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Game Preserve Ethics: The Case for Hunting the Poor

by Harrett Gardin

It has been famously argued by Garrett Hardin¹ that helping the poor, specifically feeding the starving, will lead to an all-too-common tragedy: the death of even more starving people in a subsequent generation². Such reasoning relies on one of the very premises that those who advocate humanitarian aid endorse: human starvation is bad and ought to be prevented. With an additional and plausible consequentialist premise that the more people who starve the worse the situation, the very reasoning that makes us recoil in horror at the suffering of those in the regions of the world gripped in the deadly hands of famine leads inexorably to the conclusion that we ought *not* to help them now, lest a bigger moral catastrophe await us. Feeding starving people in the short run will merely extend their lives so that they can reproduce, bringing into the world legions of children who will face as bad if not worse prospects for a happy life, and who will further eat away at the already-inadequate food supply. This second, larger generation³ will starve to death unless we help them, and our helping them will only create a third, even

¹Hardin, a University of California Professor of Human Ecology, recently put his money (and for all I know, his shotgun barrel) where his mouth is and contributed to decreasing the population by engaging in a joint suicide with his wife in September, 2003.

²See Garrett Hardin's *Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor* (Psychology Today, 8: 38-43 (1974)) and his *The Tragedy of the Commons* (Science, 162: 1243_1248 (1968)) for two fine examples of this line of thought.

³The trends in the actual cases have sometimes been towards uncontrolled population growth in the very areas where starvation is imminent.

more populous group of potential unwilling Gandhis. Of course, this reasoning is iterative and it seems that empirical evidence shows it to be a slope on which footing is secure. Thus, we must, sadly and painfully and with regret, watch as nature herself remedies these out-of-balance situations by starving the population to the point that it is below the carrying capacity of the land.

This essay will show that both the traditional liberal answers (aid-giving) and the more conservative answers suggested by Hardin have both failed and suggests a promising third way of approaching the problem of massive starvation.

As much as it might seem as though we in the richer nations should sacrifice our luxuries for the lives of those less fortunate, authors like Hardin offer convincing arguments in favor of the claim that our aid will make things worse all the way around:

What happens if some organizations or countries budget for accidents and others do not? If each country is solely responsible for its own well-being, poorly managed ones will suffer. But they can learn from experience. They may mend their ways, and learn to budget for infrequent but certain emergencies. For example, the weather varies from year to year, and periodic crop failures are certain. A wise and competent government saves out of the production of the good years in anticipation of bad years to come. Joseph taught this policy to Pharaoh in Egypt more than 2,000 years ago. Yet the great majority of the governments in the world today do not follow such a policy. They lack either the wisdom or the competence, or both. Should those nations that do manage to put something aside be forced to come to the rescue each time an emergency occurs among the poor nations?...The concept of blame is simply not relevant here. The real question is, what are the operational consequences of establishing a world food bank? If it is open to every country every time a need develops, slovenly rulers will not be motivated to take Joseph's advice. Someone will always come to their aid. Some countries will deposit food in the world food bank, and others will withdraw it. There will be almost no overlap. As a result of such solutions to food shortage emergencies, the poor countries will not learn to mend their ways, and will suffer progressively greater emergencies as their populations grow.

Hardin is well aware that many will react badly to this plan. He rejoins them thus:

If poor countries received no food from the outside, the rate of their population growth would be periodically checked by crop failures and famines...Without some system of worldwide food sharing, the proportion of people in the rich and poor nations might eventually stabilize. The over-populated poor countries would

decrease in numbers, while the rich countries that had room for more people would increase. But with a well-meaning system of sharing, such as a world food bank, the growth differential between the rich and the poor countries will not only persist, it will increase. 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.

Contra Hardin and his ilk, Peter Singer, Peter Unger and others⁴ have written volumes claiming that morality demands that we, the well-off, aid the starving. Point-by-point rebuttals are made to Hardin's analysis, and many people, including philosophers and even government policymakers seem swayed to their side at times. NGOs (e.g., Oxfam), religion-based charities (e.g., Christian Children's Fund) and governments of wealthy countries around the world all contribute vast amounts of humanitarian aid to poorer countries where starvation is imminent, whether due to ongoing famine caused by overpopulation or to transient weather or political abnormalities.

More recently, apathy has set in again. We have come to see that there is more to the problem than lack of food. In fact, the modern era of mass starvations is linked to the introduction of proper sterile technique and superior medical care to formerly stable situations in which the infant mortality rate had been quite high. Suddenly a very high birth rate is coupled not with a nearly equally high infant mortality rate, but with a very low one. This gives rise to a huge population growth rate which, in turn, leads to massive starvation. Since we will not restore the health-care standards of the third-world to their prior states, we watch as these underfed groups beget more and more children who have very poor prospects. This situation has allowed Hardin's strategy to be tested, in effect, for several years. The amount of aid given to Third World countries is negligible in terms of its demands on the average citizen of a wealthy country, yet the famines continue. Rates of death by starvation are either holding steady or climbing. Clearly, then, our laissez-faire strategy, reasonable as it had seemed, is not working.

⁴See, e.g., Singer's "Famine, Affluence and Morality" and "The Famine Relief Argument" and Unger's *Living High and Letting Die*.

We need to find another solution to this problem we all find so abhorrent. Fortunately, human endeavor in another area provides a strategy which has proven to be successful at long-term population management, It is this strategy which must now be adapted to rid the world of the blight of starvation.

Environmental management has long had to deal with wildlife populations with limited space in which to thrive. As human beings have increasingly encroached on the habitats of nonhuman animals, the fauna that remain have run into problems similar to the problems faced by the Third World. Too many creatures are forced onto not enough land, and when the carrying capacity is thus exceeded, starvation ensues. No doubt if liberals were to have their way, we would establish a World Wildlife Food Bank and let deer and whatnot withdraw from it whatever food they wanted. If we destroyed any incentive for rational self-control in this way, we would be letting our humanitarian instincts lead us to a course of action that would be far worse in humanitarian terms: more and more deer would survive on the same already meager plot of land until they exhausted our largesse and have either starved in greater numbers than before, crushed each other to death, or drowned in their own excrement,⁵ meeting the same horrible fate alcohol-producing yeast do, despite the protest from tea-totaling vegans around the globe.

Even our attempts to safeguard animals on game and nature preserves isolate these animals from their natural predators. Much in the same way that the introduction of antibiotics and knowledge of sanitary procedure removed the prime causes of infant mortality in the Third World and led to the population explosion, isolating species in artificially takes away their natural causes of “infant” mortality, and overpopulation and starvation and disease rise

⁵Some bleeding-heart liberals (e. g. Amartya Sen) have suggested that education coupled with food aid and health care can have the effect of reducing or even reversing population trends. While the data in these studies are provocative, they come mainly from Kerala, India—a section of the world which is notoriously hard to study, what with all those little sheet-wearing guys running around. And the flies! Good lord, have you seen the flies? Those things will fly right down your throat and lay maggots in your stomach, after helping themselves to *your* lunch, for chrissakes! Besides, there is no reliable data that deer education programs are anything more than a tax-and-spend, pork-barrel boondoggle perpetrated by bleeding-heart liberal democrats against the honest American working man.

dramatically.

Some might go so far as to suggest that we humans give up some of our luxuries for the sake of sparing the lives and suffering of the animals in question. Singer would no doubt claim that we should all forgo High Definition TVs for the sake of these animal lives, given how quickly he would have had us trade color TV for the lives of the Third World starvation victims.⁶ But this line of reasoning clearly sets a foot upon the slippery slope already pointed out by Hardin, who rejects the idea that we might owe some of our excess wealth to those who have less:

We Americans of non-Indian ancestry can look upon ourselves as the descendants of thieves who are guilty morally, if not legally, of stealing this land from its Indian owners. Should we then give back the land to the now living American descendants of those Indians? However morally or logically sound this proposal may be, I, for one, am unwilling to live by it and I know no one else who is. Besides, the logical consequence would be absurd. Suppose that, intoxicated with a sense of pure justice, we should decide to turn our land over to the Indians. Since all our wealth has also been derived from the land, wouldn't we be morally obliged to give that back to the Indians too?

Left to themselves, these creatures follow the natural and brutal sinusoidal fluctuation of Population vs. Food Supply and alternately overpopulate and then starve in large numbers. Hardin's solution is elegant in its simplicity—cut off all aid to areas of the world where overpopulation causes starvation on an epic scale and let the invisible hand of evolution leave only societies which can sustain themselves survive. The rich nations stay rich and have a safety net with their excess, poor nations are allowed to winnow until they cease overtaxing their resources and then can set to work becoming richer⁷I have similar advice for all my critics, which, in part,

⁶See "Famine, Affluence and Morality".

⁷In fact, Hardin favors "evolutionary" answers to all sorts of problems, including the problem of criticism of his position:

While this last solution [letting the poor starve to death] clearly offers the only means of our survival, it is morally abhorrent to many people. Some say they feel guilty about their good luck. My reply is simple: "Get out and yield your place to others." This may solve the problem of the guilt-ridden person's conscience, but it does not change the ethics of the lifeboat. The needy person to whom the guilt-ridden person yields his place will not himself feel guilty about his good luck. If he did, he would not climb aboard. The net result of conscience-stricken people giving up their unjustly held seats is the elimination of that sort of conscience from the lifeboat.

explains their dwindling numbers..

The problem with Hardin's position is that it doesn't go far enough. He gets near to the solution when decrying the development of high-yield grains and high-protein fish:

Those who support this well intended humanitarian effort should first consider some of the fundamentals of human ecology. Ironically, one man who did was the late Alan Gregg, a vice president of the Rockefeller Foundation. Two decades ago he expressed strong doubts about the wisdom of such attempts to increase food production. He likened the growth and spread of humanity over the surface of the earth to the spread of cancer in the human body, remarking that "cancerous growths demand food, but, as far as I know, they have never been cured by getting it."

Just so. Cancerous growths need aggressive treatment to kill them. We target them with surgery, drugs and radiation. We bring to bear on them all of our technology and cunning, and we hunt them down and kill them to the best of our ability. We should do no less for the unfortunate of the earth, thus I propose that Third World countries organize safaris in which rich westerners hunt their starving poor.

While the side-effects of cancer treatment are almost always detrimental to the patient, in the most extreme cases, the cure has the same result as the disease: death. In our proposal, no such dire consequences result. In fact, quite the opposite is true: the attempt to treat the disorder (overpopulation) actually benefits the patient (the afflicted country, and, by extension, the world at large) by providing hard currency for cash-starved economies and reducing the strain on the supplies of food and other essential goods.

My proposal will be no doubt find enthusiastic approval in the hunting community. In Richard Connell's most famous short story, General Zaroff explains to Sanger Rainsford why he needs more stimulating prey to sustain his interest in hunting:

"They [the most cunning animals] were no-match at all for a hunter with his wits about him, and a high powered rifle. I was bitterly disappointed. I was lying in my tent with a splitting headache one night when a terrible thought pushed its way into my mind. Hunting was beginning to bore me! And hunting, remember, had been my life. I have heard that in America businessmen often go to pieces when they give up the business that has been their life."

"Yes, that's so," said Rainsford.

The general smiled. "I had no wish to go to pieces," he said. "I must do something. Now, mine is an analytical mind, Mr. Rainsford. Doubtless that is why I enjoy the problems of the chase...hunting had ceased to be what you call 'a sporting proposition.' It had become too easy. I always got my quarry. Always. There is no greater bore than perfection."

Surely even non-hunters can understand this predicament. As anti-animal weaponry and tactics grow ever more sophisticated, game animals become ever more piscine and the wilderness grows ever more barrel-like. Of course, Zaroff's solution is to hunt humans, whom the story's title calls *The Most Dangerous Game*. This solution must appeal at some deep level to many people, as this roughly 8,000 word story is one of the most widely reprinted stories in history. It is to *The Most Dangerous Game* we must turn to find our way out of this politico-moral morass.

We have in this country, and in other developed countries, a large number of people who enjoy hunting and pay handsomely for the pursuit of this hobby. Certainly, each of these hunters must feel the force of Zaroff's argument as they train the scopes of their high-powered rifles on deer, e.g., which have been conditioned by automatic feeding machines⁸ to walk the same paths through the forest. Certainly, it is not much of an exaggeration to say that the modern hunter has long since achieved Zaroffian perfection. To put the fun back into hunting, to address the problems of over-population and to pump cash into the third-world economies where the need is the greatest, all we have to do is allow safaris in which rich westerners hunt the starving masses. Game Preserve Ethics replaces Lifeboat Ethics⁹.

Unfortunately, the empirical support for the urgency of adopting Game Preserve Ethics isn't what it could be. Hardin's projections were indeed dire but overly optimistic for those of us looking for a knock-down justification for hunting the poor. Hardin starts with the population of

⁸It is worse that you might think. These automatic feeding machines are loaded with attractive feed and dose it out on a schedule designed to get the animals to come to every feeding. The most sophisticated of these machines have motion-activated normal and night-vision cameras which record the size and type of animals coming to the scheduled feedings, so the hunters can decide where and when to come to shoot the most desirable deer or what have you. Zaroff would be astonished and bored out of his mind.

⁹I need scarcely point out that Game Preserve Ethics also addresses the issue of the suffering of the starving people who are hunted in just the same way that hunting deer addresses their suffering—a quick death-by-bullet is a better end than death by disease or starvation.

the United States in 1974 as a baseline, and by calculating population growth-rate by year and extrapolating for a sufficient number of years for the US population to double, Hardin explains the concurrent growth to be expected in the needier countries:

As of 1973, the U.S. had a population of 210 million people, who were increasing by 0.8 percent per year. Outside our lifeboat, let us imagine another 210 million people...who are increasing at a rate of 3.3 percent per year. Put differently, the doubling time for this aggregate population is 21 years, compared to 87 years for the U.S. The harsh ethics of the lifeboat become harsher when we consider the reproductive differences between rich and poor. Now suppose the U.S. agreed to pool its resources with those seven countries, with everyone receiving an equal share. Initially the ratio of Americans to non-Americans in this model would be one to one. But consider what the ratio would be after 87 years, but which time the Americans would have doubled to a population of 420 million. By then, doubling every 21 years, the other group would have swollen to 354 billion. Each American would have to share the available resources with more than eight people.

Besides the howler committed in reaching the truly shocking figure of 354 billion people in the poor countries in 87 years¹⁰, it does seem like we are going to be bled dry by the teeming, reproducing masses. Thus, Hardin's passive Lifeboat Plan and my more realistic Game Preserve Plan. Sadly, the actual numbers are not as bad as Hardin predicted. According to the US Census Bureau, Hardin overestimated the population growth in his sample countries¹¹:

	1980	1990	1998	2000	2010	2025
Total (millions)	232.7	296.4	346.5	359.5	423.2	511.1
Hardin-Projected	255.2	353.0	457.7	488.5	675.8	1099.9
% Overestimate	9.7	19.1	32.1	35.9	59.7	115.2

At the same time, Hardin underestimates the population growth of the United States:

	1980	1990	1998	2000	2010	2025
US Total (millions)	227.7	249.9	270.3	274.9	298.0	335.4
Hardin-Projected	220.3	238.6	254.3	258.3	279.8	315.3
% Underestimate	3.2	4.5	5.9	6.0	6.1	6.0

¹⁰It ought to be 3.54 billion people. Hey, it's only off by two factors of ten. Give the guy a break. The 8-to-1 ratio in the next sentence gets it right, which is why, I suppose, this error continues to survive reprintings and anthologizing to this day.

¹¹ Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Morocco, Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines

So the figures we have been working with for all these years overstate the growth of the Third World by more than 100% and underestimate the growth of the US population by nearly 6%¹². In the end, we would end up sharing our wealth with only about 1.6 other people. But who cares? That's enough for me. If I had wanted to buy a laptop, for example, to share with some other hypothetical 6/10s of a poor person, I would have¹³. But I bought my laptop (and all my other stuff) for myself and myself alone. I don't want to share them, the poor people can't make me, and so I'm going to keep it all for myself. And anyone who thinks differently had better look for the red spot of my laser-sighted hunting rifle on his or her forehead.

In closing, I propose an alternative title for my plan. After all, Hardin has coined the memorable term "Tragedy of the Commons" and adopted the term "Lifeboat Ethics" to give resonance and memorability to his theses, and I fear Game Preserve Ethics is not quite up to snuff. Thus, I will close by paraphrasing Woodrow Wilson and say that since diplomacy (and neglect) have failed us, we need to adopt a policy of "Gunboat Ethics," instead.

¹²Figures taken from U.S. Bureau of the Census, Report WP/98, World Population Profile: 1998, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1999.

¹³I would have gotten a bigger hard drive, too. A 60% bigger one.