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ECS 188

### Tragedy of the Commons Ethical Analysis

In 1968, Garret Hardin created his essay, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, to address the growing concerns surrounding shared resource consumption. He called these shared resources commons, which include air, water, land grazing, and the atmosphere. Throughout his essay, Hardin criticizes the human race and says humans cannot properly manage a shared resource, as it will always lead to overconsumption. His key point is that overconsumption, for example, overfishing or polluting the environment, cannot be solved by technological innovations, as what is there to innovate if we have already destroyed the shared resource? He declares that the best way to solve this problem is through something called mutual coercion mutually agreed upon. This can be interpreted as social or institutional constraints designed to limit the overuse of resources, and it may be a law or tax to prevent the rational ideal of using something that feels unlimited currently. Decades later, Hardin's concerns continuously echo the growing issue of climate change, where we are starting to see degradation of the shared resources we have come to take for granted. Our atmosphere, oceans, and forests are being exploited and overused without any constraints to stop them. This result has led to massive ecological disasters such as melting glaciers, rising seas, and biodiversity collapse, which technology may be unable to solve. Throughout this paper, we will be discussing how different ethical theories, such as Utilitarianism, Contractualism, and Egoism, relate to the climate change issue and Hardin's claims surrounding the commons. Each of these ethical theories will provide its own viewpoints on this issue of climate change and whether or not they concur with Hardin's claim that solving

these issues requires ethical and moral responsibility for their actions, along with technological fixes.

Firstly, Utilitarianism relates heavily to environmental ethics and policies. Utilitarianism was developed by philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and they argued that the moral worth of an action is determined by its consequences and how much general happiness/well-being is created for the greatest number of people. This way of thinking provides insights into complex issues like climate change, where actions of past generations are having massive impacts on future generations. From a utilitarian perspective, climate change is an example of a dilemma that needs the whole population to agree that this exploitation of our environment is damaging. The long-lasting consequences of climate change, such as destruction of the ozone layer or deforestation, outweigh the short-term benefits from a utilitarian point of view. A utilitarian would endorse the changes in human behavior to solve climate change and reduce the net suffering that could impact the future of later generations. Utilitarianism also implies that governments and individuals should prioritize policies that induce long term benefits even at the cost of short term sacrifice. Implementing taxes on carbon-based fuels, environmental regulations, and green energy management are all policies that may inconvenience certain industries, but allow for a greater benefit in reducing global harm. For example, if a new policy were to come into effect that creates a shortage of jobs in coal-based industries, a utilitarian might view this as justified as it has the potential to lead to a more sustainable future and preserve biodiversity. Moreover, utilitarian ethics champions intergenerational responsibility – future generations rely on the actions that we as a community make today. Reducing emissions now can prevent irreversible damage, creating a ripple effect that aligns with utilitarian goals. On a global scale, utilitarianism also supports the principles of climate justice, recognizing that the

poorer nations who are least responsible for carbon emissions often endure the harsher consequences from climate-related disasters. This framework emphasizes the moral duty of wealthier nations to take part in reduction efforts in support of vulnerable communities. Utilitarianism reinforces Hardin's warning that without collective action to prioritize the common good, the consequences of environmental degradation will both increase in magnitude and be widespread.

Another way to approach Hardin's argument is through contractualism, which argues that moral norms are justified through mutual agreement. Thomas Scanlon, a prominent contractualist, offers a helpful framework for contractualism in his book, *What we Owe to Each other*. Scanlon argues that an action is wrong when it violates principles that no one can reasonably reject. This idea can be applied directly to climate change issues. For example, consider a scenario where a major company deliberately suppresses and ignores data about their carbon footprint to avoid regulation. At the expense of the environment, this company gains profit and the general public is affected by their toxic waste. Scanlon's framework allows for the general public to reasonably reject this action as over-polluting the environment for personal gain harms the overall community. This framework aligns with Hardin's claim that shared resources must require collectively agreed-upon constraints. Hardin believes that a sustainable solution to the tragedy of the commons requires mutual constraint. Every party in a conflict must agree, whether explicitly or implicitly, to limit their behavior for the sake of the common good. A contractualist perspective supports this idea as no moral can be justified unless it is reciprocally acceptable. All parties must have fair and equal grounds to agree on certain ideas and norms. For example, consider the Paris agreement in 2016 which aimed to limit levels of global warming. Every country that participated in this climate agreement collectively agreed to limit their

nation's emissions. If one nation were to produce a disproportionate amount of pollution, other countries who are contributing to the climate act would find it unfair and have reason to reject this behavior, falling in line with Scanlon's contractualism.

However, contractualists may not fully agree with Hardin's perspective, especially in terms of his level of urgency and enforceability. Hardin argues that regulation often requires a robust amount of regulation including new laws, penalties, and treaties to ensure compliance. Without the extra enforcement, the collapse of a shared system of resources is inevitable. From a contractualists standpoint, this level of regulation may be unnecessary as they believe individuals are already motivated to honor principles that align with everyone's view in society. The extra level of enforceability to ensure practicality may be deemed unnecessary. Hardin has a more cynical view of human nature in comparison to that of a contractualist. While Hardin believes that people are inclined to work for their own self-interest, contractualists believe that people are compelled to work for the reasonable good. Thus, while contractualism aligns with the ethical logic of Hardin's dilemma, it may not be in full agreement with the extra regulation barriers as it can potentially undermine the agreements held by every party in a system.

Egoism is based on the idea that an individual must act primarily for their own benefit and self-interest. In particular, a central form of egoism, rational egoism, suggests that people must act in ways that promote their own long term benefit. At first glance, egoism may sound synonymous with selfishness. However, egoism is not the same as selfishness. While selfishness completely disregards another individual's well-being, egoism is more focused on what matters to an individual and what gives them reason for their actions. It does not explicitly call for people to never care for one another, rather "caring" stems from an individual's own interest. In the context of the *Tragedy of the Commons*, rational egoism partially aligns with the solution of

mutual constraint. Hardin argues that shared resources will not be preserved without some form of collective agreement. A rational egoist might support these restrictions, as they may come to an understanding that the overexploitation of common resources will eventually come to harm them individually. For example, Hardin's famous parable gives a scenario where multiple herders are farming and raising cattle on a common piece of land. While each farmer may temporarily benefit from adding more cattle and grazing the pasture without restriction, a rational egoist might think that these factors will eventually lead to the common piece of land becoming barren. This outcome will eventually hurt each individual farmer, so the long term consequences outweigh the short term benefits and give reason for a rational egoist to be mindful of the overconsumption of resources.

However, Hardin's call for a sense of urgency and group sacrifice conflicts with a rational egoist's viewpoint. His argument that individuals must be willing to sacrifice their own personal freedom and holding others accountable for acting selfishly may contradict what a rational egoist believes. For example, Hardin emphasizes the importance behind confronting others who are overusing shared resources. A rational egoist may see little personal gain in being an enforcer of this ethical behavior. If it comes at the cost of reputation, relationships, and standing, a rational egoist may view publicly opposing others as an unnecessary burden with no benefit.

Furthermore, Hardin's support of the implementation of additional laws, taxes, and penalties to curb exploitation can conflict with the rational egoist's viewpoint. Support of new regulation is conditional to a rational egoist. While they may be in full agreement with the cause of the tragedy of the commons, if the new regulation personally works against a rational egoist, they will prioritize their own benefit rather than the collective interest. Rational egoism in a sense is selectively cooperative – only policies that promote their benefit are favorable. While rational

egoism recognizes the potential danger of the overconsumption of resources, Hardin's moral urgency and agenda does not fully align with rational egoists' unless all policies are in their benefit.

In relating this to *The Tragedy of the Commons*, Hardin's essays support a utilitarian solution: the unchecked self-interest in consuming resources will lead to outcomes that are only beneficial in the short term and not the long term. The only way we can prevent an overall negative effect of overconsumption of these resources is to shift our way of thinking towards making policies that protect our future rather than jeopardize it. Actions that could lead to a better outlook that satisfies a utilitarian would be reducing carbon emissions, investing in renewable energy, and imposing carbon taxes on those who overconsume. To further this point, philosopher Peter Singer writes about his stance concerning utilitarianism ideals relating to climate change. In his book *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, Singer argues that nations have a moral duty to reduce their global emissions and help other countries to do just the same. He says that failure to act will lead to drastic consequences for later generations, and only further shows that the Utilitarian point of view lines up with Hardin's point of view in the essay. There is also an opposing critique of this point of view, as there's also a tradeoff with stopping all over consuming or contributing to climate change. We would not know how limiting these effects would impact our current society, and what if what we do now is barely beneficial to future generations, but only just harmful to the current one. With Utilitarianism comes much consideration about the consequences of our actions, and it must be considered heavily before making a decision. Hardin recognizes that, but still believes the end goal will be worth limiting the overconsumption in the current generation.

Hardin's essay echoes many of the concerns facing society today. It is a relevant and scary essay that details a future where if we continue with overconsumption, it will lead to our untimely demise. The only way to fix this is mutual cooperation and governments coming together to solve climate change. His words demonstrate the three ethical principles in action: Utilitarianism, Egoism and Contractualism. Utilitarian ideals are prevalent throughout the essay as he wants to curb the overuse of the resources for the long term collective good of humanity. Egoism is used as justification for why humans decide that it would be best for their respective government to overuse these resources that the whole world shares. The theory demonstrates a reason why humans act in self interest and how this will ultimately lead to a world that is destroyed. Lastly, Contractualism aligns with Hardin's main dilemma, as in modern times, the Paris Accords demonstrate a contract to stop the rise of climate change which is what Hardin proposes as a theoretical solution. Overall, Hardin's essay can be analyzed from the perspective of multiple ethical viewpoints and his thesis is something that should be taken seriously.

## Bibliography

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