

# Chapter 12

## World Hunger

### 12.1 Homework

Readings – RTD 14, 15 + Hardin *Lifeboat Ethics*

Study Questions –

1. On 9/11 and Starvation: what are the reasons why people react very differently in the cases of the 9/11 attack, and in the case of daily starvation? Which of these reasons do you think are morally legitimate?
2. The Singer Solution to World Poverty: Singer claims that there is no fundamental moral difference between Dora selling a kid (who is to be killed for his organs) in order to get a TV, and us buying a new TV set instead of helping starving children. Do you agree? If not, what are the relevant moral differences between the two situations?
3. Explain in what respect the case of Bob and the Bugatti is a more compelling analogy with our situation (when we don't give money to the UNICEF or Oxfam America).
4. At what point are you morally legitimated to stop giving according the Singer? What do you think of this?
5. Explain Hardin's lifeboat metaphor.
6. Hardin seems to imply that, because we cannot put everybody on the boat, we should not let anybody in. Does this implication sound logically valid to you?
7. Explain the "tragedy of the commons". Is it true that "it takes only one less than everyone to ruin a system of voluntary restraint"?
8. Hardin explains that increasing the food production would cause further problems for the planet. Do you find this argument convincing?

## 12.2 Introduction

The problem of our action toward world hunger is clearly stated by Mylan Engel:

- 9/11. 2986 died that day. Average aid to families was 45,000 dollars. The government put together an aid package of 5 billion, i.e. 1.6 million per family, and has spent billions on terror.

- That day, 33,000 children under five died from malnutrition, and 18,000 from poverty related diseases. Every five seconds everyday, one child dies from preventable causes (proper food, clean water and minimal antibiotics or vaccines). These are entirely preventable. Yet, almost nothing is done, either at the level of the individual or at the level of the government.

→ *Should we conclude, as Singer has it, that we are all living morally undecent lives?*

IMPORTANT NOTE:

One often heard argument, in the case of World Hunger as in other ethical cases is that *it is acceptable that we don't help because many other don't either*. This is \*never\* a good argument.

## 12.3 What makes Child Hunger a special case?

Child Hunger is an interesting case for the following reasons:

**The fact of suffering** – Dying from starvation or diarrhea is a clear case of suffering

**The contrast** – When contrasted with our privileged lives, the situation of these kids becomes even more striking, almost unbearable

**The issue of luck** – Unlike with adults or countries, no argument can be made that these children bear the responsibility for their situation – It is simply a matter of luck whether you are born in the US or in Somalia. As a child, you don't *deserve* more just because of where you are born.

**The problem is chronic** – Unlike natural catastrophes (like seisms, floods, tsunami or other hurricane), or human catastrophes (like wars), this is a chronic problem. We are talking about 30,000 deaths every single day.

**The issue of complicity** – Arguably, our wealthy countries have made their wealth partly on the misery of the third world countries: slavery in the past, and now: use of natural resources, political protection of corrupted and tyrannic regimes, questionable system of aid and debt.

→ *So: the point of talking about Child Hunger is not to draw on emotions because of the "special emotional value" of children. The point is to take a case in which the usual arguments, drawing on the supposed responsibility of the poor, do not apply. Hungry children don't deserve to be hungry and are not even given the opportunity to do something with their (less than 5 year long) lives. If anything, we westerners even may have some responsibility in the situation.*

## 12.4 One extreme: Hardin and the duty not to Help

[http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles/art\\_lifeboat\\_ethics\\_case\\_against\\_helping\\_poor.html](http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles/art_lifeboat_ethics_case_against_helping_poor.html)

### 12.4.1 Hardin's position and arguments

**Hardin's position** – Hardin comes to the extreme conclusion: “Complete justice, complete catastrophe”

**Hardin's Main Analogy** – the world as a lifeboat

- Crude distinction between poor and rich nations
- Rich nations on boats, the other drowning
- If we get everybody on board, the boat sinks
- If the boats sinks, everybody drowns
- SO: it actually has worse consequences to let people in than to let them drown

Hardin's argument relies on an analogy. So, we need to see what the differences are between the people on the lifeboat and us on the Earth. More precisely, we need to assess whether there are any differences which relevant for the moral issue at hand.

**Further arguments** –

1. Safety factor: we should not reach the upper limit of our capacities – reserves in case of emergency
2. Differences in population growth rate between poor and rich
3. The tragedy of the Commons: mutual ruin is inevitable
4. The world food bank: attack on four levels:
  - a. taxpayers had to pay
  - b. selfish interests – all the chain of production and transportation of grain has benefited from the plan
  - c. people don't learn the hard way
  - d. in the long run, increases the needs (more poor to survive, more poor to feed)  
“The less provident and less able will multiply at the expense of the abler and more provident, bringing eventual ruin upon all who share in the commons”
5. Increasing the food production would soon violate the carrying capacity of the land – poor = cancer ???
6. Immigration: too much burden on the land (bringing the people to the food)

**The problem of luck** – Hardy grants that it is a matter of luck whether we are born on the boat or in the water. But we have to start with the situation we are in.

→ *Hardin gives a lot of arguments, but, as we shall see, none of them being properly developed. He seems to (1) count on the fact that the sheer number of “arguments” is going to balance the lack of quality of these arguments, and (2) appeal more to some “common sayings” than to sound arguments.*

## 12.4.2 The problems with Hardin’s arguments

The article presents a series of logical flaws: unsupported assumptions, logical gaps, slippery slope arguments etc.

### The arguments analyzed and criticized :

#### Problems with the main metaphor :

- Are we on a lifeboat or on a cruise ship?  
All along the article, Hardin presupposes that there is a shortage of resources with increasing population. In other words, he assumes that *it is physically impossible to have everybody properly fed*. This is far from being obvious.
- There is a difference between the geographical distribution of wealth and the geographical distribution of resources.  
To take Hardin’s analogy, if the poor countries are in the water, then we have to admit that we are taking the fish out of, and throwing our trash in *their* water.  
Is that part of the lifeboat ethics as well?
- Slippery slope argument: just because we can’t save them all, does it imply that we should not try to save any?  
Compare with the situation of Jewish people during the war: just because you can’t save them all, you should not even try to save any?  
In that case, all the people we saw in the movie *The courage to care* did something wrong ???

#### Problems with the further arguments – Hardin’s arguments feature either unsupported (and untenable) assumptions, or sheer logical contradictions

1. Safety Factor:
  - Assumption that we are in a situation of shortage of food
  - But we are far from any kind of need
2. Difference in birth rates:
  - Assumption that the poor countries keep the same birth rate.
  - But this is not the case: with industrial development, birth rates usually diminishes: Demographic Transition See Figure 2
3. The Tragedy of the Commons:
  - Assumption of selfishness concerning common goods.
  - Counterexample: Increased awareness about the environment

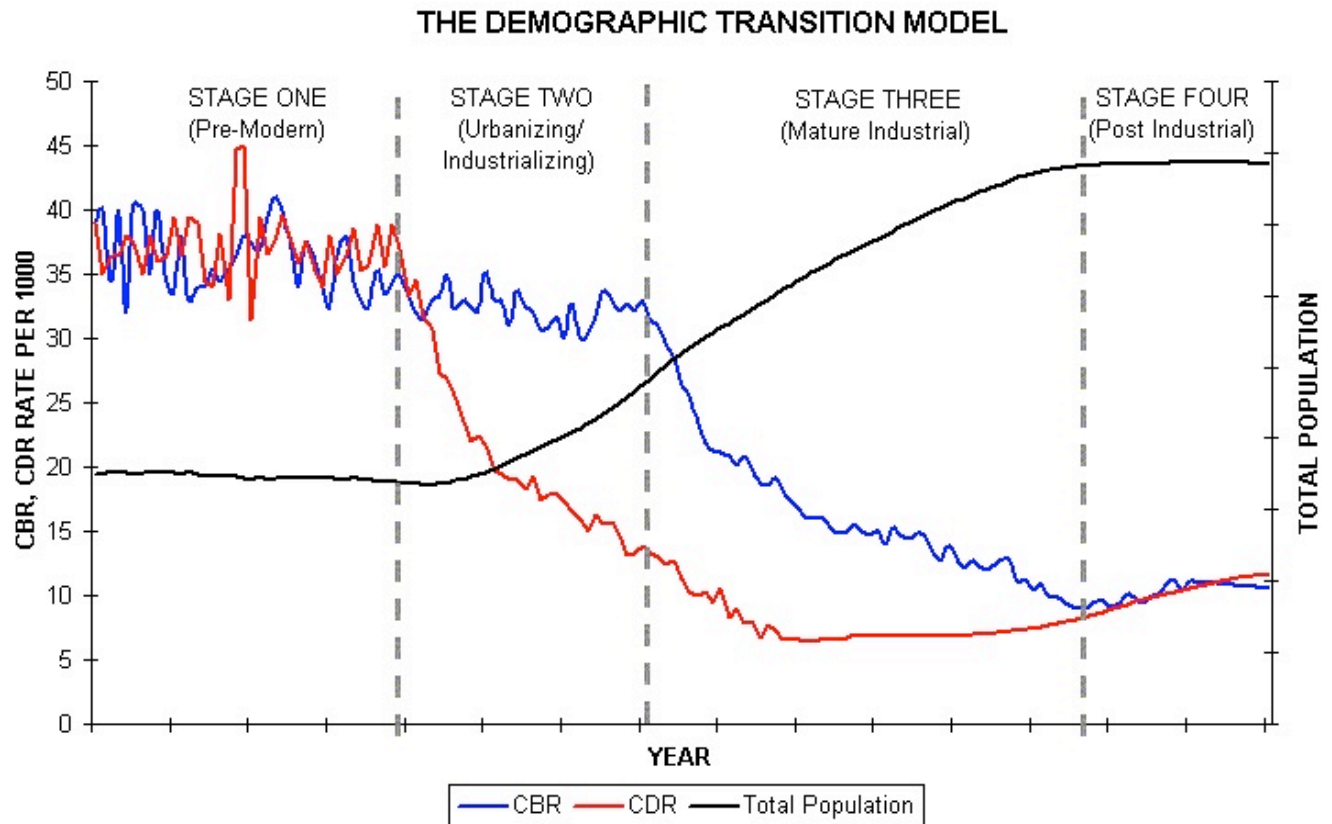


Figure 12.1: The Demographic Transition

- Assumption that whenever something is open to common use, there is no control of the way it is used.  
Counterexample: the Gym is a common good, but there are policies for using it.
- Claim that one selfish behavior ruins the entire commons:  
Counterexample: Dogs and the Park
- 4. The world food bank:
  - a and b are contradictory: taxpayer and increase of economy : this is called investment, since it creates wealth
  - b is irrelevant: confusion between the intention of the action and the by product of the action
  - c What kind of “learning” does a kid get from dying before he or she turns 5?
  - d Assumptions that the poor countries will remain poor.  
Asiatic countries, as well as the development of some African countries, provide a counter-example to this claim. The Republic of Côte d’Ivoire is a good

example.

- 5: the Indian / Chinese threat: even if China produces more carbon than the US, the relative rate per habitant is still very low: on average, an Indian produces less than a quarter of what an American produces.

In general, the idea that there is an inevitable shortage of resource to come is very controversial. There are arguments that show that a better management of our resources would easily solve the problem – starting with giving up on being on a big polluting cruiser where Hardin seems to encourage us to stay.

### 12.4.3 Conclusion on Hardin

Most of Hardin's arguments are neither valid nor sound. The problems are:

1. Not valid because of logical Flaws: problematic analogy, slippery slope and unsupported assumptions
2. Not sound because of highly dubious assumptions:

The two main ones are:

- a. There is shortage of food
- b. The situation will remain the same: all the poor, even if helped, remain poor and with high birth rate.

Both these assumptions are in conflict with the available data on food production and development.

→ *Even if it dwells on quite common ideas, none of Hardin's arguments seem to work very well. Hence, his conclusion that our duty is to not get any help to the poor remains unsupported.*

## 12.5 At the other extreme: Singer and the obligation to help

Peter Singer is a Professor at Princeton University and world-known ethicist. He has been defending a coherent but radical utilitarian view on many issues in applied ethics, such as world hunger, animal rights, euthanasia etc.

He wrote his first article on World Hunger more than about 35 years ago, when he was only 28. He has not stopped defending his radical views since.

### 12.5.1 Singer's position and argument

**Two examples** – Singer gives you two situations to compare to our own situation regarding the starving children

1. Dora in *Central Station*
2. Bob, the Bugatti, the child and the rail track

The analogy with Dora does not work as well as the analogy with Bob and the Bugatti.  
 → *The point of these two analogies is the following: We judge both Dora and Bob as monsters. But, according to Singer, we are in similar situations. Hence, if Dora and Bob are to be considered as monsters, then we are monsters as well.*

**Singer’s position** – Singer comes to the strong conclusion that “[...] each of us with wealth surplus to his or her essential needs should be giving most of it to help people suffering from poverty so dire as to be life-threatening”

This is a strong radical view.

**The argument** : Singer’s argument goes along the following lines:

P1. A child dying as a result of poverty is bad.

P2. **Core principle:** *If it is in one’s power to prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, one ought (morally) to do it.*

P3. It is in my power to prevent people’s dying as a result of poverty by giving more money to charity than I currently give.

P4. By giving more money to charity than I currently give I would not be sacrificing anything morally comparable to the evil of dying of starvation.

CC So: I ought, morally, to give more money to charity than I do now. Specifically, I ought to give to charity everything over and above what I need to meet my basic needs.

The argument is valid. Is it sound? Premises 1, 3 and 4 are difficult to deny.

What about premise 2?

## 12.5.2 The problem with Singer’s argument

Let us look into premise 2. Is this premise so obvious?

To get a sense of what it implies: Compare it with an alternative premise:

2. If it is in one’s power to prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing *anything of comparable moral importance*, one ought (morally) to do it.

2\*. If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing *anything morally significant*, we ought, morally, to do it.

Put your answers in the following table:

1. in following premise 2
2. in following premise 2\*

If you could prevent someone from...	Miss lunch?	Not buy a new cell phone ?	Not save for his child's education?	Not get the minimal education he needs to get a job and survive?
Would you feel obligated to ... ?				
Miss lunch ?				
Not buy a new cell phone?				
Not save for your child's education?				

→ Notice how more demanding Singer's premise is!

We get the sense that Singer is collapsing *moral favors* and *moral obligations*.

The point is, here again, that it does not seem that we are morally obligated to be Great Samaritans.

### 12.5.3 Conclusion on Singer

- Singer's conclusion that we ought to do give every penny we spend beyond our essential needs relies on the strong premise that:

*If it is in one's power to prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, one ought (morally) to do it.*

To accept such a premise is to deny the difference between moral obligations and moral favors.

One has to accept this only if one endorses radical impartiality.

- That said, it remains that, if we change the strong premise into a less demanding one:

*If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it.,*

Most of Singer's argument remains and we can conclude that most of us do in fact live indecent lives.

## 12.6 Finding our way through

**Possibility and Effectiveness** – A first question: is it possible to solve the problem of world hunger?



The useful distinction here is: short term vs. long term help

1. The US production is more than enough to feed the world
2. In the long run, of course, development is the solution
3. Development does not need to be as wasteful as the western countries have been – New technologies can produce wealth everywhere
4. Taking as example the failure of the third world countries over the last 50 years is really unfair : the situation is very complex and we should recognize the successes as well

→ *SO: we can do it. Should we do it? To what extent?*

### **How demanding are our moral obligations towards strangers? :**

- Singer's argument that we are morally obligated to help the starving children seems to be convincing, at least to the extent that helping them does not imply any morally significant sacrifice
- When it comes to question whether we should make morally significant sacrifices whenever we can prevent something morally worse to happen, the situation is harder:
- If we want to resist Singer's conclusion, we need to argue that to make morally significant sacrifices to prevent something morally worse to happen amounts to do a moral favor.
- Now, if we want to argue for this, we need to argue that there are relevant difference between people, such that we can give more weight to ourselves and our beloved ones than to strangers
- That is, we need to reject the idea of radical impartiality
- This is still a point of controversy among ethicists:
  - We'll see that Utilitarianism and Duty Theory puts a strong emphasis on impartiality
  - Other views have recently developed which try to make sense of our intuition that there is something unsatisfactory with the idea that I should give equal weight to a child on the other side of the globe and to my only child.

### **Post-Scriptum – Additional Material – A note on Positive / Negative Rights**

- Some people (libertarians for example) defend the idea that we are not morally obligated to help the poor in making the following distinction between the so-called positive and negative rights.

#### **Definition 32 – *Positive Right***

*A right is a positive right if and only if the right holder is entitled to be provided with some good or service.*

**Definition 33 – Negative Rights**

*A right is a negative right if and only if the right holder is entitled to not suffer any interference in the corresponding activity.*

- Libertarians claim that only negative rights are acceptable, while any kind of positive right amounts to too much interference with the individuals' autonomy. Taking the example of property vs. proper nutrition: while a person has the negative right of not having anyone taking his goods from him (negative right of property), he would not have the positive right of having someone providing me with proper food (positive right to minimal means to survive).
- The distinction, however, is somewhat misleading. When people use the distinction above, they seem to imply that claiming that negative rights be respected does not imply that we request anything from others – it would come for free, whereas claiming that positive rights be respected does impose such a request on others. The problem is that, if we think about it, both negative and positive rights are equally difficult to secure: Compare the amount of money spent on police and military to protect property with the amount of money spent on education and health care.
- A much better distinction is between claim rights and privilege rights (two of the “Hohfeldian incidents”, from Wesley Hohfeld (1879-1918))

**Definition 34 – Claim Right**

*A person A hold a claim right to R against a person (or a group of persons) B if and only if B has the duty to do R.*

Examples:

- An employee has the (claim) right to wages against his or her employer: that is, it is the duty of the employer to pay wages to his or her employee
- A child has the (claim) right to be provided proper care against his parents: that is, his parents have the duty to provide the child with proper care

**Definition 35 – Privilege Right**

*A person A hold a privilege right to R if and only if A does *\*not\** have the duty *\*not\** to do R.*

Examples:

- As faculty and students from the university, we have the privilege to use the buildings and equipment on campus: that is, we have *\*no\** duty *\*not\** to use them.
- We all have to privilege to look up at the stars at night: it is not a duty not to stare at the stars

- With this distinction in hand, we understand that *both the so-called positive and negative rights are in fact claim rights*: rights that we hold against other people. The right of property is a right we hold against other people: they have the duty to leave our property alone.

So, the distinction between positive rights and negative rights does not allow us to make the libertarian argument.

