



THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS AND LIFEBOAT ETHICS: A REVIEW

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Abstract

Garrett James Hardin, an American ecologist was born on 21st April, 1915. He is well known for Hardin's First Law of Human Ecology: "You cannot do only one thing", which "modestly implies that there is at least one unwanted consequence". Hardin used the term 'tragedy of the commons' to describe a situation where individuals think of their own needs and interests without paying any attention to the fact that the others in the world may also have similar interests and needs. Individuals, driven by their self interest exploit the finite resources blindly leading ultimately to the collapse of the system, thereby bringing tragedy to the entire population. In this concept "commons" actually means all the natural and manmade resources that have to be shared between all the people of the planet earth. He believed that if individual or societies continuously use more and more resources, then whatever may be the reasons for this, at the end this will bring 'tragedy' to the 'commons'. Another metaphor that Hardin used in 1974 was 'Lifeboat Ethics' for resource distribution. Hardin's metaphor describes a lifeboat in which 50 persons are present. There is possibility of 10 more persons getting on the boat. The lifeboat is in an ocean surrounded by a hundred swimmers. The "ethics" of the situation arises out from the dilemma whether (and under what circumstances) "swimmers" should be allowed to come onto the lifeboat. The lifeboat metaphor presents rich nations as individual lifeboats and the poor nations as the 'swimmers'.

Keywords: *Tragedy of the Commons, Lifeboat Ethics, population, resources*



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Garrett James Hardin, an American ecologist was born on 21st April, 1915. In 1936, he did his B.S. in zoology from the University of Chicago and in 1941 completed his Ph.D. in microbiology from Stanford University. He was the Professor of Human Ecology in the the University of California, Santa Barbara from 1963 till 1978. He is well known for Hardin's First Law of Human Ecology: "You cannot do only one thing", which "modestly implies that there is at least one unwanted consequence".

Hardin also used the term '**tragedy of the commons**' to describe a situation where individuals think of their own needs and interests without paying any attention to the fact that the others in the world may also have similar interests and needs. Individuals, driven by their self interest exploit the finite resources blindly leading ultimately to the collapse of the system, thereby bringing tragedy to the entire population. Hardin wrote an article in 1968 and in this referred to the result of 'unregulated grazing on common ground'. In this concept "commons" actually means all the natural and manmade resources that have to be shared between all the people of the planet earth. He believed that if individual or societies continuously use more and more resources, then whatever may be the reasons for this, at the end this will bring 'tragedy' to the 'commons'. Another reason for the 'Tragedy of the Commons' was that the rich well developed countries in a desire to lead a very comfortable, luxurious lives often exploit the resources to the extent of depleting the quality and quantity of resources for the future generations. Hardin believed that 'the welfare state' that supported children actually led to overpopulation leading to 'the Tragedy of the Commons'

Hardin believed that the world is finite. "A finite world can support only a finite population; therefore, population growth must eventually equal zero." Larger the population lesser the share of each individual. Thus it is just not possible to provide sufficient resources to all if the population is large. The reality is that we need to control population growth and also take strict decisions about the extent of usage of natural resources. He mentioned in his last book, *The Ostrich Factor: Our Population Myopia* (1999) that 'overpopulation was against sustainable growth and development of earth.' He explained the problems and dangers that can be caused by overpopulation. In his paper in Science in 1968 he talked about "the damage that innocent actions by individuals can inflict on the environment". He supported abortion and was in favour of eugenics through sterilization. If one gives up one's freedom to breed, we will be able to attain

other more freedoms to enjoy resources. If individuals are made aware of the detrimental results of overpopulation, then they will themselves take initiative to control population. Various restraints and incentives may be adopted to control population. If we generalize from what we observe around us, human beings actually are concerned about what others think about them. A person lives in a system in which he is almost compelled to increase the number of offsprings in a world that actually has very limited resources. Every individual promotes only his interest and this eventually leads to ruin. The number of offsprings that couples decide to have depends upon many factors like socio economic status, culture, circumstances etc. If these factors are suitably monitored then there may be reasonable control on population growth. But strict rules like that of one child policy being followed in China lead to negative unintended consequences. He supported that strict constraints should be imposed on "unqualified reproductive rights". "All persuasion takes place through coercion". The people especially those of poor countries who were enjoying the benefits of disease control should happily accept population control also.

A consequence of overpopulation is an increased need for food production. According to Hardin if we want to increase food production then we are bound to increase pollution by causing reduction in other resources present on our earth. The people of the future will thus have resources of lower quality. We all are so busy fulfilling our own needs and interests that we do not give a thought to all the things available on our earth that are very essential for us but in limited amount. Hardin proved that if people in the modern world engage actively in increasing their wealth and utilization of exhaustible resources then the future of the commons is doomed. The rich nations of the world exploit the natural resources to fulfill their needs for leading a luxurious and comfortable life. This exploitation extends to different parts of the globe. Developing nations like India and China with their large expanding population exploit the limited resources to fulfill the increasing demands of the persons. We show interest in increasing production but we ignore the repercussions. Garrett Hardin said that "Overpopulation can be avoided only if borders are secure; otherwise poor and overpopulated nations will export their excess to richer and less populated nations." In today's world we all know the significance of petroleum. But Hardin had rightly highlighted that "The financial world habitually speaks of yearly 'production' of oil. But the unvarnished truth is this: we human beings have never produced so much as a single barrel of petroleum. Only nature produces oil - and at a very slow

rate.” He further elaborated that “every proposal to build a dam, to widen a highway, to cut down another forest, to turn wetlands into salable real estate, or to bury unwanted waste products is sure to have unintended consequences.” However, environmental historians Joachim Radkau, Alfred Thomas Grove and Oliver Rackham denounced Hardin "as an American with no notion at all how Commons actually work".

Another metaphor that Hardin used in 1974 was ‘Lifeboat Ethics’ for resource distribution. Hardin's metaphor describes a lifeboat in which 50 persons are present. There is possibility of 10 more persons getting on the boat. The lifeboat is in an ocean surrounded by a hundred swimmers. The "ethics" of the situation arises out from the dilemma whether (and under what circumstances) “swimmers” should be allowed to come onto the lifeboat. The lifeboat metaphor presents rich nations as individual lifeboats and the poor nations as the ‘swimmers’. Lifeboat ethics is related to environmental ethics, utilitarianism, and issues of resource depletion. Hardin used the term lifeboat ethics to raise questions about the policies that were related to foreign aid, immigration, and food banks. He published an article in *Bioscience* magazine in September 1974. The title of the article was "Living on a Lifeboat". In this, he said that sending food to Ethiopia for the victims of famine would increase the problem of overpopulation in that area. Hardin called the supporters of growth as "growth maniacs" and was against ‘exponential growth on a finite planet’. He justified genocide on the basis that this would lead to ecological balance. According to Hardin “Whenever a community consists of too many people for the resources available to it, heavy mortality can then actually improve the conditions of life for the lucky survivors.” Hardin’s thinking is believed to be influenced by Tertullian, a Christian philosopher. Tertullian said that famine and war were useful as through these the grave problem of overpopulation could be easily solved.

Hardin compared the term “lifeboat” to the ‘Spaceship Earth model’ of distribution of resources. The term **Spaceship Earth** has been used for expressing concern over the need for all of us to wisely work as a crew for using the limited resources that are present on the Earth. It is believed that the earliest usage of this concept was in chapter 2 of book IV of the book ‘Progress and Poverty : An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth: by Henry George in 1879. In this George writes “It is a well-provisioned ship, this on which we sail through space. If the bread and beef above decks seem to grow

scarce, we but open a hatch and there is a new supply, of which before we never dreamed. And very great command over the services of others comes to those who as the hatches are opened are permitted to say, "This is mine!"

The concept of Spaceship earth has also been discussed by Adlai Stevenson in July, 1965 in his last speech as the ambassador to the United Nations said: "We travel together, passengers on a little space ship, dependent on its vulnerable reserves of air and soil; all committed for our safety to its security and peace; preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and, I will say, the love we give our fragile craft. We cannot maintain it half fortunate, half miserable, half confident, half despairing, half slave—to the ancient enemies of man—half free in a liberation of resources undreamed of until this day. No craft, no crew can travel safely with such vast contradictions. On their resolution depends the survival of us all" However, Hardin criticized the Spaceship Earth Model. He said that a spaceship is directed by one leader while the earth is not. He further explained that the spaceship model actually leads to 'the tragedy of the commons.'

Hardin strongly believed that if we want to enjoy the resources on the earth then we all need to sacrifice some of our freedom, needs and interests to ensure the successful survival of all human beings. Hardin and his wife Jane believed that an individual should have the freedom to choose the time of their death. They committed suicide after their 62nd marriage anniversary in September 2003. At that time Hardin was 88 years old and Jane was 81 years old.

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