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BOOK REVIEWS

PROMETHEAN ETHICS: LIVING WITH DEATH, COMPETITION, AND TRIAGE

By GARRETT HARDIN

Too seldom are the starker aspects of the human adventure faced by an author who is competent and informed, yet neither a cynic nor a sentimentalist. The efforts of Prince Kropotkin to show that mutual aid, or what the Friends call "concern," was not confined to the human species found rough going due to his lack of a zoologist's union card, while today's duly qualified spokesman for biosociology draws fire for reminding us of our immensely long biological background—fire, one suspects, often coming from those who have not read him with care.

Garrett Hardin challenges philosophical communism with his now celebrated paper on "The Tragedy of the Commons" in which he demonstrates that ownership equally and widely shared is almost inevitably penalized for all by any who crowd their privilege. He further has appealed to common sense by pointing out that where lifeboats are loaded to exceed their capacity, there are likely to be no survivors.

His Jessie and John Danz lectures, given at the University of Washington and published in this slender volume, deal with three topics seldom far from thoughtful minds and usually in somber, often tragic context. Here they are viewed in a more commanding perspective, tersely signaled by Hardin's reiterated "and then what?" Actually this is an emphatic variant, from a biologist, of the message of a distinguished engineer. For Arthur Morgan, one time head of the Tennessee Valley Authority and president of Antioch College, urged and exemplified the importance of "conclusive engineering analysis;" by this he meant that the engineer's responsibility does not end with design, but must include the analysis of consequences so far as possible.

Prometheus, of course, was the symbol of forethought and hence anathema to the stand-pat Olympians. So far as death is concerned, human attitudes range from sheer terror of the inevitable to the gentle melancholy intoned by Thomas Gray:

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1. Address to the Pacific Division, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1968.
For who, to dumb forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing, anxious being e'er resigned,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Not cast one longing, lingering look behind?3

Hardin, for his part, considers what would happen if death were abolished and reminds us of Reverend Joseph Fletcher's admission that skeptics about immortality appear to face death more calmly.4

Competition, the second ethical problem considered, is as inevitable for humanity as death, and no less in need of dispassionate viewing. Population increase and the resulting biological competition get the attention deserved. "People," we are reminded, "who hate competition, or who are terrified by a Promethean inquiry into the consequences of competition, can play no role in the diminution of tragedy."5

To which we might add, in this day when labor-saving devices are being huckstered on every hand, the biological truism that effort is the price of survival for any organism.

The third problem raised is that of triage, a term especially used with reference to the treatment of battle casualties. Actually, it refers not to the three-fold categories of curable, hopeful, and hopeless, but to the business of judging, sorting, and assigning priorities. "The central problem, both philosophically and practically, is to find acceptable ways of weighing opposite goods..."—a closing sentence whose completion I leave, along with a great deal more of excellent reading, to those whom it may concern.

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3. T. GRAY, ELEGY WRITTEN IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD stanza 22 (1741).