



GARETH HARDIN'S LIFEBOAT ETHICS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY OF THE NIGER-DELTA REGION

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Abstract

The contemporary issues of environmental pollution and degradation are demanding the revision of the values of the human person as a subject of lived-experience in relation to all aspects of creation. It is on recognition that most of the effects of environmental pollution and degradation are results or products of human activities (actions) in and on the environment through the increasing quests for industrialization, urbanization, and technological civilization, especially in mining, military engagements, nuclear weapon testing, and oil exploration. It is on conviction that Gareth Hardin came up with the ethics of lifeboat- an ethical principle that states the importance for the recognition of the fact that one's activities on the environment have the capacity to affect the wholeness of the human community. Relating this principle to the oil-exploration activities that are now oil exploitation activities in the Niger-Delta region by some national and multinational corporations and the litany of illegal refineries, causing a lot of oil spills and gas flaring, are greatly affecting lives and livelihood in the region. Adopting an expository and phenomenological method of analysis, the paper concludes that all persons, groups, and corporations involved in the oil exploration, better still, oil exploitation in the Niger-Delta Region, should be conscious of the values of the human person and recognize the indispensable connectivity of the human person in society. With this caution, we should remember that the environment is the boat that all humanities are sealing with in the journey of existence and living, and what happens to a part of the environment, which in this case, the Niger-Delta Region, will indispensably happen to the whole Nigerian society. Therefore, there are needs for moral or ethical checks on natures and contents of human activities on the environment as a remedy to overcome environmental pollution and degradation and advance the causes of environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Environmental Sustainability, Environmental Pollution/Degradation, Human Person, Lifeboat Ethics, Niger-Delta Region, Oil Spillage

Introduction

In the world today, we are faced with a variety of ecological and environmental issues. These range from the depletion of the ozone layer, oil spillages, food shortages due to droughts, et



cetera. Even in our particular environments, we have issues like food shortage, flooding, deforestation, erosion *et cetera*. There is a general concern among scholars about events that affect the ecosystem negatively. Scholars have tried to posit a solution to these issues. Richard Boulding postulated the “spaceship earth theory” which Hardin debunks that this theory focuses on rights without the corresponding responsibilities. For him, the spaceship earth has no captain. This is explicitly characterized by the United Nations which he describes as a toothless tiger (Hardin, 1974: 561). For Isanbor and Edema (2022: 40):

For the sake of common human survival, the exercise of true freedom is to be natural and humane, recognizing that the natural law that defines human existence beyond the imposing influences of science and technology, even as they are to be employed to modify and explore the nature, not to exploit it. When we engage ourselves in actions and responsibilities, the values of the human person should remain the measure of our philosophical and developmental ideologies, creativities and innovations. Hence, for more secured and sustained future, in right freedom, we necessarily and indispensably need to seek eco-friendly technologies and industrialization. Outside these convictions; there are abound the aberrations of the values of the human person, and his or her environment will continually suffers the heats of exploitation and deterioration. But, when freedom is duly exercised by the recognition of the divine nature of the environment and the phenomenological ethics of *otherness*, all elements and recourses of the environment are sustained in order to keep our communal living, from generations to generations.

The ethics of living in relations to the values of the environment indicates that we all travelling on a journey which is determine on the mortifs behind our actions and choices, Hence, Hardin notes that it is the neglect of the corresponding responsibilities that go with rights that have put us in this precarious situation. He says that “where human survival is at stake, the acceptance of responsibilities is a precondition to the acceptance of rights” (Hardin, 1974: 561). This led him to postulate the lifeboat ethics and with which this paper seeks to analyze, evaluate and situate in the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria. The Niger-Delta area is the southern part of Nigeria which comprises of her oil producing states. This area is supposed to be rich and devolped in all regards, owing to the fact that she produces more than 70% of Nigeria’s revenue. The reverse is the case as it is a catraprophe to behold with huge neglects not excluding oil spillage and other environmental hazards.

Garrett Hardin’s Lifeboat Ethics

Hardin uses the metaphor of lifeboats to describe the discrepancies between rich and poor countries. According to him, two-thirds of the world’s population is poor, while just only a one - third of it is rich when measured by Gross National Product (GNP) (Hardin, 1974: 561). Hardin says that the poor of the world are in an overcrowded lifeboat, while the rich sit in their lifeboat comfortably. They continuously fall off their boat and swim for a while with the hope that they will be admitted into the lifeboat of the rich. The question that arises is what are the rich in the lifeboat with space suppose to do since each lifeboat has a limited capacity? (Hardin, 1974: 561). This creates an ethical problem or dilemma. Hardin puts it thus:



The ethical problem is the same for all and is as follows. Here we sit, say 50 people in a lifeboat. To be generous, let us assume our boat has a capacity of 10 more, making 60. (This, however, is to violate the engineering principle of the "safety factor." A new plant disease or a bad change in the weather may decimate our population if we don't preserve some excess capacity as a safety factor.) The 50 of us in the lifeboat see 100 others swimming in the water outside, asking for admission to the boat, or for handouts. How shall we respond to their calls? There are several possibilities (p. 562).

One of the options in this situation is to admit them all into the lifeboat. This is fueled through Christian charity or the Marxian rule of giving each what they need (Hardin, 1974: 562). Eventually, the lifeboat will be flooded with water, and sink and everybody will die. In deciding to help those swimming in the water, the passengers in the other lifeboat put themselves to death. The second option is to just admit ten persons which is the number of the available seats left, but how the ten are to be chosen becomes an issue. The third option is to safeguard the safety factor of the boat by admitting no one (Hardin, 1974: 562). These are the choices the people in the lifeboat are faced with, and they can only choose one.

The situation of the Niger Delta can be likened to that of the lifeboat. The local people are the poor nations in the overcrowded lifeboat, while the oil companies and those who benefit from the wealth gotten from the oil are the rich in the other lifeboat. It should be noted that the local people are not the major cause of their problem. The government and oil companies have failed in their duty and responsibilities towards them; farming which is the major source of income and livelihood is now practically impossible due to oil spillage and the pollution of the environment. Those who benefit from the oil gotten from the Niger Delta are faced with the three options of either helping everyone in the Niger-Delta area, helping a few or worse still ignoring the poor predicament of those living in the area and the environmental hazards caused by oil exploration. Doesn't the general condition of the Niger-Delta area need to be helped? In all, a choice must be made.

Reproduction

The reproduction of persons as beings is the basis for the sustainability of creation. It demands on the application of ethical principles to regulate human actions and choices in relations to the values of our existence. According to Hardin, "the harsh characteristics of lifeboat ethics are heightened by reproduction, particularly by reproductive differences." (Hardin, 1974: 562) In rich nations, the reproductive growth is very low, while in poorer nations the reproductive growth is very high. This affects the population growth as an increase in population will mean a high demand for resources to sustain such a population. In a scenario where the population increases rapidly in the Niger-Delta area in contrast with the few who enjoy the dividends of the wealth gotten from the oil, there is a striking imbalance in their conditions.

For Hardin's lifeboat ethics, we are all in sailing in a singular boat of existence, which is the environment, and such boat should not be overloaded with many interests contrary to the values of common good and solidarity. One person's effectual errors may or can lead to the capsizing of the boat, and then, resulting to the death of many persons. Hence, Hardin pays attention to two



forms of reproduction. Hence, the understanding of the values of reproduction are more meaningful in food production for the sustainability of human community, and it is a responsibility by everyone in the same voyage of common survival. He says that increase in food reproduction helps to drive an increase in human birth. The resultant effect is the same, by increasing food production, hunger is not diminished, rather more food is an impetus for more birth. So, birth has to be controlled in order for the available food to sufficiently sustain the population.

Ruins in the Commons

We can refer to this as the tragedy of the commons. The idea of common is communal/common ownership. This grants everybody access to the available resources, but it also has its demerits, the excessive usage of common property that they are depleted and destroyed. Thus, a tragedy is created. In the Niger Delta, there are clashes of herdsmen with farmers due to this factor, uncontrolled dredging which poses a threat to the ecosystem, overfishing, deforestation *et cetera*. Hardin says that to proffer a solution to the problem, “one of the major tasks of education today is to create such an awareness of the dangers of the commons that people will be able to recognize its many varieties, however, disguised” (Hardin, 1974: 562). Education plays a vital role in sensitizing the populace of the dangers we pose to our common heritage (the environment) through mismanagement and over-usage. There is a need to protect and conserve what we have for ourselves and future generations. The government can play a vital role as regard this by formulating policies and setting up control agencies. There must be an implementation of these policies and punishment of offenders.

World Food Bank

The world food bank is an attempt to create a ‘new common’ in which countries gathered food products in storage facilities to be given to other countries in need of these food items. Summarily, this means that citizens of richer countries have to pay more tax to fund this project. Some of the poor countries who benefited from this aid such as India were forgiven for their huge debt. In all, the farmers, storage warehouse owners, transportation companies and shipping companies benefit wholesomely, while the burden of this venture fell on the taxpayers (Hardin, 1974: 563). Hardin notes that there is no rational justification for this act because it amounts to spoon-feeding these countries to the detriment of other countries’ taxpayers. These countries are supposed to project for food shortages and other emergencies that are to come in the future, but they rarely do so, this shows the high level of their incompetence and lack of wisdom. This can be said of the Niger-Delta situation in which the federal government has no blueprint for developing the area that produces more than seventy per cent of its income. Thus, the Niger-Delta area is like a cow whose milk is milked dry without feeding her. Can the agricultural output be improved? What possible ways can be implemented to make poor countries producers of what they consume and even exporters? The government has to improve its agricultural sector and create an enabling environment for investment and job creation. There must be both short and long term plans to engender development in the country to improve the standard of living.



The Ratchet Effect

This involves the control of a sovereign to safeguard his country. He ensures that there is population control. There should also be a way to preserve surplus food for the future. Hardin warns that surplus food should not be a cue to increase the number of the population. Instead, it should be converted into a safety factor (Hardin, 1974: 564). Regrettably, during the oil boom in the seventies, Nigeria did not save nor plan for the future. Instead of growing and improving our technology, science and agriculture, her wealth was lavished on irrelevant things and even stolen by a powerful few, today the masses continue to suffer for their actions.

Hardin argues for a shift to a melioristic system from a peyoristic system. A peyoristic system is that in which poor countries are heavily dependent on the world food bank by making a withdrawal from it without contributing to it. The outcome of this is that such withdrawal will continue till even the rich countries become poor (Hardin, 1974: 565). It is a consumption system without any form of production. Contrary to this attitude of consumption found in the peyoristic system, Hardin postulates a melioristic system which is geared towards continual improvement. It entails responsible production. In the Niger-Delta area, the melioristic system ought, and should be adopted. Thus, there should be a focus on improving agricultural production, job creation, science and technology to make better the lives of the people in that area, and the environment. Those in the Niger-delta area have a dependent mentality in which they are used to receiving handouts for their survival. There is no concrete effective effort to make them productive and economically independent.

Eco-Destruction via the Green Revolution

In a bid to help poor nations by helping them to revolute means of food production, these poor countries are exposed to ecological threats and destruction. The green revolution is a bid by some rich countries and companies to help poor nations by financing programs to improve agriculture in poor nations (Hardin, 1974: 565). The resultant effect of this high crop production, improve seeds and genetically improved mechanized farming. With this increase of food, there follows an increase in population. Hardin puts the question forth of this well-intended humanitarian effort puts into consideration the resultant effects. The analogy of cancerous cells is used to describe this situation. Cancerous cells grow by affecting other cells, but this does not cure cancer. Does helping poor nations increase their food output help avert poverty, unemployment, and ecological threats? Certainly not, the population will continue to grow while the people languish in poverty and unemployment.

The green revolution has some underpin effect on the environment and future generations. Forest will have to make way for industrialized farming. There will be soil erosion, floods, *et cetera*. "Every life saved this year in a poor country diminishes the quality of life for subsequent generations." The cost of this is that the future generation will suffer the consequences. This is the case in Nigeria, with oil exploration in the Niger-Delta area, and the innovations of mechanized farming with genetically improved seeds, there is still a high rate of poverty and unemployment. The future generation will suffer because the soil will weaken and become unfertile. Over drilling of oil will reduce the available oil for future generations. Even



mechanized farming is creating environmental and health issues. Doctors decry the rate at which the chemicals applied to crops affect our immune system negatively. Environmentalists say that chemicals applied to farms are destroying microorganisms in the soil and the run-off of the chemicals into streams pollute the water.

Immigration Creates a Common Living

The issue of immigration is one of the pressing concerns to be discussed as regards common in Hardin's lifeboat ethics. Using the United States as an example, Hardin notes that the inflow of legal immigration every year is about 17% while adding illegal immigration, amounts to 37% despite strict immigration laws (Hardin, 1974: 565). This surely affects the population growth and economy. In past generations, as he notes, the United States had a prejudice against foreigners which can even be seen today. Nevertheless, this does not stop people from other nations from searching for greener pastures in America, the land of opportunities. Hardin says "World food banks move food to the people, thus facilitating the exhaustion of the environment of the poor. By contrast, unrestricted immigration moves people to the food, thus speeding up the destruction of the environment in rich countries" (Hardin, 1974: 566). This creates the same problem of the pejorative system in another dimension. Immigrants are going directly to the source of the food to have access to it. In recent times, people sort to travel into the U.S, Canada, Europe and other favourable countries in order to seek for opportunities at life. The resultant effect is still the same, the destruction of the environment of rich countries. So, this does not solve the problem at hand, contrary it enlarges the problem and even create a greater problem.

Comparing the Lifeboat Ethics and the Traditional Akan Ethics

It is worthwhile to make a comparison of Hardin's lifeboat ethics from an African perspective. There seems to be a common ground shared by both the lifeboat ethics and the traditional Akan ethics. Both types of ethics, promote hard work. The lifeboat ethics challenges one to work hard to join the rich in the boat. The traditional Akan ethics also demands hard work (Appiah-Sekyere 2014: 31). That notwithstanding, whereas the fortunes of the hard worker in the lifeboat ethics may be reserved for the individual with a possible expression of charitable help towards the poor and needy, the traditional Akan ethics, considers the fortunes of the hard work as a resource to be used for the common good to benefit his/her family, clan, tribe or society. This also can be applied to the Niger-Delta area, in which those who are hard-working can incorporate their fellow citizens into the act of earning what they eat without relying on aid.

In the context of lifeboat ethics, any help coming from the rich (in the lifeboat) to the poor (outside the boat) is considered a charitable deed that depends on the kind-heartedness of the rich. The close-netted nature of the traditional Akan communalistic spirit treats helping the poor and needy as an obligation or duty. In fact, for the traditional Akan ethics, one is morally obliged to help a poor or needy neighbour since the latter's predicament can affect everyone in the entire family, clan, tribe or society (Appiah-Sekyere 2014: 34).

The lifeboat ethics considers the wealth of the rich as their fortune to be enjoyed and used for their own respective needs. The traditional Akan ethics, however, sees the rich as being endowed



with the wealth to be utilized to benefit the entire community. The hard and fast ‘demarcation’ between the rich and poor in the lifeboat ethics is almost nonexistent during the celebration of funerals, durbars and festivals among traditional Akans (Appiah-Sekyere 2014: 37). From another perspective, whereas the lifeboat ethics can easily be employed to refuse help that a neighbour needs, it is not possible to do that easily with the traditional Akan ethics. This is because the former seems to emphasize the wealthy few (inside the boat) but the latter’s communal spirit emphasizes the wellbeing of the community including both the rich and poor. This is also obtainable in the Niger-Delta region, but quite, unfortunately, it is not the case of the rich refusing to help the poor, but the rich denying the poor what belongs to them by stealing public funds and withholding what belongs to the public.

Comparing Humanist Ethics and Lifeboat Ethics

Since humans are the intelligent beings that live in the world, some philosophers have proposed an ethical system that is humanist in nature. For Paul Appiah-Sekyere, “humanist ethics deals with the values of right, wrong, good, evil, and responsibility according to the beliefs/teachings of Humanism (Appiah-Sekyere 2014: 34). Humanism is a philosophical and value system that seeks after the well-being of humans without seeking recourse to a higher being. Thus, humanistic ethics deals with what is wrong, good, evil, and bad, as it concerns man. It is all about giving meaning and shape to a man’s life. Humanist ethical principles include the following (Lamont 1997: 13):

Morality stems from our situation as social beings.

The emphasis is on the human being and the here-and-now.

The origin of morality/ethics is the human society without reference to any metaphysical or spiritual source.

It is the society that determines the uniqueness of human beings.

One can be morally upright without necessarily being religious.

To adopt Hardin’s lifeboat ethics, it must at least be humanist in some regards. Appiah-Sekyere gives some similarities between humanist and lifeboat ethics which we shall discuss briefly below. For Appiah-Sekyere, “both the Lifeboat ethics and Humanist ethics focus on issues that pertain to the human society here-and-now without reference to the life hereafter or the netherworld” (Appiah-Sekyere 2014: 37). They both embrace the human condition. Whereas the Lifeboat ethics discusses the gap or relationship between the rich and poor in our world, Humanist ethics also focuses on humans in this present life, discussing a variety of issues such as religion, ethics (treating issues such as abortion, suicide, and euthanasia), the individual human being (including one’s sexual proclivities and desires), democratic society, the world community and humanity as a whole. All these are factors to consider if the lifeboat ethics is to be adopted to ensure the sustainability of the present generation and future generations.



From another perspective, both the Lifeboat ethics and the Humanist ethics do not involve the belief in and the role of a supernatural being in their respective ethical principles (Appiah-Sekyere, 2016: 437). This common characteristic of the Lifeboat ethics and the Humanist ethics is different from other types of ethics, such as Christian ethics, Islamic ethics, and Traditional Akan ethics that acknowledge the belief in and the role of a supernatural being in their respective ethics. The duty and responsibility of taking care of the environment and its inhabitants solely rest of man and not some higher being. Furthermore, unlike Christian ethics, Islamic ethics and Traditional Akan ethics wherein there is a dimension that deals with how one's good moral life in this present life can merit one a good reward in the life hereafter, both the Lifeboat ethics and the Humanist ethics do not have such a dimension (Appiah-Sekyere 2016: 437). Both the Lifeboat ethics and the Humanist ethics do not relate good/bad moral life in this present life to a good/bad reward in the metaphysical immortal life in their respective ethics. The concern here is that our actions either produce a negative or positive effect on the environment which affects our life and that of future generations. The concern is to safeguard the environment through proper management of the earth's resources.

Evaluation

What have we learnt from Hardin's lifeboat ethics? Or rather what can Hardin's lifeboat ethics teach us? Tough love is the motto Hardin portrays in his essay. Sometimes we may think helping people out of their difficult situations is always the solutions to such problems, but we fail to realize that in helping them, we make them unable to solve their own problems, and reliant on us. This might even be the prelude to future problems they may encounter. He believes a poor country that needs support needs to learn the hard way, even if that means losing resources or people. The ethics he reveals have good reasoning. Helping someone in need has always been moral in someone's life. But now, Hardin proposes a new ethic, lifeboat ethics. "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case against Helping the Poor," at first is a shocking piece because of the different views of ethics Hardin proposes.

While reviewing Hardin's lifeboat ethics, Bill Cooper *et al* state that "like the lifeboat's crew, a mountain climbing party may be forced as a last resort to abandon those in distress so that the remainder of the party may be saved. However, by cutting some of the ropes, the entire web may be weakened or rent, leaving the survivors less able to contend with subsequent dangers" (Copper, et al. 1975: 292). The recognition of the interdependencies inherent in the mountain-climbing metaphor seems more likely to lead to policies beneficial to other technologically advanced nations, and detrimental to the Third World countries. It seems that this is the sort of relationship that exists in the world today. Instead of a mutually beneficial relationship, there is a dependency relationship in which the dependent nations are shortchanged. Their natural resources are carried overseas where they are refined and resold to them. It is quite a pity that Nigeria one of the world's largest oil producers has to buy refined oil products as none of her refineries is functional. Thus, we spend billions of dollars every year just to subsidize oil products when we can be producing them here at home.



Lifeboat ethics proposes hard work as a *sine qua non* for development. It is possible for some members of the Niger-Delta society to be lazy or pretend to be less strong and depend on the strong ones for sustenance. They are used to receiving handouts, and some have no intention to work. If this happens and the strong and hard workers are few then a disaster of insufficient production to feed the mass and lazy population will emerge with attending consequences such as poverty and underdevelopment. This we found on the reliance on foreign aid, this has not still solved the problem of unemployment or poverty.

From the above discussions, it can be deduced that the lifeboat ethics may be applicable in a socio-cultural milieu wherein the principle is 'each one for himself or herself, and God for us all.' The traditional African ethics, however, may be suitable in an environment wherein interdependency, coupled with inter-generational responsibility is the norm. The concept of 'individualism' that the lifeboat ethics espouses is evident in the extract from the theory that asserts: "Some say they feel guilty about their good luck. My reply is simple: "Get out and yield your place to others." Normal moral or Christian ethical axioms are not operational in Hardin's lifeboat ethics, everyone or nation must take responsibility for his/her survival. Hardin's lifeboat ethics simply suggests that in trying to help others, your own survival is threatened. This is lucid in his concern about the effect of immigration on the US in the nearest future wherein the resources available may become scarcely sufficient to cater for the high population then. Immigration is still a global concern today. It is not just about people looking for opportunities, but people fleeing from war torn countries like the situation in Ukraine, Ethiopia today or authoritarian conditions like North Korea, or even harsh climate conditions which has made life unbearable in such areas. The question that goes forth is, should rich countries in applying Hardin's lifeboat ethics shut their countries against these people without any iota of humanism?

One thing that we must unfailingly learn from Hardin's Lifeboat ethics is the protection of the environment for both present and future generations. Human's actions continually threaten the environment. As a result, there have been different surges of environmental hazards. In the Niger-Delta region, oil spillage from oil exploration and illegal bunkering remains a perennial problem. As a result, the land is unfit for farming, fishes die due to water contamination and the water is unsafe to drink. Already, this has made living conditions difficult; it falls on us to proffer solutions to this menace and more. We have the duty and responsibility to protect the environment for posterity. There must be concrete effort in promoting and preserving an eco-friendly ecology that will safeguard the environment and all life in it. Although Hardin's lifeboat ethics may be taken as offensive and impolite, Hardin is simply only trying to provide a solution to our worldly problem. Sacrifices need to be made for the world to go on strong. We can either try to save everyone and die trying or save ourselves and let the flourishing life. Weak countries will learn to fend for themselves and either fail or succeed. Take care of yourself and let other nations learn to do the same. The purpose of this essay is to introduce a new ethical way in which our world should live for it to succeed.



Conclusion

If the Niger-Delta region is to grow, it must be ready to welcome technological innovation, science and agricultural improvement which will bring about sustainability and development. As Hardin notes in his lifeboat ethics, the culture of helping poor nations with food from the World Food Bank is a misguided generosity. African states are been crippled with foreign aid from foreign countries, especially from China. The Niger-Delta region and Africa, in general, must look inward and harness the resources available in other to sustain their population. While this is done, care must be taken to protect our common home which is our shared duty and responsibility to ourselves and posterity.

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