

# Not On My Lifeboat

## *Avoiding universalism's fatal embrace*

Book review by Michael W. Masters

*"I feel guilty about my good luck," say some.  
The reply to this is simple: Get out and give  
your place to others.*

— Garrett Hardin, "Living on a Lifeboat"

*Stand by to repel boarders...*

— Anonymous sailing ship captain

Perhaps the most gratifying sound in public discourse is the *pop* of punctured preconceived notions — particularly when the notions thus deposed are manifestly harmful ones. With the ascendancy of universalist liberalism as a compulsory ethical model, there are plenty of injurious preconceptions to choose from. No one harpoons them better than biologist Garrett Hardin, Professor Emeritus of Human Ecology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Hardin, now in his 80s, has wielded his pen with the impact of a wrecking ball ever since his seminal essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons," appeared in 1968.

Hardin is the author of numerous books and essays on ethics, ecology, population and immigration. Book credits include *The Limits of Altruism: An Ecologist's View of Survival*; *Living Within Limits*; *The Immigration Dilemma: Avoiding the Tragedy of the Commons*; and *Exploring New Ethics for Survival*. The most recent release, a reprint of *Stalking the Wild Taboo*, includes several essays and a new preface illuminating the

### Stalking the Wild Taboo

by Garrett Hardin

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destructive impact of the universalist ethos on our society. Besides "The Tragedy of the Commons," his most influential essays include "Living on a Lifeboat," "Carrying Capacity as an Ethical Concept," and "Discriminating Altruisms."

Much of Hardin's work advances the thesis that universalism is an *inherently* flawed, even suicidal, ethical system. It compels those deceived by its siren song to sacrifice self and group interests for the benefit of mankind as a whole. Yet it is practiced widely only by Western peoples — who are thereby impaired in competing with those whose loyalty remains closer to home. Universalism

harms those we care about most — our own friends, relatives and kinsmen. It benefits those who are, at best, indifferent to our beliefs — and, at worst, utterly contemptuous of them.

Hardin has a warning for those whose actions are guided by such beliefs: "Noble intentions are a poor excuse for stupid action. Man

is the only species that calls some suicidal actions 'noble.' The rest of creation knows better." To Hardin's words, we would add: The penalty for those who fail to grasp nature's realities is the same as it is in the animal kingdom—disappearance.

### The Tragedy of the Commons

To understand Hardin's message, one may begin with "The Tragedy of the Commons." In concise, elegant prose, Hardin introduces many of the ethical themes that have illuminated his work since. Among them: anything that is free invites exploitation (an apt description of welfare); the carrying capacity of any resource is a vital ethical consideration (a realistic justification for limiting immigration in a finite world); and voluntary "ethical" behavior, without regard to the actions of others, can act as agent for its own elimination.

The tragedy of the commons, first advanced in 1833 by mathematician William Forster Lloyd, is simple in concept. Imagine a pasture, held in

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common by a group of herdsmen. All are free to graze their animals in the commons. The depletion of resources caused by adding additional animals is borne by all, but the benefit accrues only to the individual. Thus each herdsman, acting purely out of self-interest, will tend to exploit the commons by adding more animals.

But the ability of the commons to support more animals is finite. This limit is called the carrying capacity. Exceeding the pasture's carrying capacity destroys its ability to produce grass and leads to soil erosion, takeover by weeds, etc. Thus, it is almost certain that the commons will be exploited to exhaustion. The inevitability of this outcome is the "tragedy" alluded to in the essay's title.

The tragedy of the commons is not confined to animal husbandry. Any system, natural or human, may constitute a commons. Our own land is a prime example. Immigration is turning Western civilization itself into a vast commons, a fragile human ecosystem ripe for exploitation not only by the teeming billions of people in the Third World — to whom the West looks like the proverbial land of milk and honey — but also by callous and rapacious elites who care nothing about the irreversible damage they cause.

Fortunately, restraint is possible even in the presence of human greed. If the pasture has an owner, he has a vested interest in preserving it for the future. If he fails to limit use to the pasture's natural carrying capacity it will be ruined, and he will suffer great loss. The tragedy of the commons is a persuasive argument for private property ownership. It is also a telling indictment of Marxism's denial of private property.

In a similar manner, the ethnic and cultural binding of the peoples of traditional nation-states with the geography they inhabit motivates preservation of historic homelands for future generations. Without this close, sometimes mystical association between blood and land ("the motherland," "the fatherland"), there inevitably ensues a rootlessness that renders impossible the conservation of nature's fragile endowment.

### The Cult of Conscience

Taken by itself, the commons case is a profound one. It explains much of the tendency of societies to wreck their environment. But Hardin does not stop there. He adds another crucial point, one that deals with the flawed and potentially self-destructive

nature of conscience.

Since conscience — adherence to a "moral" code of behavior without coercion by others — is one of the shibboleths of both secular liberalism and Christian dogma, this will strike many readers as heretical. However, reality is quite indifferent to our preconceived notions: *Conscience is self-eliminating from a population.*

Hardin first illustrates why by examining voluntary birth control. He then generalizes the conclusion to all acts of self-sacrificing conscience.

*People vary. Confronted with appeals to limited breeding, some people will undoubtedly respond to the plea more than others. Those who have more children will produce a larger fraction of the next generation than those with more susceptible consciences. . . . The argument here has been stated in the context of the population problem, but it applies equally well to any instance in which society appeals to an individual exploiting a commons to restrain himself for the general good - by means of his conscience. To make such an appeal is to set up a selective system that works toward the elimination of conscience from the race.*

Returning to the commons example, imagine that some herdsmen, imbued with concern for the land, forego overstocking the commons with their own animals. They will fare less well than their contemporaries who are under no such compulsion. Their families will live less well. Their children will inherit less and likely will also live less well. They may even be displaced by more aggressive herdsmen, whose assets have brought added power:

If even one person in the community follows a lower standard [of conscience] that person prospers at the expense of the others. A laissez faire market system ruled by conscience alone rewards for a lack of conscience. . . . The second stage in the dissolution of a conscience-ruled system takes place because of envy. As the 'good guys' see the 'bad guys' prosper their envy is energized and one after another good guys become bad guys.

Some will object that Hardin's conclusion is false. After all, conscience still exists. Indeed, Western people may be its highest exemplar. The answer is that until recently, European-descended

peoples were largely isolated from other peoples. Now, modern transportation and communication has changed all this. Our conscience-induced refusal to curtail immigration is importing vast numbers of people who do not share our moral code—and who thereby threaten to displace us permanently.

Whose lifeboat is it, anyway?

The commons model, where exploitation is restrained only by conscience, is an inherently flawed ethical system. This raises the question: Is there a more survivable way? Rather than treating our land as an endless vista of inexhaustible largess, to be bestowed on all comers as an act of kindness, Hardin asks us to consider a different approach.

His “Living on a Lifeboat,” published in 1974, deals with the ethics of a finite world occupied by an ever-growing population. Consider the case of lifeboats floating on the ocean — each limited in its “carrying capacity” and each filled with an ample cargo of humans. Suppose occupants of some lifeboats are leaping into the water and swimming toward our lifeboat. It may be that they have reproduced to a level that they cannot sustain. Or they may be hungry, unable to feed themselves due to their lack of ability or motivation. Or they may simply wish to avail themselves of the amenities with which we have outfitted our lifeboat.

The ethical dilemma we face is what to do about these potential “immigrants” in the water. Hardin considers three possibilities. First, “We may be tempted to try to live by the Christian ideal of being ‘our brother’s keeper,’ or by the Marxian ideal of ‘from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.’” This ethical code will lead us to take in everyone. Since people in other boats are multiplying endlessly, our lifeboat will eventually capsize, leaving us to drown. As predicted in “The Tragedy of the Commons,” our conscience will have been our undoing.

Second, we may take in none at all. To those who object to this alternative, Hardin offers the advice quoted earlier: “*Get out and yield your place*

*to others.*” [Emphasis in the original.] Although letting in these sad-eyed strangers may seem to epitomize compassion and moral virtue, it is in reality a fatal embrace. If we do not reject them, we shall perish — overrun by people whose self-interest is not blinded by “noble intentions.”

Finally, we may take in only a few. But who do we admit? “How do we *discriminate*?” We shall return to this theme in a moment, for there is a natural criteria by which we may guide our choice.

“Living on a Lifeboat” shows that immigration has turned the West into a precarious human commons. Our ecosystem is being plundered by those who have not duplicated for themselves our Western way of life. Although we already pay a high price for immigration in crime, welfare and destruction of our culture, our children

and grandchildren may pay a higher price still.

*To be generous with one’s own possessions is one thing; to be generous with posterity’s is quite another...rejection of the commons is still valid and necessary if we are to save at least some parts of the world from environmental ruin. Is it not desirable that at least some of the grandchildren of people now living should have a decent place to in which to live?*

This last point provides us with a clue as to how to “discriminate” among potential immigrants. Our lifeboat is *not* filled with strangers. It is occupied by our own family and kin, an adjunct of the process that created ethnically-based nations. Immigration proponents ask us to *imperil the safety and future well-being of our children* to make room for these strangers. If we see our own kin in the water, we will no doubt gladly take them in, but we cannot admit every stranger who clamors for admission.

After all: *Whose lifeboat is it, anyway?* Does it belong to the people in the water — who are demonstrably unable to rise to our standards — or does it belong to those of us who made it what it is? The answer is clear if we value our children’s future: It is ours — and we must take whatever steps necessary to make sure it remains ours. To those who clamor for admittance, we have no choice but

The law locks up both man and woman  
Who steals the goose from off the common  
But lets the greater felon loose  
Who steals the common from the goose.

— Edward Potts Cheyney  
*Humane Society of U.S. News*  
(Spring 1997, Vol. 42, No. 2, p.31)

to respond: *not on my lifeboat.*

### Nature's Moral Order

Is this "moral"? This is equivalent to asking, *is it moral to survive?* To even ask the question is to reveal the extent to which our instincts as well as our powers of rational thought have been corrupted. Leaving aside debilitating liberal platitudes and enervating Christian passivity ("...the meek shall inherit the earth."), one thing is certain; those who do not seek to survive will not do so.

Nature's moral order values loyalty to those to whom one has distinct ties, usually ties of kinship —

*tribes.*

Those who demonize this as racist or xenophobic — and therefore immoral — are being disingenuous. That which is built inextricably into the laws of the universe cannot be immoral. The in-group, out-group distinction still operates today; only the battleground has shifted. Violence has diminished, only to be superseded by irredentism and dueling birthrates. Any idealistic group that unilaterally dismantles its own group identity will be the loser in this new form of competition.

### Understanding the Script

Behind the pious rhetoric of those who condemn fealty to nature's plan is a dirty little secret: Universalism also provides an insidious means of securing power and wealth. It exposes us to exploitation by amoral men who use any weapon available to advance their own self-interest — including our innate sense of moral probity. Says Hardin: "[S]uch verbal devices as 'principles,' 'liberty,' and 'fairness' can be used as competitive weapons."

Despite the currently fashionable conceit that "democracy" and "free enterprise" have routed the worst excesses of socialism, what is happening in the West is recognizably Marxist in design. To understand how this is so, one must follow the *dramatis personae* in the West's unfolding passion play — of which there are three principals.

First, there is a group ripe for exploitation — a commons. This group is the historical body of European-derived people who created Western civilization. They are largely moral people who go quietly about their lives, often without concern for the grand design unfolding around them. Because they are productive, they have something others want. Because they are kind-hearted, they are vulnerable to appeals of conscience.

Second, there is a vast reservoir of disaffected people who, if cleverly manipulated, may be incited to envy of the first group's success. Call them the "poor" and the "oppressed"; they are largely Third World in composition. Their role is to function as a social battering ram in service of whoever is able to secure their allegiance.

Finally, there is a third group who stands to profit

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what we would call ethnic groups or tribes.

Hardin writes: "The essential characteristic of a tribe is that it should follow a double standard of morality — one kind of behavior for in-group relations, another for out-group." In-group relations are governed by cooperation while out-group relations are properly governed by, at best, a tit-for-tat code. Hardin argues that, because of the nature of altruism and competition, the dual code of morality is inescapable:

*In the absence of competition between tribes the survival value of altruism in a crowded world approaches zero because what ego gives up necessarily ... goes into the commons. What is in the commons cannot favor the survival of the sharing impulses that put it there — unless there are limits placed on sharing. To place limits on sharing is to create a tribe — which means a rejection of One World.... A state of One World, if achieved, would soon redissolve into an assemblage of*

by pitting the second group against the first. It is this group that James Burnham, author of *The Suicide of the West*, called the “managerial elite.”

Immigration is a potent weapon in this struggle for dominance. The politicizing of universalism by Western elites and their legal and social institutions — among them government, education, media, entertainment, religion, etc. — has deluded many European-derived people into believing that it is immoral to survive as a distinct group. As a result, they can find no reason to resist the Third World flood inundating the West — a flood that is rapidly breaking down the culture, institutions and unique character of Western civilization.

### The Ethics of Diversity

This disintegration benefits the elites who perpetuate it by creating hitherto unimagined opportunities for securing power and wealth at the expense of historic peoples and their cultures. This outcome can hardly be described as moral. Indeed, it may be the most immoral design ever inflicted on a long-suffering humanity. The elites’ “return on investment” is the very antithesis of the moral code they espouse. It is not “liberty, fraternity and equality.” It is something far more venal: power, wealth and dominance. Hardin writes:

*Why poor people should want to make this transfer is no mystery: but why should rich host encourage it? This transfer, like the reverse one, is supported by both selfish interests and humanitarian ones.*

*The principle selfish interest in unimpeded immigration is easy to identify; it is the interest of the employers of cheap labor, particularly that needed for degrading jobs. We have been deceived about the forces of history by the lines of Emma Lazarus inscribed on a plaque inside the Statue of Liberty...*

The Lazarus poem (“Bring me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free...”) is a particularly pernicious example of exploiting the commons. Lazarus, a Sephardic Jewess from a wealthy New York family, exploited American sentimentality in order to prepare the way for more immigration by victims of the Russian

pogroms. Likewise, the “melting pot” metaphor — created by playwright Israel Zangwell — also conditioned public opinion for the dismantling of turn-of-the-century barriers.

To Hardin’s indictment of employers seeking cheap labor, we would add condemnation of politicians catering to minority voters. Just as Radical Republicans exploited the Southern black vote during Reconstruction, both parties pander shamelessly to minorities today. Whereas most whites vote their consciences, thereby diluting their effectiveness, minorities well understand their own self-interest — many bloc-vote to get it. Minority power is thus highly magnified while the majority’s

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dispossession is largely conscience-inflicted.

“Democracy” is not an answer. When applied to “diverse” peoples, democracy simply “legalizes” the rape of the commons. The problem is not that democracy is inherently evil but rather that it has limitations. If the interests of those grouped as voters are sufficiently divergent, exploitation of the producers by envious have-nots is inevitable. The real enemy of democracy is “diversity” — as Hardin notes in *The Immigration Dilemma*:

*Since diversity is so highly praised these days, it would be well for us to examine the environment needed to foster and conserve this virtue. Many people think that One World — a single political sovereignty governing the whole world — will be achieved some day ... Year after year the studies of Freedom House show that the great majority of the nations are not democratically run. In the formation of a single sovereignty, democracy would probably not survive the bargaining of the major non-democratic powers. ... Unity within nations, coupled with diversity among nations, is surely the best recipe for*

*evolutionary progress in the species as a whole.*

### Western Survival at Stake

In an aptly titled 1971 essay, "The Survival of Nations and Civilizations," Hardin strips away feel-good humanitarian delusion and forces attention onto the ultimate issue that confronts us—our continued existence as a distinct people. We must maintain sufficient numbers to constitute a viable population group and to defend our "territory" or we will surely drown. Of Americans' diminishing percentage of the world's population, Hardin writes

*If we renounce conquest and overbreeding, our survival in a competitive world depends on what kind of world it is: One World or a world of national territories. If the world is one great commons, in which all food is shared equally, then we are lost. Those who breed faster will replace the rest. Sharing the food from national territories is operationally equivalent to sharing territories: in both cases a commons is established, and tragedy is the ultimate result.*

Biologists have a name for this phenomenon — the Competitive Exclusion Principle. In the competition for living space and resources between two species (or two groups that occupy the same ecological niche), one will inevitably and inexorably eliminate the other. "[I]n a finite universe — and the organisms of our world know no other — where the total number of organisms of both kinds cannot exceed a certain number ... one species will necessarily replace the other species completely if the two species are 'complete competitors,' i.e., live the same kind of life."

But, why should we care if our living space is overrun by strangers? After all, if every one is "equal" why does it matter? The unpleasant truth is that all people are *not* equal — either by standards of objective reality or by their own perceptions. (Is there a mother anywhere who would concede that her own child is not in some way special, at least to her?) Indeed, if all peoples were equal, the West's prosperity would exist equally everywhere in the world. No one would want to come here. The very fact that others are attracted to the West is proof that our character — and the way of life it has created — is different, and therefore worthy of preservation.

One need not yield to liberal-condemned

stereotypes of superiority and inferiority to justify the distinctiveness of the world's peoples. Distinctiveness is an inseparable part of human nature — a heritage we have an unalienable right to preserve. To attempt to destroy it — whether out of humanitarianism or out of something altogether more malevolent — is an act of aggression. Whether distinct groups be called tribes, nations, religions, ethnic groups or races, they are still worthy of respect and conservation for their distinctiveness. One of liberalism's most poisonous evils is that it condemns such loyalties as morally wrong.

If carried to its logical conclusion, our universalist, "melting pot" ethic — which ignores the realities of life in a competitive world — can only result in the inexorable eradication of *our* distinctiveness. Others not fettered by fastidious consciences will occupy the land and multiply to the utmost limit. There is a word to describe this outcome, and Hardin does not flinch from its utterance. "It may be that no one is ever killed; but the genes of one group replace the genes of the other. This is genocide."

It is difficult to understand how anyone could view this outcome as morally defensible. But, of course, that's the point isn't it? The most cunning promoters of this view do not believe it themselves, nor do they practice it. For them, universalism is simply a path to power. Over whom that power is exercised — whether it be the endangered heirs of European civilization's creators or an empire populated with Third World masses — seems to matter not at all. This is universalism's ultimate malediction; far from being the most righteous of moral systems it is the most corrupt. **TSC**

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