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THE MORALITY OF SCARCITY: LIMITED RESOURCES & SOCIAL POLICY

FINNIN and SMITH, Eds.

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. 1979. Pp. 128.

The *Morality of Scarcity* is a collection of papers by eight well known and leading thinkers. Although the overt unifying theme is concern for the ethical implications of global development, it is difficult to address the book as a whole since the articles cover such diverse topics as American health care and foreign policy. One implicit theme underlying several of the papers is the problem of an objective basis for ethics. The book suggests certain objective bases, all negative principles, for avoiding error in respect to certain hypothetically posited survival values.

Kenneth Boulding's "Ethics of the Critique of Preferences" suggests that there is some relativity in cultures, but also that there is a basis for pointing out inconsistencies identifiable as cases of perverse group dynamics. The "tragedy of the commons," as Garrett Hardin has called it, is an example of an objectively identifiable perverse dynamic. In a situation in which all have access to resources held in common, the natural dynamic in a competitive society is for each to take more than his share in order to maximize his immediate profit, which results in depletion or destruction of the common resource to the mutually recognized disadvantage of all.

Boulding claims that although truth cannot be proved (this would put into question any hopes for an absolute basis for ethics), lies and errors can be, for they are inconsistencies. The process of learning values and preferences is based on some kind of asymmetry between better and worse, truer and less true. There may be no single "truth," but there is an "area of truth" and an "area of error," and if we never can be sure of the former, we gradually can delimit and eliminate the latter through the uncovering and rectification of inconsistencies. The power of the rational method regarding truth is negative; it is "not this," and "not that."

The sole criterion for judging an ethical system that Boulding cites is "success." Ethical systems, e.g., the golden rule, cooperation, generally succeed while selfishness, being inconsistent with social harmony, destroys. With exceptions such as that a technologically superior society may conquer one which is ethically superior, one may presume that consistency and cooperation eventually will prevail. In particular, an ethic of moderation in the use of resources may be a condition necessary for survival.

In his article, "Ethical Implications of Limits to Global Developments," Herman E. Daly claims that the most basic laws of science are "impossibility theorems" (perpetual motion is impossible, one cannot exceed the speed of light, one cannot create or destroy matter/energy, etc.). He attempts to give another basis for objective ethical judgments in the form of an ecological impossibility theorem: our high-consumption life-style cannot be applied to all nations or continue into the indefinite future. Daly reformulates the utilitarian rule of the "greatest good for the greatest number" to fit the contemporary situation, restating it as "sufficient per capita product for the greatest number over time." But of course this immediately raises a question regarding what is "sufficient." Daly does not try to answer this question. Such questions, he says, inspire intellectual humility and can be answered not by econometrics, but by "moral insight" and "prayerful meditation." Even if such questions cannot be answered, our freedom depends upon "obedience to objective value." That is, we can be controlled from without or from within; control from within depends upon obedience to objective value.

Hardin's "Heeding the Ancient Wisdom of *Primum Non Nocere*" gives us another negative suggestion—"first of all, do no harm." We do not yet realize all of the possible consequences of foreign intervention, failing to see that although we can remedy one person's hunger with food we cannot do the same for an entire population. As a consequence, we fail to see that the problem is not "hunger," but rather "carrying capacity." Yet, global approaches to such problems remain dreams while there is no global enforcing power. Hardin's prescription of non-intervention is another "negative principle" which can be added to our list of objective bases for ethical judgment.

Ethical judgments can be either hypothetical in form, or categorical. Hypothetical judgments do not presume the intrinsic value of certain ends, but claim only that if one desires a certain end then one must act in a certain way. Kant and other similar-minded philosophers have played down the significance of hypothetical judgments, but our authors have demonstrated the importance and implications of such judgments.

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