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The Question of Moral Responsibility to Others: The Case of Feeding the Hungry

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Abstract

The escalating effects of hunger and malnutrition worldwide call for a "global solidarity to build the food-secure and climate-resilient future that every person, everywhere, needs and deserves" (Global Report on Food Crises, 2025). This paper presents two opposing arguments about the moral obligation to feed the hungry. Narveson (2017) argues that feeding the hungry is an "ethics of the hair shirt" that is turning the giver into slaves to the badly off. Singer (2017), on the other hand, argues that feeding the hungry is a moral obligation that should be imposed on everyone. His reasons are as follows: First, suffering and death because of lack of necessities are bad. Second, if one has the power to alter the misfortune of others without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, one is therefore morally obligated. Although the paper supports the position of Peter Singer on the moral obligation to feed the hungry, nonetheless, we have some reservations. First, it undermines a person's autonomy to give or contribute only an amount according to their disposition. Second, Singer suggests that giving a substantial amount of money or the reduction of the giver to marginal utility is morally permissible; hence, this is not morally comparable. This position is "*reduction ad absurdum*" because the act of giving should not put the giver in a compromised situation like the receiver. Third, although it is morally worthy to give beyond what is required, the act of giving a considerable amount of money, however, must be a personal commitment rather than an imposed policy or norm.

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Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have envisioned creating a world free of hunger by the year 2030. However, in 2015, the issue of hunger and food security showed an alarming increase. This increase is associated with external factors such as the global pandemic, war, weather disturbances, and deepening inequalities (Global Report on Food Crises, 2025). According to the same report, in 2024 an estimated 8.2 per cent – or 1 in 12 people – of the global population faced hunger and about 28 per cent – nearly 2.3 billion people – were moderately or severely food insecure. This is measured by looking at the incidence report of malnutrition for three consecutive years, and the data shows the severity of the revealing crisis of humanity. The report added that an estimated 2.33 billion people faced moderate to severe food insecurity in 2023. One reason is the lack of access to reasonable nourishment. The persistent surge in hunger and food insecurity, fueled by a complex interplay of factors, demands immediate attention and coordinated global efforts to alleviate this critical humanitarian challenge (SDG's Goals Report, 2025). Thus, a "global solidarity to build the food-secure and

climate-resilient future that every person, everywhere, needs and deserves." The report stipulates that hunger in the century is indefensible and failure to respond is not only a defect of the systems but more so, a failure of humanity (GRFC, 2025).

While billions of people suffered extreme poverty, there were also billions of people, or middle-class earners, who spent most of their material wealth lavishly (Singer, 2019). The number of affluent people and the level of billionaire wealth increased significantly. For instance, in the October 2025 report, the world's richest man, Elon Musk, became the first person to have wealth over half a trillion dollars, while one in four people globally face hunger (Oxfam, 2026).

This paper presents two opposing views on whether or not one is morally obligated to help feed the hungry of the world. Narveson (2017) argues that one cannot be morally obligated to help others in need if and only if one is not directly involved in such misfortune. Although helping those who are in need is morally praiseworthy, we are not obligated to a compelled moral responsibility. Thus, feeding the hungry is neither an ought to do nor a must to do, especially when the misfortune is no fault of one's own. Feeding the hungry, as Narveson proposed, is neither a duty of justice nor a duty of charity, but rather an "ethics of the hair shirt" that is turning the giver into slaves to the badly off. Narveson further argues that starvation of humanity is not necessarily a product of nature's inability to provide material resources, but rather it is often a result of the failure of government systems to ensure that resources are distributed appropriately. Thus, it is no one's business to feed the hungry for whatever reason, and one is not morally bound to do so.

Singer (2017), on the other hand, argues that feeding the hungry is a moral obligation that should be imposed on everyone. His reason is grounded on the following principles: First, suffering and death due to the lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad. Second, if one has the power to alter the misfortune of others without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, one is therefore morally obligated. Singer's principles of feeding the hungry might not be agreeable to many; however, he insisted that the stipulated principles are morally more praiseworthy than their opposite.

The first part of the paper explores Jan Narveson's egoistic indifference, which holds that moral responsibility to others is hypothetically stipulated. The question that the paper attempts to explore is stipulated in this way: What sort of moral concerns does one have about starving people? Do we have the basic duty of justice to feed hungry people? If this is not feasible, are we required to offer charity to these unfortunate people? The second part deals with the arguments of Peter Singer that helping others goes beyond proximity and distance, and whether or not we are the only person or one among millions that offers help to unfortunate people is morally significant. By way of conclusion, we will raise some of the compelling issue/s of both authors. For instance, the issue of Narveson's paper on egoistic indifference may not be plausible, especially when one has the capacity to help. Although we affirm his position that somehow there is an antecedent cause why some people suffer in desperate and destitute situations, we do not agree altogether with his position that we do not have moral responsibility to feed hungry people, especially distant ones or strangers. While we agree with Peter Singer that one has a moral responsibility to help others in need, we have some reservations that helping these people is a compelling one, and that one may even renounce the comforts of life to aid these unfortunate people. We take this position as a supererogatory act and should be decided freely by individuals without any constraint or compulsion.

Jan Naverson's Ethics of Hair Shirt

In his paper entitled "*Feeding the Hungry,*" Jan Naverson (2017) argues that one has no moral obligation to help the unfortunate people, especially distant ones. His reasons are grounded in the following principles: First, a person has no obligation to feed the hungry if he/she is not the antecedent cause of such misfortune. Second, feeding the hungry now does not minimize or solve the issue of starvation; instead, this can only exacerbate the serious problem of the future. Third, although feeding the hungry is an admirable character trait, if imposed on individuals as duties of justice and charity, it is not plausible.

In a critique of James Rachels' (1981) argument that "letting someone die and killing them" is morally equivalent, Narveson expresses the moral difference in his argument on starvation. He begins by understanding the function of the term in either a passive or active verb. Starve in a passive verb means "something that happens to one," while expressed in the active form, it connotes "something inflicted by one person on another." The latter form of the verb is an issue and morally equivalent to killing and therefore demands antecedent responsibility, while the former is in cases where a person is not the antecedent cause of misfortune.

For illustration, we may refer to the controversial "Flood Gates Control Project of the Philippine Government," which aims to mitigate the severe effects of flooding in some prone areas of the country. However, it was discovered that the said project was not efficiently

implemented as planned, and the appropriated billions of pesos for the project just went into somebody's pocket. As a consequence, thousands of people are directly affected by floods due to bad weather conditions caused by several typhoons and tropical storms that hit the country as early as July 2025. The report of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) on August 10, 2025, estimated that a total of 9.7 million individuals were directly affected by the three consecutive tropical cyclones (Laqui, 2025). This is not a case of "letting die", rather a case of "killing" whose actions are causally determined and the foreseeable negative effects are intended.

The worsening effects of the disasters are associated with the failure of the authorities to implement the planned projects intended to minimize the severe effects of flooding. As a result, people suffered the loss of material things and the loss of loved ones. Is this not a form of killing innocent people and thus, eligible for condemnation? The bad thing that happened to people is foreseeable, brought about, and demands antecedent responsibility. The evil effect is induced, which brings it about that the person is dead where he would otherwise still be alive (Narveson, 2017). Thus, letting someone die through no fault of one's own is not morally equivalent to killing them.

In the case of starving people in the world, Narveson stipulated that starving and allowing to starve are special cases of "killing and letting die". Thus, the principle may generate two further questions. First, is it unjust to let others starve to death? Second, is feeding the hungry a duty of justice or unenforceable charity to be left to individual consciences? In a related context, Narveson distinguishes duties of justice from duties of charity. The former, according to Narveson, is compulsory, where one's action is subject to the evaluation of performance, while the latter is a character trait generated from a person's disposition to solely benefit others in need. For him, both duties of justice and charity are compelled by institutions like the government. This is evident from the taxes collected to support government projects and programs of charity intended to benefit the less fortunate people. Narveson pointed out that feeding the hungry becomes an unwavering commitment to everyone, which seems to connote that one is morally obligated to extend one's help in any form to alleviate the sufferings of others. This putative obligation carries an equal weight and value with the giver. For Narveson, this is an "ethic of hair shirt" mentality of compulsory justice and charity. The principle states to "benefit others, at the expense of yourself, and keep doing it until you are poor and miserable as those whose poverty and misery you are supposed to be relieving" (Narveson, 2017). This is a misguided charity that has happened to many philanthropists who devoted most of their lives and material resources to charities while leaving their families in marginal utility.

Charity begins at home, where the first beneficiaries of goodness should be one's immediate family, relatives, and friends. Sympathy is a matter of heart disposition, and what matters most to the heart are not strangers, but someone whose distance and proximity are within reach. Although helping strangers is a commendable act, the outcome of exercising charity to people related to us is an investment and intended payoff. Narveson affirms that we don't have a direct moral responsibility to relieve others in distress, especially if we are not the antecedent cause of such distress. Feeding the hungry is not our moral responsibility; in fact, doing so, according to Garrett Hardin (1974), creates a much greater problem in the future. Thus, feeding the hungry now is a misguided charity that will eventually result in an escalating problem of starvation worldwide. In a lifeboat analogy, Hardin explains:

> So here we sit, say 50 people in our lifeboat. To be generous, let us assume it has room for 10 more, making a total capacity of 60. Suppose the 50 of us in the lifeboat see 100 others swimming in the water outside, begging for admission to our boat or for handouts. We have several options: we may be tempted to try to live by the Christian ideal of being "our brother's keeper," or by the Marxist ideal of "to each according to his needs." Since the needs of all in the water are the same, and since they can all be seen as "our brothers," we could take them all into our boat, making a total of 150 in a boat designed for 60. The boat swamps, and everyone drowns. Complete justice, complete catastrophe (Hardin, 1974)

The metaphor insinuates the distribution of resources. The lifeboat is already loaded with 50 passengers on board; however, it can still accommodate 10 more individuals on board. The Lifeboat is surrounded by a huge swimmer who wants to be on board also. Ryberg (1997) suggests three options to the people on board: First, they can accommodate people on board, as justice demands; however, by exceeding the capacity on board, the sense of justice may lead to a tragedy. Second, they may maximize the capacity of the boat with an additional 10 persons; however, maximizing the capacity on board will endanger the safety factor whenever a calamity or weather disturbance occurs while sailing; this option implies a high risk of unprecedented disaster. Third, they will not admit anybody on board; this option preserves the safety factor, and most likely all 50 persons will be saved. Hardin argues that the third option is the lesser evil; thus it is morally

permissible. This conclusion, when applied to the relation between the developing and affluent countries, illustrates Hardin's non-assistance argument: Firstly, assisting aids to countries that exceed their carrying capacity with aid is catastrophic. Feeding the hungry only "keeps them alive longer to produce more hungry bellies and disease and death". Moreover, feeding the hungry of the world entails sustainability that will be demanded of affluent nations; as a consequence, the rich countries will possibly suffer economic moribundity. Secondly, Hardin's conclusion implies the issue of migration, where starving people move to where the food is. This is the reason why Hardin proposed a strict policy on immigration control (Ryberg, 1997).

Hardin further explains that the developing nations are populated more than the developed countries, where the sharing of resources in the spaceship analogy would become more skewed, and assuming the burden of responsibility with these developing countries is no longer feasible. Providing mutual aid like feeding the hungry and allowing immigration may only lead to the detriment of all or the tragedy of the commons. Thus, instead of a catastrophic shipwreck, Hardin argues that letting the unfortunate die is morally preferable to having an option of sacrificing some for the overall population (Brzozowski, 2010). Bigman (1990) concluded that lifeboat ethics is unethical and even suicidal because food aid given to developing countries will only promote destructive population growth that eventually brings about greater catastrophe, as Hardin describes the tragedy of the commons.

Peter Singer and Feeding the Hungry as Moral Responsibility

Peter Singer argues that feeding the hungry should not be perceived as an act of charity, but rather it should be seriously treated and imposed on everyone as a norm or policy, like stealing or murder. This is because the problem of starvation in developing countries is a serious matter that needs a concrete solution and unwavering commitment. His argument is stipulated in this way: First, that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad. This follows the second argument of unwavering commitment to feed the hungry, formulated as "if it is in my power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (Singer, 1972). In an analogy, Singer explains:

> On your way to work, you pass a small pond. On hot days, children sometimes play in the pond, which is only about knee-deep. The weather's cool today, though, and the hour is early, so you are surprised to see a child splashing about in the pond. As you get closer, you see that it is a very young child, just a toddler, who is flailing about, unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond. You look for the parents or babysitter, but there is no one else around. The child is unable to keep her head above the water for more than a few seconds at a time. If you don't wade in and pull her out, she seems likely to drown. Wading in is easy and safe, but you will ruin the new shoes you bought only a few days ago, and get your suit wet and muddy. By the time you hand the child over to someone responsible for her, and change your clothes, you'll be late for work. What should you do (Singer, 2009)?

This story of the drowning child in a shallow pond was first told by Singer in his published article in 1972, "*Famine, Affluence and Morality.*" In an expected event in 2011, Singer told a pathetic story of a two-year-old child in Foshan, China. A 2-year-old girl named Wang Yue wandered away from her mother and into a small street, where she was hit by a van that did not stop. The most terrible and shocking thing that happened was that no one even dared to help or rescue the child lying helplessly in the street. People saw the accident; however, they were not mindful of rushing the child to a nearby hospital. Soon the child died (Singer, 2009). This incident reflects the deaths of millions of children around the globe from either untreated diseases or malnutrition. Singer reflects that if only people donate or give money to a charitable institution managing these children, it could have saved a child, rather than letting them die.

According to the report of United Nations News in 2017, famine has been formally declared in parts of South Sudan where 100, 000 people are facing starvation, and the problem continues to accelerate to a million people classified as being on the brink of famine (Rulashe, 2017). Despite the escalating famine worldwide, little attention has been given in the public and academic sphere. Although it is stipulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), these UN Goals do not categorically stipulate how to eliminate hunger and famine globally. Rubin (2019) argues that the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) don't have a clear target on how to address this extreme and absurd manifestation of humanitarian apathy where a huge part of humanity suffers a degrading state of economic disparity. The discourse of hunger and famine is only given attention in academic discussion when Peter Singer in 1972 presented his argument on Famine Relief, highlighting that helping the victims of famine is a moral obligation imposed on affluent individuals or nations.

Singer argues that pulling the drowning child from the muddy, shallow pond is not distinct from aiding a starving child from the other side of the globe. This conclusion of Singer leads him to the formulation of his very well-known 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). The moral obligation of saving the child from drowning is not diminished by the fact that there are many people around who noticed the event but are doing nothing. Moreover, it is not conditioned by distance or relationship with the child. Furthermore, the consequence, perhaps of getting muddy and wet, is morally insignificant compared to the death of the child. This moral obligation to help save the child from drowning is rooted in our fundamental capacity to discern that the act is morally right and morally worthy. Our moral sense is triggered, for example, by conditions that offend our sense of morality or our deeply held beliefs about the morally good life—say, inhumane treatment of laborers, unjust killings of persons, and deliberate infliction of pain and suffering, such as the case of the child in the analogy (De Vera, 2019). For Singer, we do have a moral obligation to help other people, especially when we have the power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance; we ought, morally, to do it. The application of the second assumption is stipulated in this way: First, it eliminates the preconceived assumption that distance and proximity matter in extending one's help. The argument is grounded on the idea that proximity offers a better position in determining the appropriate help needed. While this is true, this position contradicts some of the already established moral principles like impartiality, universalizability, and justice, aside from the fact that it is discriminatory. Thus, it is not the case that the moral obligation to help others is lessened by distance and relationship. From a utilitarian perspective, helping others in the case of starving people would obviously and significantly increase the happiness of people in the world (Singer, 1997). Singer suggests that the above argument is possible when affluent people in the world keep only the necessities of life and allocate some of the material resources to a relief fund intended for the hungry around the globe (Singer, 1997).

The principle makes no difference between cases in which I am the only person who could do anything and cases in which I am just one among millions in the same position (Singer, 1996). However, the quantitative difference can be made plausible if everyone is morally obligated to help the famine victims. This is feasible through a policy demanding everyone give a substantial amount of money, so that by giving, we may be able to mitigate or minimize the suffering of others. The strong version of the argument requires us to prevent bad things from happening unless, in doing so, we would be sacrificing something of comparable moral significance. This is controversial; hence, this would reduce the giver to marginal utility. However, for Singer, this is highly commendable. The reason for upholding the strong version is that poverty and famine are serious problems, especially for developing countries. Thus, a policy that obliged everyone to give a substantial amount can be a powerful means of alleviating the great suffering as a consequence of famine. Singer argues that the overall consequence of doing what everyone ought to do cannot be worse than the result of everyone doing less than one ought to do, although the result of everyone doing what one reasonably believes one ought to do could be a better one (Singer, 1996). While the moderate version of the principle only directs one to prevent bad occurrences, unless one does so, one has to sacrifice something morally significant, which is an appeal to people living in a moderate economy.

This conclusion of Singer's is not exempt from criticism and objections by academic scholars. They think that Singer's Famine Relief Argument is a demanding call for charitable benevolence (Rubin, 2019). One criticism observes that asking people to help aid the poor to a point where the giver is reduced to the same marginal utility as the receiver is against commonsense morality, a principle that is only acceptable to people with high altruistic principles. Kuper (2002) comments that Singer's analogy of helping a drowning child connotes a shift from a moral philosopher to that of a lifeguard. Kuper (2002) continues that Singer's celebrated analogy is not a real fact of the world; his proposed argument is a disanalogy between a moral principle of helping a drowning child and aiding a starving child. Swanton (2009) argues that Singer's charitable benevolence implies a limitless demand that should not compromise the giver's personal life, nor neglect his/her proximate responsibilities, such as his family, loved ones, and friends. Moreover, Cullity (2004) criticises Singer's argument as an ethics of short-circuits, for it is morally unquestionable for a person to give something to the poor in exchange for his own self-fulfillment.

Thus, for Singer, the moral obligation to help feed the hungry should not be treated as an act of charity, but rather a duty to be imposed on everyone, especially on the affluent. Giving money to famine victims as an act of charity is optional because it depends upon one's disposition of generosity; hence, it does not guarantee the active participation of everyone. However, if giving money to the victims of famine can become a norm or policy, such as the moral norms against stealing or killing, then one can assume an active participation of everyone. Thus, if

everyone commits to help ease the sufferings of others, then it follows that there will be enough food, shelter, and medical care to be given and administered to the victims. With sufficient material resources at hand to be distributed to famine victims through charities stationed worldwide, the problem, if not eradicated, will significantly slow down in numbers.

In response to Hardin's lifeboat ethics and Naverson's a hair shirt morality, Singer argues that feeding the hungry is a moral obligation imposed on everyone, especially the affluent. Famine and starvation around the world are serious problems that should be treated accordingly. An act of charity through donation is not enough to minimize or eradicate the problem; rather, a comprehensive policy or norm that obligates everyone to contribute a substantial amount of money and resources is necessary to have a significant change in the lives of people affected by famine and starvation. Singer even proposed a drastic renunciation of a luxurious lifestyle and allocating the excess material resources to famine victims in the world.

Conclusion

In 2015, all countries under the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to transform the world through a proactive commitment and participation of everyone in all walks of life to end, if not minimize to a substantial degree, the growing problems of the world concretely specified in the 17-point agenda (United Nations, 2015). As a response to the UN call, the paper specifically addresses the issues of poverty (SDG 1), hunger (SDG 2), and good health and well–being (SDG 3). The paper presents the negative argument of Narveson that helping feed the hungry in the world cannot be imposed as a moral obligation on everyone, nor a duty of justice and charity. Narveson maintained that feeding the hungry is not a solution to end famine and starvation worldwide; rather, it only results in a much greater problem in the future, the tragedy of the commons.

From a moral point of view, Bigman (1990) comments that millions of people are deprived of food and other necessities, and the issue of undernourishment in the world has reached an unprecedented level. This is an obvious evil, and thus cannot be tolerated under any criterion of morality. Bigman added that even without any formal theory of justice, common sense tells us that an economic system which allows human beings to die from starvation at the same time as others enjoy an abundance of food is fundamentally unjust (Bigman, 1990). O'Neil (1975) argues that egoistic indifference is morally equivalent to killing and not just a case of permitting the death of starving people. Being insensitive to the needs of others in matters of life and death, like hungry people, is a crime against humanity and a direct violation of humanitarian standards (Bigman, 1990).

Peter Singer, on the other hand, argues that feeding the hungry is a moral obligation that should be imposed on everyone. Famine and starvation are serious problems that require radical commitment and active cooperation of humanity, especially the affluent ones. This radical commitment and active cooperation even require a drastic renunciation of a luxurious lifestyle to allocate a substantial amount of money enough to alleviate, if not totally eradicate, the perennial struggle of poverty and hunger worldwide. In "*Practical Ethics*", Singer (2011) speaks of living according to ethical standards that are "tied up with the notion of defending the way one is living, of giving reasons for it, of justifying it". However, justifying an ethical standard grounded on egoistic disposition is not defensible because it is only self-serving, disregarding a benefit that can possibly be offered to a larger community. Singer (2011) argues that an acceptable ethical standard should be at least universal, that is, a broadly utilitarian position. Singer explains this universal aspect of ethics:

> In accepting that ethical judgments must be made from a universal point of view, I am accepting that my own needs, wants and desires cannot, simply because they are my preferences, count more than the wants, needs and desires of anyone else. Thus, my very natural concern is that my own wants, needs and desires, henceforth I shall refer to them as "preferences" – be looked after must, when I think ethically, be extended to the preferences of others (Singer, 2011).

Here, Singer is proposing an empathetic ethical decision, a decision that is not only focused on a personal preference, but rather a preference that most likely maximizes the preferences of others, the course of action that generates a balance and a warranted outcome for all affected. Singer suggests that, to think ethically, one must consider the feelings and position of others. Thus, by empathizing with the position of others, one may realize that one's preferences are not of a privileged one or of greater weight; rather, a good preference must be a course of action that has a desirable outcome for all people affected by the decision.

Although we agree with the position of Singer that helping feed the hungry is a fundamental moral obligation of everyone, regardless of distance and affinity, having it as an imposed obligation through a policy or norm seems

problematic. First, it undermines a person's autonomy to give or contribute only an amount according to their disposition. Second, Singer suggests that giving a substantial amount of money or the reduction of the giver to marginal utility is morally permissible; hence, this is not morally comparable. This position is "*reduction ad absurdum*" because the act of giving should not put the giver in a compromised situation like the receiver. Third, although it is morally worthy to give beyond what is required, the act must be treated as a personal choice according to the disposition of the giver rather than an imposed policy or norm.

Ethical Statement

The paper is theoretical in nature and did not involve any human and animals' participation. The data used is generated from the search engine and properly acknowledged in the references.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the conduct and publication of this research. All procedures followed were in accordance with institutional and ethical standards, and there were no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the outcomes of this study.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the authors utilized Grammarly for sentence construction improvement. Following the use of this tool/service, the authors conducted a review and made necessary modifications, assuming full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Data Availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are available within the paper.

Author Contributions

MLC: Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review and Editing; **MCPG:** Validation; **RRHC:** Validation; **JMDC:** Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review and Editing; **BFR:** Writing - Review and Editing; **JBV:** Writing - Review and Editing; **EFDL:** Writing - Review and Editing; **JERA:** Writing - Review and Editing.

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