

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Security & Individual Freedom

Instructions

When doing the reading for this class, there are the two basic kinds of information you need to understand:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible position on an issue, rather than another.

Reading

Hardin, G. (1998, Spring). The feast of Malthus. *The Social Contract*, 8(3), 181–187.

This Place. (2015, June 9). *Tragedy of the commons | The problem with open access* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYA1y405JWo>

Optional: Hardin, G. (1974, October). Living on a lifeboat. *BioScience*, 24(10), 561–568.

Comment

In “The Feast of Malthus”, Garrett Hardin argues that the only way to solve the problem of global overpopulation is to significantly limit individual freedoms. This is a popular theme for Hardin.

I have included a video about the “Tragedy of the Commons”, which helps further illustrate Hardin's worry that when people have too much individual freedom, this leads to tragedy and ruin for the collective. Indeed, Hardin clearly believes that individual reproductive rights will inevitably lead to the tragedy of overpopulation.

Meanwhile, the optional reading, “Living on a Lifeboat” (especially in the sections on “Lifeboat Ethics”, pp. 561–562, and “World Food Banks”, p. 563) shows how Hardin applies the argument from “The Feast of Malthus” to an international context about foreign aid. In short, Hardin believes giving foreign aid is extremely imprudent—both for the giver and for the receiver.

Questions

As you read, keep these questions in mind:

1. In “The Feast of Malthus”, Garrett Hardin's main argument is that individual freedom (“rights”) are inconsistent with the survival of the human species (p. 181).
What is Hardin's justification for this claim? In other words, why does he believe that (a) protecting individual freedom will doom civilization and (b) the survival of the species will require us to significantly limit individual freedom?
How is Thomas Robert Malthus' story of the feast supposed to help illustrate Hardin's argument?
2. Overpopulation is sometimes called (by Hardin, actually) a “Tragedy of the Commons”. To understand more about this concept, watch the video from This Place. The video uses the example of placing sheep in a field. However, you can replace “put another sheep in the field” with “have another child”, to see how the example applies to reproduction. In the language of the video, this would be “the problem of open access to reproduction”.
So how does reproduction create its own tragedy of the commons?
3. Given his belief that individual freedom is inconsistent with our survival, what is Hardin's response to this problem? In what ways is this similar to what we have seen in the Realism of Thomas Hobbes?

To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.