THEY'LL SORT IT

THE DIFFUSION OF RESPONSIBILITY

THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS GARRETT HARDIN; 1968

"Picture a pasture open to all. It is to be expected that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons. Such an arrangement may work reasonably satisfactorily for centuries because tribal wars, poaching, and disease keep the numbers of both man and beast well below the carrying capacity of the land. Finally, however, comes the day of reckoning, that is, the day when the long-desired goal of social stability becomes a reality. At this point, the inherent logic of the commons remorselessly generates tragedy.

As a rational being, each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain. Explicitly or implicitly, more or less consciously, he asks, "What is the utility to me of adding one more animal to my herd?" This utility has one negative and one positive component.

1 *The positive component is a function of the increment of one animal. Since the herdsman receives all the proceeds from the sale of the additional animal, the positive utility is nearly +1.*

2 *The negative component is a function of the additional overgrazing created by one more animal. Since, however, the effects of overgrazing are shared by all the herdsmen, the negative utility for any particular decision-making herdsman is only a fraction of -1.*

Adding together the component partial utilities, the rational herdsman concludes that the only sensible course for him to pursue is to add another animal to his herd. And another, and another.... But this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons. Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit - in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all."[1]

1 *G Hardin (1968) The Tragedy of the Commons; Science www.garretthardingsociety.org*

In the above excerpt, Garrett Hardin makes the point that even if the land becomes overgrazed, people will continue to put their animals on the damaged fields and even add to their herd. And the reasoning: individuals see no point in making a sacrifice if others continue to use a common asset. Even if everyone is aware of the risk of abuse, the mix of selfishness, competitiveness and unregulated exploitation eventually makes the land unusable for all.

Environmentalists often use this parable to demonstrate the dilemma posed by climate change, and our overuse of energy and natural resources - *Why should I make sacrifices if no one else does?*

There are a number of psychological factors which lie behind our battle between our individual needs and the greater good.

THE BYSTANDER EFFECT

The principle of the bystander effect is quite simple. Whenever there are other people around we have a ready excuse for holding back and waiting to see what they will do. *"After all,"* we reckon, *"why should I be the person to become involved? Maybe I am misjudging what is going on. Maybe someone else is about to sort it."* So, when people are in a group, responsibility for acting is diffused. We assume that someone else will help out, or that, because no-one else is acting, the apparent problem isn't actually a problem.

The Kitty Genovese case is often cited as an example of the bystander effect in action. In 1964, in New York City, Kitty was savagely attacked on the street just before reaching home. She was brutalised over a period of 40 minutes, during which time she attempted to reach her apartment. Apparently, her screams and calls for help were heard by at least thirty eight neighbours who saw or heard her struggle. But no-one came to help or even phoned the police. The attacker was spooked by witnesses twice, but after he went away, each time, Kitty was left alone. He then returned to rape and kill her in the doorway just next to her apartment. Witnesses were able to give full accounts of what happened afterwards.

In 1968, in order to demonstrate why people did nothing in cases like this, US researchers Bibb Latane and John Darley staged emergencies of one kind or another in different situations, and then watched what happened. They invited students to participate in a market research survey. In one of them, the students went to an office, where they were met by a young woman who told them to sit down and gave them a questionnaire to fill out. She then went into an adjacent room separated from the office only by a curtain. After a few minutes, the students heard noises, suggesting that she had climbed on a chair to get something from a high shelf, and the chair had fallen over. She cried out: *"Oh, my God, my foot…" " I ….I….can't move it….Oh my ankle. I…..can't…can't…get….this thing off…. me."* The moaning and crying went on for about another minute. Of those students who were alone in the adjoining room filling out the market research survey, 70% offered to help. When another person who appeared to be another student completing the survey - but was in fact a stooge - was also present, and that person did not respond to the calls, only 7% offered to help. Even when two genuine students were together in the room, the proportion offering to help was much lower than when there was only one student.

In another experiment they had a student alone in a room stage an epileptic fit. When there was just one person next door, listening, that person rushed to the student's aid 85% of the time. But when subjects thought that there were four others also overhearing the seizure, they came to the student's aid only 31% of the time.

In his book, *States of Denial*, Stanley Cohen,[2] points out that, in both South Africa and Israel, pockets of bystanders with liberal values survived the reality around them by retreating into private life. They conformed outwardly, but in their psychic space their oppositional thoughts remained intact. So, to maintain this inner/outer split you cut yourself off from the unpalatable facts of life around you by not watching the news or reading newspapers, not talking politics with your family and friends, immersing yourself in barbecues, picnics and other social and sporting activities. This is more than trying not to be upset by bad news. The people subscribe to universal values, they are uneasy about what they know is happening - but they are reluctant to be too outspoken or to "get involved".

According to Cohen, the bystanders do not see the world much beyond their own boundaries, and so, being less conscious of others' needs, they distance themselves from the demands of wider relationships. Studies of why some people helped and sheltered Jews during the Second World War in Europe,[3] have shown that they were more likely to attach themselves to others, to assume responsibility for them, and to act inclusively towards a wide range of people. Whereas dissociation, detachment, and exclusiveness are the hallmarks of "constricted" persons (the passive bystanders,) the rescuers displayed involvement, commitment, care and responsibility. By contrast, the "extensivity" of these people meant caring for others beyond immediate family and community, feeling part of a common humanity, being sensitive to moral violations, and even seeking out opportunities to help. They find it difficult to refrain from action. Already inclined to include outsiders in their sphere of concern, they find no reason to exclude them in an emergency. Yet they see themselves as being no different to others - *"anyone would have done the same thing in my place"*. This absence of a sense of virtue is the most constant theme. People said they were acting with *"common-sense"* human decency; they did not see themselves as doing anything special; the situation gave them no choice; they were helping because this was the obvious thing to do and it fitted with the routine morality they had learned and practiced in their communities and families.

Cohen says that their altruism resulted from a particular cognitive outlook – a sense of self as part of a common humanity rather then tied to specific interests of family, community or country. The recognition of who you are was more important than allegiance to any abstract moral or political agenda; you helped whoever you could when you were asked - it was not a question of reasoning, as the people felt they had no choice. It was a recognition that they were a certain type of person, and that this meant they had to act in a certain way. This recognition fits nearly all activists the author has known. Nothing explains its biographical origins, or why some people rather than others have this "instinctive extensivity". And, he says, at the sociological level, we don't know whether this state is fostered more by some political cultures than others or, at the psychological level, why it appears in only a particular minority within the same culture.

Some inconsistencies are well known. There are people who, in the public realm, are altruistic and deeply compassionate about humanitarian causes, but in their private lives are neglectful parents, narcissistic friends and indifferent to all others' needs. And then there are others, like the Nazi doctors, who were so loving to their children and dogs, who were caring parents, selfless friends, sensitive and rooted in their own community - yet they were utterly indifferent to appeals from outside their immediate circle.

2 *Stanley Cohen (2001); States of Denial; p. 147*
3 *Ibid; p. 263-5*

OUR SENSE OF FAIRNESS

Anyone who has children is well used to seeing little (and sometimes not so little) faces pucker, followed by a pained *"it's not FAIR"* response to whatever "injustice" has just been metered out. This can be quickly followed by *"EVERYone has got one"*, or *"he got MORE than me"*.

Humans judge fairness in a relative way, usually in comparison with peers or social equals. The only problem is that my definition of fair is very likely to be different to your definition. Therefore, for any social group to work, shared rules of fairness have to be laid out objectively.

According to Peter Singer,[4] our willingness to help the poor can be reduced if we think that we would be doing more than our fair share. The person considering giving a substantial portion of his or her disposable income can't help but be aware that others, including those with a lot more disposable income, are not.

Similarly, Giddens[5] talks about the sense people have that others are free-riding. This can arise in any area of social or economic life in which collective outcomes hinge on decisions taken by individuals, *"we are too small to make a difference"*, *"we shouldn't take action until bigger countries do"*. People who don't contribute are free-riding, since they benefit from doing nothing. This is very relevant to climate change.

The "Ultimatum Game" puts fairness to the test and is one of the best known and most tried experiments in behavioural economics. The rules are simple. Two people, unknown to each other, are paired up. One person, the proposer, is given a sum of money, say - €10, and has to decide, on his own, how to divide it between them both. He then makes a take-it-or-leave-it offer to the other person. The responder can then either accept or reject the offer. If he accepts the money both players pocket their respective amounts. If he rejects it both players walk away empty handed. You would think that the responder would accept any amount, because what they will get is better than nothing, and that the proposer would recognise this and make a lowball offer. But, no, this rarely happens. Instead, what are seen as mean offers, anything below €2, are routinely rejected, and even more interestingly, the proposers anticipate this and rarely make many low offers in the first place. The most common offer in the ultimate game is, in fact, the fairest of them all, €5.

The experiment has been carried out across the developed world, and the results are remarkably uniform, despite cultural differences. And increasing the stakes (with reason) doesn't seem to make much difference.

The conclusion that has been come to is that, in an ideal world, everyone should end up with what they deserve, and, seeing as only luck decides who become the proposer and the responder, people feel that the spoils should be fairly equal. In an interesting version of the test, when the proposers "earned" their role as a result of a test, they offered less and not a single offer was rejected!

Human behaviours are often explained as being hard-wired in our DNA evolutionary leftovers of life on the savannah or during the Stone Age. But a study carried out by Joe Henrich, an evolutionary psychologist from the University of British Columbia suggests that, rather than being rooted in our DNA, fairness toward strangers evolved recently, and is embedded in culture rather than biology.

To study this dynamic, Henrich's team asked 2,100 people from fifteen small scale societies, including hunter-gatherers, marine foragers, nomadic herders, and pastoralists, to play three variations of a game designed to measure their innate sense of fairness. Subjects played each game anonymously and for potential payoffs equivalent to one or two days' salary. In contrast to ultimatum games played by college students in industrial societies, the most common offer ranged from 15 to 50 percent. Responders either never rejected low offers or rejected them as often as 50 to 80 percent of the time – which goes to show that there is no clear-set point for what constitutes a fair offer in this game – it depends on the cultural norms of the society in which one lives.[6]

4 *Peter Singer (2009) The Life You Can Save; p.55*
5 *A Giddens (2009) The Politics of Climate Change; p. 101*
6 *Marc D Hauser (2006) Moral Minds; p. 83-4*

THE IDENTIFIABLE VICTIM

"If I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will." MOTHER THERESA

An individual in need tugs at our emotions. We will do far more to rescue an identifiable victim than we will to save a statistical life.

The story of "Baby Jessica"[7] is a good example of this. In late 1987, in Texas, eighteen-month old Jessica McClure spent 58 hours trapped in a well, and Americans responded with sympathy, a tremendous rescue effort, and money. The McClures received over $700,000 in donations for "Baby Jessica" in the months after her rescue, and a popular television film was subsequently made. Apparently, the level of worldwide media coverage the incident received was only rivaled by the death of Princess Diana ten years later.

At the time, there was no question but that everything possible should and would be done to rescue the child; cost was no object.

The identifiable victim effect can also be the precursor to a shift in public attitudes and even policy changes. The story of Ryan White the young haemophiliac from Indiana, who contracted HIV in 1984 demonstrates this.[8] Following his death, the US congress passed the Ryan White Care Act, which funded the largest set of services for people living with the AIDS in the country. It is clear that Ryan's moving, meritorious six-year struggle with AIDS did more to alter peoples' attitude about the disease than any amount of statistical or medical arguments.

The following causes of the identifiable victim effect are outlined in a study by Karen E. Jenni and George Loewenstein of Carnegie Mellon University.[9]

Vividness: The stories are usually very emotional, we see visual images of the people or follow the event unfolding in real time, without the emotional distance provided by historical perspective.

Certainty and uncertainty: Identifiable deaths are usually certain to occur if action is not taken, whereas statistical deaths are probabilistic. We are more likely to place disproportionate weight on outcomes that are certain relative to those that are uncertain but likely. And a certain loss is seen as worse than an uncertain loss with the same value.

Proportion of the reference group that can be saved: In general people are more concerned about risks that are concentrated within a known geographic region or population than about those that are dispersed.

Immediacy: Identifiable victims are actual people who are likely to die if help is not given, and we meet them after a risk producing event. We feel responsible for helping then, because if we do not they could die. Whereas, the decision on whether or not to respond to a statistical risk is usually made before the risk producing even has occurred.

Development charities have long cottoned onto the identifiable victim effect, which is why their fund-raising letters include such engaging personal testimonies from people they have helped to overcome hunger or poverty.

The effects of climate change are not so clear cut and it is therefore a lot harder to pinpoint identifiable victims.

One attempt to do this is to focus on island nations that are sinking due to sea level rises. Unfortunately, the story hasn't yet ignited the world media.

7 *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jessica_McClure*
8 *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ryan_White*
9 *Explaining the Identifiable Victim Effect, by Karen E Jenni and George Loewenstein http://www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/g120/GeorgeLoewenstein/Papers_files/pdf/identifiable-victim.pdf*

THE EFFECT OF MONEY

"Men do not desire to be rich, but to be richer than other men." JOHN STUART MILL

It would appear that as societies began to use money, the need to rely on family and friends diminished, and people were able to become more self-sufficient. In this way, money has enhanced individualism but seems to have diminished communal motivations.

According to Margaret Heffernan,[10] our desire to see ourselves as virtuous ensures that we value money because it appears to be the external proof of goodness. We live in societies in which mutual support and co-operation is essential, but money erodes the relationships we need to lead productive, fulfilling and genuinely happy lives. When money becomes the dominant motivator, it doesn't co-operate with, or amplify, our bonds with others; it disengages us from them. The further removed we become from our neighbours, the more trapped we are in our self-sufficiency, the easier it is to treat people as things, to turn a blind eye to the human costs of toxic cultures and to make immoral decisions.

Having money doesn't make us more generous either, as anyone who has spent time shaking a charity collection box on the street well knows. In several countries, most noticeably Britain, there is an inverse correlation between the level of donations and wealth: the richest give relatively little. In the UK, only about 30% of households contribute to charity, and a majority of these donations involve little cost or commitment. In the US, almost 50% of all charitable donations go to the individual's church, a contribution that could be seen as selfish given that the churchgoers get back personal returns on their gifts.[11]

In a study carried out by the University of Minnesota marketing professor, Kathleen Vohs and her colleagues,[12] it was discovered that people, unconsciously primed with images of money, were not only likely to be more self-reliant, but they also turned out to be less helpful to others. Participants were asked to rearrange sets of words to form sentences. One group was given neutral words which made up sentences like "it's cold outside", while the others had to construct phrases that related to money, such as "high paying salary". When the unscrambling tasks were finished, subjects were asked to arrange twelve discs into a square and the experimenter left the room, saying they could come to him if they needed help. The people who first worked on the "salary" task struggled with the puzzle for about five and a half minutes before asking for help, while the others who had worked on the neutral task looked for assistance after just three minutes. Thinking about money had made the first group more self-reliant. In further stages of the experiment, these participants were also less willing to help the experimenter to enter data, less willing to assist another subject who seemed confused and less likely to help a stranger who had dropped a box of pencils.

Two studies of day care centres in Israel conducted by Aldo Rustichini of the University of Minnesota and Uri Gneezy of the University of Chicago,[13] published in 2000 and 2005, found that when day-care facilities instituted a fine on parents who collected their children later than a specified time, this led to more parents turning up late rather than fewer. The fine, the authors argued, was interpreted as a "price" for lateness which some parents were prepared to pay. And the number of late-arriving parents did not go down when the fee was removed. The researchers concluded that it is dangerous to bring money into the picture, because once a social contract has been turned into a financial-economic one, it is very difficult to change it back.

An experiment carried out online with adults from around the United States by Cassie Mogilner of the University of Pennsylvania,[14] suggests that people who are made to think about time have a different approach to life than people who think about money. They plan to spend more of their time with the people in their lives while people who think about money fill their schedules with work.

Mogilner concluded that, although focusing on money motivates people to work more, passing the hours working does not generally make one happy. Spending time with loved ones does, and thinking about time might motivate people to pursue these social connections.

10 *Margaret Heffernan (20011); Wilful Blindness: p. 257*
11 *Marc D Hauser (2006); Moral Minds; p. 288*
12 *Dan Ariely (2008); Predictably Irrational; p. 74-5*
13 *http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/science/mind-money.html*
14 *http://psychcentral.com/news/2010/10/08/thoughts-of-time-or-money-influence-behavior/19369.html*

Ori and Rom Brafman,[15] described how Swiss townspeople were fairly willing to have a nuclear waste depository built near their town. Perhaps out of a feeling of social obligation or national pride, 50.8% of the townspeople agreed to such a facility being built. This wasn't quite as high as the government had hoped for, so they added some incentives to help swing more votes their way. They decided to offer a compensation of 5,000 francs to each resident for agreeing to have the facility built near their town.

Once money was introduced into the equation, people moved the decision out of the social norm into the business norm. And from a business perspective, you'd want a lot more than 5,000 francs to live next to a nuclear waste deposit. So the percentage of townspeople willing to have the facility built next to their town dropped to only 24.6%! Even after the government offered to double or triple the amount of money given to each resident, it had little effect on the vote.

Daniel Keltner at the University of California, Berkeley[16] first started to contemplate the link between wealth and empathy after being struck by the profound self-interest and social disconnect shown by Wall Street bankers, while at the same time recalling the generosity of his neighbours growing up in a poor area. People going through tough times need the help of others to see them through and so become sensitive to the feelings of those around them – people are dependent on each other. In contrast, those with more money can pay their way out of a situation and so can afford to pay less attention to others. Keltner and a colleague, Michael Kraus, designed a series of experiments to test whether people from different social background really do interact differently. In one study, they divided 100 volunteers into pairs, and filmed each pair meeting and getting to know each other for 5 minutes. To avoid any bias, two independent observers viewed the resulting videos and rated each participant's actions during the exchange, by counting how often they showed signs of interest such as nodding, laughter and eye contact, compared with more detached behaviours such as doodling.

As expected, the poorer subjects were more likely to use warmer and more expressive body language and gestures that signal engagement, while the richer participants were more stand-offish, some even going to their phones to check the time, or fiddling with their backpack to make sure it was in order!

To find out if wealth can influence empathy, the researchers first asked 200 university employees, from all levels, to rate the emotions expressed in 20 photographs of human faces - a standard test of emotional intelligence. As predicted, those with more prestigious jobs were consistently worse on the task.

In another experiment, participants were divided into pairs and asked to carry out mock interviews, with one person asking the questions and the other answering. Afterwards they were asked to rate their own feelings, such as excitement, hope or worry. They also had to estimate the scores of their partners. Again, the students from poorer background were better at guessing their partner's feelings than those from wealthier backgrounds.

Interestingly, Keltner and Kraus found that these differences were fluid, changing with the participant's perception of their position with a group. When asked to imagine a conversation with someone they deemed to be higher up the social ladder, the wealthier participants became immediately better at reading emotions. The team concluded that these are probably automatic reactions that lead us to become more vigilant and mindful of others when we feel subordinate.

Keltner's latest study has found that richer people are more likely to commit an offense while driving, eat sweets intended for children(!), or cheat to increase the chance of winning a prize.

(Health warning: these experiments were carried out on students, which may not be a very representative sample).

Hazel Rose Markus of Stanford University in California, studies the effects of culture on behaviour. She has also found that social and financial success can make people less caring. She suggests that the difference may arise from the sheer range of opportunities afforded by wealth – the rich spend more time considering how to spend their fortune than worrying about the needs of others. Their life is centred on their own needs, interests and choices, which makes them less caring.

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15 *Ori & Rom Brafman (2009) Sway-The irresistible pull of irrational behaviour;p.132-5*
http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2008/07/09/money-can-change-your-behavior-toward-others/

16 *New Scientist; 21st April 2012; p. 52-55*

Judith Levine[17] describes the year when she (and her compliant partner) decided not to buy anything other than food, toilet paper and other basics. Living in Vermont, she is is a regular cross country skier. On one occasion, she ends up at the sports centre with her skies but without her wax kit, and is thus *"locked in a windowless cell of anxiety".* She is worried about having to beg a few swipes of wax from the guy at the desk; *"Can I borrow..." "May I have...." "You see my partner drove away with ..." "I'm doing this project and ...."*

She devises various strategies, composes and rehearses appropriate lines. She doesn't want to sound too demanding, but neither does she want to come across as nonchalant. A note of apology might be appropriate, but abjectness is over the top. She admits that she basically wants to ask for help in such a way as to prevent anyone from noticing she is asking.

And she frets that it is putting the guy out, he is an employee of a business after all and she is a customer - it's unfair to break the rules.

In the end, she asked the lanky young man behind the desk if she could borrow a little blue wax, just a few swipes. *"Borrow it?"* he asked with a smile, *"You can have it",* and then proceeded to wax her skies himself.

Judith Levine mulls over this experience and admits that she likes to feel independent, and that the marketplace frees her from relationship, releases her from needing other people. As long as you've got a credit card in your pocket, you can go it alone - call it a form of consumer confidence.

Levine reckons that she needs to cultivate the skill of asking for help, she needs some non-consumer confidence.

GUILT-TRIPPING DOESN'T WORK

At a dinner party a while ago, we were talking about high energy prices, and one guest made the comment that it was okay for me and Quentin, because we had solar panels, we didn't have to deal with such high electricity bills. I, of course, ever the evangelist, responded that they should get solar panels too, to which the reply was *"It's easy for you to talk, we don't have that kind of money".* To which I replied, *"Well, we chose to spend our money on solar panels, not expensive holidays. Why don't you forgo this year's trip to Portugal?"* Which of course raised hackles and Quentin had to tactfully intervene!

Guilt is the emotional response to a self-perceived shortfall with respect to one's own standards of conduct, and people who feel guilty are motivated to make amends or feel a moral responsibility to behave differently. However, according to the American Psychological Association's report,[18] attempts to shame individuals into adopting pro-environmental behaviours can be ineffective particularly when they lead to rationalizations of behaviour and rejection, resentment, and annoyance at such perceived manipulations. Research in other areas, as well as recent research on reactions to "guilt appeals", indicates that it is important to make distinctions between messages that lead to feelings of guilt, versus those that cause shame, with the former resulting from reflections on one's behaviour and the latter resulting from reflections on personal characteristics.

Dilling & Moser[19] say that we like to think that people who feel guilty want to make amends or feel a moral responsibility to behave differently. Explicit guilt appeals can indeed evoke such feelings, but do not necessarily persuade or induce behaviour change, because individuals just feel resentful or annoyed with overt manipulation. Take someone's reaction to the criticism that they fly a lot. The almost invariably resentful reaction is frequently followed with justifications for why they have to do so – people will maintain their sense of self and identity before changing an environmentally damaging behaviour, unless the new behaviour is consistent with who they want to be in the world.

17 *Judith Levine (2006) Not Buying It- my year without shopping; p.43-6*
18 *Psychology and Global Climate Change: addressing a Multi-faceted Phenomenon and Set of Challenges http://www.apa.org/science/about/publications/climate-change.aspx*
19 *S. Moser & L. Dilling (Eds.) (2007) Creating a Climate for Change; p.71*