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Doing Well by Doing Good

Garrett Hardin's "Lifeboat Ethic"

by DANIEL CALLAHAN

During an October conference at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, Dr. Jay Forrester, whose work presaged the Club of Rome's study on "the limits to growth," was reported to have said that the time may have come to adopt an ethic of triage with respect to poor countries by providing aid only to those countries which have the best chance of survival. A similar possibility has been raised by Dr. Philip Handler, President of the National Academy of Sciences. In a recent speech "On the State of Man," he notes that the population growth in poor countries is much greater than rich countries, and that this is particularly the case in South Asia. It may simply happen, he observes, that the developed countries of the world will decide to "forget" those countries, "to give them up as hopeless." Dr. Handler does not appear to be directly advocating such a course. But he does observe that, if the developed countries are not prepared for a massive attempt to help them, then a lesser effort

may turn out to be "counter-productive." "Cruel as it may sound," he said, "if the developed nations do not intend the colossal all-out effort commensurate with this task, then it may be wiser to let nature take its course. . . ."

There is nothing all that new about these suggestions. Paul Ehrlich in *The Population Bomb* and the Paddock brothers in *Famine—1975!* were making the same kinds of points in the late 60s. Yet it is striking how forcefully, and with an apparently new respectability, these points are being pressed again and taken up by a much broader group. Anthony Lewis, for instance, a sensitive and thoughtful columnist for *The New York Times*, devoted a full and apparently sympathetic column to Dr. Handler's speech. But it is Garrett Hardin who has most fully developed the case for a deliberate abandonment of poor countries.

In "Living on a Lifeboat," an article which appeared in the October issue of *BioScience*, Dr. Hardin moves well beyond the tentativeness found in the presentations of Drs. Forrester and Handler. Never a dull writer, Dr. Hardin begins by rejecting the popular

metaphor of "spaceship earth" (Kenneth Boulding), on the grounds that spaceships have captains with decisive authority. This is not the case with the earth, which is under no one's firm control and is divided into warring and bickering factions. An important ethical consequence is that demands are made "on common resources without acknowledging corresponding spaceship responsibilities."

His alternative is the metaphor of a lifeboat, not only because he believes it to be more descriptive of the actual divided world of

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

Joseph F. Fletcher updates his continuing investigation into the indicators of humanhood . . . **Donald P. Warwick** brings a message from the Bucharest population meetings . . . in the case study, when the safety of an IUD device is questioned, a small clinic is faced with a number of ethical problems which are evaluated by **Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, Gaya Aranoff** and **Victor W. Sidel**.

nation-states, but also because it entails a more realistic ethic. "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." Immigration is the primary way in which the poor try to gain admission to more affluent lands; the procurement of food, development and agricultural assistance the means by which they hope to benefit from the "goodies" of rich countries. The ethical question posed by Hardin is this: "What should the passengers on a rich lifeboat do? That is the central problem of 'the ethics of a lifeboat.'"

In a very effective fashion he goes on to argue that if we, in the United States, tried to take everyone aboard our lifeboat, it would eventually sink. Even if we concede that we might be able to accept more immigrants than at present, we would be jeopardizing our own margin of safety and survival and, simultaneously, be taking on some impossible ethical dilemmas in deciding how to choose the few we could admit.

Even more ominously, Hardin contends, the disparity of reproduction rates between the developed and the developing countries

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militates against sharing our resources with poor countries. Our population is doubling approximately every 35 years, theirs about every 35 years, "and the relative difference in prosperity is becoming greater." The error, he says, lies in our humanitarian impulse to solve the problem of this disparity by the adoption of a "sharing ethics," whereby we either try to provide direct assistance or, as urged more recently, help to establish a world food bank, to which the agriculturally rich lands can contribute and from which the poor lands can draw in time of need. For Hardin, however, to do that would be to invite the "tragedy of the commons," that tragedy whose fundamental premise he earlier likened to "a pasture [in this instance the world as a whole] . . . run as a commons open to all, the right of each to use it is not matched by an operational responsibility to take care of it."

Applied to the idea of establishing a world food bank, the practical implications of such a premise can readily be imagined, he claims. Countries which are irresponsible in their food and population policies will have a lessened incentive to take those steps necessary to solve their own problems; there will always be someone to bail them out. In addition, because the aid given them from the food bank will enable them to survive and thus to continue reproducing at a high rate, they will be in increasing difficulty as their population grows. In the long-run, as world population continues to expand, the survival of all—rich and poor—will be

jeopardized. The net operational effect of a "sharing ethics," according to the view of a Garrett Hardin, is that it will eventually destroy those who unwisely succumbed to their humanitarian impulses, will only delay the day of reckoning for the poor countries and, biologically speaking, will interfere with that "normal" cycle of nature which matches population size to the "carrying capacity" of the environment (by the very effective pruning devices of war, pestilence and famine).

I find this argument powerful, troubling and, as one living in a rich country, immensely seductive. Its power lies in underlining a seemingly inexorable trend—a rapidly growing world population, so far under no control or real limitation, situated within a human community that seems to have neither the will (underscored by the meager results of the World Food Conference) nor the skill to do much about the food problem. Hardin's additional appeal to our responsibility to future generations touches another sensitive nerve. "Is it not desirable," he asks, "that at least some of the grandchildren of people now living should have a decent place in which to live?" It is hard to answer "no" to that question, particularly when the "some" is implicitly taken to mean the grandchildren of those on the rich lifeboat, that is, *my* grandchildren.

But it is, for all that, an exceedingly disturbing argument, even if one grants that I and those of my tribe, nation and class, have a

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greater obligation to our own grandchildren—for whose birth we have a special responsibility—than to those who are strangers and foreigners. Yet even that concession (in any case debatable) hardly exhausts the ethical issues. For what, in reality, is the proposed “ethics of a lifeboat”? It amounts to nothing less than a deliberate decision to allow people who might otherwise survive, at least for a time, to die of starvation and disease. Of course most of us will not personally have to observe their emaciated bodies, or help to dig the mass graves necessary to cover those millions of corpses—and that is surely a small consolation. An even greater blessing is that we can continue about our own business, unburdened of sentimental humanitarian impulses, more respectful than ever of nature’s “normal” way of allowing the survival-minded to survive and, best of all, be reassured that we have done the best we can for our grandchildren.

Dr. Hardin asked “What should the passengers on a rich lifeboat do?” It is the right question, and needs to be pursued. Yet one can hardly begin trying to answer that question without clearing away some gratuitous assumptions. For instance, Hardin facilitates his own case by begging a number of questions. He assumes, first, that ours is a self-sufficient lifeboat. But it is surely evident, as the oil crisis makes clear, that we are highly dependent upon the natural resources of other countries to sustain our own economy. Moreover, one reason ours is a rich lifeboat is that we have been able to buy natural resources cheaply from poor countries and then manufacture them into goods which can be sold at high cost. We might of course become self-sufficient by the expedient of radically lowering our own standard of living. But there seems little inclination for this country to move in that direction, however sensible that would be. For that would mean ours would no longer be a rich lifeboat, and who wants that?

A second assumption Hardin makes—his own form of “blaming the victim”—is that the poor countries are in their present condition because they are neither as wise nor as competent as the rich countries. Though he says that “The concepts of blame and punishment are irrelevant,” that only “operational” consequences of policies are important, his article is liberally filled with condescending references to the ineptitude of the poor. If we are tougher toward them, they may learn to “mend their ways,” may do away with “irresponsible reproduction,” and may learn not to tolerate “slovenly rulers” who lack wisdom and power, especially the latter.

His third assumption is perhaps the most critical. He sets up a straw-man known as “perfect justice,” which he then proceeds to demolish. It consists of arguing that “perfect justice” would, for example, require that we give the United States back to the Indians, since we stole it from them in the first place. More broadly, it would require a total undoing of the inequitable distribution of the world’s resources.

*“What should
the passengers on
a rich lifeboat do?”*

But the problem is not that of achieving “perfect justice,” whatever that is, but rather of not perpetuating outrageous injustices which are self-interestedly allowed to continue. Justice does not demand that the Indians be given back the entire country; it only demands that we cease exploiting and repressing them, while at the same time providing them with some fair compensation for the past injustices they have suffered at our hands. Nor does justice demand that we give away all of our resources and wealth to poor countries, which would not in any case solve their enduring problems. It only de-

mands that we not exploit them to keep our own lifeboat pleasantly stocked; that we do what we can to help, in the process sparing them our self-righteous judgments about their own ineptitude and our own judgments about what is really in their own long-term interests.

“Every life saved this year in a poor country,” Hardin writes, “diminishes the quality of life for subsequent generations.” This may be perfectly true, but if so it would seem to be the right of those in poor nations to make their own decision to allow people to die. The “Ugly American” is no less ugly because he employs demographic and agricultural data.

Quite a different set of assumptions are needed and can be sustained. The fact of the matter is that the United States, precisely because it is rich, can afford to provide significantly more food aid than it is presently giving; it has nowhere near reached its limit. Much of the immediate world food crisis can be traced to cyclical weather conditions, inflated oil and fertilizer prices, the lack of systematic systems of distribution and a general world recession. The developed countries, led by the United States, continue to use a disproportionate percentage of the world’s resources. That could be significantly reduced without in any sense making ours a poor country or posing any threat to our own survival. If we do nothing for poor countries, particularly when *they know*, and they know *we know* that we could be providing them with at least some help, we can be assured of their enduring hostility. Even our crass political self-interest would be harmed by that development (and we are scarcely beloved even now).

Finally, while life on our planet is hardly very hopeful these days, there is no firm evidence to sustain a thesis that any of the poor countries are in so hopeless a condition that they must be written off. It is thus a perfectly moral course to

act *as if* each and every country can be saved, and *as if* we can take at least some minor steps to help them (in cooperation with other developed countries). How can we know otherwise? Moreover, if we abandon them, we will all the more surely bring about a self-fulfilling prophecy; their fate will indeed be hopeless if no one comes to their aid. While we surely have obligations to future generations, our more immediate obligation is toward those now alive. There is no moral justification for making them the fodder for a higher quality of life of those yet to be born, or even for the maintenance of the present quality of life.

There is always something attractive about proposed hard and hard-nosed decisions. They appeal to our love of no-nonsense realism, and to our desire to once and for all be rid of nagging problems which we never seem to solve in any happy way. They are all the more attractive when their ultimate appeal is to our own self-interest. And they are positively irresistible when they promise the possibility of both doing well and doing good. We would all like to live in a moral universe guided by a magic hand which guaranteed that any act in our own best interest was also an act in the interest of all. Ours is not that kind of universe—or only very rarely. But there is no reason to go to the other extreme, really the obverse side of the same coin, and assert that our own best interests will be served by deliberately allowing people to starve. There are also moral interests to be served, of which survival is only one. If we are to worry about our duty to posterity, it would not hurt to ask what kind of moral legacy we should bequeath. One in which we won our own survival at the cost of outright cruelty and callousness would be tawdry and vile. We may fail in our efforts to help poor countries, and everything Dr. Hardin predicts may come true. But an adoption of his course, or that of triage, seems to me to portend a far greater evil. ●●

Four Indicators of Humanhood —The Enquiry Matures

by JOSEPH F. FLETCHER

Jean Rostand describes a meeting of French Catholic intellectuals; they spoke of a prosecution for infanticide following the thalidomide disaster of the Sixties.¹ Morvan Lebesque: "After centuries of morality, we still cannot answer questions like those raised by the trial in Liege. Should malformed babies be killed? Where does man begin?" Father Jolif: "No one knows what man is any longer."

That is the situation, exactly. Whether or not we ever knew in the past what man is, in the sense of having a consensus about it, we do not know now. To realize this, make only a quick scan of the wild confusion and variety on the subject gathered together by Erich Fromm and Ramon Xirau in their historical compendium.²

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First There Was One

Yet it is this question, how we are to define the *humanum*, which lies at the base of all serious talk about the quality of life. We cannot appraise quality or enumerate human values if we cannot first say what a human being is. The *Hastings Center Report* (November 1972) published a shortened version of an essay of mine in which I made a stab at this problem, under the title "Indicators of Humanhood: A Tentative Profile of Man."³

In substance I contended that the acute question is what is a *person*; that rights (such as survival) attach only to persons; that out of some twenty criteria one (neocortical function) is the cardinal or hominizing trait upon which all the other human traits hinge; and then I invited those concerned to add or subtract, agree or disagree as they may. This was intended to keep the investigation going forward, and it worked; the issue has been vigorously discussed pro and con.