

“The Tragedy of the Commons”—Hardin

- There is a class of problems with “no technical solution”
- Focus on one such problem—that of over-population
- Problem is to avoid overpopulation without relinquishing current privileges—there is no technological solution to this problem

Greatest Good of the Greatest Number?

- Can't maximize two variables at the same time
- In terms of population, the greatest number is incompatible with the greatest good
- Maximum population implies misery—minimum calories for survival for each person

Trade-Offs

- What is the right trade-off between population demands and quality of life, or between the natural environment and the production of goods?
- Radically differing opinions
- Among animals, natural selection “solves” the problem
- How to resolve the problem for humans?

Common Pool Resources and Individual Freedom

- No reason to believe that free choice will lead to the optimum resource use.
- The “invisible hand” approach will not work - too many externalities.
- There is an essential conflict between individual freedom and reaching the optimum - Greed? - Self-Interest?

Tragedy of the Commons

- Tragedy—not in the sense of unhappiness, but “the solemnity of the remorseless working of things.”
- The “inevitableness of destiny”
- “the futility of escape”

Pasture Illustration

- A pasture (the commons) is open to all herdsmen
- Each herdsman grazes as many cattle as possible on the common pasture
- Eventually, the over-grazing ruins the common resource
- Individual freedom has led to mutual destruction—the tragic outcome

Individual Calculus

- Grazing one more animal on the pasture has costs and benefits
- The cost is the “load” on the pasture
- The benefit is the value of the grazed animal
- The cost is shared, so I bear only a small cost; I capture the entire benefit
- Therefore, I want to graze another animal there, and another, and . . .
- Every herdsman reasons the same way

Tragedy

“Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit—in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all.”

Examples—ca. 1967

- Free parking meters for Christmas shopping
- Grazing cattle on federal land
- Freedom to fish the seas
- National parks

Example: National Parks

- Sell the parks as private property
- Keep the parks public, but allocate use:
 - By price
 - By merit
 - By lottery
 - By first-come, first-served

Pollution

- Tragedy of the commons applies to pollution
- “The morality of an act is a function of the state of the system at the time it is performed.”
- Example: A 19th century frontiersman dumps waste in a river; a 21st century city dumps waste in a river

Hardin's Implied Moral Theory

- Seems clearly consequentialist in outlook
- Human-centered
- Morality connected with harm to others
- Thinks absolute rules inadequate, rejects “Thou shalt not . . .” formulation

“Pathogenic Effects of Conscience”

- Faced with a threatened commons, two responses are possible:
- If you exploit the commons, you suffer explicit criticism for greed
- If you refrain from exploiting the commons, you suffer implicit criticism for simplicity
- Leads to a pathology of “anxiety”

“Mutual Coercion Mutually Agreed Upon”

- Hardin’s favored solution—create temperance by coercion
- Taxation as a remedy
- Emphasis on mutual decision
- Acknowledge imperfect justice
- But Are there other options?

“Recognition of Necessity”

- Commons feasible only with low population/use demand/density
- Commons feasible only with surplus—Locke and others
- “Every new enclosure of the commons involves the infringement of somebody’s personal liberty.”
- “Freedom is the recognition of necessity.”

Conclusion

Tragedy of the Commons Occurs when

- No technical solution is possible
- Propaganda in favor of conscience won't work
- “The only way we can preserve and nurture other and more precious freedoms is by relinquishing a freedom.”
- But How?