

Summary of Garrett Hardin's "The Tragedy of the Commons"
February 15, 2005
By: Harley Christensen © 2005
www.harleyc.com

We are constantly making use of goods, space, and resources that are also available to others. The personal benefit of using these "commons" is clear, and on an individual level, the impact made is seemingly trivial. A rational individual quickly concludes that the benefits of the common can be enjoyed, without causing any more than the slightest damage to it, yet as a group, we wreak havoc. This is "the tragedy of the commons", as popularized by Garrett Hardin.

Hardin begins his article by noting that there exist problems that lack a technical solution. He claims that the "population problem" is one example, noting that our ever-growing human population, with each individual trying to maximize their gain, is subject to a finite planet. Taking a foothold on Social Darwinism, Hardin accurately suggests that the prospect of an ever-growing population (all members trying to maximize their own gain) continuing to exist in a finite environment is impossible. The tragedy comes as the usage of each common climbs above the optimal level.

In his most effective example of the tragedy, Hardin describes the situation created by pollution: "The rational man finds that his share of the cost of the wastes he discharges into the commons is less than the cost of purifying his wastes before releasing them." When put into the context of a very large population, this "rational man" (and all those with a similar mindset), demonstrates that we "are locked into a system of fouling our own nest".

Hardin argues the futility of legislation to encourage human temperance in the use of commons. Given that he provides marvelous insight into the nature of the human population, his points on the ineffectiveness of legislation and laws do little to add weight to his article. Fully aware of the utilitarianism of humans, most readers would quickly realize (aided by their last visit to a littered park) that the overuse of the commons can not be reversed by laws or legislation, the change must occur in the attitudes of the human race.

Returning to the population problem, Hardin suggests that human breeding must be limited. He correctly states that "with appeals to limit breeding, some people will undoubtedly respond to the plea more than others". Using Darwinian views, it is very apparent that those less receptive to this plea will out-breed the others, thereby strengthening population growth. In this, his core point, Hardin has effectively tied together the population problem and the tragedy of the commons.

The power of the article lies in its transference of "the tragedy of the commons" to the reader, facilitated by an effective discussion of the population problem. Whether the population problem lacks a solution or not is irrelevant. To understand that the collective overuse, and resulting tragedy, of the commons will govern population growth in our finite environment is absolutely sufficient.