

# Garrett Hardin: An Appreciation

## *Learning about ethics for the long term*

by Georgie Anne Geyer

**M**y first impression of Garrett Hardin, when we had lunch in Washington several years ago, was what a gentleman he was! A brilliant scientist and a courtly man then in his eighties who moved carefully with a walker, he was still filled with a youthful, effervescent joy in life. I looked at this fine man and this consummate intellectual across the table and shook my head: How could one countenance for a moment those people who liked to accuse him of being “nativist, bigoted and xenophobic?” Such rhetoric was appalling.

We started out that day with his telling me a story, in fact his quintessential story of our times, one about India, harvests, and the environmental impact of immigration and population. It was one that surely underlined immediately the ethical questions of carrying capacity and environment and which illuminated those neglected areas of foreign policy and of missionary work involved in the entire immigration/citizenship question.

“Think of things this way,” he began. “In 1966 to ’67, India had a shortfall in agricultural production. America sent ten million tons of grain to India. (One ton of grain keeps five people alive per year.) Then, in 1968, we did not send grain. I went to India for an interview with the planning commission and they told me, ‘When word came down that there would be no grain in 1968, at first we were very angry; we even thought we had been double-crossed. But, having been told that, we exerted ourselves to provide grain for our people, and now we are out of the woods. It was one of the best things that ever happened to us.’”

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The Socratic Mr. Hardin then leaned across the table and asked me, “Let us grant ourselves the most malevolent of motives: Let us ask, ‘How can we harm India — *really* harm her?’ Quite simply, by sending India a bounty of food, year after year.”

To me, he stood for a different worldview, different particularly from welfare-state professionals, both national and international. This was the man who early on described the earth as a “lifeboat”; who coined the more discriminating word “commonism” to replace “one-worldism”; and who managed to make “global” America’s own nagging welfare-state worries.

But to understand Professor Hardin, one has to go back to his first really public “shocker.” It was 1968; innocently (or at least, so he would have us believe) he wrote a little treatise, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” which stunned the scientific community and is now published in one hundred different anthologies and quoted in hushed voices in arcane academic circles. Unlike private property, he begins in his now-classic paper, a commons is a “resource to which a population has free and unmanaged access.” It is fine so long as the commons is managed by someone, and so long as the people do not overgraze it or generally overstress it. But if, say, each herdsman increases his own herd at the expense of the commons, very soon there is disaster ahead for everyone.

By the time we met, Hardin, no stranger to controversy, had extended his thesis to the even more emotion-laden field of immigration and citizenship. He was professing that our unassessed immigration policy, which had as yet seen no rational debate, was one of the major causes of America’s ten-million-unemployed problem and of a general diluting on all levels of America’s seminal responsibility to its own citizens.

Hardin dismissed (his term) “indiscriminating

altruism” and (my term) the “compassion professionals” who have given us everything from essentially counterproductive food programs in India to welfare programs in America that destroy the recipients’ spirit and incentive. As he again made his point that true compassion can be given only to those close to you, he reminded me of the French socialist thinker Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who captured the meaning of real compassion in the last century,

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— Garrett Hardin

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saying, “If everyone is my brother, I have no brothers.”

Before we left each other that day, I reminded him that “People say you’re hard-hearted. Are you?”

He smiled his warm and intelligent smile. “My thinking appears to be hard-hearted — in the near term,” he answered. “But that is because I am trying to protect future generations. So, really, I am soft-hearted in the long run.”

What differentiates Professor Hardin from the masses of “thinkers” who accept without question whatever fashionable theories about human nature and human development are prevalent at the moment lies in the fact that he deals with ethical questions, with first principles, and with first responsibilities. He looks at the crucially important ethical question of how and when to be “my brother’s keeper” without cant and with what I believe to be true love and genuine sentiment.

“Traditional ethics has an answer to this problem,” he says. “Charity begins at home. Why the restriction? Because the greater the distance between

donor and recipient, the more likely it is that well-meant charity will cause more harm than good.”

Moreover, the ethical imperative grows ever more intense when we study the real outcome of pushing for uncontrolled immigration — and the concomitant lack of assimilation that invariably attends it. Because, as Hardin says, “when immigration is at a slow rate, cultural and linguistic distances can be overcome. But when immigration is very rapid ... the result is conflict.”

As for the general altruism of loving everyone in the world and neglecting the reasonable welfare of one’s own, perhaps Austrian economist Friedrich von Hayek demolished that pretense most effectively. Loving all the world is a “meaningless conception,” he said, emphasizing that man can care only for specific individuals in concrete circumstances.

Hardin reflects that idea as well as that of the great diplomat George Kennan who has written that, by absorbing the poverty of the Third World, the more prosperous society “is sometimes quite overcome in the long run, by what it has tried to absorb.” Any more prosperous society then diminishes itself so that it is no longer an example to the world, and necessarily diminishes the only hope that the poorer countries have to emulate and learn from.

Who belongs? *To whom is our primary responsibility? Where does it begin? Where does it end? What responsibility do I have to my family, to my immediate fellows, to my fellow citizens, to the stranger?* These questions are dealt with by most of the world’s great philosophers, not to speak of many more of the not-so-great, and in every sacred book from the Bible to the Koran. And no one in our present generation has dealt with them with more depth and intelligence than Garrett Hardin.

I felt that I had been in the presence of a great man. •