

Course work on read(lifeboat ethics) the case against helping the poor

[Sociology](#), [Population](#)



Nowadays the problem of poverty and limited resources becomes more and more urgent. The famous Hardin's essay, "Lifeboat ethics" covers different aspects of this issue and gives strong but often disputable arguments against helping the poor in the worldwide, international sense. The fact that Earth's resources are limited is undisputable, and Hardin's metaphor comparing nations of people to lifeboats floating in the limited space of resources seems very neat. In this situation different ethical and moral problems come into play. The main ethical issue in current situation is helping the poor with the limited helping capacity and the need to perform selective helping in this case. Hardin argues that international aid programs and other similar types of so-called commons do not influence the root of the problem. I agree that helping the poor in international sense is not good because it leads to overpopulation. This eventually results in overuse of limited resources, and subsequently increases the level of poverty, causing global disaster. The threat is evident and there is an obvious need for evaluating pros and cons of the situation, as the ethical aspect is not the only and the primary when it comes to common sense. Thus, Hardin represents his common sense in the essay under consideration.

To Hardin's mind, the metaphor of spaceship applied to Earth is incorrect due to the absence of the captain, or a global control unit. Instead, he goes into the other representation. "If we divide the world crudely into rich nations and poor nations, two thirds of them are desperately poor, and only one third comparatively rich" (p. 358). He states that it would be correct to compare rich nations to the lifeboats carrying comparatively rich people, while outside each boat there swim poor people willing to share the wealth

or the rich.

Developing the metaphor, he proposes to assume that the lifeboat has a limited capacity of 50 people, already carrying them, besides it “ has room for 10 more, making a total capacity of 60. Suppose the 50 of us in the lifeboat see 100 others swimming in the water outside, begging for admission to our boat” (p. 358-359). There are different ways to solve this issue. The first one proposed is the Christian principle of “ being your brother’s keeper”, or with the similar sense, the Marxist’s ideal “ to each according to his needs.” In both cases the ones on the board will help those aboard and the lifeboat will sink due to the limited capacity. This is a logical view on the situation and in this sense it is correct. With limited resources and the demand exceeding them there is no chance to survive.

Resorting to selective helping by letting 10 more people in, and by the way, risking the “ security factor” also doesn’t seem very good logically and ethically. The same is with jumping overboard and admitting one’s place to someone else. It is noble, but lacks common sense and doesn’t solve the problem of poverty at all. The last variant would be not risking one’s security and let no one in. It lacks justice, but leads to survival of the lifeboat and natural regulation of population by the means of hunger, disease, disasters and so on.

As one of the main arguments, Hardin notes that the population in poor countries grows much faster than in the rich ones. Such reproductive difference makes the situation even more harsh and complicated. In ethical sense, the growing number of the poor will make it harder and even impossible for the rich to help them. In case they help them, the resources

will not be enough for everybody; overpopulation eventually leads to total disaster. Thus, in the situation of such reproductive gap, the principle “to everybody according to his needs” will not be applicable.

“The tragedy of commons” described by Hardin lies in the disastrous consequences, that happen when the use of common resources is uncontrolled. He compares common resources to pasture and all the people to those who use it according to their needs. It is obvious that the pasture needs protection and the use of it must be reasonable. “If everyone would 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, mutual ruin is inevitable if there are no controls.” (p. 360) For sure, there will anyway be those violating the common agreement to protect the resources and use them reasonably.

Continuing about the means of helping the poor and showing the real example of commons, Hardin dwells on the idea of The World Food Bank. It satisfies the interests of international liberal groups and greatly appeals to humanitarian impulses. But the consequences of it are the following. To Hardin’s mind, every country must be prepared to emergency situations. When there is the food bank that supports countries that got into emergency situations, these countries are unlikely to establish their own means of prevention of such situations. Moreover, if they do not prepare for emergency, have external support in these cases and the population grows, it will become much harder for the world food bank to supply the growing population of the poor with bigger and bigger emergencies. And again, it can lead either to natural population regulation due to the lack of resources, or to

total disaster in case making the resources of developing countries the commons.

In the situation of global population growing the world food bank would lead to widening gap between the rich and the poor. According to Hardin, “ Because of the higher rate of population growth in the poor countries of the world, 88 percent of today's children are born poor, and only 12 percent rich. Year by year the ratio becomes worse, as the fast-reproducing poor outnumber the slow-reproducing rich.” The downside of international aid programs is that with the existence of such an aid the demand for it grows, and then the population grows even more which leads again to the growth of demand. This will eventually bring “ ruin upon all who share in the commons” (p. 363).

There is another, modern way of realizing the international aid. The sense of it is not in sharing money and food, but in sharing advice and technology. But again, any kind of such “ Green revolutions” have their main downside. They are again just a kind of commons, and lead to overpopulation in the world of limited resources.

Overpopulation with the growing demands exhausts the environment, leads to pollution and devastation. India may be the example of it. As Harding states, “ The country's forests are now only a small fraction of what they were three centuries ago and floods and erosion continually destroy the insufficient farmland that remains. Every one of the 15 million new lives added to India's population puts an additional burden on the environment, and increases the economic and social costs of crowding.” (p. 364) Thus, we may already see that overpopulation is bad for environment and also for

people.

People from poor and overpopulated countries also have another way to get the food - the immigration. This way poor countries get to the resources of the rich ones and use them. But if the immigration becomes unrestricted, people from poor countries will flood the places where there still are resources, extensively use them at the same time making the problem of overpopulation more acute. Hardin says that there's obviously a great need in immigration control, moreover, there is a global need in reproduction control. Of course, the restriction of immigration may be viewed as the form of injustice, but throughout the history there have been invented and implemented restrictions and laws against the "pure justice" that would sooner or later lead to disastrous consequences.

Speaking about my attitude towards the issue of helping or not helping the poor, I think that this is the right time to call for the common sense. Ethical side of the problem is of great importance but under current conditions that have been highlighted in Hardin's essay, this problem is ethically unsolvable. I agree that some humanitarian approaches may lead to disaster if not properly controlled by a special institution. Chaotic population growth, spread and use of natural resources is definitely catastrophic. I agree that every country has to prepare for the emergency situations. The idea of international aid seems reasonable only in case this aid helps preventing the emergencies in poor countries by giving those countries technologies and ideas of how to prevent disaster. To my mind, the ideas of helping poor countries and the idea of fighting the poverty within the country must be regarded and treated separately, and the second one is even of greater

importance than the first. The natural population number control is inevitable and cannot and should not be avoided. Poor countries have greater reproductive rates because of meager conditions, diseases etc. It is the natural trend to reproduce more under harsh conditions and this also demands natural regulation. International institutions that try to aid will only make worse because the population growth will jump while the amount of resources will stay the same.

Summing up, the problem of overpopulation and lack of resources is of primary global importance nowadays. In his essay Hardin argues that helping poor by establishing international aid programs will not solve the problem and lead to disaster because of overpopulation, lack of reproduction control and immigration. The only solution may be the foundation of global institution specializing on the control of resources use, population growth and migration. The chaotic and uncontrolled development of these processes will definitely lead to global disaster. That is why I will have to agree with Hardin's arguments.