

The Moral Missteps of Climate Activism



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These collected essays were designed, written, and originally published separately. The intention was for them to stand alone so that someone uninitiated with the subject would be able to read any individual one in isolation, and not need to reference the others in order for it to be easily comprehensible. And so there is a slight overlap across the essays – the occasional restating of ideas, developments and principles.

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1. Greta Thunberg, Child Soldier



The way she was *justified*, is the way we should *judge* her.

It has been a month since Swedish teenager, Greta Thunberg, stole the show at the United Nations with her passion, her outrage, and her *person*. What everyone agreed upon at the time was that she made people uncomfortable – and, of course, that was the idea!

It was the fizzing emotions and the smirk of disgust behind American President, Donald Trump's, back that drew the camera to her alone, but she was in New York with an entourage: a line-up of fifteen other teenagers, from across the globe, with only two things in common – their climate activism and their age.

Filing a civil suit against five 'large polluters', all selected for their greenhouse gas emissions and their ratification of the third optional protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the rich irony of the moment seemed to completely pass the audience by.

This protocol merely allows suits to be registered directly by children – and so there was no obvious gravity behind the actions themselves. And it's not appropriate to expect those teenagers – Thunberg as their *de facto* leader – to understand exactly why *they* were there, why *they* had been chosen, and propelled into so unnatural of circumstances, so quickly... child soldiers rarely do.

The phenomena of children in combat – the real ones, with real weapons – only make strategic sense when you see them on the ground. There is little doubt children were first used in armed conflicts only as a desperate plan-B, simply because there weren't enough available adults. But battlefield lessons are often the most quickly learnt.

With less developed personalities, and more vulnerable to influence, child soldiers are easier to recruit, cheaper to maintain, easier to manipulate, think less independently, and lack a true sense of fear and consequence.

So they are also more likely to follow orders, less likely to complain, more willing to undertake dangerous missions, tend to show more loyalty, respond more instinctively to the promises of reward or punishment, are more susceptible to group dynamics and promises of grandeur, and seek the comforts of family (with the military becoming a surrogate).

Children bring something unique to the table, something that unfortunately makes them incredibly effective military assets, and incredibly useful to the adult soldiers still in their ranks – they present a dilemma for the enemy.

It's hard enough to ever get comfortable with the idea of killing another adult, even in self-defence. What happens then when you look down the rifle scope and see a child instead? Sure, they are uniformed, armed, and combat hardened, but in their face, their stature, and their voice, they are still very much a child, with everything that entails.

In short, child soldiers are effective exactly because they don't play by the same rules. Do you hold your ground and engage them? Do you run away or surrender? Either way you lose!

This is why Greta Thunberg's appearance at the United Nations was so effective and so unsettling at the same time. Most people – ordinarily deep in the opposing trenches of this conflict – suddenly didn't know how to fight back... or even if they should. Those who did, suffered predictable battle wounds – accused of punching down, and bullying a teenager.

Her enemies were clearly rattled, but her allies should have been also. During her address – her voice quivering with outrage – Thunberg was angry, shaken, but above all fearful. You could feel the overwhelming weight of her burden – the long term environmental effects of climate change were being locked-in around her, and soon it would be her generation to bear the cost.

She was right to be worried! But just because a war is justified, it doesn't then follow that *children* are justified in fighting it. All over the world today there are parents in desperate situations – with real world hardship and suffering at their door – looking down at their terrified sons and daughters, and instead choosing to force a smile, to lighten the mood, to change the subject; anything to distract from what is actually happening.

They are not in denial and they are not lying to their families – they are simply choosing to have the fight alone, so that their children can continue to be children.

Climate change inaction is the problem here, but it is not Greta Thunberg's problem. The adults in her life have let her down. By her own account, Thunberg's parents were resistant when she first started pushing them to lower their family's carbon footprint. Eventually, of course, she won them around to their long denied 'responsibility' – increasing their recycling efforts, becoming vegans, and giving up commercial air travel.

Having recruited new soldiers to the fight, this should have been an end to the teenager's tour of duty. Instead she was promoted and rearmed by various foundations, non-profits, and institutions like the United Nations.

It was visible then, and it is obvious still, that this is all taking its toll on Thunberg. In post-conflict zones across the world the physical and emotional consequences of battle on child soldiers is there to be seen. Forced into situations beyond their years, they are soon plagued by health issues such as depression, anxiety, and insomnia; not to mention extreme forms of post-traumatic stress disorder and life-long psychological distress.

Valued specifically for their youth, and so only useful in the short term, child soldiers – by what they are – burn out fast. At which point they are discarded and replaced by someone younger – someone with everything that was earlier prized in them. Damaged and no longer useful, they are dumped out into the sudden emptiness of real life – lost, confused, and a danger to themselves and others.

Seated in the audience, listening to Greta Thunberg's own words - "*This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here*", "*how dare you*", "*You have stolen my dreams*" – it was amazing that no one glanced around at the chamber they were in, stood up, took the microphone from her hands, and gently eased her off stage.

This was the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, charged with upholding the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and specifically these words: "*the child, by reason of his [her] physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care*".

2. The Blind Spot of Climate Activism



From Greta Thunberg at the United Nations to Extinction Rebellion on the streets of London, Climate activism is back in fashion. As the days edge forward and the planet continues to warm – as things become increasingly desperate – these moments of protest are only likely to grow larger, louder, and deliberately more intolerable. And they will also continue to fail, for the simple reason that they don't understand *who* or *what* they are actually fighting against.

There has been enough modelling, enough resources, enough consensus, and enough opportunities to falsify the data, if it were possible. Indeed, the first hints of the problem came as early as the 19th century, from a series of scientific estimates for the warming effects of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other gases like methane.

More than half a century later, in 1965, the President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC) in America oversaw the first thorough assessment of the effects of CO₂ emissions in the atmosphere. Before long, the 'Study of Man's Impact on the Climate' and the 'Study of Critical Environmental Problems' came to the same conclusions. The World Climate Research Programme (WCRP) was soon formed, and the First World Climate Conference was held in 1979.

The cascade of new proofs, confirmatory information, and deeper understanding, hasn't let up since.

It should now be impossible for any thinking person to deny that we live on a rapidly warming planet, or that *We* – human beings – are largely responsible for this. Just as it should be impossible to deny the existential risks associated with this changing climate. And yet this is clearly not the case!

In the face of such an overwhelming truth, and an equally overwhelming malaise of inaction, the rise of climate activism is understandable. In fact, they are taking their lead from what are – in this field – sources of authority.

From that First World Climate Conference in 1979, to a second in 1985 in Villach, Austria, onwards to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992, the 1997 Kyoto protocols, the 'Bali Road Map', the 2009 Copenhagen Accords, Durban in 2011, the 2012 'Continuation of

Kyoto', and now the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, the international ambition has always remained the same – to pressure and shame governments and people into taking full, remedial, responsibility for their greenhouse gas emissions.

The idea is simple: if the overwhelming majority of the world's population are aware that their everyday behaviour is causing themselves and their community future harm (with the associated costs of acting today vastly outweighing the likely costs of suffering through it tomorrow), and yet they still don't make the necessary changes, then there must be something wrong with the message, or with its delivery.

So protests become louder and more intrusive, and instead of listening to statesmen and scientists we are lectured-to by well-known celebrities and frightened teenage girls. And yet with every escalation of this kind, with every new initiative, the same mistake is being made!

Step back from this for a moment, and imagine yourself in the middle of a quiet street. On the other side you see a close friend of yours walk out of a shop; you smile at each other and wave hello. Then suddenly you hear a deafening gunshot, and at the far end of the road you see a man aiming a high powered rifle. You jump instinctively for cover, and now laying on the ground you look up and see your friend standing unmoved, as if oblivious to what has just happened.

In a panic, you motion towards your friend, imploring him to run, to hide, to do *something*. He looks back at you, nods to confirm his understanding of the danger, and then starts walking casually toward the shooter. Another bullet fizzes narrowly by, and you shout a warning. You scream in the direction of your friend, telling him that there is a man with a gun, that he is trying to kill you both, and sooner or later, if your friend continues getting closer to him, then that is exactly what is going to happen.

His stride unbroken, and still walking towards the shooter, your friend turns his head to acknowledge what you have just said. He calmly explains to you that he fully understands what is happening, that he takes the situation seriously, that he absolutely does not want to die, and that you are both on entirely the same page here. He then turns away, and keeps walking.

You continue screaming, louder, clearer and with more visceral concern each time... your friend continues idling nonchalantly toward his certain death.

Whether you like it or not, the problem you are now facing has little to do with the armed lunatic firing bullets your way, and everything to do with the psychology of the friend you are trying to save. With the right planning the shooter could be dealt with, or perhaps simply avoided; getting inside the mind of your friend, and manoeuvring through the psychosis he is displaying, is a much less certain, and much less pleasant task.

This is where we are at with climate change, walking happily toward catastrophe while acknowledging that that is exactly what we are doing. And yet despite their experience in this, the broader community of climate activists seem to still believe that if they can only raise their voices loudly enough, if they can only repeat their message enough times, in slightly different ways, then they might finally break through from claiming peoples' attention to also changing their behaviour.

The aim here, the purpose of climate activism, is surely to do more than just fight – it must be to win... and to survive.

In many ways, this mirror's the current gun debate across America today. Whenever polled, an overwhelming majority of citizens support greater restrictions on the sale and ownership of firearms

– pushed along in no small part by high rates of gun violence, and the particularly scarring episodes of mass shootings. After each massacre of this kind, a new energy is found, and all the talk is of *'this finally being the catalyst for tighter controls'* – only for the moment to be lost, with most people soon forgetting about their own self-professed desire for change.

The future battleground for climate activism – and gun control for that matter – cannot be just a replay of the last one, only with the intensity dial wound up a few more notches. The enemy here is *Us* – human beings – and specifically human minds. There is something about our biology or our culture that turns us instinctively away from sacrificing for the future, and makes us resistant to problems of this kind.

To push ahead with strategies of pressure, shame and coercion, is to make the same blind mistake as those people on the opposite end of the climate debate who are still denying that the problem is real. From either direction, wishful thinking is not helpful.

Whether it is a technical innovation – something capable of removing carbon from the atmosphere – or a novel work-around for the psychological barriers within us, what we do know for sure is that the answer is uncertain, and perhaps yet unthought-of. The whole game from here out, must be to find it as quickly as possible. Yet it will only become apparent if we first acknowledge the actual problem before us, and stop trying to solve the one we wish we had in its place.

3. Sustainability is Unsustainable



It is a sad fact about philosophy that physicists tend to do it better... David Deutsch does it better! A pioneer in the fields of *quantum computation* and the *many universes interpretation* of quantum mechanics, Deutsch also thinks that we have it all wrong on climate change. Not the science! He agrees with the consensus regarding our CO₂ admissions and the warming of our planet. But when it comes to the philosophical implications of that scientific understanding, we are entirely confused.

Imagine yourself drifting through the ocean, underneath the waves, in a large, well designed submarine. Equipped with all the latest safety mechanisms, escape valves, and improvements in performance, this submarine is the pinnacle of technological advancement – the pinnacle of human knowledge – the best that we can do... so far. Every comfort that you enjoy in life is due to the technology around you, but it is also your life support system – without it you would die almost instantaneously, swallowed by the ocean.

Now imagine that one of your fellow passengers, born into the safety of the submarine, begins staring whimsically at the picturesque beauty outside. Then, forgetting just how unimaginably inhospitable that scenery actually is, and ignoring all warnings that it represents our near certain death, they open a hatch in order to get a better view.

For Deutsch, the submarine works as an analogy for civilization as we know it and the progress we have made as a species. The opening of the hatch is a commonly exhibited failure to properly understand just how fragile a position we are in, as well as just what it took to get us here – safe, alive, and relatively comfortable inside our biosphere. The person opening the hatch, and ending the whole project of human life, is representative of the sustainability movement.

To explain this properly we will need to take a step back to the Great Rift Valley and our origins as a species in Eastern Africa. We first evolved there with genes specifically designed for our environment, living – just as with all other species – the normal, sustainable life for which nature intended. And just as with all other species, including all other species that have ever lived on this planet, it almost killed us. *“Nasty, brutish and short doesn’t begin to describe it” – it was “sheer hell!”*

The rivers were clean, the skies were clear, the earth visibly untouched by human endeavour, yet we never had it so bad. Beyond the obvious fears of starvation, exposure to extreme weather and threats from predators, micro-organisms such as cholera bacillus were also evolving specifically to kill mammals like ourselves. As far as we can be considered, on balance, to be polluting the biosphere today, the opposite was true for all of pre-modern history – the biosphere was polluting *Us!*

The statement that *‘99.99% of all species that have ever existed have gone extinct’* is repeated so frequently that its meaning is often not properly appreciated. There is a real lesson in this perpetual genocide: that is, in the natural course of events, environments kill their inhabitants. Improvements in gene technology, through evolution, offer the means for a brief, backs-to-the-wall resistance – but one that is destined to eventually fail. As witnessed by all those other species.

Yet unlike all other species, *We* have a unique weapon in this fight for survival – the capacity for *explanatory knowledge*. And there exists an intimate link between *explaining* and *controlling* the world around us. Our ancestors needed explanatory knowledge to survive the Great Rift Valley (knowledge that is now lost to most of us), just as new forms of such knowledge allow us to survive, and occasionally thrive in, our environments today. How hospitable an environment is, is simply based on what the inhabitants know.

The trouble is, those immediate descendants of the move out of Africa – people with brains nearly identical to our own – continued to live similarly miserable lives. Their *“ability to make progress remained unused”*.

If a future archaeologist were to discover your remains at some point in the future, they would be able to accurately place your age – likely to the exact year – by analysing your surrounding technology. However scientists studying those ancient civilizations cannot place discovered artefacts (technology) for anything closer than a period of 10,000 years. Inventions, such as improvements in spearheads, better designed farming techniques, or even fire, were so uncommon, that in the course of an individual’s life, nothing ever changed.

But it wasn’t for lack of trying. *“In every aspect of their lives they wished for progress, just as we do, but they failed almost completely to make any. They didn’t know how to”*. For David Deutsch, the *“tragedy of that protracted stagnation isn’t sufficiently recognised”*.

Human history is a history of hardship and suffering not because it has to be so, but because it is also a history of near-complete stasis. And this is why 'sustainability' is such a dangerous idea. The term has two complementary meanings: 'unchanging' and 'providing'. It's the idea that we can find a stable, non-dangerous way of life, where no more existential problems arise that require creativity and progress to solve. This is Garden of Eden-type thinking – environments never *sustain* anything!

For this reason, we simply don't have a recorded history for most of the static societies that have existed, because they just don't survive very long – destroyed by the first major problem they encountered that required progress and innovation.

So what changed? Well the enlightenment was the break-out moment, but what had actually changed was a rejection of sustainability and the attached parochialism that claimed: *everything that can be known, is already known*. Understanding that "we shall never reach anything like an *unproblematic state*", that solving problems inevitably produces new problems, and that the only solution is to keep moving forward, *We*, for the first time in human history developed "*the capacity to deal with unforeseen, and unforeseeable failure*" through a commitment to rapid, open-ended progress.

It was inconceivable that we would look back with envy - Global warming has now changed all that!

The risks of a rapidly warming planet – droughts, floods, sea-level rises, agricultural failures, mass extinction, etc. – are undeniably real. But it is also true that by the time that our best theories of human induced climate change began to emerge in the late 1970's, we were already, by any reasonable consideration, locked-in to a catastrophic scenario.

High concentrations of carbon were already in the atmosphere (the warming effects and environmental changes are often delayed), there were few viable alternative energy sources, and underdeveloped populations around the world had already bet their poverty-reduction strategies on exploiting carbon-heavy energy sources. (Not to mention our now demonstrated psychological resistance to altering our standard of living in this regard).

The solution, according to Deutsch, is, and should have been, obvious: we ought to be working on discovering new technologies for removing carbon from the atmosphere or for lowering temperatures by other means. Fringe research in these areas currently involve: encouraging aquatic life to consume more carbon, generating clouds as a means to minimise warming, and placing mirrors in space in order to reflect sunlight, but "*neither supercomputers nor international treaties nor vast sums are devoted to them*".

Instead they are devoted to, and our imaginations are consumed by, the idea of reducing our carbon output – the idea of returning to sustainability and stasis. Yet we have been here before. This is not the first existential crisis that we have faced, and it won't be the last. But if climate change moves us back to pursuing the status quo, then even if it doesn't kill us, the next problem will.

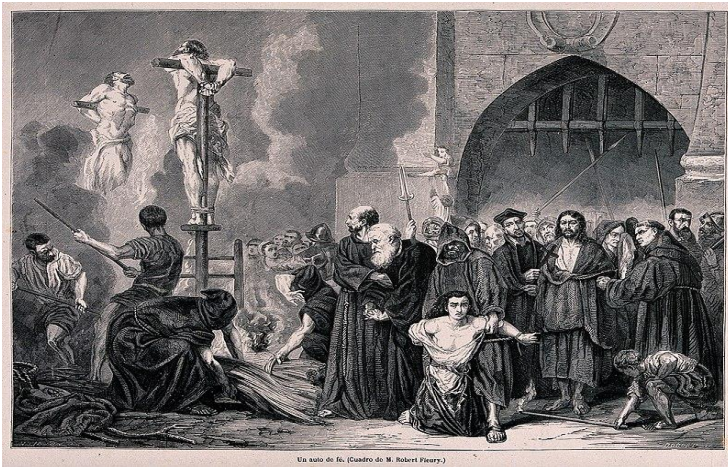
Tactics of prevention and delay can be useful, but they never constitute a future strategy in themselves. For example: "*If you have been punched on the nose, then the science of medicine does not consist of teaching you how to avoid punches*". "*If medical science stopped seeking cures and concentrated on prevention only, then it would achieve very little of either*".

The dangerous thing to do is to imagine that some solutions are beyond our reach. As Deutsch explains, any physical transformation not explicitly forbidden by the laws of nature, is achievable given the right knowledge. And there is just no reason to believe that cooling our atmosphere is a

more intractable problem than that of developing without carbon emissions. What is certain is that *“If we stop solving problems, we are doomed”*.

This brings us back to Deutsch’s submarine. Embodied within all that technology, all that comfort, and all that safety, is a continuous stream of problem solving – not just problem avoidance – stretching all the way back to the enlightenment. Now we are being told that our progress is itself the problem. That we should open the hatches and shrink back into sustainability – the same sustainability that killed all our cousin species. But this has things around entirely the wrong way – *“Sustainability is the disease and people are the cure”*.

4. Pleasure in the Pain of Climate Change



The goal of climate change activism is to be the exception. To be the one civilization that avoids extinction, that continues, and thrives into the future. And yet the central message of all these groups is ironically the one thing that will ensure the opposite happens.

The first inklings of the problem before us happened quite early, with a series of published scientific estimates in the 19th century. By the mid-1960’s people were beginning to approach things a little more seriously, with the creation of climate institutes under the direct funding and support of national governments.

Then it was the eye-catching spectacles of climate summits, all the while evidence mounting up, and the scale of the looming crisis stretching far beyond ordinary points of panic. Yet behind all of this, much-too-much time was lost with insincere debates about the underlying science, all to the detriment of conversations about what we should *actually* be doing in response.

A relative afterthought, and without the same levels of energy, scrutiny, and creativity that have been applied to analysing the problem itself, the world has stumbled into a single pathway out of this crisis, a single solution, all bound-up in a single policy. Namely, limiting our carbon outputs by punishing economic activity.

There are a number of problems with this. As a species we have consistently shown on this issue – and others similar to it – a deep, and so far unshakable, psychological resistance to sacrificing in the present moment for the benefit of our future, or of altering our standard of living in any way.

And despite our early start on climate science, a full enough understanding of the impact of greenhouse gas emissions didn't come about until it was, by any reasonable consideration, already too late to avoid catastrophe, due to the 'lock-in' effects of carbon in the atmosphere.

It's unsettling to think that an existential crisis might sneak up on us in this way, risk bringing the whole project of humanity to its knees, and leave so little obvious recourse. No doubt this is what arouses so much of the climate activism we see, as it gets louder and more intrusive each day. Fear motivates, even when things are at their most hopeless.

But the hopelessness being felt around the issue of climate change today, has nothing to do with climate change at all, and everything to do with that question of what we should do. Though it is popular to think otherwise, we are not boxed into a catastrophe here, for the very reason that we – as a species – have been in this exact same position many times before.

Whether it was new tools for hunting, the development of farming techniques, safeguards on the spread and use of nuclear weapons, or now a solution to climate change, there is a tried and tested pathway out of existential crises of this, and every, kind: technical innovation.

In many ways this is the obvious solution, but it is also the only one available to us. And around the world embryonic projects are trying to do just this with biological carbon capture, chemical sinks, iron fertilization of the oceans, aerosols in the atmosphere to precipitate cooling, and much more. But the resources are just not there, no international treaties have been signed, and there is no galvanised and dedicated community of supporters; no coordinated full-court push of any type.

All the funding, all the initiatives, and all the climate activism, are still devoted to doing the one thing that we know won't work: finding new, and harsher, ways to punish economic activity. Why we would do such a thing requires an explanation – an answer to which lies deep and forgotten inside ourselves: our love of punishment.

We have a range of modern ideas about what punishment should be, why we do it, and what we are hoping it will achieve – typically explained through some combination of 'deterrence', 'retribution', 'reformation', 'reparation' or 'prevention'. But to only try and understand punishment in this way – as a form of behaviour modification – is to ignore its genealogy, and the real value it often still holds.

Originally a philologist by training, Friedrich Nietzsche saw that punishment was something much more instinctive than all of this, something that comes to us naturally, a long way removed from carefully structured responses to carefully designated undesirable behaviours. But also something rarely understood, even by those people administering it.

The link between the German words for guilt [*Schuld*] and debtor [*Schulden*] are a bold reminder of this forgotten history. But it is also there in the records of every known civilization – an explanation of punishment that sounds a lot more like a business transaction than a behaviour modifier.

Within our foundations of justice is a deeply entrenched idea that our actions have a cost, and that this cost must be paid in full – a debt being owed. And then also attachments of guilt to those who fall on the wrong end (as 'buyers' or 'debtors') of this relationship. We hear the hard echoes of this today when prisoners and victims talk about 'debts to society'.

What is slightly less obvious, but just as strong, is the pride associated with those people in the position of 'seller' or 'creditor'. This is why it was once so natural for debts to be passed on and transferable between family members – justice came with a sense of exchange, of compensation, and above all else measurement.

It is here that the question of punishment becomes the question of pain. Traditionally creditors would extract their payment – their justice – through torture and humiliation. Everything has its equivalent price, especially when it comes to dishonour, harm, and offense. So in Nietzsche's words, it became common to "*excise as much flesh as seemed commensurate with the size of the debt*".

But this is still only half the picture, it gets worse... *We* get worse.

Our desire to punish other people is also a means unto itself. Looking back into history again – and written into the founding documents of the three great monotheisms, and as far back as Homer's account of the Trojan Wars – punishment has always taken on a festive-like quality.

On the ground, in daily life, things fared little better, with it being common for aristocratic weddings to include spectacles of torture and execution as part of the celebrations; and for noble households to employ someone for the sole purpose of being a destination for pent-up violence, someone on whom they could "*vent one's malice and cruel teasing*".

There is a truth here that can only be avoided through some effort – we punish others for no other reason than because we enjoy it!

Punishment is pleasure, it's a moment when your enemy is presented to you, belly-up, prostrate, defenceless, and stripped of their rights to dignity and protection. It is an entitlement to be cruel, an excuse to express anger, and the right to mistreat someone else as beneath you.

There is nothing more pleasurable or festive than cruelty, and there is no more satisfying way to be cruel than through the righteous exaction of punishment.

With this still written into our culture as well as our penal codes, it begins to make more sense as to why our global policies to address climate change look the way they do, and why we are pursuing them with so much fervour, and so little scepticism. Policies that, even if enacted, and capable of reducing carbon emissions to zero overnight, would still do nothing to stop the future warming of the planet due to the high levels of carbon already 'locked-in' to our atmosphere.

This can be found in the language of our climate summits and their documents, with the repeated insistence that an arbitrary upper limit on greenhouse gas emissions be set, and then those countries found in breach of these limits be first named responsible, and then punished accordingly. In some instances "*calculation kits*" have even been handed out, so that states, businesses, and everyday people, can painstakingly tally-up their 'historical responsibility'.

Climate change had its break-out moment at the Villach Conference in 1985, a conference that proclaimed to the world: 1. Harm had been caused to the environment by carbon emissions, 2. That *We* were to blame for this, 3. And so a cost was owed by us all, explicitly a sacrifice in our standards of living.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992) dug deeper into the details of this 'owed sacrifice', creating a proportional framework for each state in terms of the harm they had already caused. Later, the Kyoto Protocols (1997) continued to narrow-in on this relationship between 'harm-caused' and 'debt-owed' by dividing responsibility between 'developed' and 'developing' countries.

The informal Copenhagen Accords (2009) and the Paris Climate Agreement (2015) focussed most of their attention on creating a better monitoring and verification system for the implementation of climate punishment. When it became obvious that such a punishment regime could not be agreed

upon, the conference instead decided to 'name and shame' violating countries (a social punishment in place of a physical/material one).

Even beyond such supranational organisations, the policy talk is remarkably consistent – involving very little beyond the proportioning of financial punishments through carbon taxes or emissions trading schemes.

At every step, the question of how to address global warming has been sidelined for, and dominated by, a process of microscopically calculating how much harm has been caused, carefully apportioning percentages of blame to match these calculations, and then insisting that punishment is exacted in full and public terms.

Which brings us back to those climate activists, and what motivates them each day to return to the streets and protest in ever louder ways. Their obsession with the problem before them is clearly genuine, and yet all they talk about is 'punishments' rather than 'solutions'. Through their language, and written on their banners and graffiti, is an unmistakable link to our ugly past.

There is no talk of helping to reform or rehabilitate the perpetrators, instead everything is hyper-moralised and flooded with outrage. From this outrage you can hear the cries of an 'aggrieved creditor', someone who feels individually wronged, and so demands that the 'debt' be repaid in full.

We have an overwhelming instinct to punish people even when it is fruitless and counterproductive, because it satisfies something deep inside ourselves. So a solution to our climate crisis that involves removing carbon from the atmosphere, or artificially lowering temperatures by other means, would be unsatisfactory for many people, because it would also remove their entitlement to inflict related punishments.

The problem would be solved, but the heavy polluters would be excused of their debts, and climate activists would be denied their pound of flesh.

It is always tempting to imagine that the solutions to large and difficult problems are beyond our reach. And this is where the real danger lays. Our rapidly heating planet is not the first existential crisis to confront our species, and it won't be the last. But if we allow global warming to pull us back into our primitive selves, and down a pathway of problem avoidance rather than problem solving, then even if by some chance we avoid the coming annihilation, the next problem – when it arises – will almost certainly destroy us instead.

5. What Climate Activists Get Right



Imagine yourself as a murderer: as someone who, both unprovoked, and with foresight, has just brutally killed your neighbour. There ought to be little doubt as to what moral responsibility you bear for this crime. Anything short of turning yourself into the police, admitting guilt, and accepting a criminal punishment that corresponds to the severity of the harm you have caused, would be a moral injustice.

Now imagine that instead of you being the sole perpetrator of this crime, you have in fact planned it and enacted it, in equal measure, with the help of 99 of your friends. Would it suddenly be just not to turn yourself over to the police, to not admit guilt, and not accept appropriate punishment? Does this change in circumstance absolve you of responsibility for the death of your neighbour? Are you, along with your friends, each only 1 percent of a murderer, or are you all murderers in your own right?

The answer might seem fairly intuitive, but when it comes to climate change we are all too happy to accept just such an exoneration by mass complicity.

The logic runs that, since both the causes and effects of global warming are apropos global, then it would be unreasonable to expect countries with fairly minor carbon footprints to limit their emissions without an agreement from the world's largest emitters that they in turn would do the same. If, for instance, a country were to be proactive, and decide to act alone with climate legislation, they would damage their domestic economy, they would harm their standard of living, and they would have very little impact upon the global effects of climate change. There are simply no prizes for leading the pack on climate action.

While it is conceivable that this logic would fail when considering the development of green technologies, or with efforts to minimise the impact of economic restructuring, it is certainly the case that once the barrier of science denial has been overcome, this understanding of moral responsibility completely infects the climate debate. Hence the near-universal jubilation that was felt after China and the United States, as the world's two largest polluters, found common ground in the lead-up to last year's G20 summit and agreed to a joint limitation of their future carbon emissions.

Still, even if we were to accept this line of reasoning as indisputable fact, it is however, a line of reasoning that entirely loses sight of why climate change matters to us.

This is not a matter of losing sight of the simple question of 'why should we care about climate change?' - The answer to this ought to be obvious - but rather it is a losing sight of the question,

‘why should we care more about climate change than we ought to care about a tsunami, an earthquake, or any other natural disaster, if for instance the harm caused by any such phenomenon is identical in intensity and scope to the harm caused by climate change?’

The answer lies in an understanding of the difference between positive and negative duties.

Imagine a meteorite hitting earth, flooding our skies with ash, damaging our environment, and killing just as much plant and animal life (including human) as will be achieved by our worst estimates of climate change. It might seem on face value that both events, being equally harmful, should exercise our moral concern in equal measure – reasonable however, they should not!

After the meteorite’s damage has become apparent, and considering we are lucky enough to have escaped the worst the suffering, it is right to assume that we have an obligation to help alleviate the misery of others through emergency relief and long-term rebuilding efforts. This is a principle of moral utility that essentially reads, ‘if you can help others at minimal cost to yourself, then you are morally obliged to do so’. This is the same principle that underscores all global charity efforts.

Yet combating the harm caused by climate change cannot be conceived as an act of charity. At least no more so than turning yourself into the police after murdering your neighbour can be conceived as an act charity. Rather, this type of obligation is correctly understood as a moral duty – a ‘positive’ moral duty.

The kind of behaviour that positive duties demand of us all are narrowly framed around providing positive assistance to others. Therefore, if we were able to do so, yet chose not to help others in the aftermath of the meteorite, we would be violating the positive duties that we have toward our fellow human beings.

Where this differs from climate change is that, rather than exercising our positive duties, the presence of harm caused by climate change represents a violation of our ‘negative’ moral duties. Negative duties are essentially a requirement that we avoid harming other human beings wherever possible. Unlike the metaphorical meteorite, over which we have no control, and therefore no control over the harm it causes, climate change is caused directly as a result of our behaviour.

It might be reasonable at this juncture to question whether this discussion might be largely dealing in semantics. After all, despite drawing moral distinctions between our meteorite and the climate change, the outcomes are unchanged. Whether the global catastrophe that we are imagining is the result of our behaviour, or the result of pure chance, the harm is no less real. The same number of people die either way, the same amount of suffering is caused, and the same quantity of structural damage is produced. What does moral responsibility matter if there are no practical implications?

The answer is motivation. The harm in question corresponds directly to need. That is the need for humanitarian aid operations, the need for rebuilding efforts, and the need for structural reform in order to protect against such harm reoccurring in the future. In this context, moral responsibility, and how it is understood, matters because it directly impacts our level of motivation when faced with such burdensome remedies.

To understand how moral motivation might differ between violations of our negative duties and violations of our positive duties, it is helpful to consider the well-worn analogy of Peter Singer’s Pond. Singer asks you to imagine that a young child is drowning in a shallow pond, and that you are the only person who is close enough to save her. You can either let her drown unaided, or wade into the water and rescue her, thereby destroying your \$100 shoes in the process. Naturally the only moral option is to suffer the financial loss and save the child.

Singer uses this analogy to highlight how we ought to approach all acts of assistance. For considerably less than the cost of the \$100 shoes, we can all save the lives of children by contributing financially to international aid efforts. The moral logic that makes us wade into the pond is the same moral logic that ought to make us support international charities.

Convincing? Yes. The trouble is, it does not work. The average person tends to be convinced by Singer's argument (that we have a positive moral duty to assist others in need), yet they also tend to be unmotivated by their newly found conviction. Effectively we understanding our moral responsibility in relation to positive duties, we just don't want to do anything about it – at least when the duties in question are beyond our immediate eye line.

So to further build on this moral thought experiment, now imagine that the same child is drowning in the same pond, but instead of it being an accident, it is because you have pushed her in, and are now forcing her head under the water. Rather than a violation of our positive duties to assist, this now represents a violation of our negative duties not to harm.

It should go without saying that the responsibility you have to stop killing this child is considerably greater than the responsibility you previously had to rescue her. Failing to assist someone is palpably different to murdering someone. Our motivation to avoid doing the latter ought to supersede any motivation, or lack thereof, that we might feel in regard to the former.

The relevant science behind human-induced climate change has been settled now for an uncomfortably long time. The heating effects that greenhouse gases have on our climate were first postulated over two centuries ago. And by the late 1950's, carbon dioxide, as the primary greenhouse gas associated with human industrialisation, was being accurately correlated to increasing temperatures in our atmosphere. Since then, the scientific strength of the argument has become overwhelming. Every day we are introducing high levels of carbon dioxide into our atmosphere - carbon dioxide that will in turn precipitate dangerous levels of a global warming.

And for the most part, these dangerous levels of carbon dioxide have already been reached - the heating is now on its way. An ever-increasing amount of environmental degradation and natural disasters are already being attributed to human-induced climate change. And although some of these links are tenuous, as time goes on the causation between the heating of our atmosphere and global suffering, will likely become irrefutable. It seems we have all invested heavily in our own long term structural harm.

This being the case, the harm caused by climate change represents a massive violation of our negative duties. For decades now we have had no reasonable cause to doubt the science of climate change. The harm that has been caused by climate change, the scope of future harm that we should expect, and the measures that are needed by us in order to mitigate against such harm, have all been explained to us in painful detail. Human-induced climate change was both predicable, and also largely avoidable. So, returning to Peter Singer's Pond, we are all guilty of both knowingly and deliberately drowning the child – though perhaps a mass drowning would be more accurate.

It therefore stands, that the harm caused by climate change ought to exercise our moral instincts differently to unrelated, or unforeseeable, natural disasters. That is, we are all morally obliged, regardless of cost, to respond to such harm with emergency aid, support to rebuild, structural reform assistance and, where applicable, compensation.

But this is a rather unwelcome realisation. It is only natural to not want to think of ourselves as moral monsters, just as it is only natural to not want to accept material responsibility for anything that is likely to require substantial sacrifices in our standards of living.

So we seek consolation wherever we can. We obfuscate wherever possible. And the solace we find is in the realisation that, despite being morally responsible for the harm caused by climate change, we have after all not acted alone. We are but a small part of a very large injustice. We meticulously count the carbon emissions that we alone have produced, and thereafter consider our moral responsibility to be diminished so that it neatly matches this percentage of the global problem.

And at first glance it might seem reasonable for a relatively small country that is responsible for a mere 1 percent of global emissions to be reticent about committing to burdensome reductions in their fossil fuel output and to costly international aid programs, if China and the United States, as responsible for a combined 40% of global emissions, are refusing to reciprocate.

However, with this being the case, climate change has essentially become a global standoff, whereby nations feel comfortable in refusing to undertake meaningful action to reduce carbon emissions, until all other nations embrace their own responsibility, and act first.

Worse still, if we return to our analogy whereby we murdered our neighbour with help of 99 of our friends, now not only are we saying that we don't have a responsibility to turn ourselves into the police and accept society's punishment, but we are actually not a murderer after all. Rather we are exactly 1 percent of a murderer. If the mandatory punishment for murder is 25 years in prison, then we deserve 3 months of that sentence, as 1 percent of the total punishment.

No reasonable society delineates moral responsibility in this manner. We all intuitively expect to be held entirely responsible for any crime that we knowingly committed, regardless of how many perpetrators knowingly committed it with us. Criminal responsibility simply does not diminish according to criminal companionship. We do not teach our children that if they are going to harm other people, then it is better that they do it in gang.

Yet, (and perhaps because we are all complicit in the crime) when it comes to climate change, we are all too happy to accept just such moral reasoning. We are all comfortable in trying to abrogate our responsibility for the harm we have caused, and are still causing, by virtue of the company we keep – we exonerate ourselves by association.
