

# The tragedy of the commons theory analysis



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In “ The Tragedy of the Commons”, Garrett Hardin argues that appeals to conscience are not effective in solving common problems. First, I will explain Hardin’s arguments against appealing to conscience and why he thinks it is ineffective, and then show what he thinks will work instead of appeals to conscience. After that, I will describe why I don’t think his reasoning is correct and offer an alternate proposal for why appealing to conscience can solve commons problems. Next, I will respond to my proposal to make a reasonable case for it. Finally, I will show that I make a stronger case than Hardin and that appealing to conscience is very effective means of solving common problems.

Hardin states that “ conscience is self-eliminating” (Hardin, p. 1246). He references Charles Galton Darwin who shows that persons who appeal to conscience would when confronted with appeals to limit breeding, would respond by limiting breeding. C. G Darwin argues that this does not fit with the theory of natural selection and these people would, after hundreds of generations, cease to exist. Hardin argues that based on natural selection and the heredity of conscience, persons who are more susceptible to appeals to conscience have a system set up to eliminate that trait from the race. He uses heredity generally to include germ cell transmission of traits and exosomatal transmission of traits.

Hardin also discusses how asking someone to stop doing something, he uses exploiting the commons as an example, “ in the name of conscience” (Hardin, p. 1246) is a contradiction. He describes the two different messages being sent as intended and unintended communication. This is referred to as the “ double bind” by Bateson. When one makes a request for an appeal to

conscience what is intended to come across is that “ If you don’t do as we ask we will openly condemn you for not acting like a responsible citizen.” (Hardin, p. 1246). The unintended message one receives is that “ If you do behave as we ask, we will secretly condemn you for a simpleton who can be shamed into standing aside while the rest of us exploit the commons.” (Hardin, p. 1246). This unintended message, Hardin claims, triggers guilt and anxiety. While this can be effective, Hardin questions whether the ends justify the means. He doesn’t think it is acceptable to use techniques that are psychologically pathogenic. His response to this is that instead of psychologically manipulating persons who exploit commons we should adjust the social arrangements in regards to responsibility. His response leads from the philosopher Charles Frankel who defines responsibility as “ the product of definite social arrangements.” (Hardin, p. 1247). Hardin explains that to keep a bank robber from using the bank as a commons, you don’t reprimand him or aim to psychologically coerce him you change the social arrangements. If you say the bank is not a commons then the social arrangements will keep it from becoming a commons. According to Hardin the way in which we can alter social arrangements is through privatization and taxes.

I don’t think that Hardin’s view that conscience is self-eliminating is valid. If one can make the appeal to conscience to limit breeding, than they should also be able appeal to their conscience to increase population when necessary. This is to say that persons who appeal to conscience can adhere to many appeals to conscience, not only ones that would decrease their population. Take into account religious organizations that preach that

persons are put on this earth solely to reproduce and that by not doing so they will face disapproval or judgment. This is an appeal to conscience. Having as many kids as you can is the right thing to do; it is your obligation to have as many children as possible. This works as well with many people as appealing to conscience to save the earth and decrease our population does with another type of persons. His argument that being susceptible to conscience will cause them to go extinct does not hold for all persons of conscience.

In relation to common problems I believe that appeals to conscience can provide a solution so long as it is paired with education. I think it is unreasonable to say that there can only be one way to solve common problems, allowing for appeals to conscience be paired with education. By incorporating an educational piece into an appeal to stop exploiting commons it solves the problem of the double bind. You are able to clearly convey the intended message as before. However, the unintended message is cleared because you are actually showing facts and figures on why people should stop exploiting commons. If you have the evidence that shows that the pros out way the cons to cutting back on usage, then people won't feel like they are being swindled. While this may take more time than privatizing land or charging taxes because you may have to try multiple time to get people to fully understand the facts it can still work.

People that are more susceptible to appeals of conscience will agree more readily to stop exploiting the commons. As more people make appeals to conscience the persons that are less susceptible can see the improvements that are being made by those that have stopped exploiting the commons.

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The research and education piece will build on itself making a stronger case for everyone to appeal to conscience. An objection that can be made is whether it is morally acceptable to come at people on a psychological level. Exposing a person as irresponsible citizen can still cause stress and make some people “ appeal to conscience” when they are merely afraid of being judged. This can cause a problem when the actions and advocacy of individuals that have appealed to conscience is a large part of appropriately educating people. If this happens it will be less effective than originally thought.

I think that because of the psychological pathogen that is conscience, Hardin makes a better argument for staying away from using it to solve commons problems. While appealing to conscience while appropriately educating can work, it would take more time and effort than merely changing the social arrangements. I also believe that his claim that “ conscience is self-eliminating” is not accurate. This however, does not affect the larger issues of using conscience to solve common problems.

In “ The Tragedy of the Commons”, Garrett Hardin argues that appeals to conscience are not effective in solving common problems. Hardin’s argues against appealing to conscience because he thinks that conscience is self eliminating and that using a psychological pathogen is ineffective and morally problematic. He suggests changing the social implication of a commons by using privatization and taxes to solve commons problems. I disagree that conscience is self eliminating and that appeals to conscience can work as long as people are properly educated at the same time to solve the problem of the double bind. Unfortunately, this does not solve the

problems that may come up as conscience is still a psychological tool and may have negative effects to the plan. I think that Hardin makes a stronger case that taxation and privatization are the most effective ways to solve commons problems.