

Hunger Arguments and the Empirical World: Looking for Info

I. Moral of Examination So Far: Both parts of argument, normative and empirical matter.

- A. People accepting same normative principles can disagree on what to do if they disagree on the empirical facts.
- B. People disagreeing on normative principles can agree on what to do depending on the circumstances.

II. Sorting out the truth:

- A. http://www.timepolls.com/hppolls/archive/poll_results_417.html Poll re most trusted news source.
- B. How can this be?
- C. Same thing goes for other sources.

III. Kinds of information to look for.

A. Most everyone will want information on the efficacy of various policies in stemming famine deaths.

1. For consequentialists, the empirical facts that are most relevant have to do with the effects of various policy alternatives on hunger and deaths due to famine or lack of access to resources. That's because they think that morality requires us to do whatever leads to the best outcome (the most benefits with the least bad effects). So you'll want to find information about what works and what doesn't in preventing such deaths.

2. This same information will be relevant for a non-consequentialist like O'Neill because she thinks that many famine deaths and deaths due to a lack of resources are killings. And she thinks that some of these are killings for which we are responsible. Given her normative principle those killings will only be permissible if they were unavoidable. And information about whether alternative policies could stop these deaths will determine whether they are unavoidable or not. Furthermore, if they are avoidable and we avoid them by doing what it takes to avoid them, we are no longer killing those we save.

B. People who accept moral theories like O'Neill's will also need to know whether human beings caused the deaths that are due to famine and resource usage and whether we ourselves cause such deaths. If they are human caused her duty to defend people from being killed kicks in so that we would have a duty to stop those deaths. Furthermore, if these were killings that we caused we would have more reason to stop them as we would otherwise be killing them ourselves, in violation of the duty not to kill.

IV. We'll start by looking at whether famine deaths are often human caused. One question is whether famine deaths are caused by a lack of food or by how it and other resources are distributed.

A. As of 1992, there has been on average twice as much food per capita in sub-Saharan Africa (a highly famine prone region) as there is in other drought or flood prone countries that have avoided mass deaths. (N Y Times, 1/17/93)

B. According to Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen, Bangladesh's very severe famine took place in a year of high rice production because flooding put rural laborers out of work. Then a scare about supplies raised prices and people starved. (New York Times, January 17, 1993)

C. Africa has been a net exporter of barley, beans, peanuts, fresh vegetables and cattle, as well as coffee and cocoa. (Lappe' & Collins, *Food First* (Houghton Mifflin; Boston, 1977) p. 15) Lappe' now has a hunger related website with more info including more recent stuff at: <http://www.smallplanet.org/>.

V. The distribution of these resources may be directly dependent on human action but it may also be indirectly dependent on human action if it depends on:

A. Distribution of Land (since land distribution is itself human caused):

1. How the land is distributed will effect how much food available:

- a. A landowner who has a large farm has incentives to grow food for sale rather than subsistence.

And they will likely try to raise food for which prices are highest and then sell them to those who can afford it. (This is often called “cash cropping”).

1. The crops for which demand is highest often include beef, coffee, sugar and cotton. Not all of this is the most efficient way to create food sources.

aa. Raising meat takes more land than raising grains of equal nutritional value.

2. And these crops are then exported to regions where there is no shortage. We can find info on Sudan (which has historically had famine problems) for example here:

www.findingdulcinea.com/news/Africa/August-08/Sudanese-Food-Exports-Hard-to-Swallow-.html & <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/10/world/africa/10sudan.html?scp=1&sq=sudan+food+exports&st=nyt> .)

B. Political Power.

1. The distributions of food and land often reflect differences in political power.

a. Amartya Sen argues that countries with democracies and a free press don't have famines. (1/17/93 New York Times -

<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/17/weekinreview/it-s-never-fair-to-just-blame-the-weather.html?scp=1&sq=Amartya+sen+democracy+January+1993&st=cse&pagewanted=all>)

b. But the exact nature of the connection is controversial as noted in this 2003 NY Times article: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/01/arts/does-democracy-avert-famine.html?scp=2&sq=Amartya%20sen%20democracy&st=cse>

2. El Salvador in 1970s (from Lappe & Collins, p. 36 cited above.) The source is somewhat old, but much of the information hasn't changed all that much and in any case the structure of the example is nice to illustrate how O'Neill thinks of these things. Whether or not any given famine is caused in this way depends on the facts in the region in question. So to make an argument about those places look up the relevant information for areas currently suffering from famines or in danger of suffering from famines.

a. Only 1% of farms over 250 acres in the 1970s contained half the total farming area of country, and all the prime land. There has been some change due to land reform since the data here were collected, but not all that much.

i. Artifact of Spanish Colonial History of that country.

ii. Grow mostly export crops such as Cotton, Sugar, coffee, and Beef.

b. Remaining land not good farm land.

i. Erodes easily.

ii. Often quickly abandoned.

c. Arguably land would be better used if distributed differently.

d. The distribution of the land was an artifact of El Salvador's colonial history, and stayed in place through the exercise of political power by the oligarches who opposed various land reform proposals. They were sometimes able to remain in power through military means and sometimes get help from the US government in opposing rebels militarily.

3. Thomas Pogge (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Pogge) argues that laws which give rulers the right to resources even when they use their political power corruptly to acquire those resources provide incentives which lead to corruption, war and starvation. If we enforce such laws our actions might be part of the causes of certain famines since we create the incentive structure.

a. Pogge claims that some of the poorest places are the most resource rich because in those places corruption is more lucrative. See, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press 2008)

4. Somalia is currently under threat of severe famine. One reason is that it hasn't had a unified functioning government since 1991 since the government of Siad Barre fell. That government had been a cold war client first of the Soviet Union, then of ours. One could think that that puts both of those world powers in the causal chain. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somalia#Communist_rule)

C. Economic Power.

1. That the owners of resources in various countries have incentives to grow crops for export rather than for local nourishment is itself a function of there being a market for these items in which those who want them are willing to pay enough to make it more lucrative than growing food for local consumption. So it looks like those of us who buy and pay for these imported items have done something that causes the distributions to look like they do.

D. Insofar as global warming is primarily caused by the more developed world, especially through its use of energy for transportation and heat, but also due to beef consumption, if warming disrupts food production and that leads to deaths, these deaths would also count as killings by O'Neill's definition.

VI. Then there is the question that all of the authors, consequentialist and non-consequentialist will have an interest in: Are future deaths preventable and are there measures that are counterproductive rather than helpful at preventing deaths?

A. If deaths are not preventable then neither a consequentialist like Singer, nor a non-consequentialist like O'Neill will require anything by way of assistance. On the other hand if they are preventable (without causing an overall increase by increasing the deaths of other people) then both consequentialists and nonconsequentialists like O'Neill will think we should act to prevent them or some of them.

B. So whether deaths are preventable will turn on the kind of control we have over these factors.

1. Future population growth.
2. Food and resource production.
3. Distribution of resources.
4. Pollution and its effects on climate and the environment.

VII. Future Population Growth:

A. We already looked at two mechanisms that may be at work influencing population trends.

1. Tragedy of Commons.
2. Incentives to have more children in an under-developed economy.

B. We know that population is growing more rapidly in the under-developed world than the developed world. The UN has a chart at: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/socind/population.htm>

1. This may seem to give evidence for Hardin's perspective, since population is growing most rapidly in the areas that have received the most immediate famine assistance.

a. Africa was sparsely populated until this century and famine assistance is also a phenomenon of this century.

2. But there are some reasons to doubt that such assistance is the major cause of population growth:

a. Population has grown significantly for a much longer period without assistance playing a role.

b. The US once had a birth rate of around 6 children per woman before dropping to its current rate of roughly 2 per woman. Whereas it took about 58 years for the birth rate here to drop from six to four births per woman, the rate in the developing world as a whole has taken only 20 years to do so. (UPI Science report of June 24 1992)

c. Since this change has taken place during a period where there has been famine assistance, it is unlikely that such famine assistance has functioned to significantly increase fertility rates.

2. Chart is probably better evidence that development brings down the birth-rate.

C. A study (Sanderson, et. al.) appearing in *Nature* in August of 2001, predicts that global population will peak at 9 billion people in 2070 and decline thereafter. That's somewhat lower than earlier studies predicted would be the likely outcome. Some more recent studies are once again more pessimistic.

VIII. Food production.

A. Some Data (From website <http://earthtrends.org>). Checking recent data seems to show that so far the trend of increased per capita food production continues, though in some regions things get worse.

B. Whether such growth can/will continue will depend on whether or not either land currently in use can be better utilized or whether more land can be put to use.

1. There is some reason for pessimism over the long term, though advances can be made.

a. Environmental costs of increased production. b. Genetically modified food.

IX. Is it feasible to effect the distribution of resources in ways that might allow more to live on the same amount of resources? This is partly a question of social, political and economic power of the sort discussed above. But there are also issues about what sorts of distributive programs or policies might be effective.

A. There are some complex issues here, but places to start looking at some proposals include:

1. The world Bank's website has information to start some research from at: <http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/0,,menuPK:476823~pagePK:64165236~piPK:64165141~theSitePK:469372,00.html>

2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_reform Wikipedia's entry on land reform.

3. <http://www.oxfam.org/>, the website of Oxfam International.

4. <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/>, the website of Doctors Without Borders.

B. The following labels are useful to search for if you are looking for information on types of programs to reduce starvation/resource insecurity and also the kinds of factors which can lead to it: agrarian reform, cash cropping, debt relief, land reform, micro-loans.

1. There are many other sorts of things to look for when you do your research for the exam. The people at the reference desk of the library can be very helpful in looking for fruitful sources of information.

X. A 9/8/2008 article in the *Lincoln Journal Star* tells us of an article in the *British Medical Journal* says that having one or fewer children might be "the simplest and biggest contribution anyone can make to leaving a habitable planet." This may be most true for people in developed nations since we use 160 times the carbon per person as those in Ethiopia.

XI. It is relevant to ask do expenditures on foreign assistance make it impossible to deal with problems in the states.

A. This survey about what people think our foreign aid budget is and what it really is is relevant: <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brunitedstatescanadara/670.php>