

Chapter 11

Ethical Egoism Applied: World Hunger

11.1 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 to 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? Explain Hardin's lifeboat metaphor.
5. Hardin seems to imply that because we cannot put everybody on the boat, we ought not to let any in. Does this implication sound logically valid to you?
6. Explain the "tragedy of the commons". Is it true that "it takes only one less than everyone to ruin a system of voluntary restraint"?
7. Hardin explains that increasing the food production would cause further problems for the planet. Do you find it convincing?

11.2 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.

11.3 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 sources, 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 avoid to have to deal with some usual arguments, drawing on the supposed responsibility of the poor. 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 even may have some responsibility in the situation.

11.4 The two extremes: Hardin vs. Singer

11.4.1 Hardin and the Lifeboat

http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles/art_lifeboat_ethics_case_against_helping_poor.html

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

The arguments – From spaceship to lifeboat

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
- This is not, properly speaking, an argument: it is 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:
 1. taxpayers had to pay
 2. selfish interests – all the chain of production and transportation of grain has benefited from the plan
 3. people don't learn the hard way
 4. in the long run, increases the need (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.

The argument analyzed and criticized – No much to analyze in precision because the article presents a series of logical flaws. Short cut, slippery slope, straw man etc.

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 *their* water. Now, is that part of the lifeboat ethics as well?
- Slippery slope argument: just because we can't save them all 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 :

1. Safety Factor: 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
3. The Commons Tragedy:
 - Assumption of selfishness concerning common goods. Isn't the rise of awareness concerning ecological matters a simple proof that human beings are not as selfish and shortsighted as Hardin wants them to be?
 - Assumption that commons = no control, which does not follow. Example: the Gym is a common good, but there are policies for using it.
That something is common does not imply that there cannot be any control of the way it is used.
4. The world food bank:
 - 1 and 2 are contradictory: taxpayer and increase of economy : this is called investment then, which creates some wealth
 - 2 is irrelevant
 - 3 and 4 are just absurd: usual idea that people don't want to get out of poverty
 - * if they are given the minimum, don't you think they would try to become autonomous?
 - * Learn the hard way = die before you are 5 ?What kind of learning is that?

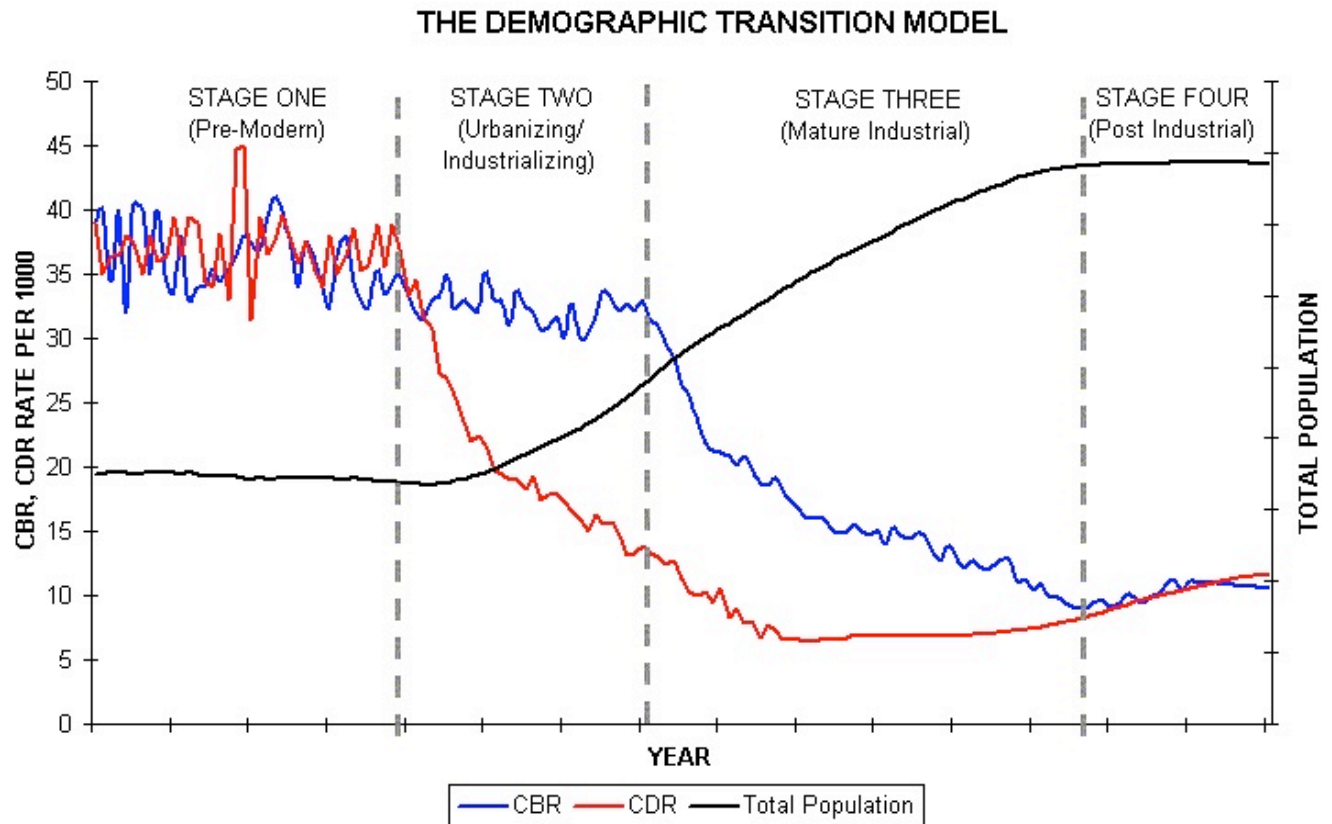


Figure 11.1: The Demographic Transition

As in the case of the birth rate, this is assuming 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 habitants 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.

Conclusion on Hardin – Most of Hardin's arguments are neither valid nor sound:

1. Logical Flaws: He does not have real arguments, more a series of statements that appeal to images and saying from the conservative tradition.
2. 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.

11.4.2 Singer and the obligation to help

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

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

The point is to show that we judge both Dora and Bob as monsters. According to Singer, we are in similar situations, and hence, if Dora and Bob are 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”

The argument :

1. A child dying as a result of poverty is bad.
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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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? What about premise 2?

Singer's argument analyzed – What Singer has to assume to make the second premise of his argument work is :

1. Radical equality : every human being is worth the same
2. Radical equality implies Radical Impartiality: as a moral agent, no preference should be made for a particular human being (be it family or friends) over other human beings (strangers)

Note: Singer is an utilitarian but this does not seem to be crucial for the argument above.

Singer’s argument criticized – Take the argument above. Look into premise 2. Is this premise so obvious? Doesn’t it have absurd consequences?

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.... Would you be ready to ... ?	Miss lunch?	Not buy a new cell phone ?	Not save for his child’s education?	Not pay for college and not have the job you’d like?
Miss lunch ?				
Not buy a new cell phone?				
Not save for your child’s education?				
Not pay for college and not have the job you’d like?				

→ Notice how more demanding Singer’s premise is!

We get a sense that there is something wrong. Indeed, it seems that Singer is collapsing *moral favors* and *moral obligations*

Moral Favors vs. Moral Obligations – We encountered this distinction when we discussed abortion

Definition 13 – Moral Obligation

A moral obligation is something one must do on pain of immorality.

One usually does not get special praise for doing his or her moral obligations. If, however, one doesn’t do his or her moral obligations, he or she can be blamed.

Definition 14 – Moral Favor

A moral favor is something one can do above and beyond moral obligations.

If one does a moral favor, he or she can be praised, If, however, one does not do any moral favor, he or she is usually not blamed for it.

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

We should keep in mind this distinction for when we'll discuss utilitarianism

11.5 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

- In general, be aware of the slippery slope argument: I should not save any of them because I cannot save them all

SO: we can do it. Should we do it?

Property and Right to proper nutrition – two values in conflict

In the debate over world hunger, there is an opposition between:

- The right to proper nutrition or to equal opportunity
- The right of property

A often used distinction here: Positive rights vs Negative rights.

Definition 15 – 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 16 – 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.

The distinction is often used, in particular by libertarians, in order to argue 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:

- negative right of having nobody taking my goods from me
- positive right of having someone providing me with proper food

The distinction, however, is somewhat misleading. If we think about it, both negative and positive rights are as difficult to secure:

- Compare: amount of money spent on police and military to protect property / 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 17 – *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 18 – *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 to *not* use it
- 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 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, it is unlikely that the distinction between positive and negative rights can help us much

Particularity vs Impartiality – The true question is: is there really no relevant difference between people, such that we *ought to* give equal weight to any human being in our moral decisions?

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.

Example: Single mother in NYC and the five dollars.

This is one of the line of attacks that we'll see arising against utilitarianism in the next chapter.