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Population and Third World Assistance
– *A Comment on Hardin's Lifeboat Ethics*

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ABSTRACT *Many philosophers have defended the view that well-off people or nations have an obligation to assist people who suffer from famine in less developed areas of the world. However, in contrast to this outlook, some theorists have claimed that it is ethically wrong to provide this kind of assistance. In this article the non-assistance view is discussed. It is argued that even if a neo-Malthusian population theory is correct and if we accept a maximizing policy which allows the relevant weighing of evils, there may still be an obligation to assist the victims of starvation in poor countries.*

Since *applied ethics* in the early 70's was recognised as an important part of moral philosophy several works have been written concerning the moral obligations to assist people who suffer from famine in less developed areas of the world. Among the many different views presented in the debate there are two conclusions which are first and foremost adhered to. Either it is claimed that well-off people (or nations) have an obligation to feed the starving and, more generally, to contribute to the development of poor countries. This view has been defended in many different ways [1]. Or, it is suggested that feeding the starving should be regarded as charity, which means that well-off people (or nations) should perhaps be praised for assisting the victims of starvation but that there exists no obligation in the sense that they can be blamed for not assisting [2]. This view has been defended for instance on the ground of property rights of people well-off. In contrast to both views there is however a third outlook which apparently has a more limited number of adherents but which has nevertheless influenced the debate markedly, namely, that there exists an obligation *not* to feed those who suffer from starvation. This view is predominantly related to the name of Garrett Hardin who has, over the last two decades, expounded his *lifeboat ethics* in various writings; most recently in his comprehensive work *Living Within Limits* [3].

That it is morally wrong to assist the starving is a view which is probably abhorrent to many people. Certainly the abhorrence is not mitigated by the radical way in which Hardin has often stated his point of view as, for instance, when he claims that with regard to the poor countries 'the worst thing we can do is to send food . . . Atom bombs would be kinder'. Or that, if we consider how we can really harm a poor country then the answer, of the truly malevolent mind, would not be 'bacterial warfare' but simply to send food [4]. However, that one is easily inclined to dissociate oneself from the view involves the risk of easily brushing aside Hardin's arguments without serious counter-arguments.

The purpose of this article is to consider Hardin's non-assistance argument. I shall shortly outline his famous lifeboat analogy and thereafter comment on some of the objections which have typically been raised against his conclusion; objections which, in my view, are either

ignorant or mistaken. It will then be argued that, on closer inspection, the theory which he has suggested does not justify the conclusion that it is morally wrong to assist the starving in poor countries. My arguments will differ from other criticisms in that I actually share, or at least so I think, the normative ethical assumptions Hardin holds, and argue that, even if one accepts the neo-Malthusian population theory he has outlined, his non-assistance conclusion is nevertheless not justified. I believe this to be an important conclusion because the opposite is usually assumed to be the case, not only by proponents, but also by those who reject Hardin's non-assistance conclusion.

(1) Lifeboat Ethics

Hardin's lifeboat metaphor provides an analogy between countries and lifeboats. Imagine each country in the world as a lifeboat with a certain carrying capacity. Developing countries are ill-equipped, crowded lifeboats. People continually fall out of the ill-equipped lifeboats and swim in the water hoping to be admitted to a rich lifeboat, or benefit from the 'goodies' on board these lifeboats. The issue, raised by this dramatic scenario, is what the people in the well-equipped lifeboats should do about those who ask to be let into their boats or to be given some of their provisions.

Suppose that a well-equipped lifeboat has a carrying capacity of sixty persons and that there are fifty persons on board while one hundred other persons are swimming in the water outside the lifeboat. Three options are then available to the people in the boat. (1) They can admit everyone on board. The carrying capacity of the boat will then be vastly exceeded, the boat will be swamped and everyone will end up drowning. According to Hardin this is an instance of complete justice resulting in a complete catastrophe. (2) They may make use of the unused excess capacity of the boat and admit only ten people on board. This will eliminate the *safety factor* which means that if unexpected problems occur the boat will sink. This alternative therefore implies a high risk of the complete catastrophe. (3) They may admit no one on board. This will preserve the safety factor and make it likely that all fifty will survive. The alternatives are exactly the same when people in the well-equipped lifeboats consider whether to distribute their provisions to people outside the boat. They may share the provisions equally; distribute only the surplus provisions; or desist from giving anything and thereby retain a safety factor. Only the latter alternative makes it likely that some will survive.

Hardin suggests that when confronted with this trilemma the morally right answer is to choose the lesser evil. The third option, which results in the survival of fifty people, is therefore preferable. When this conclusion is applied to the relation between rich and poor countries it illustrates two basic points.

The first concerns assistance from the rich countries to countries which have exceeded their carrying capacity and in which people are suffering from famine and related problems. If assistance is provided then, owing to the mechanisms of population dynamics, it will result in a severe increase in the problems. Joseph Fletcher, who has also subscribed to this view, claims that food assistance will seriously damage the recipient country. Feeding the hungry only 'keeps them alive longer to produce more hungry bellies and disease and death' [5]. Hardin makes an even stronger claim. Assistance will not only lead to an increase in the number of famine victims but, in order to fulfil the increasing demand, there will have to be a one-way transference of wealth from rich to poor countries. This will drain the

economy in the rich countries which will only come to an end when 'all countries are equally and miserably poor' [6]. Moreover, the whole process will be accompanied by a hastening destruction of the environment. Thus, Hardin claims, analogous to the lifeboat scenario, assistance does ultimately threaten the human species. It is worth noting that, while Fletcher argues that assistance in the form of food shipments should not be provided to the starving, Hardin apparently goes a step further and rejects even developmental assistance on the same grounds.

The second point concerns migration from poor to rich countries. While assistance is to move food to people, transnational migration to rich countries is the reverse process — that is to move people to the food. This will lead to a further environmental deterioration in rich countries and will, for several other reasons related to the theory of population dynamics, worsen the problems in poor countries as well. Hardin therefore draws the conclusion that strict immigration control should be enforced.

As this indicates, Hardin's non-assistance argument is a quite general argument, which contains two premises. The first, the normatively ethical premise, illustrated by the lifeboat scenario, is that in such cases we should perform the action which results in the lesser evil. The second premise is, the population theoretical assumption, that non-assistance does in fact constitute the lesser evil. Both premises have been criticised, though quite often not in a very convincing manner.

(2) Ethical Criticism

The critics who have repudiated the non-assistance conclusion by denying the ethical premise do not, in my view, take Hardin's argument sufficiently seriously. The general claim is usually that the lifeboat metaphor is misleading in that it obscures morally important issues.

According to William Murdoch and Allan Oaten, the metaphor is too simplistic because it assumes that there is no relation between the lifeboats. In the real world nations interact and 'the effect of rich nations on poor nations has been strong and not always benevolent'. Past (and sometimes present) economic and colonial relations have contributed unfairly to the good of developed countries at the expense of countries less developed, and this relationship is totally ignored in the analogy [7]. The underlying ethical reason for pointing at this dis-analogy is quite often advocated in Third World debates. That rich countries in many cases gained some of their wealth by wronging the very countries which are now racked with starvation provides at least one reason why affluent countries cannot just keep their goods and let people in poor countries remain starving [8].

How far an analogy should be stretched is always a matter of discussion but, with respect to the lifeboat metaphor, the guideline must be what we regard as morally important. Personally, I do not think that former maltreatment of other people is what now constitutes our moral obligation towards these people. In my view we are obliged to assist those who suffer independently of who or what caused the suffering. Be that as it may, it is nevertheless not the analogy but rather the objection which is obscure. Even if we accept that obligations, at least partly, rise from former wrong-doings such a view would not lead to the conclusion that we should assist people who starve. The crucial point in Hardin's argument is that assistance worsens the existing problems. To increase the number of starving people can surely not be a way of repaying a moral debt to poor

countries. Thus, the objection simply ignores what is important in Hardin's lifeboat argument.

The same answer can be given to an argument presented by Sissela Bok who claims that acting in accordance with Hardin's prescription will be corrupting and destructive for a society [9]. A society will be rent 'asunder by discord' by refusing humanitarian aid and by closing the doors to immigration. But why is that the case? Hardin could equally well, or perhaps even better claim that it would be corrupting to act in a way that would increase suffering manifoldly rather than not provide 'humanitarian' aid. As mentioned, the result of Hardin's predictions is that assistance ultimately threatens humanity.

Another objection which has been raised against the lifeboat analogy is that it ignores the temporal distance. Hardin's argument suggests that presently existing people should be sacrificed in order to avoid a larger future evil. The argument therefore presupposes that there is an obligation to future generations. This aspect is ignored in the lifeboat scenario [10]. However, to claim that there are no obligations to the future is not defensible. It is reasonable to maintain that temporal location is morally irrelevant. Thus, perhaps there is a dis-analogy but on a point which has no moral significance. And the weaker claim, that the well-being of future people should at least be discounted, is simply insufficient. Even if a discount rate is applied, and surely it is dubious that this can be justified, it may still be the lesser evil not to assist those who are now starving [11].

As the examples indicate, the ethical criticisms which have been raised against Hardin are often quite simplistic, and sometimes even ignorant with regard to the basic conflict [12]. The non-assistance argument is a basic consequentialist argument. If the underlying population theoretic assumptions are correct then neither direct nor indirect consequentialists would avoid the conclusion. Peter Singer, who has strongly recommended that assistance is provided to the poor countries would, on the grounds of his famous *famine relief argument*, be forced to exactly the same conclusion. But, even though one does not hold the most radical view on numbers, it is hard to avoid the conclusion. Glover, for instance, distinguishes between two kinds of maximizing policy [13]. According to the weak maximizing policy it is right to be guided by numbers of lives expected to be saved but it would, for instance, be wrong to throw out someone already in a lifeboat even if this act would result in more saved lives. The strong maximizing policy allows such positive interventions. If one accepts the *acts and omissions doctrine* one would probably (if one accepts a maximizing policy at all) hold the weak version. However, even if one only accepts the weak version, one will have to accept Hardin's non-assistance conclusion because the omission, not to help people swimming in the water, would save most lives.

Obviously, some adherents of non-consequentialist ethics might find the conclusion unacceptable. Examples which consider sacrificing some people to save more people usually bring the disagreements between consequentialist and non-consequentialist ethics clearly into perspective. I shall not here discuss further possible non-consequentialist objections (as they have been outlined in many other traditional conflict cases), since this would go far beyond the purpose of this paper, but merely mention that I find it hard to avoid the non-assistance conclusion if the conditions are in fact analogous to the lifeboat case. As mentioned, my point is that the analogy does not hold even if one accepts the underlying assumptions derived from population theory.

(3) Diverging Theories

Moral philosophical reflections often transcend reality in the sense that philosophers depict scenarios and consider what would be right and wrong if these scenarios were reality. When we want a real guide for action, hypothetical situations will, however, no longer do the job. Since knowledge of the causal interaction between population size and economical, social, environmental and psychological factors is quite limited it is obviously difficult to provide an ethical action guide on population.

An interesting theory, with direct implications with regard to assistance, is the *child-survival hypothesis* [14]. According to this theory, the high fertility in many rapidly growing underdeveloped countries is a result of parents' wishes to have a certain number of their children (usually sons) who survive their own old age. The number of children required to achieve the parental objective therefore differs with the prevailing infant mortality, longevity and other morbidity characteristics. This means that if one increases the chance of child survival by improved nutrition, public health etc., this will lead to a perception by parents that fewer pregnancies and births are necessary to secure the desired size of the surviving family. Food aid and nutrition programmes will increase infant survival and the net result will be lowered fertility. Another important general theory, with many adherents, concerns the demographic transition. According to this theory, poor countries will — when the standards of living are improved — undergo a transition, known from developed countries, from high death and fertility rates to low death and fertility rates. Hardin obviously rejects both theories, and claims that improved conditions of life will increase fertility [15].

The reason for paying attention here to these disagreements in population in theory is that they form the background for another kind of criticism of Hardin's non-assistance conclusion. Obviously, a reasonable criticism would be to show that Hardin's theoretical assumptions about population are mistaken. If this could be established then Hardin would, of course, have to give up his non-assistance view. However, as indicated, there does not exist one well-confirmed and accepted theory on these matters but rather several rival theories. That there is no certainty on which theory is correct, has been used to defend assistance in a way which, in my view, is far from compelling.

Singer has, as mentioned, recommended that famine relief should be provided to poor countries. He argues that starvation is a bad thing and that if we can prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought to do so. The suggestion could of course be applied to support non-assistance, depending on what the estimated consequences of assistance would be, but Singer rebuts Hardin's non-assistance conclusion on the grounds of probability considerations. Any consequentialist ethics must of course take probabilities of outcomes into account. Better 'one certain unit of benefit than a 10 per cent chance of five units; but better a 50 per cent chance of three units than a single certain unit' [16]. The same is the case with regard to evils. Singer then claims that a 'theory, at least as plausible as any other, is that countries pass through a "demographic transition" as their standard of living rises', and that if 'this theory is right, there is an alternative to the disasters' which adherents of non-assistance predict. After having briefly outlined the theory he concludes that we 'cannot allow millions to die from starvation and disease when there is a reasonable probability that population can be brought under control without such horrors'. This sounds reasonable, but the question is how has Singer at all established that there is this 'reasonable probability'? In fact he himself claims

that the demographic transition is a 'theory, at least as plausible as any other', but if this is true then it only indicates that we lack knowledge on which of the competing theories is reliable. It tells nothing about probabilities [17]. His position becomes even more mysterious when he claims:

> Thomas Nagel makes another powerful objection to the lifeboat theory when he points out that the theory requires us to allow a *certain* present disaster in order to forestall a *possible* greater future disaster. [18]

I must admit that I do not understand how this can count as a powerful objection. If we have not estimated the probability of the greater disaster (as well as the size of the smaller and greater disasters) then no conclusion will be justified. The statement only makes sense if one *ignores* the importance of probability calculations and sticks to the moral principle that we should always avoid a certain disaster rather than a merely possible disaster independently of the latter disaster's magnitude. This is apparently what Callahan has in mind when he asserts that there 'could be no guarantee that those [future] lives would be saved' [19]. However, it does not require many counter-examples to establish that this principle is highly implausible. To recommend that a person takes a drug to remove a present headache, well knowing that the drug involves a major risk in that the person could develop cancer, is surely unacceptable.

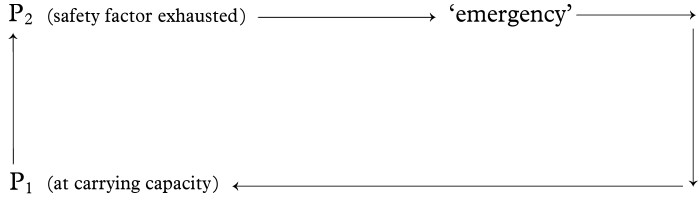
In order to criticise the non-assistance conclusion on the grounds of probabilities, much more would have to be clarified about the relevant probabilities than is clarified by Singer. A reasonable criticism would, of course, be to claim that we simply lack the sufficient theoretical knowledge of population to make the relevant forecasts, but this would undermine the non-assistance conclusion as well as Singer's assistance conclusion.

(4) Hardin's Theory

After these preliminary comments it is now time to concentrate specifically on Hardin's argument. As indicated, I believe that the moral conclusion drawn from the lifeboat scenario, that in such cases we should choose the lesser evil, is plausible, but I shall argue that even though this premise is combined with a neo-Malthusian population theory it does not necessarily justify the non-assistance conclusion.

Consider a population in a country which has no effective population control, and which receives no aid from other countries. According to Hardin the population will, under these conditions, go through a demographic cycle such as the one indicated in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1

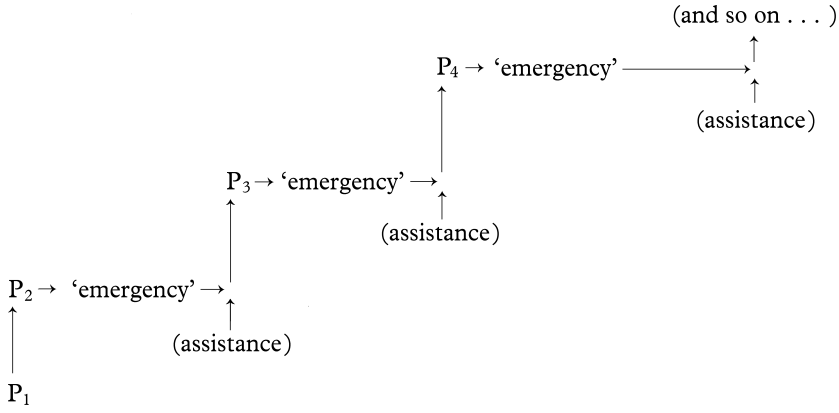


While P_1 is a population of a size matching the carrying capacity of the area, with a certain safety factor, P_2 is a greater population which has exhausted the safety factor. It represents a

state of overpopulation. That the safety factor is exhausted means that when an accident occurs, as for instance a crop failure, there will be a state of 'emergency' which, if it is not met by outside assistance, will cause the population to drop back to the level of the carrying capacity or somewhere below. The population will then start increasing and the cycle is repeated. A population curve over time is thus a fluctuating one, equilibrating about the carrying capacity [20]. The demographic cycle indicates the basic neo-Malthusian assumption that a state of overpopulation, with its related misery, results in decreasing fertility and increasing mortality, while a state of underpopulation, with its related felicity, results in increasing fertility and decreasing mortality. Population fluctuations are therefore countered by a natural response which restores the population to its set point size [21].

Consider, instead, a situation in which the emergency is actually met by assistance from the outside. What will happen is that the demograhic cycle is now replaced by the 'escalator' illustrated in Fig. 2. Assistance will prevent the population size of P_2 from retracting to the lower level. It will continue its growth until the new artificial carrying capacity (the natural capacity plus assistance) is transgressed.

Fig. 2



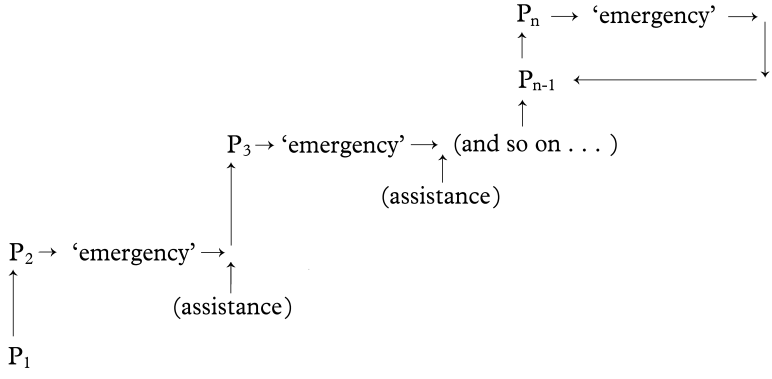
An accident will now lead to a new state of emergency which, if it is once again met by input of food from the outside, does not prevent the population being pushed further upward. This population curve keeps on as long as it is possible to increase the food assistance. However, since the increase cannot go on *ad infinitum* the end result will be a much larger amount of suffering or, as Hardin predicts, 'a catastrophe of scarcely imaginable proportions' [22].

At first glance, non-assistance apparently constitutes the lesser evil if this theory is correct. However, I think the argument is flawed if we accept two basic assumptions. The first question we should ask is what the net result of a demographic cycle is in terms of well-being, or whatever makes life worth living. That is, whether a population which is not assisted from the outside and which equilibrates about a carrying capacity, is preferable to a zero-population. Probably there is no universal answer to this question but it seems that there is no reason to claim that the net result is necessarily in the negative. Obviously, there is much suffering involved in the 'restrictive phase' but, on the other hand, a population may contain much positive well-being when it matches the carrying capacity or is in a progressive phase. Thus, let us assume that an equilibrating population is not necessarily worse than a zero-population. The next question is whether it is worse if a larger population

transgresses a higher carrying capacity than if a smaller population transgresses a smaller carrying capacity. Is it, for instance, worse to transgress a carrying capacity at 100,000 than a carrying capacity at 200,000, if the transgression is relatively the same in both cases? Perhaps the total suffering involved in transgressing the higher carrying capacity is greater, but I see no reason why a transgression could not be *proportionally* equally bad in both situations. Let us assume that this is the case.

Hardin claims that the 'escalator' is brought to an end by the total collapse of the whole system. Suppose that this collapse indicates a point at which the rich countries can no longer increase assistance, and that the countries break off assistance to a poor country which has now reached the population size P_n. In that case, there will surely be an enormous catastrophe because, now, the population will have to drop back to a level at about or below the initial carrying capacity at P_1. This drop-back obviously involves much more suffering than the dropback from P_2 to P_1, and probably much more suffering than if assistance had not been provided in the first place. However, the fact that assistance cannot be increased infinitely does not imply, as is sometimes naively assumed, that there is a point at which one will have to break off all assistance. This is surely an 'everything or nothing' fallacy. Assistance can be stabilised at a certain level.

Fig. 3



The population curve will then, still following Hardin's theory, be as indicated in Fig.3, where the demographic cycle takes place at a higher level between P_n and P_{n-1}; now equilibrating about the artificial carrying capacity at P_{n-1}. How should we valuate this scenario compared to the one in Fig. 1?

Hardin claims that, as a population size is pushed upward in the escalator, the absolute magnitude of the emergencies is increased. But, now, combine this with the two assumptions, that the net result of the demographic cycle may be positive and that transgressing a higher carrying capacity is not proportionally worse. This entails that, though the absolute magnitude of suffering in the cycle P_{n-1} and P_n is greater, the absolute magnitude of positive well-being will also be proportionally greater and, if the net result of the first demographic cycle is positive then the net result of the higher level cycle will also be positive. Since the surplus of positive well-being is proportionally the same the absolute positive surplus will actually be greater in the higher level cycle (it is preferable to get a certain percentage from a larger cake than from a smaller cake). Thus, the cycle in Fig. 3 may be preferable to the one in Fig. 1.

Furthermore, there is another reason for preferring the curve in Fig. 3. If assistance is provided up to a certain level then one has prevented all the emergencies, with following restrictive phases, which would have taken place in the meantime if the cyclic curve had continued unaffected.

This indicates how Hardin's lifeboat metaphor is seriously defective. The lifeboats have specific invariable carrying capacities. This leaves only two alternatives; either the carrying capacity (with safety factor) is transgressed, which results in a catastrophe, or the carrying capacity (with safety factor) is respected which means that all people in the water will drown. With respect to countries the carrying capacity is changeable. If the carrying capacity with regard to food has been exceeded then the capacity may be raised by input of food from the outside. That the carrying capacity can be increased means that, compared to the lifeboat scenario, there is a third possibility: to try and increase the carrying capacity up to a certain level and thereby help some people. Thus, it seems that even if we accept Hardin's neo-Malthusian population theory the non-assistance conclusion does not necessarily follow.

(5) Possible Responses

The previous argument can be rejected if one denies one or both of the two underlying assumptions. The denial can take two different forms. Either it can be claimed that the assumptions are factually mistaken; or that they should be rejected on the ground of a value theory which does not pay attention to the relevant weighing of positive and negative well-being.

Starting with the first possibility, we should ask whether it is reasonable to assume that the net result of well-being of the demographic cycle in Fig. 1 is positive. It is important to underline that I do not assume that the net result is always or necessarily positive, but rather that it may be positive. Hardin does not consider the question, but he claims that the restrictive phase in the cycle contains much suffering. However, this suffering may be outweighed by the positive well-being when the population is below or matches the carrying capacity, or is in the progressive phase. Whether this is so obviously depends on how exactly 'carrying capacity' is defined. If it indicates the maximum number of people who are barely able to survive given the available amount of resources, then it will be much worse than if it indicates the maximum number of people that can be sustained above a certain minimal standard of living. Moreover, the net amount of well-being also depends on the temporal conditions in a cycle; for how long a progressive or restrictive phase lasts. Since Hardin does not comment on these questions there is nothing in the non-assistance argument which excludes that a population equilibrating about the carrying capacity may be preferable to a zero-population; and I can think of no plausible reason that would exclude this possibility [23].

Probably Hardin would object most strongly to the second assumption, that the demographic cycle is not worse if it takes place at a higher level, where the population is fluctuating about an artificial carrying capacity generated partly from assistance. While Fletcher, as mentioned, specifically claims that assistance will increase the number of famine victims, Hardin sees the destruction of the environment as an equally or perhaps more important implication of assistance. Though a demogrpahic cycle need not, in principle, be proportionally worse at higher levels, it may in reality be much worse when

we include in the calculation the increasing demand for vital resources other than food, and the consequent environmental deterioration, which accompanies a larger population.

Whether this objection is legitimate obviously depends on the specific conditions in a potential recipient country. If the carrying capacity with regard to the environment is much lower than the capacity with regard to food, and if there are nevertheless starvation problems, then an increase in population size may have very serious consequences. If, on the other hand, the environmental carrying capacity exceeds the capacity with regard to food then the latter capacity may be increased without too serious environmental implications. Furthermore, since the suggestion is that assistance might be stabilized at a certain level, there is absolutely no reason why the ability to satisfy the demand for other vital resources, and the impact on the environment, should not be considered when it is considered at what level the assistance to a country should be stabilised. Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that the most effective way of assisting a country would be not only to remove starvation but also, for instance, to prevent environmental destruction.

Another and more general reason for claiming that a demographic cycle is proportionally worse at a higher level concerns the consequences for the donating countries. The higher the level at which the escalator assistance is stabilised the larger the input of resources from the outside that will be required. This means that the cycle will be proportionally worse, not because it is proportionally worse for people in the recipient country, but because it is worse for the donor country. As mentioned, Hardin points to the drain on the economies of rich countries, caused by the one-way transfer of resources, as one of the arguments against assistance. Weighing the *pros* and *cons* for providing assistance the costs for the donating countries should, of course, be included in the calculations. Nevertheless, I think it is unclear how much weight should be attributed to this argument. When Singer outlines his famine relief argument then, beside the moral premises of the argument, he also presupposes that rich countries can do something to reduce starvation in poor countries without giving up something of comparable moral importance. That a country is affluent simply means that it has a disposable income over and above the cost of the basic necessities of life. Singer's premise is, in my view, fully justified. There is no reason to believe that what is gained in terms of well-being by assisting will be outweighed by what people in affluent countries will lose. The law of diminishing marginal utility surely supports this presumption. And once again it is worth remembering that if the costs to the donating countries become too large this can also be included when the level at which assistance should be stabilised is considered.

Though both objections point out something that should be included in one's considerations, neither objection suffices to support the principal character of the non-assistance conclusion. As indicated, there is however a different line of reason, of a purely moral sort, which might be referred to as undermining the two suggested assumptions. Since Hardin does not explicate the exact content of his consequentialist position, I do not know whether he would actually accept any of these views. But I think he would be well-advised not to.

One possibility is to reject standard versions of utilitarianism in favour of the view Karl Popper enunciates when he claims that one 'should demand, more modestly, the least amount of avoidable suffering for all' [24]. If only negative well-being, or whatever makes life worth not living, has moral (dis)value then the net result of the demographic cycle is obviously negative; and since the absolute magnitude of suffering increases when the cycle is pushed upward to a higher level this outcome will be even worse. Negative utilitarianism,

however, is not a plausible moral theory. In fact, as a negative utilitarian Hardin should probably recommend that as much aid is provided as possible because he thinks that assistance ultimately threatens the survival of humanity; this outcome will assumedly be the lesser evil compared to the negative well-being that will be aggregated over time if the human species is perpetuated. This implication is surely implausible.

A less radical possibility would therefore be to admit that positive well-being has moral value but to claim that there is no symmetry in the way positive and negative well-being should be evaluated. If there is asymmetry in the sense that the quantity of negative well-being always has disvalue while the quantity of positive well-being only has value up to a point or has declining value above this point, then this would justify the conclusion that low level cycles are preferable to cycles at a higher level. Though the relative parts of positive and negative well-being would be the same as we move up the escalator the net moral value will, above a certain point, decrease because the value of the positive well-being disappears or declines while the quantity of negative well-being has limitless increasing disvalue.

Neither does this view, however, avoid implausible implications. Suppose, purely hypothetically, that the demographic cycle contained a very large surplus of positive over negative well-being. The higher up the escalator the cycle is located the more the moral value declines, and at some point the disvalue even outweighs the positive value which means that a zero-population would be preferable to the cycle scenario, even though it contains proportionally the same amount of positive and negative well-being as the lower-level cycles, and despite the fact that it contains a large surplus of positive well-being. This conclusion is hard to accept. In his discussion of an asymmetry in the valuation of well-being Parfit points at implications which are essentially the same. He regards them, and I think rightly, as being absurd [25].

Summing up, it seems that none of the answers succeeds in rejecting the assumptions that the net result of the demographic cycle may be positive or that cycles are not proportionally worse at higher levels. Notice again, that I do not claim that the assumptions might not in some specific case be false, but simply that there are no reasons, neither factual nor axiological, to think that they are generally mistaken.

(6) Conclusion

When Hardin, or other adherents of non-assistance, illustrate the fatal consequences of assisting poor countries they often do it by asking the reader to consider situations such as, for instance, one in which 1,000,000 people are starving because of a crisis (flood, drought, or the like). If assistance is provided the amount of starving people will grow to 1,010,000; by further assistance the number will grow to 1,020,000; there will thereafter be 1,030,000 who ask for more food; and so on [26]. Such prospects are obviously frightening and therefore apparently convincing. As the argument of this paper illustrates, however, they are not sufficient to support the non-assistance conclusion. It may be correct that the number of famine victims grows but we would also have to know what would happen if aid were to be stabilised at some level, and how many would benefit from the assistance up to the point at which it was stabilised. Unless such information is provided the examples are inconclusive.

Probably some will regard the previous considerations as being very far removed from the realities in many poor countries. If we consider countries in sub-Saharan Africa, in which

half the population is living in poverty and very many are starving, then it may seem out of place to talk about the weight of positive well-being. But notice that what I have objected to is the principal character of the non-assistance argument, by showing that non-assistance does not necessarily follow from the premises in the argument. This means that, in order to draw a conclusion, when we consider whether or not to assist, we will have to consider the specific conditions in the potential recipient country. To refuse aid on the grounds of the principal neo-Malthusian argument is unjustified. Moreover, with regard to the terrible conditions in sub-Saharan countries it would be interesting to ask Hardin exactly where these countries are for the present located on his population curves. Such formation is never given. Rather than claiming that life in these countries undermines a conclusion about assisting up to a point, it might be the case that it undermines the neo-Malthusian population theory.

It might be objected that to provide assistance to poor countries up to a certain level is to accept the conclusion that assistance should not be provided, viz. above this level; that is, a partial acceptance of the non-assistance conclusion. But I am willing to accept this conclusion. If it is really the case that assistance above this level makes things worse then I do not think that further assistance should be provided. As indicated, I accept the moral conclusion that in lifeboat cases we should choose the lesser evil. But notice that I have taken the modest view that assistance up to a point may be the moral right answer *if* the pessimist neo-Malthusian population theory is correct. We should hope that the world is less discouragingly constructed.

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Notes

[1] See, for instance, PETER SINGER, Famine, affluence, and morality; JAN NARVESON, Morality and Starvation; WILLIAM K. FRANKENA, Moral philosophy and world hunger; ONORA O'NEILL, Lifeboat Earth. All in W. AIKEN & H. LA FOLLETTE (eds. 1977) *World Hunger and Moral Obligation* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey). Or Dower, N. (1983) *World Poverty: Challenge and response* (York, The Ebor Press).

[2] See JOHN ARTHUR, Rights and the duty to bring aid, in AIKEN & FOLLETTE eds., op. cit. Or see PETER SINGER's discussion of Nozick's entitlement theory, in Reconsidering the famine relief argument, in: P. G. BROWN & H. SHUE (1977) *Food Policy* (New York, The Free Press).

[3] See GARRETT HARDIN (1974) Living on a lifeboat, *Bioscience*, 24; or GARRETT HARDIN (1977) Lifeboat ethics: the case against helping the poor, in: Aiken & Follette, op. cit., G. HARDIN (1993) *Living Within Limits* (New York, Oxford U.P.). See also G. LUCAS & T. W. OGLETREE (1976) *Lifeboat Ethics* (New York, Harper & Row Publishers), which contains several contributions by authors defending the non-assistance conclusion.

[4] The first quotation is from ASEEM SHRIVASTAVE (1992) Overpopulation: the great red herring?, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Sep. 19., p. 2032. The second quotation is from GARRETT HARDIN Carrying capacity as an ethical concept, in: Lucas & Ogletree op. cit., p. 125.

[5] JOSEPH FLETCHER Give if it helps but not if it hurts, in: AIKEN & FOLLETTE, op. cit., p. 109. See also JOSEPH FLETCHER, Feeding the hungry: an ethical appraisal, in: Lucas & Ogletree, op. cit.

[6] HARDIN (1974), op. cit., p. 565.

[7] WILLIAM W. MURDOCH & ALLAN OATEN (1975) Population and Food: Metaphors and the reality, *Bioscience* 25, p. 562.

[8] See, for instance, MICHAEL A. SLOTE, The morality of wealth, in: Aiken & Follette, op. cit.

[9] SISSELA BOK, Population and ethics: expanding the moral space, in: G. SEN, A. GERMAIN & L. C. CHEN (1994) *Population Policies Reconsidered* (Boston, Harvard U.P), p. 20.

[10] MICHAEL D. BAYLES points at this criticism put forward by Callahan, see MICHAEL D. BAYLES (1980) *Morality and Population Policy* (Alabama, The University of Alabama Press), p. 70.

[11] Many arguments have been raised against the practice of employing a pure discount rate; see, for instance, TYLER COWEN & DEREK PARFIT, Against the social discount rate, in: P. LASLETT & J. FISHKIN (1992) *Justice between Age Groups and Generations* (Yale, Yale University Press).

[12] Another example is simply to refer to the rights of those who suffer as, for instance, when DANIEL CALLAHAN claims that: 'Those already alive, and in need of food, have a right to security/survival. To wilfully allow them to die, or to deprive them of the necessities of life, in the name of saving even more lives at a later date cannot be justified in the name of a greater balance of good over evil.' (1971) *Ethics and Population Limitation* (New York) p. 31. But what about the same right of future people? Callahan does not comment on this conflict.

[13] J. GLOVER (1977) *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books) pp. 206–10.

[14] See, for instance, MICHAEL F. BREWER, Slowing population growth with food aid, in: Brown & Shue (1977), op. cit.

[15] See his interesting discussions in Hardin (1993) op. cit., chapter 16 and 17.

[16] See P. SINGER (1993) *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge U.P.), pp. 238–241.

[17] Some decision theorists might suggest that in cases in which we simply lack knowledge about which of a set of different theories is correct we should assign the same probability to the implications of each theory. I do not believe that this is what Singer has in mind but even if it was, it is still not clear how this would provide an objection to the non-assistance conclusion.

[18] Singer (1977), op. cit., p. 53 note 23.

[19] Callahan, op. cit., p. 31.

[20] Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 are presented in Hardin (1974), op. cit.

[21] Hardin claims that this 'Malthusian demostate' is the essence of Malthus's contribution to population theory; see Hardin (1993), op. cit., chapter 16.

[22] Hardin (1974), op. cit., p. 564.

[23] Unfortunately, Hardin does not present a clear definition of carrying capacity either in his article on carrying capacity, Hardin (1976), op. cit., or in the discussions in Hardin (1993), op. cit.

[24] K. R. POPPER (1966) *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul), pp. 284–85.

[25] D. PARFIT (1984) *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, Clarendon Press), p. 410.

[26] This is Hardin's own example in Hardin (1976), op. cit., p. 121.