

Handout: Garrett Hardin – “Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor”

I. The Problem: Environmental Limits vs. Humanitarian Ideals

Garrett Hardin, a biologist best known for “*The Tragedy of the Commons*,” introduces this essay in response to increasing calls in the 1970s for global humanitarianism: foreign aid, food banks, and open immigration.

- Hardin believes that **well-meaning humanitarian efforts** (especially from affluent nations like the U.S.) are **self-defeating** and **ecologically unsustainable**.
- He argues that traditional moral systems (e.g., *Christian brotherhood*, *Marxist equality*, *spaceship Earth metaphors*) ignore the **ecological realities of finite resources** and **population dynamics**.

Thesis: *Affluent nations must adopt a harsh but realistic “lifeboat ethic” that limits aid and immigration—otherwise, overpopulation and environmental degradation will lead to global catastrophe.*

II. The Lifeboat Metaphor: A Guiding Framework

Hardin develops the **lifeboat** as a metaphor to critique liberal moral reasoning:

- Imagine each rich nation as a **lifeboat** with 50 people and room for 10 more.
- In the ocean swim **100 poor people** desperate to get in.
- **Three moral options:**
 1. Let all 100 in → lifeboat sinks, all drown (“*complete justice, complete catastrophe*”).
 2. Let 10 in → How do you choose? No safety factor remains.

3. Let no one in → Maintain safety and survival, but appear “morally callous”.

Hardin argues for **Option 3**, despite its perceived moral harshness:

- **Helping everyone** destroys the lifeboat (i.e., affluent society).
 - **Safety factor:** Like in engineering, societies need resource reserves for crises.
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III. Key Concepts and Arguments

1. Against the Spaceship Earth Metaphor

- Popularized by environmentalists to justify global cooperation and shared resources.
- Hardin critiques this as dangerously idealistic:
 - A spaceship implies a **central captain and shared governance**, which Earth lacks.
 - Without enforceable global governance, shared resources become **open-access commons**, inviting overuse and collapse.

2. The Tragedy of the Commons (pp. 3–4)

- A situation in which individuals, acting in their own self-interest in a shared-resource system, ultimately **deplete or destroy** that resource.
 - E.g., overgrazed pastures, overfished oceans, polluted air.
- **Private ownership** aligns incentives with sustainability; **shared commons** do not.

Hardin's Law: “You can never do merely one thing.” Interventions have unintended systemic consequences.

3. Population Dynamics

- **Poor nations reproduce faster** (doubling every ~21–35 years) than rich nations (~87 years).
 - Aid and food relief **enable unchecked population growth**, making the poor poorer and increasing the global burden.
 - Aid functions like a **commons**, encouraging dependency.
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IV. Critique of Foreign Aid

A. The World Food Bank (pp. 3–5)

- Proposed as a shared global reserve to handle emergencies.
- Hardin's objections:
 - Rewards **irresponsible planning**.
 - Enables governments to **avoid budgeting or reform**.
 - Benefits **corporate and agricultural interests** under the guise of charity (e.g., "Food for Peace" mainly helped U.S. agribusiness).

"[Foreign aid] will carry the taint of charity, which will contribute little to the world peace..."

B. The Green Revolution

- Technological advances (e.g., "miracle rice") increase food supply.
 - Hardin invokes Alan Gregg's ecological critique: *more food → more people → more pressure on the environment*.
 - **Feeding the hungry doesn't solve the problem—it amplifies it.**
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V. Immigration and National Sustainability

Hardin views immigration as **another version of the tragedy of the commons**:

- **Poor people move to rich nations**, increasing environmental strain there.
- Immigration driven by:
 - Employers seeking **cheap labor**.
 - Humanitarian guilt among the liberal intelligentsia.
- Immigration accounts for **up to 37%** of U.S. population growth in 1974 (legal + illegal combined).

"World food banks move food to the people... immigration moves people to the food." In both cases, the **environmental burden follows**.

VI. Justice, Posterity, and Intergenerational Ethics

Hardin confronts the **moral objection**: Isn't it unjust to exclude others once we ourselves are safe?

- He admits the **historical injustice** of colonialism and land theft but dismisses the **idea of pure justice** as impractical.
- Introduces the concept of "**intergenerational stewardship**":

"To be generous with one's own possessions is quite different from being generous with those of posterity."

VII. Implications: Lifeboat Ethics vs. Liberal Humanitarianism

Liberal View

We are morally obliged to share

Hardin's Lifeboat View

Sharing leads to collapse (overpopulation, scarcity)

Aid = compassion

Aid = dependency, irresponsibility

Immigration = justice

Immigration = unsustainable resource strain

All lives equal

Prioritize survivability of stable systems

World = spaceship (shared future)

World = lifeboats (fragmented survival)

Hardin accepts that **lifeboat ethics are harsh**, but insists they are the **only feasible ethical framework** in a world without global governance and with stark resource limits.

VIII. Historical & Philosophical Context

A. Malthusian Influence

- Hardin draws heavily from **Thomas Malthus's** demographic model:
 - *Unchecked population growth exceeds food supply.*
 - Only **natural checks** (famine, war, disease) can restore balance.

B. Post-War Environmentalism

- The 1970s saw a surge of **ecological awareness**:
 - Oil shocks, pollution crises, and early conservationism.
 - Hardin's essay rides this wave but focuses on **population** over pollution.

C. Contrast with Peter Singer

- Where Singer argues for **radical altruism**, Hardin argues for **ruthless realism**.
 - Singer: *Save the drowning child.*
 - Hardin: *If you save too many, everyone drowns.*