In our world today many people believe that it is the ethical duty of wealthier nations to support and share resources with poorer nations. However, there are some who believe that the ethical reasoning behind giving aid to the poor is flawed and ultimately unsound. Garrett Hardin, in his article *Lifeboat Ethics*, creates the lifeboat metaphor to explain and answer the question of resource distribution between nations. Hardin argues that in the real world wealthy nations should not aid poorer nations. I will examine Hardin’s view in relation to why nations should or should not distribute the assets and money they have, specifically in relation to providing humanitarian aid. Ultimately, I will argue that although Hardin generates somewhat justified arguments against aiding the poor, there exist fallacies in his metaphor as well as invalid assumptions in his reasoning. Therefore, I do not believe that the ethical reasons behind rich nations sharing their resources are flawed or unsound.

Briefly, Hardin’s lifeboat metaphor describes a situation in which fifty people are in a lifeboat and in the water surrounding them swim one hundred people, all looking for a place on the boat. Those in the boat are more fortunate, are in the minority, and multiply slower than those in the water. Conversely, those in the water are much less fortunate, are in greater numbers, and are multiplying at a faster rate than those in the boat. The lifeboat has room for ten more people, but the method of choosing those people is left up to the people in the lifeboat. Resources are limited and are inevitably going to disappear. Hardin’s argument is that those on the lifeboat will collectively choose to not let anyone on the boat because helping a few may risk all of their lives. He says that those who truly feel guilty for those in the water will sacrifice their place on the boat for someone in the water, still maintaining the same number of people in the lifeboat. Hardin explains that this situation can be applied on a global scale; wealthy nations representing those in the boat and poorer nations representing those in the water. Essentially, he argues that in the real world, every nation will look out for itself because with depleting resources, its own survival comes first. Nations are running out of the resources and space for a rapidly growing population. Those who can support themselves are the minority, and a vast majority of poorer nations look to the help of that minority. Hardin’s metaphor essentially argues against more privileged nations helping less fortunate nations. He expands his argument by using real world applications, including the giving of humanitarian aid.

Hardin’s lifeboat metaphor is flawed in many ways. The metaphor itself has invalid statements. How can the people in the lifeboat or in the water be multiplying? In reality, survivors of a crash that are in or out of a lifeboat would be decreasing in numbers not increasing, and eventually the number of people would become less and less significant. The less people there are to choose from, the more likely people in the lifeboat are going to choose to save some of them. Therefore, Hardin’s argument cannot apply to the real world of growing populations. Even further, Hardin makes a few Ad Hominem attacks against “misguided idealists” and “kind-hearted liberals” showing that his arguments are biased and therefore unsound. The main problem with Hardin’s metaphor is that it over simplifies what the real world is actually like. In the lifeboat, people are essentially left with two options: save none and live, or save all or some and risk dying. In the real world, you do not risk your life by attempting to help or save others. Wealthy nations are not risking their own survival as a nation by aiding poorer nations. The circumstances on a lifeboat are too exclusive. Nations are not individual people and do not act as such.

Humanitarian aid is one of the foremost methods of distributing resources from wealthy nations to poor nations. Hardin gives the example of the proposed World Food Bank to support his theory. He brings up four arguments against the formation of World Food Bank that I will in turn attempt to refute. Firstly, he disputes that the millions of dollars that go toward humanitarian aid ultimately results in losses for businesses and worsens the economy. He cites the previous implementation of Public Law 480, or the “Food for Peace program” that shifted the surplus of grain in the United States to countries with food-shortages. This law cost businesses millions of dollars to help support his theory. This consequently caused a myriad of small economic mishaps throughout the nation. Therefore, Hardin states a World Food Bank is not in the economic interest of wealthy nations. Hardin’s second argument is that the monetary aid that is given is not always put towards eliminating hunger and promoting peace. He says that some of the money is guaranteed to be spent on other selfish interests, which defeats the purpose of the aid in the first place, and can even worsen the situations. For example, businesses will donate secondary goods that were recalled or flawed to poorer nations because they want to profit from the good publicity while also getting rid of the proof of their money loss. His next argument assumes that some emergency situations can merit humanitarian aid. He says that a problem arises when determining what situations are emergencies and who determines this. He implies that biases can once again corrupt the aid that is given and it becomes unwise to send aid at all. Hardin’s last argument is simply that poorer nations will become dependent on the aid that they will be given and will never learn how to be self-sufficient.

Hardin’s four arguments against humanitarian aid all essentially do not properly address the ethics behind sending aid. Worsening the economy is not an ethical problem. He is only looking at the issue of giving humanitarian aid as an economical transaction. The fact that sending aid will cause businesses problems is not a moral issue. Hardin assumes that nations as a whole are greedy, which is not always necessarily true. Hardin argues that helping poorer nations can make wealthier nations have a better reputation from an international standpoint, proving that their reasons for sending aid are not ethically sound. However, Hardin is making a general claim here that does not necessarily have complete truth value. He cannot state (without making false assumptions) that all those in the government involved with gathering and sending humanitarian aid are solely trying to better the reputation of their nation. Similarly, Hardin cannot necessarily guarantee that some of the money given to humanitarian aid will go to corrupted individuals or groups. Lastly, Hardin argues that poorer nations will become dependent on wealthier nations, but this is not a moral reason not to help them. If anything, wealthier nations can teach poorer nations how to become self-sufficient by giving aid.

Although Hardin has some evidence to support his claims, I definitely believe that humanitarian aid should be given to those in need. Consciously, I would feel guilty not helping those less fortunate than me. This is because morally, I have been conditioned to believe that because I have been blessed with good fortune, I should help those who are cursed with bad fortune. It is not my fault that I am in my position and it is not their fault that they are in their position. If I do not deserve what I have, they definitely do not deserve to live the way they do, so I would help them. Of course, in the example of the lifeboat, I would definitely support Hardin’s plan because my individual survival would outweigh that of the others in the water; I would not give up my position up on the boat. However, on a larger scale the concept of a lifeboat just does not apply. My life is not at stake if I help those less fortunate than me.

Similarly, if the government of a wealthy nation was witnessing an injustice to a poorer nation and could help to save the lives of many, than I think the nation would make at least some humanitarian effort to help. Hardin is applying his theory of individuals to massive amounts of people, and this is the flaw I see in his plan. Hardin attempts to refute my argument by explaining that each individual in the giving nation is negatively affected for every individual in the receiving nation that is positively affected by the aid. However, if we are attempting to create a better world, improving living conditions for the incredibly poor is worth decreasing living conditions for the incredibly fortunate. We cannot blame the poor for not having the proper resources to help them, but we can blame ourselves for not giving them any resources that we can spare.

Hardin does not feel guilty for his inaction because he does not take an ethical or moral stand on the issue. He is looking at the issue economically. He is not thinking about the gains of the people who can be saved, but the losses of those who are trying to help. Essentially, in my opinion, not taking action against an injustice may be just as bad as the injustice itself. If we have at least some resources to share, we should because these resources are going towards the betterment of our world as a whole. I believe that nations should work towards bettering the world, because in the end we are all in the same boat. Feeling empathy for the poor allows you to detach yourself from your material possessions, and therefore I believe you are able to truly understand why those who are less fortunate should be helped.