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- Source: *Population and Environment: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, Volume 12, Number 3, Spring 1991: 213-219.

Ethics and Numbers

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As the twentieth century draws to a close, uninvited immigration has become a problem worldwide. Migration from poor or troubled countries to rich and relatively peaceful nations was always an intermittent fact of life, but few governments have seen it as a "problem." Most have just tried to hold the would-be immigrants at arm's length. Of the powerful nations, the newest one, the United States, is somewhat confused in its policy.

The troubles of the present are rooted in the past. We need to understand how the compromises worked out early in the [twentieth] century produced difficulties in later years. Alone among the nations of the world, America boasts a Statue of Liberty. Within the base of the statue are displayed verses that welcome the immigrants — unconditionally. No other nation has adopted such a policy (deductions from these facts are left to the reader).

Over the eons of evolution and history, a congenital distrust of new acquaintances has no doubt been of survival value. For all species, distrust seems to be the default position in social interactions. Our biological nature places the burden of proof on any implications of trustworthiness.

[Between 1986-1992] several acts of Congress affected immigration in various ways: in summary, both legal and illegal immigration increased.... Simply put, immigration may be defended as a positive good for either of two reasons: (a) as a benefit to the immigrants; (b) as a benefit to the citizens of the receiving country. Discussants who are most committed to the first goal are — in America — likely to remind their fellow citizens that "we are a nation of immigrants." Under pressure, the idealists may admit that a similar assertion can be made of every nation in the world: it's just that some immigrants are recent while others are very remote. But, say some, is it not selfish of us to deny our land to others?

Emotionally, the argument is a moving one. Its shortcoming is not obvious, but it is nonetheless real: there is no reference...to numbers, either of human beings or of the resources available for human life. It is a literate, or verbal argument; it is not numerate or quantitative.

What we should do about immigration is certainly in part an ethical problem. No stable solution is possible so long as we refuse to look at the numbers: the numbers of immigrants; the rates at which they are admitted; the resources available for all the members of an operating group like a nation; and the quantitative consequences of over-stressing the resource base. The "resources of the environment" are subject to constant revision, but at each stage in the development of our thought we must admit that the environment practically available to the human species is limited.

A metaphor often helps us to get our thoughts straight. Any territory or environment that is admitted to be finite suggests the metaphor of a lifeboat (which is certainly finite).... Unfortunately, in the rhetoric of traditional ethics there is almost never any hint of limits.... Above all, we must take the future into account. ■

[From the essay, "Whose Ox is Gored?" in *The Immigration Dilemma: Avoiding the Tragedy of the Commons*, Washington, D.C., Federation for American Immigration Reform, pp. 1-8, 1995.]