

Garrett Hardin and James Rachels: Gurus of a Post-Human Age

Anne Barbeau Gardiner

ABSTRACT: In this essay I shall look at the writings of two men who broke new ground in promoting the culture of death. Both died in 2003 and both are still highly regarded in academe: (1) Garrett Hardin, a biologist who taught Human Ecology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, worked actively in the 1960s for the legalization of abortion and for population control for ecology's sake. (2) James Rachels, a philosopher and medical ethicist at the University of Alabama, merited praise in *The New York Times* for having launched the campaign for euthanasia by denying the difference between killing and letting die. Both men may be called *post-human* because they grounded their support for the culture of death on contempt for the human race—Hardin reduced us to numbers, while Rachels leveled us with beasts. That both men rose to the top of their fields shows how secular academe today encourages post-human perspectives.

IN THIS ESSAY I shall look at the writings of two influential professors who died in 2003 but whose post-human teachings are still highly regarded in the academic world. The first is Garrett Hardin, a biologist who taught human ecology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the second James Rachels, a philosopher and medical ethicist at the University of Alabama who was credited in *The New York Times* with igniting the euthanasia debate. Both of these academics may be called “post-human” because each expresses a thoroughgoing contempt for human nature and sees nothing wrong with consigning the weak among us to a cruel death. Each rose to the top of his profession in America, a fact that reveals how completely our secular academic world has embraced the culture of death.

Garrett Hardin turns flesh-and-blood human beings into numbers on a page so that he can calmly consign vast numbers of people to a needless death. He complains that “traditional thinking” is “deplorably nonnumerate.” Christianity is especially deficient in this area, having

developed before there was “much appreciation of the importance of numeracy,” but many ethicists and philosophers have also failed to realize how much “numbers matter.” For Hardin, the great task before us today is to “marry” ethics to scientific “numeracy.” While words may still have value, they now “require a numerate cast.”¹ Hardin sees religious language as utterly disconnected from reality: “People need to be made allergic to such thought-stoppers as *infinity*, *sacred*, and *absolute*. The real world is a world of quantified entities: ‘infinity’ and the like are not words for quantities but utterances used to divert attention from quantities and limits.”² Thus he dismisses as non-existent the transcendence of man over the material world.

For Hardin, reality consists only of *quantified entities*. Thus he was an all-out activist for legalized abortion as far back as 1963, and then spent then next forty years of his life promoting population control. This is why he heartily approved of a comparison between the spread of humanity and “the metastasis of cancer” made in 1955 by Alan Gregg, then Vice President of the Rockefeller Foundation. This comparison was meant to justify letting people in densely populated areas starve to death because “[c]ancerous growths demand food; but, as far as I know, they have never been cured by getting it.”³ For Hardin, human beings are not the crown of creation made in the image of God but rather earth’s invasive disease.

Hardin is most famous for *The Tragedy of the Commons*, an essay recently described as “one of the most widely read of all environmental works.”⁴ This was his Presidential Address to the American Association

¹ Craig Straub, “Living in a World of Limits: An Interview with Noted Biologist Garrett Hardin,” *The Social Contract* (Fall 1997), p. 9, accessible online at: <http://www.garretthardinsociety.org>; Garrett Hardin, “Extension of the Tragedy of the Commons” (1998), *The American Association for the Advancement of Science*, p. 2, accessible online at: www.garretthardinsociety.org.

² Garrett Hardin, *Filters against Folly: How to Survive Despite Economists, Ecologists, and the Merely Eloquent* (New York NY: Viking, 1985), p. 221.

³ Garrett Hardin, “Living on a Lifeboat,” *Bioscience* 24 (1974):10, and *Social Contract* (Fall 2001), p. 9, online at: <http://www.garretthardinsociety.org>.

⁴ J. Edward de Steiguer, *The Origins of Modern Environmental Thought* (Tucson AZ: Univ. of Arizona Press, 2006), p. 213.

for the Advancement of Science (Pacific Branch) on 25 June 1968, a date that reveals how long post-human thinking has been acceptable in academe. Hardin thinks that we need to get rid of traditional morality because it makes “no allowance” for overpopulation.⁵ There is no warrant in nature for the traditional belief in the “sanctity of life,” he argues, because an individual life is “cheap, very cheap” where there is “a surplus of demanding human flesh.” His phrase *surplus of flesh* turns human beings into a vast quantity of superfluous meat. Of course, an individual life would be significant if there were too few people on earth, but instead of a shortage we have (and here he coins a quantifying word) “a longage of people.”⁶

Hardin’s post-human zeal to reduce our numbers is just the kind of impetus that has propelled Western nations to a self-inflicted demographic winter. First he reduces us to numbers, next promotes the view (embraced by deep ecologists and Green parties) that our lives must be kept in “subservient position” to the environment, and then protests that he is simply showing “concern” for man’s long-term survival when he makes the following chilling statement: that the “greatest gift” that we can offer to the “starving millions in poor countries” who appeal to us for emergency aid in time of famine is to give them “the knowledge that they are on their own.” Such indifference would amount to genocide, and yet Hardin wants us to stand idly by with a clear conscience while millions starve to death in developing countries. Why? Because a famine would pave the way to a better future. In order to reduce “the number of people who are living a miserable life,” he explains, it is necessary to reduce “the number of people who are alive in the next generation.” Here he turns a starving multitude into a *number* that needs to be subtracted from the whole so as to reach the ideal population.

Along these lines he praises China for having let millions of its own people starve to death rather than accepting outside help in time of famine. By standing on its own, he says, China came “closer” to solving

⁵ Garrett Hardin, *The Tragedy of Commons*, p. 6, accessible online at: <http://www.garrethardinsociety.org/articles>.

⁶ Garrett Hardin, *The Limits of Altruism: An Ecologist’s View of Survival* (Bloomington IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977), p. 116; *Filters*, pp. 13, 214.

its “population problem.” On the other hand, India worsened its population problem by accepting outside help to save fifty million of its people from starving in 1965-1966. If India had only one-tenth of its population, he adds, life there would be “very comfortable.” But how to get rid of what he calls “excess life”⁷? He shows that it can be done today chiefly by omission, by failing to help the destitute. For the post-human moralist, Dives may in good conscience refuse to give the scraps from his table to starving Lazarus.

Hardin complains that the global food program of the United Nations prevents millions of people from starving to death each year. Feeding the hungry masses frustrates the “corrective feedback of the population cycle” because wherever there is a “deterioration of food supply,” it means a “low ratio of resources to population,” and then if food is not provided from outside, “the population drops back to the ‘normal’ level—the ‘carrying capacity’ of the environment or even below.” Yes, this “cycle” involves “great suffering,” Hardin admits, but this is a “normal” cycle for countries that yield to “the temptation to convert extra food into extra babies.” The phrase *extra food for extra babies* suggests that having another child is the sort of activity for which one may fairly be punished by famine. Again, Hardin insists that the multitude that starves today paves the way to a better life for the remnant: “Every life saved this year in a poor country diminishes the quality of life for subsequent generations.” Not only should we allow millions to perish for lack of the food that we could easily give them, but we should also slam the door in the face of hungry immigrants: “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.”⁸ He capitalizes the word *Environment* to show its relative importance in comparison to starving people.

In a subsection of *The Tragedy of the Commons* entitled “Freedom to Breed Is Intolerable,” Hardin observes that when birds produce too large a clutch, their babies starve to death. But, he finds, this “negative

⁷ Hardin, *Limits*, pp. 63-66; Straub “Interview,” pp. 7-8.

⁸ Hardin, “Living on a Lifeboat,” pp. 6-7, 10, 11.

feedback” is unavailable to human beings. Why? Because the modern “welfare state” refuses to let the “children of improvident parents” starve to death. Thus, “overbreeding” no longer brings “its own ‘punishment’ to the germ line.” In line with this criticism of the welfare state, Hardin deplors the enactment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948, a document stating that “any choice and decision with regard to the size of the family must irrevocably rest with the family itself.” Hardin calls this “right” to choose family size an “absolutist concept” and also “ethic imperialism” when it is imposed on nations that might otherwise engage in coercive population control. If people are given a choice about family size, he laments, those with no “conscience” will outbreed the rest. Note that here the word *conscience* implies having few or no children. To reduce population size, there should be “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon by the majority of the people affected,” and “substantial sanctions” for over-fertile parents. The phrase *substantial sanctions* hints that those with large families could be punished as criminals.⁹

Indeed, Hardin compares “mutual coercion” in regard to family size to “compulsory” taxes and laws against bank robbery to insinuate that having a large family might be as criminal as defaulting on one’s taxes or holding up banks. He even warns that unless we accept “coercion” regarding family size, we will no longer be free: “The only way we can preserve and nurture other and more precious freedoms is by relinquishing the freedom to breed, and that very soon.” Under “more precious freedoms,” he includes the current licentiousness, for he states that the West is “just emerging from a dreadful two-centuries-long Dark Ages of Eros.”¹⁰ This post-human guru would give us, then, the false freedom of sexual license while depriving us of the real freedom to procreate.

Since he wants us to stand idly by while millions starve to death, it is no surprise that Hardin spent most of his “external time” from 1963 to 1973 fighting for legalized abortion. He is well known for having compared abortion to smashing “acorns to death with a hammer” and for calculating the “value of a tiny zygote” to be “just about zero.” Writing

⁹ Hardin, *Tragedy*, pp. 7-9.

¹⁰ Hardin, *Tragedy*, p. 9; *Limits*, p. 69.

on the initial stage of human life, he took occasion to restate his “general principle,” that “we cannot make an ethical advance until we realize that numeracy is a part of ethics.”¹¹ Such heartlessness was what he called an *ethical advance*! Just as he had no regret for the millions of Chinese who starved to death when their country refused outside help, so he had no regret for the nearly fifty million of babies in the womb who died as a result of *Roe v. Wade*. After all, they were only numbers, and what duty can we have to numbers?

Sadly, Hardin maintained this post-human vision to the end. His legs had been weakened by polio, so he spent his long life walking by the strength of his arms—suffering that evidently did not awaken in him compassion for the weak. In a 1996 interview he declared that when the time came that he was confined to a wheelchair, he would send for Dr. Kevorkian.¹² Seven years later, in his late eighties, he committed suicide, along with his wife.

Hardin’s post-human ideology, now spread by deep ecologists and members of Green parties, is based on the denial of Divine Providence, which the *General Catechism* defines as God’s immediate and concrete care for all creatures, including human beings. Whereas Hardin would have us commit a heinous sin by letting millions starve to death for the sake of a future chimerical good, Our Lord demands that we do the right thing now and trust in the fatherly Providence of God for the future: “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.”

Another exponent of post-human morality is the philosopher James Rachels, best known for his 1975 article “Active and Passive Euthanasia,” published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. In a 2003 obituary, *The New York Times* noted that Rachels had broken new ground in his essay “by arguing that actively killing a patient with a terminal illness was morally no worse than letting the person die by

¹¹ “Living within Limits & Limits on Living: Garrett Hardin on Ecology, Economy, and Ethics: Interview by Frank Meile,” *Sceptic* 4 (1996): p. 1, online at: www.lrainc.com; Hardin, *Filters*, pp. 124-25; Straub, “Interview,” p. 7.

¹² “Interview by Frank Meile,” p. 2.

doing nothing.”¹³ As I will show, what lay behind Rachels’s advocacy of medical murder was a strange concept of humility.

Rachels cites approvingly what Darwin wrote in his notebooks in 1838 (around twenty years before *The Origin of the Species* appeared): “Man in his arrogance thinks himself a great work worthy the interposition of a deity. More humble and I think truer to consider him created from animals.” Here Darwin calls it *arrogance* to believe, as Christians do, that man is a “great work” that came about by God’s direct intervention. He calls it *more humble* to regard man as derived from animals without any divine action. Rachels embraces this viewpoint and declares dogmatically that, after Darwin, “we can no longer think of ourselves as occupying a special place in creation.... We are not a great work.”¹⁴ Here he presents himself as *humble* in Darwin’s sense of the word, following him in declaring that man is nothing “special” in reality, certainly “not a great work” shaped by the hand of God.

Ah, but is this really being *humble*? Four centuries ago, the poet John Donne observed that certain philosophers pretend to an “impious humility” by holding a low view of man, as if his soul were “no more than the soul of a beast.”¹⁵ In his 1755 *Dictionary*, Samuel Johnson defined the word *impious* as “wicked” and “without reverence of religion,” and he also defined *atheistical* as “impious.” Thus, Donne’s phrase *impious humility* means a wicked, atheistic version of humility by which man is reduced to the level of a four-footed beast. This is a parody of Christian humility, the first of the theological virtues. For, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, humility is the virtue that sees God (certainly not a beast!) in another human being.¹⁶

¹³ Anahad O’Connor, “James Rachels, Ethicist, p. 62; “Ignited Euthanasia Debate,” *The New York Times* obituary (September 9, 2003), accessible online at www.bradpriddy.com.

¹⁴ James Rachels, “Darwin, Species, and Morality” (1987) in *The Legacy of Socrates: Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Stuart Rachels (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 2006), p. 15.

¹⁵ John Donne, “18. Meditation,” from *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, in *Seventeenth-Century Verse and Prose*, 2 vols., ed. Helen C. White et al. (New York NY: Macmillan, 1967), I: 109.

¹⁶ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 161.

Actually, Rachels reduces man not to a level with, but rather below, the beast. He remarks that the “greatest misconception of all” is to imagine that man stands at the apex of evolution; since evolution is random, the “cockroach” is a “better candidate” for the title of “highest achievement of evolution.” The *cockroach!* Rachels is aware, of course, that Aristotle and “virtually every important thinker in our history” has regarded human beings as “dominating a world made for their benefit,”¹⁷ and that his own post-human contempt for our nature goes against the philosophical consensus of three millennia. This doesn’t bother him. He quips that all those philosophers were in the throes of vanity—“Humans are a remarkably vain species”—as well as “in the grip of the notion that humanity is somehow ‘special’ in some occult or hard-to-define sense.”¹⁸ His phrase *in the grip* implies they were not thinking freely, while the adjectives *occult* and *vain* imply that their views were weirdly religious and downright foolish.

At one point Rachels warns that a lofty view of human nature aids the pro-life cause: “an exaggerated sense of the cosmic importance of human beings” leads to “the sanctity-of-human-life ethic.”¹⁹ By the phrase *cosmic importance*, he seems to glance at the mystery of the Incarnation, the supreme act of humility by which God conferred an “exalted dignity” on the human race by becoming a man, a dignity not even “given to Angels.”²⁰ By contrast, Rachels’s view of our *cosmic unimportance* leads to our human life being treated as worthless.

Rachels follows Nietzsche in regarding Christians as the epitome of *arrogance* because they believe in Holy Scripture: “Christians have the astonishing arrogance to imagine that the entire universe was made for their benefit. They have persuaded themselves that they were created in the image of God, who loves them above all others and who made the

¹⁷ “Nietzsche and the Objectivity of Morals” (1998) in *Legacy*, p. 144.

¹⁸ “Value,” *Legacy*, p. 66.

¹⁹ “The Value of Human Life” (2002), in *Legacy*, pp. 59, 65-66.

²⁰ *Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests, issued by order of Pope Pius V*, trans. John A. McHugh and Charles J. Callan (Rockford IL: TAN Books, 1982), p. 48.

world for them. They believe in addition that they will never perish.”²¹ The implication here is that the Bible, from which these doctrines derive, is a source of *arrogance* rather than humility, and that we Christians will never be *humble* in his impious, atheistic sense until we abandon Holy Scripture. This should be easy to do, Rachels says, since Christianity has already been “virtually demolished” by *The Descent of Man*, in which Darwin asserts that every one of our mental characteristics can also be found in animals. In that work Darwin claims that there is “no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties” and that even our boasted use of language differs from other animals only in “degree.” Yes, only in *degree*. Strange that there is no animal version of the *Divine Comedy*. Rachels contends that Darwin’s exalted view of animals has been confirmed in our own time because the “best theory” of animal behavior today attributes not just rational powers to animals, but even “desires and beliefs.”²² Yes, *beliefs*. Strange that animals have not yet produced a Creed.

To puncture our Christian arrogance and instruct us in the new evolutionary *humility*, Rachels cites a passage from *The Origin of the Species*, where Darwin states that the word *species* refers to nothing in the real world: “I look at the term species as one arbitrarily given for the sake of convenience to a set of individuals closely resembling each other.” Rachels agrees heartily that determinate species with fixed essences do not exist in the real world, but rather only multitudes of individual organisms exist, which are somewhat alike and somewhat unlike. This vision of the world as a chaos of disconnected particular beings requires a new morality, because “traditional morality” is based on the view that a man, as opposed to a dog or a cow, is “morally special” because of his species-membership. Now that this “old” view has “lost its foundations,” thanks to Darwin, only individual “characteristics” can have moral value.²³

What this means in practice, Rachels explains, is that to the extent

²¹ “Nietzsche,” *Legacy*, p. 149.

²² “Darwin,” *Legacy*, pp.18-19.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

a human being and a dog are alike, their treatment will be the same, but to the extent they are unlike, their treatment will differ. Treatment will depend henceforth not on someone's species-membership, but on his characteristics. And that's not all, for in this new dispensation, human beings will have "to assert a right to better treatment" when they differ from "other animals" in their characteristics. They will bear the burden of proof when asking to be treated better than a chimpanzee. But what about those who do not have the "psychological capacities" to "assert" themselves and ask for better treatment? They will be passed by, Rachels admits, because under the new evolutionary ethic, one's "mere physical existence would be as insignificant, from a moral point of view, as that of a slug." Yes, a *slug*-Darwinian humility reduces man to the level of a snail!

What fate does Rachels have in store for handicapped babies and brain-damaged adults? Having dismissed the "old" axiom that "moral status is determined by what is normal for the species," he has no qualms about killing them outright. He also defends abortion on the ground that "fetuses" may have "human bodies," but lack a "distinctively human consciousness."²⁴ Reduced to a cluster of "characteristics," the child in the womb can hardly expect to be treated better than that triumph of evolution, the cockroach.

Rachels sums up his position neatly when he says that according to the "new view" propounded by Darwin, it is no longer possible to deduce "right and wrong" from "the nature of things in themselves" because there are no *natures* in existence. It follows that "the natural world does not in and of itself manifest value and purpose" and that the natural law ethics derived from Aristotle must now be replaced with a "scientific" ethics based only on particular characteristics. Here is an example: while proponents of natural law theory have "often taken homosexual conduct to be a paradigm case of conduct that is contrary to nature," the new morality considers that if scientists should turn out to be right in saying that homosexuals have a different "hypothalamus," then our "moral view" will have to "accommodate" this "fact" and

²⁴ "The Legacy of Socrates" (1992) in *Legacy*, p. 132; "Darwin," p. 26, and "Legacy," p. 65, in *Legacy*.

public policies favoring heterosexuals must no longer be allowed to stand as a barrier to the “flourishing” of homosexuals. And here is another example: it should be considered as unreasonable to let someone die slowly when “the distinction between killing and letting die” is not “*itself* important.”²⁵ Thus, the *impious humility* that sees man as no better than a beast leads straight to the public sponsorship of homosexuality and the killing of sick people like dogs.

In conclusion, there are several doors that open onto the Culture of Death, but virtually all of them have the same contempt for human nature written on them, whether in the form of Hardin’s numeracy or Rachels’s *impious humility*. Whichever of these doors we open, the same chamber of horrors is found inside. For ideas have consequences, and if we embrace the teachings of highly acclaimed academics who deny that human life is special and sacred, we will likely end up letting millions starve to death when we might save them, working to exterminate vast numbers by abortion and euthanasia, and applauding the current homosexual juggernaut. Pope John Paul II was right when he said in the *Gospel of Life* that attacks against human life are receiving “widespread and powerful support from a broad consensus on the part of society” today and that “we are in fact faced by an objective ‘*conspiracy against life*’.” Our post-human age gives new meaning to the Apocalypse, where the times of the Anti-Christ are depicted as the rule of the Beast.

²⁵ On homosexuality, see “Legacy,” pp. 126-29; “Killing and Starving to Death” (1979), p. 73; “The Principle of Agency” (1998), p. 198, all in *Legacy*.