

PHILOSOPHY 105

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LIFEBOAT ETHICS

FOREIGN AID

- International food distribution program created by Eisenhower as Public Law 480 on July 10, 1954 to manage commodity surpluses and promote international trade & development
- Expanded by Kennedy in 1966 under the title "Food for Peace" explicitly for humanitarian purposes

THE GREEN REVOLUTION

- Set of initiatives championed by Norman Borlaug intended to disseminate modern agricultural methods and materials (e.g. irrigation, chemical fertilizer, pesticides) to less industrially developed countries

LIFEBOAT ETHICS

- 86.2% of the world's wealth is held by 8.2% of the world's adult population (~398 million people) located primarily in North America and Western Europe

Metaphorically, each rich nation amounts to a lifeboat full of comparatively rich people. The poor of the world are in other, much more crowded lifeboats. Continuously, so to speak, the poor fall out of their lifeboats and swim for a while in the water outside, hoping to be admitted to a rich lifeboat, or in some other way to benefit from the "goodies" on board. What should the passengers on a rich lifeboat do? This is the central problem of "the ethics of a lifeboat." (Hardin, 86)

FAMINE RELIEF & THE "COMMONS"

Tragedy of the Commons:

the economic theory concerning behavior within a shared-resource system (i.e. "the commons") where individual users acting independently and according to their own self-interest behave contrary to the common good of all users by depleting or spoiling that resource through their collective action

- Famine aid creates a "commons" that encourages populations to "behave contrary to the common good" by increasing in population beyond a sustainable level

THE RATCHET EFFECT

The input of food from a food bank acts as the pawl of a ratchet, preventing the population from retracing its steps to a lower level. Reproduction pushes the population upward, inputs from the world bank prevent its moving downward. Population size escalates, as does the absolute magnitude of "accidents" and "emergencies." The process is brought to an end only by the total collapse of the whole system, producing a catastrophe of scarcely imaginable proportions. (Hardin, 90)

SUMMARY OF HARDIN'S ARGUMENT

- The World Food Bank (and organizations like it) creates a "commons" encouraging bad behavior that will generate a "ratchet effect" on population growth, creating further cyclical problems
- We should treat individual nations as "lifeboats" and refrain from helping them because doing so only causes further problems

OBJECTIONS TO HARDIN

- The lifeboat metaphor is a misleading one
- Not every commons results in a "tragedy"
- Food security need not always result in population explosions

ARE WE REALLY IN A LIFEBOAT?

- Lifeboats don't necessary interact much, but countries (and their citizens) do all the time and the interaction is not one-sided
- The isolationism encouraged by the lifeboat metaphor encourages global political and economic instability

THE COMMONS

Prosperity in the system of the commons cannot survive errors. If everyone would only restrain himself, all would be well; but it takes only one less than everyone to ruin a system of voluntary restraint. In a crowded world of less than perfect human beings-and we will never know any other-mutual ruin is inevitable in the commons. This is the core of the tragedy of the commons. (Garrett, 88)

- Garrett's view assumes that activity in a commons cannot be regulated, but gives no argument as to why we should agree with this

FOOD & POPULATION

- Hardin assumes that an increase in food security entails an increase in population
- But population increases depends on a variety of factors:

parental confidence about the future, an improved status of women, and literacy. [Population increases] require low infant mortality rates, widely available rudimentary health care, increased income and employment, and an adequate diet above subsistence levels (Murdoch & Oates, 564)

