

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Depletion Thoughts #2 - On Octuplets and Lifeboat Ethics

Posted by [Nate Hagens](#) on February 15, 2009 - 11:26am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Demand/Consumption](#)

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Below the fold is a guest post from [Cornelius](#) pointing out the impact of having 14 children, from a standpoint of Garret Hardin's Lifeboat Ethics.



(The Suleman Octuplets)

A major story this past week was when unemployed mother Nadya Suleman had fertility enhanced [octuplets](#) in addition to her existing 6 children. Leaving aside the mental health, social, environmental and ethical implications for the moment, lets first highlight energy.

The average american uses just under 60 barrels of oil equivalent in primary energy (Source BP Satisfistical Review 2008). If these California octuplets and their 6 existing brothers and sisters each attain life expectancy of 78 years, that is $14 \times 60 \times 78 = 65,520$ barrel of oil equivalents in their lifetime. For arguments sake - extrapolating – if they follow their mothers cultural/genetic fecundity and each have 14 children of their own who in turn each also have 14 children, then the total lifetime primary energy consumption in this hominid pyramid is $14 \times 14 \times 14 \times 60 \times 78 = 12,841,920$ boe, which at todays rates is *58 days of oil use for the entire country of Italy* (Source, BP 2008). Whether this energy quality can change from fossil to renewable during their lifetimes is not the point. One may be confident that other scarce resources will come into play during those generations.

As atrocious as an unemployed 33 year old with 14 children on welfare appears, this *could* be a watershed moment in a nations acknowledgement of resource limits. Media and social backlash against this story suggests the general citizenry knows something is wrong with this picture, even without making the explicit leap to resource limitations. Though the media has not yet extrapolated these childrens future energy footprints, outrage seems ubiquitous that an

unemployed woman and her doctor freely planned to create octuplets without regard to the implications for others. Perhaps the extremeness of this example called peoples attention to the high contrast in social turpitude. If so, what other less egregious examples might come under scrutiny if folks had opportunity to analyze what is happening planet-wide? Where on the spectrum of right and wrong, and legal and illegal, will the lines be drawn? If 14 children on welfare is beyond the pale, what about 10, or 6 or 4 or 2?

On another level, extra social resources need to be diverted to nourish and support the premature size and condition of these babies. In a world of finite limits, when, (if ever) will we reach a point where certain thresholds of social triage, long subsidized by cheap energy and shared promise of economic growth, becomes accepted by society? Similarly, the vast majority of average medical expenditures is spent during the final 6 months of a patients life. When will some ask 'towards what end?'

If population *numbers* are an issue, and population *health/quality* becomes an issue, how can population *equality* not be? High wealth and income disparity has also been prominent in the news via the unfolding retroactive [executive limits to pay at \\$500,000](#) per year (the median income per household member, including all working and non-working members above the age of 14, was [\\$26,036 in 2006](#)). What is the proper ratio of top vs bottom tier income/wealth in a civil society? Plato believed it was a factor of four. Universities, civil services and the military have managed a factor of between ten and twenty, far below the ratio of 500 prevalent in the US corporate sector. If having 14 children triggers peoples sense of morality at 'using more than ones share', at what point does that sentiment permeate into economics, where it is clear that everyone cannot become a Rockefeller or Rothschild?



(Image- Lifeboat from the Andrea Dorea)

[Lifeboat ethics](#) is a metaphor for resource distribution proposed by the ecologist Garrett Hardin in 1974. Hardin's metaphor details a lifeboat bearing 50 people, which has room for ten more. The lifeboat is in an ocean surrounded by a hundred swimmers. The "ethics" of the situation stems from whether and under what circumstances swimmers should be taken aboard the lifeboat.

Here are the concluding paragraphs from Hardin's [Lifeboat Ethics: the Case Against Helping the Poor](#):

We Americans of non-Indian ancestry can look upon ourselves as the descendants of thieves who are guilty morally, if not legally, of stealing this land from its Indian owners. Should we then give back the land to the now living American descendants of those Indians? However morally or logically sound this proposal may be, I, for one, am unwilling to live by it and I know no one else who is. Besides, the logical consequence would be absurd. Suppose that, intoxicated with a sense of pure justice, we should decide to turn our land over to the Indians. Since all our other wealth has also been derived from the land, wouldn't we be morally obliged to give that back to the Indians too?

Clearly, the concept of pure justice produces an infinite regression to absurdity. Centuries ago, wise men invented statutes of limitations to justify the rejection of such

pure justice, in the interest of preventing continual disorder. The law zealously defends property rights, but only relatively recent property rights. Drawing a line after an arbitrary time has elapsed may be unjust, but the alternatives are worse.

We are all the descendants of thieves, and the world's resources are inequitably distributed. But we must begin the journey to tomorrow from the point where we are today. We cannot remake the past. We cannot safely divide the wealth equitably among all peoples so long as people reproduce at different rates. To do so would guarantee that our grandchildren and everyone else's grandchildren, would have only a ruined world to inhabit.

To be generous with one's own possessions is quite different from being generous with those of posterity. We should call this point to the attention of those who from a commendable love of justice and equality would institute a system of the commons, either in the form of a world food bank, or of unrestricted immigration. We must convince them if we wish to save at least some parts of the world from environmental ruin.

Without a true world government to control reproduction and the use of available resources, the sharing ethic of the spaceship is impossible. For the foreseeable future, our survival demands that we govern our actions by the ethics of a lifeboat, harsh though they may be. Posterity will be satisfied with nothing less.

It seems that issues related to reproduction, resource use and equality are coiling into a loaded spring- perhaps the octuplet example allows an opportunity to discuss these important but uncomfortable issues. Somewhere between 1 child and 14 lies an inflection point. Somewhere between an average salary and one 1000 times the average lies an inflection point. Somewhere between equality/justice for all and one dictator (benign or otherwise) lies an inflection point. Where society finds equilibrium on these 'lifeboat levels' is a question worthy of discussion. (And who will be discussing these questions is also a question worthy of discussion).



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