubin 2009a; Plümper & Neumayer 2009;
11
12 Burchi 2011). In general, there appears to be some evidence that portrayal in the media
13
14 impels politicians to react to mitigate the suffering from disasters (Boin et al. 2005; Kahn
15
16 2005; Flores & Smith 2013). This is good news since disasters are usually very visible in
17
18 the media. As a case in point, the 2017 event that gained the most global readership of
19
20 online news in a single day was Hurricane Irma (Economist 2017). The problem with
21
22 famine is that it is one of the most overlooked disasters. If hunger can be characterized as
23
24 a silent emergency, then famine constitutes nothing more than a whispering emergency.
25
26
27
28
29
30
31 The whisper of famines builds on two pieces of empirical evidence.

32
33
34
35
36 The first relates to the public interest in famine. Consider the 2011 Somalia famine as an
37
38 example. It was the most lethal disaster of the 21st in a single country: 260.000 people
39
40 perished in matter of weeks (Checchi & Robinson 2013). That number of fatalities eclipses
41
42 some of the worst natural disasters in this century such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti
43
44 (with an estimated 220.000 fatalities) and the 2004 Tsunami that hit Indonesia (with an
45
46 estimated 165.000 fatalities) (EM-DAT 2019). To proxy for global public interest in the
47
48 famine relative to other disasters, the paper draws on data from Google Trends, which
49
50 measures the usage of key search terms relative to other select key terms (Google 2018).
51
52
53
54
55 Figure 1 compares the 2011 Somalia famine with four other major disasters from 2008
56
57 onwards: the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, the 2011 Japan
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 Tsunami, and the 2015 Nepal Earthquake. Figure 1 illustrates that the relative interest in
5
6 the Somalia famine is negligible, accounting for only 0.5% of the most searched disasters
7
8 in the period, namely the concurrent 2011 Japanese Tsunami.¹ In fact, famine is dwarfed
9
10 relative to any other generic disaster search term I could think of such as flood, earthquake,
11
12 tsunami, hurricane, volcano, pandemic, avalanche, storm or cyclone. Assuming some
13
14 relationship between public interest in a given disaster and google search terms related to
15
16 that disaster (google accounts for 90 percent of searches worldwide), the global public
17
18 attention to famine disasters is indeed limited.
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

26 --- Insert Figure 1 ---
27
28
29
30

31 One might argue that while famines may not be highly visible globally, they might define
32
33 national public discourses to a much greater extent. However, contemporary famines tend
34
35 to occur in states that censor media and public debate (North Korea) or in fragile states
36
37 where the media and state institutions are weak or non-existent (South Sudan and Somalia).
38
39 This also holds true for countries currently vulnerable to famine: Yemen, Syria and Nigeria
40
41 (WFP 2018). Thus, it is often left to the international community to warn and gather
42
43 information about impending famines. Even in the relative free country of Niger, it was
44
45 left to a non-governmental organization (Doctors without Borders) to warn about the
46
47 impending famine in 2005 and to advocate for extensive interventions to mitigate its impact
48
49 (Rubin 2009b). With unfertile conditions for national public debates and investigative
50
51 journalism in most famine prone countries today, the seemingly limited global public
52
53 interest in famines becomes even more alarming.
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4
5
6
7 The second piece of evidence rests on limited academic interest in famine. To proxy for
8
9 academic interest, the paper applies an updated version of Rubin's (2019) measure of
10
11 academic interest. The academic interest is proxied by the annual average Web of Science
12
13 Social Science Citation articles that have referred to a specific disaster in their
14
15 title/abstract/keywords, counting from a year after the disaster until the most recent full
16
17 year (in this case 2017). The graph below has juxtaposed the fatalities for six major
18
19 disasters in the twenty-first century (red columns, right axis) with the average annual
20
21 number of articles in the Web of Science (blue columns, left axis).
22
23
24
25
26
27

28 --- Insert Figure 2 ---
29
30
31
32

33 The discrepancy between scholarly interest in the 2011 Somalia famine and fatalities is
34
35 striking. A meagre annual average of 2,5 articles have been written on one of the most
36
37 lethal humanitarian catastrophes in the twenty-first century whereas the academic articles
38
39 published on Hurricane Katrina exceed that of all the other five disasters *combined*. This
40
41 suggests that attention to famine is negligible even in academic circles. This also holds true
42
43 for the academic field of ethics. Not many papers have been published on famine after
44
45 Singer's famous article *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* from 1972 and most have been
46
47 moderately cited.² The contributions have mostly taken offset in Singer's Famine Relief
48
49 Argument, and largely positioned themselves as either followers or critics of the moral
50
51 principle. It thus appears pertinent to re-engage with Singer's influential Famine Relief
52
53 Argument when devising an ethics of famine.
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

Singer's Famine Relief Argument

Peter Singer has famously coined the Famine Relief Argument where the obligation of saving a child from drowning in a shallow pond is equated with that of displaying considerable charitable benevolence to the victims of famine (Singer 1972). While most would agree that it is virtuous to aid victims of famine, Singer emphasizes an *obligation* of charitable benevolence. The 1971 East Bengal humanitarian crisis caused Singer to wonder why affluent people throughout the world appeared to be unresponsive to the suffering. He developed the following analogy: "If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing" (Singer 1972: 231). Why, Singer then asked, would most people help the drowning child without hesitation while not feeling obliged to provide the same help in other situations of life and death? For Singer, there was no moral distinction between aiding a drowning child in the local pond and aiding a starving child in East Bengal. He therefore constructed the much-cited Famine Relief Argument: "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 1972:231). The principle provides a strong case for the obligation of aiding victims of famine, because so little must be sacrificed so that others can live. Whether the analogy is a drowning child in a pond or a child about to be smashed by a runaway train, Singer's basic argument for a moral obligation of charitable benevolence has remained the same for the last forty-five years (Singer 2009; Timmerman 2018).

1
2
3
4
5
6
7 Two main types of objections have been forwarded against Singer's Famine Relief
8
9 Argument: one that accepts the premise of an ethical obligation to aid the victims of famine
10
11 but questions the extent of philanthropy, and another that questions whether there actually
12
13 is an ethical obligation to aid victims of famine.³
14
15
16
17
18

19 Several scholars have argued not against the moral obligation of aiding victims of famine
20
21 but against a too demanding call for charitable benevolence (Otteson 2000; Kuper 2002;
22
23 Cullity 2004; Swanton 2009; Timmerman 2015, 2018; Seipel 2016). Their basic intuition
24
25 is that asking people to sacrifice to a point where the marginal utility value of the next
26
27 sacrifice would make them worse off than the recipients goes against commonsense
28
29 morality and would constitute an ethical principle that very few people would actually
30
31 meet. Otteson argues (2000: 200) that "a moral position that makes a father immoral for
32
33 buying his daughter a ribbon for her hair so stretches the limits of common moral intuition
34
35 as to suggest a *reductio ad absurdum*." Kuper (2002) touches on the same weakness when
36
37 arguing that the real-world situation would resemble a situation in which Singer would
38
39 walk past a pond of fifty children close to drowning each day. His life would quickly need
40
41 to be turned into that of a lifeguard rather than that of a philosopher, which would not
42
43 appear morally just; neither for Singer nor society at large. Timmerman (2015) reiterates
44
45 that Singer's analogy should rightly be based on many drowning children, in which case it
46
47 would be morally permissible to let a child drown on occasion to pursue other experiences
48
49 in life that do not involve constantly saving children. Similarly, Swanton (2009) addresses
50
51 the problem of limitless demands (drowning children) in the confinement of the human
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 psyche. She argues that moral demands should “not tax our strength to the point where the
5
6 self wits away, we neglect our children and loved ones, we ignore ethics altogether as an
7
8 everyday and pervasive phenomenon in favour of self-interest, and resentment becomes
9
10 rife” (Swanton 2009: 122). Cullity (2004) presents an interesting circular line of reasoning
11
12 where Singer’s extreme demand on moral duties actual undermines his own argument.
13
14 Singer’s ethics short-circuits when people generally do not live lives where the pursuit for
15
16 own fulfillment is completed abandoned in order to help others. Ergo, if it is wrong to live
17
18 a life that is not altruistically focused, then there cannot be good reasons for helping a
19
20 person achieve such an immoral life (Cullity 2004: 137). In short, the Famine Relief
21
22 Argument produces too many immoral individuals to retain any proper moral meaning.
23
24 Based on Singer’s Famine Relief Argument, for example, one can devise an argument
25
26 against having children because the foregone costs of raising children can be better spent
27
28 on famine relief (Rachels 2014).
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37

38 Singer has subsequently forwarded a weaker ethical principle that leaves out the
39
40 comparable perspective, and just states that one should give to the point where one would
41
42 sacrifice something of moral significance (Singer 2007). Similarly, Cullity (2004) suggests
43
44 a moderate demanding morality based on an aggregate approach where the cost of aiding
45
46 others is considered cumulatively (rather than marginally). This would entail sacrifice that
47
48 “each of us could make without depriving our lives of worthwhile achievement, enjoyment,
49
50 close personal relationship, community involvement, understanding, integrity, or
51
52 autonomy to any significant degree” (Cullity 2004: 186). In a famine context, such
53
54 revisionary duty of charitable benevolence would easily meet the funding requirement for
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 famine prevention. The combined funding gap for all the humanitarian appeals during the
5
6 2011 Somalia famine, for example, amounted to 460 million USD (OCHA 2011). The
7
8 World Food Programme estimates that 2.8 billion USD is needed to effectively aid the 20
9
10 million living on the brink of famine (WFP 2018). That is less than half a percent of the
11
12 wealth held by the 10 richest people in the world (Forbes 2018).
13
14
15
16
17
18

19 Other scholars have questioned whether there really is an obligation to aid victims of
20
21 famine (Goodin 1998; Currie 2000; Kekes 2002; Miller 2007; James 2007). While most
22
23 would agree that it is virtuous to aid victims of famine, they question whether there is a
24
25 moral obligation to do so. The basic argument is that Singer’s cosmopolitan moral codex
26
27 should be replaced morals that are dependent on context. One implication of living in
28
29 specific moral contexts is that we feel more inclined to help people in our immediate sphere
30
31 of social relations. Goodin (1988) differentiates between *general duties* that we have
32
33 toward other people and *special duties* that we have to those in a special relation to us.
34
35 Miller (2007) also claims that we should allow diverse moral principles to hold in different
36
37 contexts; not least for pragmatic reasons since nation-states are still the prime engines of
38
39 distributive justice. In his 2000 monograph on famine and hunger, Currie also argues that
40
41 “although we might subscribe to a general Good Samaritan law that transcends national,
42
43 ethnic or legal borders, the boundaries of the political community remain significant in that
44
45 general moral duties that humans hold to confront human suffering hold extra weight to
46
47 those within their own polity” (Currie 2000: 50). James (2007) introduces the concept of
48
49 *unique dependency* to draw a distinction between aiding the child in the pond and saving
50
51 famine victims from starvation. The difference, James argues, is to be found in the
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 relationship we have with those in need. In Singer's analogy, there is a determinate
5 individual relying on you (and only you) for survival, while such a relationship is absent
6 in Singer's famine relief argument. Humanitarian relief efforts fail to establish a unique
7 dependence, because assistance is mediated through relief organizations. While Singer
8 seeks to equate the two situations, James points to the fact they are distinct: the pond case
9 calls on the action of the Good Samaritan, while the distant suffering from famine calls on
10 the assistance of the Good Humanitarian.
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22

23 Singer has countered his critics by asserting that the Famine Relief Argument should not
24 appeal to whatever is the current practice of beneficence. Behavioral studies, for instance,
25 indicate that we are inclined to be much more generous towards identifiable victims (child
26 in pond) compared to more faceless statistical victims (famine victims) (Small et al. 2007).
27 This, of course, does not make it ethically just. While we might have an evolutionary
28 inclination to help members of our own group/tribe or focus on identifiable sufferers,
29 Singer argues (2007: 480) that "a practice that evolved under different conditions has no
30 normative force for us today". We are therefore faced with a stalemate situation where
31 "followers of Singer insist upon revising our intuitions in order to shield their principle
32 from logical refutation" while "critics of Singer argue that we should revise the principle
33 in order to protect our intuitions." (Siepel 2016: 98). To break this stalemate in the context
34 of famines, one can just assume, for the sake of argument, that Singer's moral principle of
35 charitable benevolence should hold stronger for citizens close to the atrocities. Banik
36 advances the ethical standpoint that "if we agree that radical inequalities in local society
37 are one of the major explanations for the creation and continuance of human deprivation,
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 then one can place additional emphasis on the proximity factor and thereby argue for
5 enhanced moral responsibility of local elites” (Banik 2010: 242). Today, most poor people
6 live in middle-income countries amid wealthier classes (Sumner 2012). In a famine
7 situation, limited redistribution nationally would in most cases suffice to prevent people *en*
8 *masse* from dying of starvation. Thus, limiting the extent of sacrifice and narrowing down
9 the number of people faced with a moral obligation of charitable benevolence still produce
10 revisionary ethics of famine that exceeds current levels of philanthropy multifold. The real
11 question is whether charitable benevolence is sufficient to alleviate famines. The following
12 will argue that we need to pursue other ethical principles as well.
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27

28 **The disconnect between Singer’s ethical analogies and the contemporary famine** 29 **discourse** 30 31

32
33 The philosophical semantics surrounding the Famine Relief Argument often draw heavily
34 on analogies. Singer’s own child in the pond is the most notable. Other scholars have
35 suggested alternative analogies that illuminate their own moral principle in relation to
36 Singer’s, but rarely have ethical debates reflected on the implications of the general use of
37 analogies. Unger (1996) sets out to support Singer’s famine relief argument using more
38 than fifty analogies, starting with an analogy of whether one should write a lifesaving check
39 to UNICEF. Similarly, Timmerman (2015; 2018) also relies on many analogies in his
40 defense of a weaker version of the Famine Relief Argument where he articulates the
41 dilemma between saving several drowning children or spending time in the theater. The
42 purpose of the analogies and metaphors used by Singer, Unger and others is not only to
43 illustrate a point but also to generate a contextual shift that provides support for their ethical
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 principles. Singer's argument that we are morally obligated to aid famine victims is not
5
6 difficult to grasp conceptually, and there is really no need for illustrative examples – with
7
8 the recent famines there are enough examples in real life – if not for setting a context in
9
10 which ignoring the child would be blatantly amoral. The persuasive power of analogies can
11
12 only be admired: Singer's pond analogy has surely been a strong driver for altruism. My
13
14 claim here is merely that these gains come at a price, as they remove the ethical principles
15
16 from the empirical phenomena to which they relate. One could risk working with an ethical
17
18 premise that does not necessarily mirror present empirical dynamics. Analogies suffer from
19
20 two limitations: they dislodge the ethical arguments from their empirical foundation, and
21
22 they are inherently static. Therefore, while the philosophical discussions themselves
23
24 display much dynamism, raging back and forth, they still implicitly or explicitly refer back
25
26 to the original analogies. This makes it difficult to capture the extent to which famines have
27
28 changed over time. Today, there might be a need to reconnect the ethical arguments to the
29
30 dynamics of contemporary famine.
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39

40 Singer's Famine Relief Argument built on an optimism shared by many at that time that
41
42 famines could be eradicated by acts of philanthropy. This is probably best exemplified by
43
44 Bod Geldof's 1984 massive Band Aid charities for victims of the Ethiopian famine. But
45
46 the optimism also extended to academia. One of the most acknowledged famine
47
48 frameworks at that time, the entitlement approach, clearly viewed "famines as economic
49
50 disasters, not as just food crises" (Sen 1981: 162). As such, they could be remedied by
51
52 economic redistribution. Indeed, many of the famines in the 1970s took place inside
53
54 relatively functioning state structures and were primarily economic in nature. The 1974
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 Bangladesh famine, the 1972-1974 Ethiopian famine and the 1971-74 Sahel famines all
5
6 unfolded in the absence of institutional collapse, violent internal conflict and political
7
8 control (Sen 1981). Today, however, fragile institutions and violent conflicts have been the
9
10 primary causes of the 2011 Somalia famine, as well as the 2017 South Sudanese famines
11
12 (Heaton, 2012; Maxwell & Fritzpatrick, 2012; Fergusson, 2013; De Waal, 2018).
13
14
15 Analysing the North Korean famine in the 1990s, the 2011 Somalia famine and the 2017
16
17 South Sudanese famine through an economic lens *only* appears to be insufficient. This
18
19 implies that famine ethics should not only be concerned with charitable benevolence. This
20
21 is also echoed in Cullity's (2004) call to pursue other efforts than humanitarian aid, "and
22
23 to encourage the structures of political accountability that can counteract its worst effects"
24
25 (Cullity 2004: 47). Similarly, Devereux (2007: 14) argues that "if famines are preventable
26
27 social and political phenomena, rather than unavoidable natural disasters, the social and
28
29 political actors and institutions should be held accountable for allowing famine to happen."
30
31
32 In an everyday moral context, there is little doubt that ethnic cleansing is wrong.
33
34 Nevertheless, the moral claim needs to go beyond calls for individual obligations of charity.
35
36 In Singerian terms, it would difficult to prevent something bad from happening by
37
38 sacrificing something of comparable moral importance, not because people are unwilling
39
40 to do so (although this is regrettably surely also the case) but because there is no linear
41
42 relationship between sacrifice and outcome. In a famine context, there is no transparent
43
44 market exchange where inputs can be traded for a certain outcome; where twenty dollars
45
46 can buy a life. Thus, there appears to be a rationale for an ethics of famine to also embrace
47
48 the moral principles being followed when it comes to extreme violations of human rights,
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 including ethnic cleansing, pogroms and other types of political/religious killings and
5
6 violence.
7
8
9

10
11 Consider the North Korean famine in the 1990s. The fact that a million people perished in
12
13 North Korea during the 1990s due to famine is a humanitarian catastrophe (Haggard &
14
15 Nolan 2007). North Korea experienced some substantial exogenous shocks that were both
16
17 related to consecutive years of harsh climatic conditions as well as geo-political changes
18
19 (with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the wavering support of China). However,
20
21 these exogenous triggers only turned catastrophic because of the government's long-time
22
23 deficient agricultural policies, the reluctance to accept international famine relief, and the
24
25 general misuse of aid and humanitarian assistance as balance-of-payment support for
26
27 military and luxury imports (Haggard & Nolan 2007: 50; UN Human Rights Council
28
29 2014). This strong connection to politics means that famine mitigation should not only be
30
31 a question of charitable benevolence but must also involve the actions of the North Korean
32
33 regime (UN Human Rights Council 2014). When regimes purposely block or misuse aid,
34
35 charitable benevolence becomes an impotent force for famine mitigation.
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44

45 The 2011 South Somalia famine constitutes another example. While the whole Horn of
46
47 Africa suffered from one of the worst droughts for sixty years, the famine itself appeared
48
49 to only strike southern Somalia (the southern Bakool and lower Shabelle regions). Al-
50
51 Shaabab, an extremist Islamic militant group controlling southern Somalia, actively and
52
53 deliberately exacerbated the famine. Al-Shabaab only allowed a few humanitarian
54
55 organizations access to the region, and they had to pay steep "registration fees" and had to
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 accept involving Al-Shabaab in all the distribution of food (Jackson & Aynte 2013: 16).
5
6 One of the most detrimental policy decisions by Al-Shabaab was prohibiting famine
7
8 victims to migrate from the affected area; cantonment camps were set up to imprison
9
10 people trying to escape Al-Shabaab territory (Ferris & Petz 2012). Al-Shabaab also used
11
12 the famine to increase people's dependence on the organization for survival. Volunteer
13
14 fighters were lured with promises of a piece of fruit every day, and the famine has been
15
16 described as "the most convincing recruiting sergeant of all" (Fergusson 2013: 176). The
17
18 relief agencies did in fact manage to raise funds at an unprecedented volume and speed
19
20 (Maxwell & Majid 2016; OCHA 2011). However, mitigating the suffering appeared more
21
22 dependent on whether the humanitarian agencies could actually gain access to the Al-
23
24 Shabaab dominated areas than it was dependent on the funding raised.
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32

33 **An Ethical Obligation of Prosecuting Famine Crimes**

34
35 The dynamics of these recent famines have spurred a new interest in famine from legal
36
37 scholars who argue that famine should be treated as crimes against humanity, and that
38
39 perpetrators of famine need to be prosecuted through international law (Marcus 2003;
40
41 Howard-Hassmann 2005, 2016; DeFalco 2011, 2016; Aloyo 2013; Kearney, 2013; Sankey
42
43 2014; Duthie 2014; Malk, 2017). The concept of famine crimes was initially introduced by
44
45 famine scholars in the 1990s (De Waal 1993; Keen 1994) but has recently been revitalized
46
47 and refined by legal scholars. Marcus (2003: 248) was among the first legal scholars to
48
49 argue that "since famines are often functionally equivalent to genocide, it makes no moral
50
51 or legal sense not to extend the protections of international law to famine-prone
52
53 population." Drawing a parallel between famine and genocides, Edkins (2007: 152) posits
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 that famine ‘is not so much a question of causes and solutions but one of responsibility,
5 criminal liability, perpetrators, bystanders, victims and survivors.’ DeFalco (2011) argues
6
7 that leading members of the communist party in Cambodia (the Khmer Rouge) should be
8
9 prosecuted for crimes against humanity based on the famine of 1975-79 which killed
10
11 upwards a million civilians. He concludes that “courts and tribunals have avoided
12
13 addressing the culpability of individuals who cause mass famines for too long, especially
14
15 now that humankind has entered an era where such tragedies are entirely avoidable.” He
16
17 continues in a later piece by arguing more generally that “the creation or enforcement of
18
19 famine conditions can often be accurately characterized as a widespread or systematic attack
20
21 on a civilian population, making crimes against humanity a promising entry point for
22
23 addressing general famine conditions outside the context of a targeted genocidal attack or
24
25 armed conflict” (DeFalco 2016: 52). Howard-Hassmann (2016: 214) also proposes a new and
26
27 distinct UN treaty to protect the right to food that should expand on the existing articles in the
28
29 UN Genocide Convention and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).
30
31 These calls for famine criminalization, published mostly in international law and justice
32
33 outlets, have begun to resonate in key international organizations and civil society
34
35 organizations. One of the most comprehensive investigations of non-violent human rights
36
37 violations, for example, has been conducted by the United Nations Human Rights Council
38
39 with respect to the North Korean famine (UN Human Rights Council 2014). The
40
41 Commission concluded that party officials had committed crimes against humanity by
42
43 implementing actions, decisions and policies known to have led to mass starvation, death
44
45 by starvation and serious mental and physical injury (UN Human Rights Council 2014:
46
47 339). No court, however, has yet entered a conviction for an international crime predicated
48
49 explicitly on famine (DeFalco 2011; Howard-Hassmann 2016). The reason is that
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 expanding international law and the reach of the ICC to prosecute famine crimes is
5
6 difficult. There is a growing consensus on the limits of criminal law and the legitimacy of
7
8 the ICC among many African states (Roach, 2016; Niang, 2017). Hitherto, the ICC has
9
10 opted to prosecute openly violent crimes that are most extensively and concretely referred
11
12 to in the Statute's articles, and where the burden of proof is easier to lift.
13
14
15
16
17

18
19 Disregarding the questions of short-term practical feasibility, famine criminalization also
20
21 faces challenges as an ethical principle. The important thing to note here is that it induces
22
23 *other* moral dilemmas than do Singer's famine relief arguments. The ethical arguments for
24
25 punishment have traditionally rested on two distinct ethical principles: a utilitarian
26
27 perspective where punishment increases the general well-being in society and a
28
29 redistributive perspective that primarily pursues justice and punish offenders for their
30
31 wrongdoing. The presented legal arguments for criminalizing famine primarily rests on the
32
33 utilitarian principle: punishment should discourage and deter the use of mass-starvation as
34
35 an acceptable political or military strategy. The criminalization of famine (where famine
36
37 crimes are prosecuted) should serve as a reminder to all leaders in the world that famine
38
39 crimes will not be tolerated. Whether this will reduce the risk of famine is ultimately an
40
41 empirical question. Naturally, merely prosecuting perpetrators of famine crimes will not
42
43 lead to the abolishment of such abuses in the world. Two systematic empirical studies of
44
45 ICC's ability to deter human rights violations do strongly suggest that the organization has
46
47 a significant positive impact: both studies (using different proxies and analytical models)
48
49 concluded that the ICC through various channels deters leaders from committing various
50
51 atrocities (Jo & Simmons 2016; Appel 2018). If successfully integrated in the ICC,
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 therefore, it would not be unreasonable to suppose that famine criminalization will reduce
5
6 the risk of famine in the long haul. There might also be an educational effect of such treaties
7
8 that could influence the behavior of some states in certain instances (Howard-Hassmann
9
10 2016). An increased attention to and prosecution of famine crimes (the intentional use of
11
12 starvation against civilians is already prohibited in the Rome Statute; ICC 1998: articles 7
13
14 and 8), rather than having direct effects of deterrence through punishment, might lead to
15
16 more incremental changes of international norms to a point where ethnic or political
17
18 cleansing by famine is considered no differently than cleansing by means of direct
19
20 violence.
21
22
23
24
25
26
27

28
29 Famine criminalization introduces the need to distinguish between intent, misfortune and
30
31 incompetence as primary drivers for famine without the proper tools and insights to do so.
32
33 International criminal law often demands both *actus reus* (physical act) and *mens rea*
34
35 (intent) for prosecution. Article 30 of the The Rome Statute, for example, states that “a
36
37 person shall be criminally responsible and liable for punishment for a crime within the
38
39 jurisdiction of the Court only if the material elements are committed with intent and
40
41 knowledge.” In cases of famine, the boundaries between *actus reus* and *mens rea* are
42
43 blurred due to the substantial temporal dimension in famine crimes.⁴ A local official in a
44
45 province in North Korea during the 1990s might have acted negligent or incompetently
46
47 when crafting a set of policies that triggered mass starvation (*actus reus*). However,
48
49 according to existing international law the official can only be prosecuted when she, aware
50
51 of the consequences of her actions, continues to enforce policies that exacerbate famine
52
53 conditions (*mens rea*).⁵ Short of clear pogroms, the exact eureka-moment when a person
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 realizes the error of his way within complex political systems with overlapping authorities
5
6 is difficult to pinpoint, let alone prove in a court of law..
7
8
9

10
11 Famine criminalization also presents other ethical dilemmas. An obligation of famine
12 prosecution moves responsibility from the individual levels (philanthropy) to the level of
13 states and international organizations (prosecution). It puts into play the well-known moral
14 dilemmas of the international communities' responsibility to protect human rights vis-à-
15 vis states' rights to uphold national sovereignty. And famine criminalization introduces the
16 ethical challenge of seeking to assign individual responsibility for a multi-causal
17 catastrophe. By implication, assigning individual criminal responsibility for a famine
18 means downplaying other potential underlying causes of famine such as broader socio-
19 economic and geopolitical systemic factors. Even contributions that highlight the
20 importance of the political level do not only highlight the importance of agency, but also
21 political systems and structures at different levels (Devereux 2007; Rubin 2009a; De Waal
22 2018). Howard-Hassmann (2016) highlights the paradox of holding *states* responsible for
23 protecting and promoting human rights but holding *individuals* responsible for their
24 violation. Applying the lens of famine crimes to the 2017 famine in South Sudan, for
25 example, appears to be too blunt an instrument to capture the dynamics of the myriad of
26 underlying national and international factors that compounded to generate the famine.
27
28 Imagine, for example, that the famine threatening situation in Yemen deteriorates into a
29 full-blown famine. Prosecuting food crimes would emphasize individual liabilities for the
30 famine, thereby ignoring the multidimensionality of famines caused by a plethora of
31 cascading non-linear dynamics (Saudi airstrikes, Houthi insurgents, failing state
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 institutions, colonial legacy, salary collapse, geopolitics and so on). Without linearity, it is
5
6 difficult to assign legal responsibility, but famines are often the outcome of non-linear
7
8 synergistic interactions among different socio-political factors (Howe 2018). Hence,
9
10 obligations of charitable benevolence as well as prosecution of famine crimes might not
11
12 suffice to effectively alleviate famine. They are ill-equipped to address the deeper socio-
13
14 political structural causes of famine. Still, an ethics of famine based on both these
15
16 obligations stands stronger than one based on either one obligation, as they address key
17
18 different dynamics of contemporary famines.
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

26 **Conclusion – A Famine Ethics of Contemporary Famines**

27
28 Famine constitutes a distinct challenge for humankind that has yet to be overcome. While
29
30 famines continue to constitute a recurrent threat for vulnerable people in the most fragile
31
32 corners of the world, they have been consistently overlooked in the global public discourse
33
34 and in academic works. In that sense, the public disregard associated with famines can
35
36 match the silent emergency of hunger. Attention to the ethical dimensions of famine also
37
38 appears to have been negligible after Singer’s groundbreaking Famine Relief Argument in
39
40 1972. This paper attempted to revitalize the debate of famine ethics by taking departure in
41
42 the ethical discussion surrounding Singer’s Famine Relief Argument but adding two
43
44 important interrelated perspectives: (i) the dynamics of contemporary famine makes an
45
46 exclusive reliance of charitable benevolence obsolete; and (ii) the recent calls to
47
48 criminalize famine have injected new interesting ethical dilemmas to the debate.
49
50 Consequently, the paper argues for a famine ethics based on two pillars of ethical
51
52 obligations that could take the following form:
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1. *An obligation of charitable benevolence* based on a weak version of Singer’s Famine Relief Argument. An obvious concrete moral principle, inspired by Macaskill et al.’s (2018) *Very Weak Principle of Sacrifice*, could state that members of the middle-class ought, morally, to use at least 10 percent of their income to effectively combat famine and extreme destitution. This principle would still pose demands that by far exceed what are currently being honored. It would effectively close the financing gap for the key humanitarian agencies involved in famine prevention, and make certain that access to financial resources and logistical infrastructure is not the constraining factor for a world without famine

2. *An obligation to criminalize famine* and prosecute perpetrators that intentionally allow a famine to unfold. This obligation would help avert famines that cannot be easily remedied through philanthropy due to their link to malicious policies (what Marcus (2003) has coined *faminogenises*). While the direct discouraging effect on any one individual perpetrator of such famine crimes might be limited, getting states and international organizations to adhere to such principle would increase attention to famine and could help develop and cement norms for what is acceptable state behavior in situations of famine.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

Conflict of interest statement

The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

1
2
3
4 **References**
5

6
7 Aloyo, E. 2013. Improving global accountability: The ICC and nonviolent crimes against
8 humanity. *Global Constitutionalism* 2(3): 498–530.
9

10
11 Appel, B. 2018. In the Shadow of the International Criminal Court Does the ICC Deter
12 Human Rights Violations? *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62(1): 3-28.
13

14
15 Banik, D. 2016. The Hungry Nation: Food Policy and Food Politics in India. *Food*
16 *Ethics* 1(1): 29-45.
17

18
19 Banik, D. 2010. *Poverty and Elusive Development*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

20
21 Boin A., P. Hart, E. Stern and B. Sundelius. 2005. *The Politics of Crisis Management:*
22 *Public Leadership under Pressure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
23

24
25 Burchi, F. 2011. Democracy, institutions and famines in developing and emerging
26 countries. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 32(1): 17-31.
27

28
29 Checchi, F. and W. Robinson 2013. *Mortality Among Populations of Southern and*
30 *Central Somalia Affected by Severe Food Insecurity and Famine during 2010-2012*.
31 Rome and Washington D.C.

32
33 [http://www.fews.net/sites/default/files/documents/reports/Somalia_Mortality_Estimates_](http://www.fews.net/sites/default/files/documents/reports/Somalia_Mortality_Estimates_Final_Report_1May2013_upload.pdf)
34 [Final_Report_1May2013_upload.pdf](http://www.fews.net/sites/default/files/documents/reports/Somalia_Mortality_Estimates_Final_Report_1May2013_upload.pdf). Accessed July 24, 2019.
35

36
37 Cullity, G. 2004. *The Moral Demands of Affluence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
38

39
40 Currie, B. 2000. *The Politics of Hunger in India*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
41

42
43 De Waal, A. 1993. War and famine in Africa. *IDS Bulletin* 24(4): 33-40.
44

45
46 De Waal, A. 1997. *Famine Crimes*. London: Villiers Publications.
47

48
49 De Waal, A. 2018. *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine*. Cambridge:
50 Polity.
51

52
53 DeFalco, R. 2011. Accounting for famine at the extraordinary chamber in the courts of
54 Cambodia: The crimes against humanity of extermination, inhumane acts and
55 persecution. *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 5: 142–158.
56

57
58 DeFalco, R. 2016. Conceptualizing Famine as a Subject of International Criminal Justice:
59 Towards a Modality-Based Approach. *University of Pennsylvania Journal of*
60 *International Law* 38(1): 1113-1187.
61

62
63 Devereux, S. (ed.) 2007. *The new famines: why famines persist in an era of globalization*.
64 Abingdon: Routledge.
65

1
2
3
4
5
6 Duthie, R. 2014. Transitional justice, development, and economic violence. In: *Justice*
7 *and Economic Violence in Transition*, Dustin Sharp (ed.). New York: Springer: 165-201.
8

9 Economist. 2017. *Charting the news of 2017*.
10 [https://www.economist.com/news/christmas-specials/21732709-years-events-most-](https://www.economist.com/news/christmas-specials/21732709-years-events-most-grabbed-worlds-attention-charting-news-2017)
11 [grabbed-worlds-attention-charting-news-2017](https://www.economist.com/news/christmas-specials/21732709-years-events-most-grabbed-worlds-attention-charting-news-2017). Accessed July 24, 2019.
12
13

14 Edkins, J. 2007. The criminalization of mass starvations: from natural disaster to crime
15 against humanity. In: *The New Famines*, Stephen Devereux (ed.). Abingdon: Routledge:
16 50-66.
17

18
19 EM-DAT. 2019. *The International Disaster Database*. <http://www.emdat.be/>. Accessed
20 July 24, 2019.
21

22
23 FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2017. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition*
24 *in the World 2017*. Rome. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-I7695e.pdf>. Accessed July 24, 2019.
25

26
27 FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2019. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition*
28 *in the World 2019*. Rome. <http://www.fao.org/3/ca5162en/ca5162en.pdf> . Accessed July
29 24, 2019.
30

31 Fergusson, J. 2013. *The World's Most Dangerous Place – Inside the Outlaw State of*
32 *Somalia*. London: Black Swan Publishing.
33

34
35 Ferris, E. and D. Petz. 2012. *The year that shook the rich – A review of natural disasters*
36 *in 2011*. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/03_natural_disaster_review_ferris.pdf)
37 [content/uploads/2016/06/03_natural_disaster_review_ferris.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/03_natural_disaster_review_ferris.pdf). Accessed July 24, 2019.
38

39
40 Flores A. and A. Smith 2013 Leader Survival and Natural Disasters. *British Journal of*
41 *Political Science* 43(4): 821-843.
42

43
44 Forbes. 2018. *The World's Billionaires*. <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/list/>.
45 Accessed July 24, 2019.
46

47
48 Goodin, R. 1988. What is So Special about Our Fellow Countrymen? *Ethics* 98(4): 663-
49 86.
50

51
52 Google. 2018. *Google Trends*. <https://trends.google.com/trends/>. Accessed July 4, 2018.
53

54
55 Haggard, S. and N. Noland. 2007. *Famine in North Korea*. New York: Columbia
56 University Press.
57

58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100
101
102
103
104
105
106
107
108
109
110
111
112
113
114
115
116
117
118
119
120
121
122
123
124
125
126
127
128
129
130
131
132
133
134
135
136
137
138
139
140
141
142
143
144
145
146
147
148
149
150
151
152
153
154
155
156
157
158
159
160
161
162
163
164
165
166
167
168
169
170
171
172
173
174
175
176
177
178
179
180
181
182
183
184
185
186
187
188
189
190
191
192
193
194
195
196
197
198
199
200
201
202
203
204
205
206
207
208
209
210
211
212
213
214
215
216
217
218
219
220
221
222
223
224
225
226
227
228
229
230
231
232
233
234
235
236
237
238
239
240
241
242
243
244
245
246
247
248
249
250
251
252
253
254
255
256
257
258
259
260
261
262
263
264
265
266
267
268
269
270
271
272
273
274
275
276
277
278
279
280
281
282
283
284
285
286
287
288
289
290
291
292
293
294
295
296
297
298
299
300
301
302
303
304
305
306
307
308
309
310
311
312
313
314
315
316
317
318
319
320
321
322
323
324
325
326
327
328
329
330
331
332
333
334
335
336
337
338
339
340
341
342
343
344
345
346
347
348
349
350
351
352
353
354
355
356
357
358
359
360
361
362
363
364
365
366
367
368
369
370
371
372
373
374
375
376
377
378
379
380
381
382
383
384
385
386
387
388
389
390
391
392
393
394
395
396
397
398
399
400
401
402
403
404
405
406
407
408
409
410
411
412
413
414
415
416
417
418
419
420
421
422
423
424
425
426
427
428
429
430
431
432
433
434
435
436
437
438
439
440
441
442
443
444
445
446
447
448
449
450
451
452
453
454
455
456
457
458
459
460
461
462
463
464
465
466
467
468
469
470
471
472
473
474
475
476
477
478
479
480
481
482
483
484
485
486
487
488
489
490
491
492
493
494
495
496
497
498
499
500
501
502
503
504
505
506
507
508
509
510
511
512
513
514
515
516
517
518
519
520
521
522
523
524
525
526
527
528
529
530
531
532
533
534
535
536
537
538
539
540
541
542
543
544
545
546
547
548
549
550
551
552
553
554
555
556
557
558
559
560
561
562
563
564
565
566
567
568
569
570
571
572
573
574
575
576
577
578
579
580
581
582
583
584
585
586
587
588
589
590
591
592
593
594
595
596
597
598
599
600
601
602
603
604
605
606
607
608
609
610
611
612
613
614
615
616
617
618
619
620
621
622
623
624
625
626
627
628
629
630
631
632
633
634
635
636
637
638
639
640
641
642
643
644
645
646
647
648
649
650
651
652
653
654
655
656
657
658
659
660
661
662
663
664
665
666
667
668
669
670
671
672
673
674
675
676
677
678
679
680
681
682
683
684
685
686
687
688
689
690
691
692
693
694
695
696
697
698
699
700
701
702
703
704
705
706
707
708
709
710
711
712
713
714
715
716
717
718
719
720
721
722
723
724
725
726
727
728
729
730
731
732
733
734
735
736
737
738
739
740
741
742
743
744
745
746
747
748
749
750
751
752
753
754
755
756
757
758
759
760
761
762
763
764
765
766
767
768
769
770
771
772
773
774
775
776
777
778
779
780
781
782
783
784
785
786
787
788
789
790
791
792
793
794
795
796
797
798
799
800
801
802
803
804
805
806
807
808
809
810
811
812
813
814
815
816
817
818
819
820
821
822
823
824
825
826
827
828
829
830
831
832
833
834
835
836
837
838
839
840
841
842
843
844
845
846
847
848
849
850
851
852
853
854
855
856
857
858
859
860
861
862
863
864
865
866
867
868
869
870
871
872
873
874
875
876
877
878
879
880
881
882
883
884
885
886
887
888
889
890
891
892
893
894
895
896
897
898
899
900
901
902
903
904
905
906
907
908
909
910
911
912
913
914
915
916
917
918
919
920
921
922
923
924
925
926
927
928
929
930
931
932
933
934
935
936
937
938
939
940
941
942
943
944
945
946
947
948
949
950
951
952
953
954
955
956
957
958
959
960
961
962
963
964
965
966
967
968
969
970
971
972
973
974
975
976
977
978
979
980
981
982
983
984
985
986
987
988
989
990
991
992
993
994
995
996
997
998
999
1000

1
2
3
4 Heaton, L. 2012. *Somalia Famine Relief: A View from Mogadishu*.
5 <https://enoughproject.org/files/somalia-famine-relief-view-mogadishu.pdf>. Accessed July
6 24, 2019.
7

8
9 Howard-Hassmann, R. 2005. Genocide and State-Induced Famine: Global Ethics and
10 Western Responsibility for Mass Atrocities in Africa. *Perspectives on Global*
11 *Development and Technology* 4(3-4): 487-516.
12

13
14 Howard-Hassmann, R. 2016. *State food crimes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
15

16
17 Howe, P. 2018. Famine systems: A new model for understanding the development of
18 famines. *World Development* 105: 144-155.
19

20
21 Howe, P. and S. Devereux. 2004. Famine intensity and magnitude scales: A proposal for
22 an instrumental definition of famine. *Disasters* 28(4): 353-372.
23

24
25 International Criminal Court. 1998. *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*.
26 Rome: ICC. [http://www.icc-cpi.int/NR/rdonlyres/ADD16852-AEE9-4757-ABE7-](http://www.icc-cpi.int/NR/rdonlyres/ADD16852-AEE9-4757-ABE7-9CDC7CF02886/283503/RomeStatutEng1.pdf)
27 [9CDC7CF02886/283503/RomeStatutEng1.pdf](http://www.icc-cpi.int/NR/rdonlyres/ADD16852-AEE9-4757-ABE7-9CDC7CF02886/283503/RomeStatutEng1.pdf). Accessed July 24, 2019.
28

29
30 Integrated Phase Classification (IPC). 2012. Integrated food security phase classification:
31 Technical manual version 2.0.

32 Retrieved from [http://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC-Manual-](http://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC-Manual-2-Interactive.pdf)
33 [2-Interactive.pdf](http://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC-Manual-2-Interactive.pdf). Accessed July 24, 2019.
34

35
36 Jackson, A., and A. Aynte. 2013. *Talking to the other side*. HPG working paper.
37 <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5346928c4.pdf>. Accessed July 24, 2019.
38

39
40 James, S. 2007. Good Samaritans, Good Humanitarians. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*
41 24(3): 238-254.
42

43
44 Jamieson, D. 2005. Duties to the Distant: Aid, Assistance, and Intervention in the
45 Developing World. *The Journal of Ethics* 9(1-2): 151-170.
46

47
48 Jo, H. and B. Simmons. 2016. Can the International Criminal Court Deter Atrocity?
49 *International Organization* 70(03): 443-475.
50

51
52 Kahn M. 2005. The Death Toll from Natural Disasters: The Role of Income, Geography,
53 and Institutions. *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 87(2): 271-284.
54

55
56 Kearney, D. 2013. Food Deprivations as Crimes against Humanity. *New York University*
57 *Journal of International Law and Politics* 46: 253-289.
58

59
60 Keen, D. 1994. *The Benefits of Famine*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 Kekes, J. 2002. On the Supposed Obligation to Relieve Famine. *Philosophy* 77(4): 502-
5 517.
6

7
8 Kuper, A. 2002. More Than Charity: Cosmopolitan Alternatives to the ‘Singer Solution.’
9 *Ethics & International Affairs* 16(2): 107-120.
10

11 MacAskill, W., A. Mogensen and T. Ord. 2018. Giving Isn’t Demanding. In: *The Ethics of*
12 *Giving: Philosophers’ Perspectives on Philanthropy*. Paul Woodruff (ed). Oxford: Oxford
13 University Press: 178-201.
14

15
16 Malk, B. Y. 2017. State-induced Famine in Eritrea: Persecution and Crime against
17 Humanity. *Journal of Politics and Law* 10(4):1-14.
18

19
20 Marcus, D. 2003. Famine Crimes in International Law. *The American Journal of*
21 *International Law* 97: 245-281.
22

23
24 Martins, J., Toledo Florêncio, M., Grillo, P., Do Carmo P Franco, M., Martins, A.,
25 Clemente, G., Santos, C., Vieira, M., & Sawaya, L. 2011. Long-lasting effects of
26 undernutrition. *International journal of environmental research and public health* 8(6):
27 1817-1846.
28

29
30 Maxwell, D. & M. Fitzpatrick. 2012. The 2011 Somalia famine: Context, causes and
31 complications. *Global Food Security* 1(1): 5-12.
32

33
34 Maxwell, D. and N. Majid. 2016. *Famine in Somalia*. London: Hurst & Company.
35

36 Mercy Corps. 2017. *Quick facts: What you need to know about famine*.
37 <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-famine>.
38 Accessed July 24, 2019.
39

40
41 Miller, D. 2007. *National Responsibility and Global Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University
42 Press.
43

44
45 Niang, M. 2017. Africa and the Legitimacy of the ICC in Question. *International Criminal*
46 *Law Review* 17(4), 615-624.
47

48 Ó Gráda, C. 2009. *Famine – A Short History*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
49

50
51 OCHA. 2011. *Humanitarian Funding Analysis for Somalia - Drought and Famine Scale-*
52 *Up*. Available at:
53 http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_report_229.pdf. Accessed July
54 24, 2019.
55

56
57 Otteson, J. 2000. Limits on Our Obligation to Give. *Public Affairs Quarterly* 14(3): 183-
58 203.
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4 Plümper, T., & E. Neumayer 2009. Famine mortality, rational political inactivity, and
5 international food aid. *World Development* 37(1): 50-61.
6

7
8 Rachels, S. 2014. The Immorality of Having Children. *Ethical Theory and Moral*
9 *Practice* 17(3): 567-582.
10

11
12 Roach, S. C. 2016. Why moral commitments matter: mapping the ethics and politics of
13 responsible and accountable global governance. *Cambridge Review of International*
14 *Affairs* 29(1): 309-326.
15

16
17 Rubin, O. 2009a. The Merits of Democracy in Famine Protection - Fact or Fallacy?
18 *European Journal of Development Research* 21: 699-717.
19

20
21 Rubin, O. 2009b. The Niger famine: a collapse of entitlements and democratic
22 responsiveness. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 44(3), 279-298.
23

24
25 Rubin, O. 2019. The Precarious State of Famine Research. *The Journal of Development*
26 *Studies*, 55(8), 1633-1653.
27

28
29 Sankey, D. 2014. Towards recognition of subsistence harms: Reassessing approaches to
30 socioeconomic forms of violence in transitional justice. *The International Journal of*
31 *Transitional Justice* 8: 121–140.
32

33
34 Seipel, P. 2016. Philosophy, Famine Relief, and the Skeptical Challenge From
35 Disagreement. *Ratio*, 29(1), 89-105.
36

37
38 Sen, A. 1981. *Poverty and Famines*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
39

40
41 Sen, A. 1995. Nobody need starve. In G. Swift, J. M. Coetzee, & J. Lanchester (eds.)
42 *Granta 52: Food - The Vital Stuff* (pp. 213–220). London, Penguin.
43

44
45 Sen, A. 1999. *Development as freedom*. New York: Knopf.
46

47
48 Singer, P. 1972. Famine, Affluence, and Morality. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1(3):
49 229-243.
50

51
52 Singer, P. 2007. Review Essay on The Moral Demands of Affluence. *Philosophy and*
53 *Phenomenological Research* 85: 475-483.
54

55
56 Singer, P. 2009. *The Life You Can Save*. London: Picador.
57

58
59 Small, D., G. Loewenstein and P. Slovic. 2007. Sympathy and callousness: The impact of
60 deliberative thought on donations to identifiable and statistical victims. *Organizational*
61 *Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 102:143–153.
62

63
64 Sumner, A. 2012. Where do the poor live? *World Development* 40(5): 865-877.
65

1
2
3
4 Swanton, C. 2009. Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Demandingness. In: *The Problem of*
5 *Moral Demandingness*. Timothy Chappell (ed). Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan: 104-
6 123.
7

8
9 Thompson, P. B. 2010. Food aid and the famine relief argument (brief return). *Journal of*
10 *agricultural and environmental ethics* 23(3): 209-227.
11

12
13 Timmerman, T. 2015. Sometimes there is nothing wrong with letting a child
14 drown. *Analysis* 75(2): 204-212.
15

16
17 Timmerman, T. 2018. Save (some of) the Children. *Philosophia* 46(2): 465-472.
18

19
20 U.S. Mission to the UN Agencies in Rome. 2017. *20 Million People in Four Countries*
21 *Face Famine*. [https://usunrome.usmission.gov/mission/20-million-people-four-countries-](https://usunrome.usmission.gov/mission/20-million-people-four-countries-face-famine/)
22 [face-famine/](https://usunrome.usmission.gov/mission/20-million-people-four-countries-face-famine/). Accessed July 24, 2019.
23

24
25 UN Human Rights Council. 2014. *Report of the detailed findings of the commission of*
26 *inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*.
27 [http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/CommissionInquiryonHR](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/CommissionInquiryonHRinDPRK.aspx)
28 [inDPRK.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/CommissionInquiryonHRinDPRK.aspx). Accessed July 24, 2019.
29

30
31 UN NEWS. 2017. *Famine declared in region of South Sudan*.
32 <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56205#.Wak7wMhJa70>. Accessed July
33 24, 2019.
34

35
36 UNDP. 2018. *Zero Hunger*. [http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-2-zero-hunger.html)
37 [development-goals/goal-2-zero-hunger.html](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-2-zero-hunger.html). Accessed July 24, 2019.
38

39
40 Unger, P. 1996. *Living high and letting die: our illusion of innocence*. Oxford: Oxford
41 University Press.
42

43
44 Web of Science. 2019. The Social Sciences Citation Index and the Arts & Humanities
45 Citation Index. <https://webofknowledge.com>. Accessed July 24, 2019.
46

47
48 World Development Indicators. 2018. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sn.itk.defc.zs>,
49 Accessed August 6, 2018.
50

51
52 World Food Programme. 2018. *Fighting famine*. <http://www1.wfp.org/fighting-famine>.
53 Accessed July 24, 2019.
54

54
55 ¹ The data does not distinguish between singular/plural or the chronology of words. Restricting the sample
56 to news searches produces a similar outcome but with fewer observations. The use of English search terms,
57 although a potential source for bias, cannot be responsible for the marked difference between famine and
58 other types of disasters.

59
60 ² In the period after Singer's influential article in 1972, only 19 articles in the *Ethics* category of the Web of
61 Science's database mentioned "Famine Relief Argument" or just "famine" in the abstract/title/or the author
62 keywords (if no author keywords were available, KeyWord Plus was applied). The impact of these articles
63
64
65

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

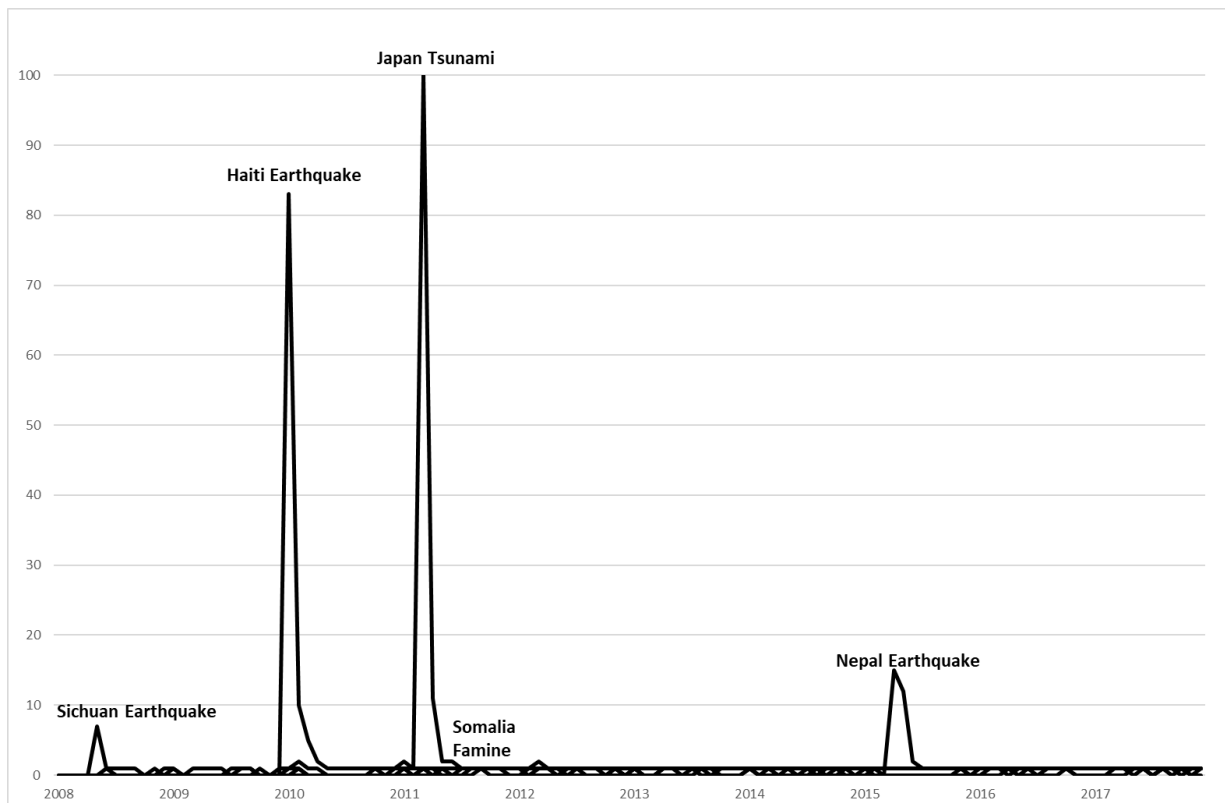
appears limited. While Singer’s article has been cited 954 times (as of July 24, 2019), the average number of citations for the subsequent 19 articles was three.

³ Naturally, these two categories do not cover all ethical objections that been waged against Singer’s principle. Hardin (1974) argued that Singer’s principle was downright immoral because it would lead to overpopulation and thus greater suffering. Keekes (2002) argued against the principle along the same lines by arguing that impoverished families are responsible for their own plight, as they should have realized the easily foreseeable consequences of having more children. Lastly, Jamieson (2005) rendered Singer’s principle invalid due to a long litany of flaws with development aid and humanitarian interventions.

⁴ *Mens rea* thus captures both first-degree famine crimes of intent and second-degrees famine crimes of recklessly ignoring the consequences of implemented policies (see also Marcus 2003 and Howard-Hassmann 2016).

⁵ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer on a previous version of a related manuscript for this argument.

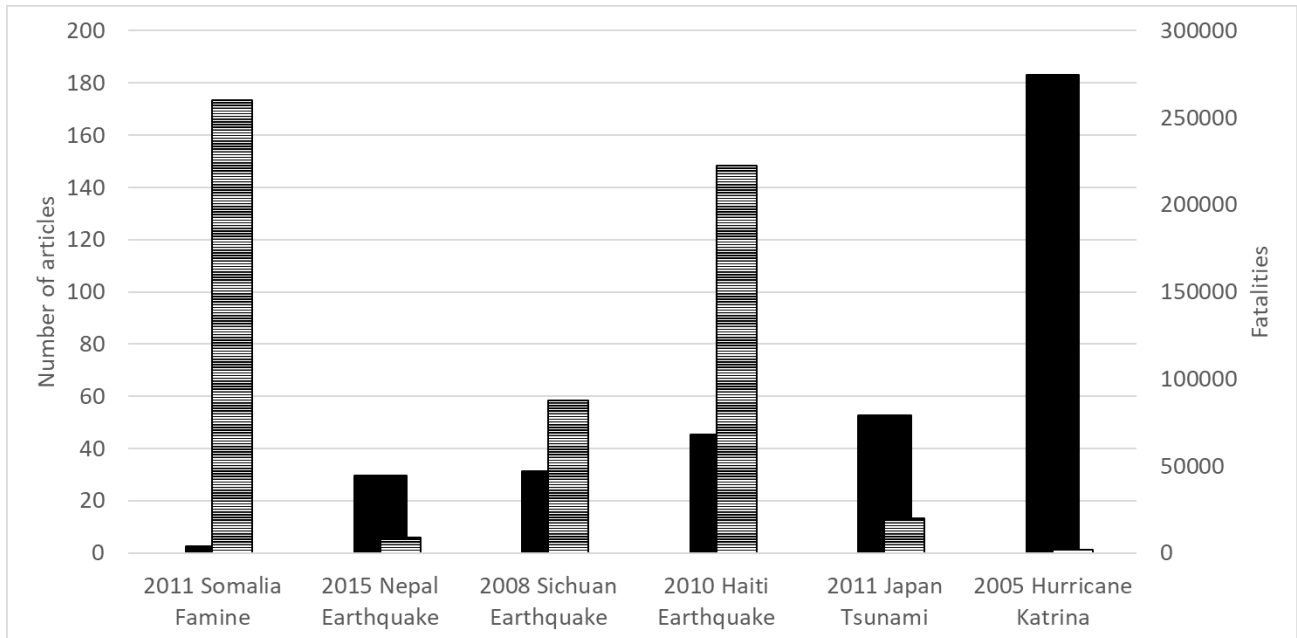
Figure 1: Google search terms for five major disasters, 2008-2018 June.



Legend: The maximum score of 100 represents the highest number of searchers for a particular term at a given point (“Japan Tsunami” in March 2011). The other scores are percentages of this maximum search interest: Haiti earthquake $\approx 83\%$; Nepalese earthquake $\approx 15\%$; Sichuan earthquake $\approx 8\%$ and the Somalia famine $\approx 0.5\%$.

Source: Google 2018.

Figure 2: Juxtaposing average annual published academic articles with disaster fatalities for six major disasters, 2005-2015.



Legend: The black column expresses the number of fatalities (right axis), while the striped column refers to the average annual number of Web of Science articles that contained the specific disaster in the topic (left axis).

Source: Web of Science 2019; EM-DAT 2019.