


AGORA

Lifeboats and their problems: On the downsides of an influential metaphor in political theory

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Abstract

Boat-based metaphors, which portray individual societies or even humanity as a whole as cast adrift on a sea of challenges, have resonated within political theory since the time of Plato, and they continue to frame how we understand and respond to key political choices. However, unless handled very carefully, they can facilitate mis-framings of our contemporary predicament. To date, these metaphors have often done a poor job of capturing the ecological challenges we face. They also risk downplaying the messy pluralism that enduringly characterises political life. If this is true, we should be suspicious of the conclusions their authors seek to draw about our collective future. Lifeboat metaphors, I will suggest, are prone to the same general problems but also add some distinctively their own. As a consequence they should be deployed with especial caution.

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Boat-based metaphors, which portray individual societies or even humanity as a whole as cast adrift on a sea of challenges, have resonated within political theory since the time of Plato. As Itamar Mann notes in his thought-provoking meditation on survival and catastrophe (Mann 2025), they continue to frame how we understand and respond to key political choices. I worry, however, that unless handled very carefully, they can facilitate mis-framings of our contemporary predicament. To date, these metaphors have often done a poor job of capturing the ecological challenges we now face. They also risk downplaying the messy pluralism that enduringly characterises political life. If this is true, we should be suspicious of the conclusions their authors seek to draw about our collective future. Lifeboat metaphors, I will suggest, are prone to the same general problems but also add some distinctively their own. As a consequence they should be deployed with especial caution.

In this response, I will first explore the drawbacks of boat-based metaphors in general, and then engage more specifically with the ‘catastrophic’ and ‘providential’ lifeboats that Mann so effectively skewers. I argue that these two metaphors are even more flawed than he recognises, and that their drawbacks should raise alarm bells about the resort to lifeboat

metaphors in general. I conclude by raising some questions about the commonist lifeboat metaphor which Mann believes performs better.

The problem with boats

My claim is not that reflecting on lifeboats, and what might happen in them, is not interesting: the stories that Mann tells are captivating. Neither do I want to make any sweeping claims about the role of idealisation and abstraction in political theory. In his paper 'Law and Politics from the Sea', Mann suggests that lifeboat metaphors, even if they are idealized and abstracted, can capture important truths about the political situation we face (Mann 2024: 93). Perhaps that is so.

But to be (politically) useful, metaphors still have to approximate *something* about the collective challenges we face. The devil will be in the detail: how much can we infer from *this* example to the key challenges of our time? This is a topic of ongoing debate, in which the vices and virtues of lifeboat metaphors have already been repeatedly picked over. In his book *Justice for Hedgehogs*, for instance, Ronald Dworkin (2011) imagines a lifeboat example in which one person must be sacrificed in order to save the rest. It is simply not obvious, he claims, that we should consider voting the right decision-procedure when determining who will be cast overboard. Crucially, Dworkin thinks this undermines the case for majority rule more broadly. In response, Jeremy Waldron (2010) rejoins that our democracies are very different to lifeboats, and that conclusions about the appropriateness of majority rule in the nautical case might well not carry over to our everyday political situation. More pointedly, he alleges that the 'constant introduction' of lifeboat-based examples in political theory distracts us from the pressing questions we actually face in politics. (Neither Dworkin nor Waldron notices that, as Mann makes clear, democracy is *not* the usual decision-procedure in lifeboat survival cases anyway).

Waldron does not tell us much about how social or political life at large differs from the situation onboard a boat. But we can attempt to draw out some key differences. First, we might note, boats are man-made. But the Earth is not; nor can we manufacture another planet if we happen to sink this one. Second, boats, in these examples, are steered by us. But to apply this thought to our planet as a whole is to fall prey to a kind of Anthropocene hubris. We are not, in fact, steering the planet as a pilot steers a boat; we do not know how to do that, and we should beware the claims of the 'geoengineers' who claim they do. Third, boats can only move in one direction at a time. But amidst the messy pluralism which is constitutive of political life this is never true. Each society, and our planet as a whole, is pulled in many different directions simultaneously – which is why the claim of any leader to steer the boat of the nation is just as hubristic as the claim of the technocrat to steer its ecosystems. Fourth, boats stay on the surface of the ocean, and boat metaphors imply a situation in which we are buffeted by the natural world rather than truly being part of it. This, though, suggests an unhelpful dualism between man and the forces of nature, which the denizens of the boat valiantly struggle against.

Lifeboat metaphors seem to me to inherit all of these problems but add distinctive problems of their own. For one thing, the condition of being on a lifeboat is typically conceived of as being temporary or transitory: the lifeboat's inhabitants await somewhere else to live, or the prospect of rescue. But that is not reflective of our collective predicament as a species. Despite the boasts of billionaires with their rocket-ships, there is scant reason to believe that we will colonise other planets, at least in the coming decades. And, as appealing as some readers of science fiction might find this prospect, we should not pin

our hopes on being rescued by actors wiser than us. Earth is, in short, not a temporary home: it is our only home, which we simply have to protect. For another thing, the existential problem on the lifeboat – aside from exposure to the elements – is characteristically a lack of material sustenance. The inhabitants of the lifeboat face a condition that political theorists call ‘extreme’ rather than moderate scarcity, in which the basic needs of all cannot simultaneously be met (hence recourse to voting, or the drawing of lots, to adjust the mortal calculus). But barring civilisational collapse – which we cannot entirely rule out – this is not our collective predicament either. Our current challenge is one of relative scarcity, in which the basic needs of all *could* be met, but where our economic and political systems thwart the projects of the poor at every turn – where desperate need is not a logical necessity, but rather a choice. Forcing our perspective onto the deck of the lifeboat may distract us from the political and distributive problems we actually face, persuading us that mortal sacrifices are inevitable when they are not.

I want to say a bit more about these worries by reflecting on specific (albeit metaphorical) lifeboats: first the catastrophic version, then the providential variant, and finally Mann’s preferred commonist model.

Sinking the catastrophic lifeboat

Garret Hardin’s famous lifeboat example reprised Malthusian themes, suggesting that helping the global poor will only exacerbate suffering in the world, and possibly capsize rich-world economies to boot. Mann recognises that Hardin’s metaphor is ultimately designed to protect the privileges of wealthy nations (Mann 2025: 10–12). We might also observe that Hardin’s lifeboat argument implicitly assumes that nations should control ‘their’ resources – and in so doing defines away real-world histories of conquest and colonialism (Tuana 2020: 110). It is no part of Hardin’s intention to ask questions about how the rich-world lifeboat came to be built, or on the proceeds of whose energies. To these blind spots, we can add flat-out contradictions in Hardin’s morality tale. He assumes that owning more resources makes *us* (in the North) more sensible in our actions, but at the same time believes that more resources will only make *them* (in the South) more profligate. He ignores substantial evidence that higher birth rates are in part a response to poverty, and (as Mann notes) the possible implication that people concerned with ‘overpopulation’ should want to tackle poverty rather than ignoring it.

Mann argues that we should reject the catastrophic lifeboat metaphor as a guide to the choices we face. I agree. But it is important to be clear about exactly *how* it mis-frames our collective predicament. In essence, the catastrophic lifeboat pushes questions about *comparative* justice (in which we question why some have so much, and others so little) to one side, by (falsely) claiming that our situation is one of absolute scarcity, in which some must starve as a matter of simple logic. Notably, Hardin wrote in 1968 – a time of peak worry about ‘over-population’. But it is abundantly clear now that human population growth is not the key issue when it comes to climate change or sustainability more broadly. The birthrate is now below replacement levels in Europe, North and South America and Asia. Africa will soon follow. Global population growth is now sustained primarily by better medicine and diet. Reproductive choices are just not the issue, and claiming they are simply diverts attention from the unsustainable lifestyles of the affluent.

We can see, then, that Hardin’s mortal questions – who is on the boat? How many can fit? – are convenient misdirections. This is not to deny that the world faces hard choices – such as whether we can mitigate climate change rapidly, tackle the biodiversity crisis *and*

continue with high-impact practices like eating meat (Rowlands 2021; Armstrong 2024a, 2024b). But in our world of affluence, starvation is a collective choice, not an existential predicament.

Although he had his own political axes to grind, Hardin was not as much of an outlier in some of his framing assumptions as we might suppose. Even though the Green Revolution was already well under way by the late 1960s and 70s, political theorists of a variety of ideological hues continued to believe that a crisis of absolute scarcity was looming. Onora O'Neill, in her article 'Lifeboat Earth', argued that questions of distributive justice must be recast against a backdrop of looming famine. Lifeboat-type situations, once thought rare, were becoming our collective predicament, she argued, because our 'expected future situation' was now one of 'global insufficiency' (O'Neill 1975: 278–279; 281). Theorists like John Rawls might have framed their theories as a response to moderate scarcity (Rawls 1971), but the question of survival would soon be 'staring us in the face' (O'Neill 1975: 292). This, we now know, was false. More significantly, the catastrophic lifeboat metaphor sustains a mis-framing. Like global poverty, the climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis are massive global problems that we are signally failing to grapple with. But they are problems of distribution and power, and not problems of absolute scarcity. If there is a vivid symbol of the challenges we face, then we might say, somewhat provocatively, that it lies less with a shortage of lifeboats and more with a surfeit of megayachts – symbols of ecological irresponsibility, squandered resources and the flight of the rich from their wider responsibilities (Armstrong 2023).

Tearing up the design manual: responding to the providential lifeboat

The providential lifeboat metaphor depicts planet Earth as a fragile vessel in need of careful steering. Steering, here, means far more than plotting a direction of travel. Earth is conceived of as a complex ecosystem, with many distinct functions and a multitude of components, which enlightened technocrats (and only them) will be able to oversee effectively. The apogee of this metaphor is to be found in Richard Buckminster Fuller's *Operational Manual for Spaceship Earth* (1969), which calls on 'the engineering elite to take control of an environment in bad repair' (Höhler 2008: 66). It is a vision for a world of major environmental and social challenges – but challenges, crucially, which can still be successfully met: rational government is capable of averting tragedy. Unlike the catastrophic metaphor, the Spaceship Earth metaphor resists the language of extreme scarcity, for instance. Rather than hard limits, we face engineering challenges, which are tractable given the right decisions and a judicious application of technology.

In some ways Fuller's Spaceship Earth metaphor is undoubtedly preferable to Hardin's bleak Malthusian vision. Rather than a flotilla of nationalist lifeboats resorting to push-back tactics, Fuller places all of humanity in a single, earth-shaped vessel. As Mann suggests, this metaphor emphasises our interconnectedness and interdependence (Mann 2025: 9). But interdependence can sometimes be a euphemism for inequality and exploitation. As Höhler (2008: 75) has pointed out, in discussions about Spaceship Earth, 'colonial history, global power relations, and disparities in wealth were rarely taken into account'. Questions about the optimal design of the planetary system took priority, it seems, over reckoning with structural and historical injustices.

The Spaceship Earth metaphor also clearly has a pluralism problem. As a vessel, the Spaceship can only be steered in one direction at once, and its systems are designed in only one way. The emphasis is on the clarity and skill, rather than the inclusiveness, of

decision-making. The Spaceship is, in Fuller's words, 'an integrally designed machine which to be persistently successful must be comprehended and serviced in total' (Fuller 1969: 52). But if it is only enlightened technocrats who are up to the task, science and technology fill in the space usually reserved for democracy.

Finally, the metaphor has a serious problem when it comes to non-humans. Unlike Hardin's lifeboat, Spaceship Earth does at least include the plants and animals that populate the planet alongside us, and on which we depend. But it will not, crucially, contain all of them. To the contrary, the wise pilots of Spaceship Earth will judge some animals to be indispensable, while others will be considered surplus to requirements. Engineers will aim to arrive at an 'optimal combination' of organisms (Höhler 2008: 73), with the implications for those who do not make the cut left unspoken. This is objectionable in at least two very serious ways. First, it is hubristic: it assumes that humans *can* successfully replace the products of millions of years of evolution and mutual adaptation with even more effective ecosystems of their own design. But there is very little indication that they can do this: experiments in designing ecosystems tend to end badly. This kind of hubris also helps explain why there has been so much concern about proposals to geoe engineer the earth's climate (Sovacool 2021). Second, it treats other animals in purely instrumental terms, as resources to be used or discarded in pursuit of human interests. Such an approach will be anathema to those who believe animals have rights of their own, and that their interests ought to be taken into account in decision-making (Magaña 2024).

All aboard the commonist lifeboat?

By contrast to the catastrophic and providential versions of the metaphor, Mann's 'commonist' lifeboat emphasises the customs that humans have developed through their varied encounters with the marine environment. His three key illustrations all relate explicitly to the natural environment and humans' place within it. For all that, however, the place of non-humans in this metaphor is somewhat elusive. Within the commonist metaphor, are the animals who populate our planet in far greater numbers than us *in* the boat, or outside of it? In Mann's article as a whole, nature or the environment feature mainly in the guise of physical forces with which humans have to contend (such as weather or climate), or, when they take the form of individual living organisms, as either predators (sharks) or prey (turtles) (Mann 2025: 8). But of course animals co-inhabit the earth with us (Armstrong 2025). Although we are often rivals, we also depend on them, and we might have duties towards them. If so, perhaps animals should be thought of as being onboard, like us. If animals *are* in the boat with us, we will be forced to tackle difficult questions of ecological justice (what kind of claims do animals have over scarce resources? Should they count for more, or less, than humans?). If they are not in the lifeboat with us, by contrast, such questions fade into the background. These are not, perhaps, the main questions Mann wants to address with his commonist lifeboat metaphor. But since his account foregrounds themes of environment and climate politics, neither can they be seen as marginal.

There is certainly a prior history of using lifeboat metaphors to ponder our moral relationship with animals, including cases where animals are definitively in the boat alongside human beings. In *The Case for Animal Rights* (Regan 1983), for instance, Tom Regan resorted to several lifeboat examples. In one of them, we are asked to imagine that four humans and a dog face starvation through a shortage of rations. In such a case, Regan tells us, the human castaways would be justified in throwing the dog into the sea to save

food. They would be justified because death is less of a harm for dogs than it is for us, given that non-human animals lack a sense of the future.

Much ink could be spilled pondering whether Regan is right that we should kill the dog in order to save the human castaways. But such a question deflects attention from a more fundamental problem, which is that posing the question in this way simply fails to illuminate – in fact, obscures – our existential predicament on a degraded planet. Specifically, I worry that such lifeboat examples deflect attention from the fact that, without animals (and plants), there'd be no human life in the first place. The either/or choice Regan presents us with constitutes an interesting moral thought experiment, but it does little to help us think through the future of the planet. The risk, then, is that such examples individualise and decontextualise the choices we face. This may not be a serious problem if the goal is to get us to think about the question of moral standing. But it is a serious problem if the goal is to get us to think about our options in the context of climate change and wider ecological crisis. Cathryn Bailey (2009: 148) has argued, perceptively I think, that in these kinds of examples 'animals may be left in the wake, not so much as actual sentient beings, but as hypothetical placeholders who function to keep us from having to seriously consider changing our behavior at all.' We are unavoidably in a situation of dependence on the non-human world – and unavoidably part of it. That fact is obscured by questions about whether we should throw the dog overboard or not. In Claire Colebrook's words, the lifeboat keeps us 'alive but stranded, cut off from the world' (Colebrook 2023: 88). It cannot help us to ponder our existential predicament, because it comprehensively mischaracterises it.

Conclusion

In this contribution, I have not attempted to write boat-based metaphors off completely. Neither do I mean to deny that reflecting on forms of life, and solidarity, on board actual boats can inspire broader political change (Scharenberg 2024). The enduring nature of nautical metaphors is no doubt a testament to the fact that they can be turned to radical uses as well as more conservative ones. Nevertheless, all political metaphors are simplifying – indeed, to point this out is hardly an objection. I have implied, however, that there may be something in the structure of lifeboat metaphors – which depict humans (and very occasionally individual animals too) as cast away within an inhospitable environment – which is particularly unhelpful. From the point of view of global justice, these metaphors, as Mann notices, are sometimes used for unpalatable political ends. But they also frame humanity's relationship with the natural environment in a way that may obscure rather than illuminating our ecological predicament. They may be ill-suited to recognising the essential co-constitution, and interdependence, of humans and the wider natural environment. And they may trick us into believing that it is us, in the end, who are steering this vessel.

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