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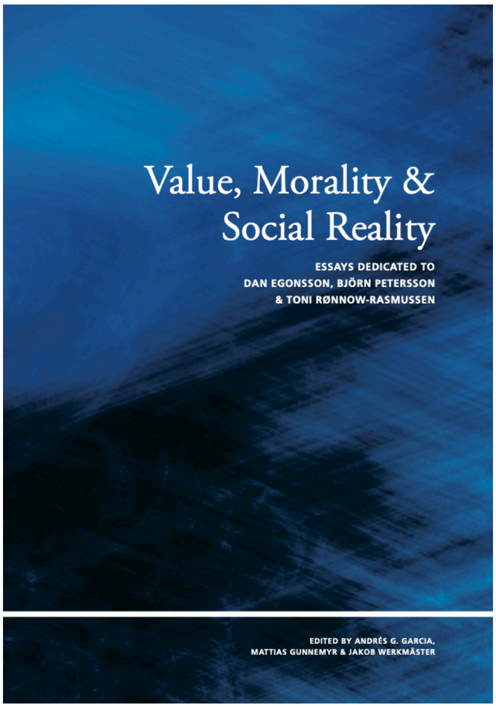
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> ‘There are different degrees in this aversion to truth; but all may perhaps be said to have it in some degree, because it is inseparable from self-love.’
>
> Blaise Pascal, *Penseés*: 100.

1. The Concept of Denialism

In *Unfit for the Future* (2012), Julian Savulescu and I argued that the moral psychology with which evolution has equipped human beings makes them unfit to deal with the contemporary moral mega-problems of anthropogenic climate change (including environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity) and the global inequality of welfare. For humans to be capable of tackling these problems they need to be morally enhanced by all possible means, including means of a biomedical kind. We concentrated on arguing for means of a biomedical kind because they are controversial and opposed by many, but we did not exclude the effectiveness of other means, like traditional moral education. Here the focus will be on moral education, especially the contribution modern moral philosophy could make to it, though there may be more promising forms of moral education.

I shall conduct the discussion in terms of the problem of ameliorating anthropogenic climate change because it involves the other moral mega-problem of rectifying global inequality, since poorer nations need aid from more affluent nations not only to alleviate starvation and diseases but harm that may result from climate change. A reason why the problem of anthropogenic climate change is hard to solve is that it comprises a *double denialism*. Denialism consists in a denial that something is true that is made not because it is supported by reasons for thinking that it is not true, but because of a desire or wish that it not be true. There are different degrees of this type of denial. In the strongest form, it is denial that something is true in the face of *overwhelming* evidence that it is true. Then the desire or wish that it be false must be quite powerful to surpass the thrust of this evidence. The denial that the global warming that we are currently observing is to a significant extent anthropogenic, despite what almost all climatological experts maintain, is of this sort.

But apart from such climate science skepticism, this issue also involves another kind of denialism, of a more moral kind, a denial that our emissions of CO_2 and other greenhouse gases are not morally wrong. This is not due to a denial of what climate scientists tell us, but rather simply to the fact that they appear so different from acts that are *archetypally* morally wrong. This paper is mainly devoted to spelling out these differences.

With respect to this feature of the relevant acts being so unlike acts that are archetypally morally wrong, the issue of mitigating anthropogenic climate change resembles the other moral mega-problem of today, the issue of the moral obligation of the affluent to reduce the global inequality of wealth. But the latter issue does not exemplify double denialism because it does not comprise anything corresponding to climate science skepticism. This counterpart would in the case of global inequality be a *blanket* denial that aid from affluent countries to poorer countries could be effective to the end of easing poverty. But this denial is highly implausible, though *in some particular cases* there might be unfounded denials that aid is effective to this end because it is wrongly suspected that the aid ends up in the pockets of corrupt politicians. The fact that the problem of global inequality does not involve double denialism makes it reasonable to hypothesize that it is not quite as hard to tackle as the other moral mega-problem of ameliorating anthropogenic climate change.

The topic of denialism has become a ‘hot’ topic recently, and if anyone in particular is to be ‘credited’ for having made it so, it is the former US president Donald Trump. A well-known example is his persistent denial that he was fairly defeated by Joe Biden in the 2020 US presidential election in spite of the fact that several recounts confirmed Biden’s victory. This is a strong form of denialism, a denial in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Of course, Trump himself would not acknowledge that this evidence is overwhelming, but he is presumably aware that in the eyes of many knowledgeable people it appears overwhelming. Trump’s denial manifests an aversion to truth that is clearly motivated by the excessive self-love of a narcissistic personality, to put it in terms borrowed from Pascal. But it is not just self-love that could motivate such strong denial. It is also the love of an in-group with which the denier identifies (see Bardon, 2020: 23-4). This is what motivates the denial of many of Trump’s followers that he was fairly and squarely beaten.

A desire or wish, irrespective of whether it has the marks of self-interest or group-interest, that something, *p*, is not true cannot be a *reason* to believe that *p* is not true in the sense of supporting the falsity of p. Rather, it must work by such devious measures as directing deniers' attention away from evidence confirming p and towards evidence disconfirming it, or by making them spend time on trying to undermine the confirming evidence.

Now people might not be interested in being morally enhanced because they deny they need to be morally enhanced, deny they fall short morally. As regards many people, this would not qualify as a strong form of denialism because it is not a denial in the face of overwhelming opposing evidence. For these are not people who commit archetypally immoral acts, like criminal acts that are punishable by prison sentences, which would supply powerful evidence that their agents are immoral. But a denial that their behaviour is as morally wrong as it actually is can still be motivated by a desire or wish about how things should be or be an instance of wishful thinking. For many people exhibit the so-called *overconfidence bias*: the tendency to think that they are better than they actually are in various respects. For instance, a much-quoted study found that 93% of American drivers believe that they are better drivers than the average (see Svenson, 1981). They may be even more strongly inclined to believe that they are *morally* better than the average because this is an asset that is more important than driving for most people. When human beings set themselves apart from other animals and cherish beliefs such as that they are made in the image of a god, it is such properties as their capacity for being moral – along with their capacity for being rational and for creating art, etc – that they are prone to emphasize.

2. Factors Determining the Obviousness of Wrong-Doing

It is obviously easier to believe that you are a good driver if you have not been responsible for any more significant traffic accident. Similarly, if you have not been responsible for any actions that are archetypally morally wrong, it is easier to believe that you are morally good. Acts that are archetypally morally wrong are acts that evidently cause great harm to people without justification. They are acts that 'ordinary decent people' are unlikely to perpetrate, for instance, acts of violence like punching somebody in the face without good reason, such as this person posing a serious threat to someone.[1] Our acts that contribute to harmful climate changes are not *flagrantly* or *obviously* wrong like this. Let us try to sort out the factors that make the moral wrongness of acts flagrant or obvious rather than so discreet or elusive that it is liable to be overlooked or underestimated.[2]

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[1] Here the victims will be assumed to be human, though this should not be taken to imply that harming non-human animals cannot be obviously morally wrong.

[2] The following factors, (1)-(6) and (A)-(F), are largely collected from Persson (2017a). See also Persson & Savulescu (2012: chs. 6-7).

(1) *Temporal proximity between the act and the harm*: the pain and damage to the victim's face occur immediately after the punch. This enables us automatically to associate the harm with the punch. If it instead takes a long time for the harm to occur after an act is done, such an association will not be set up automatically, and we shall feel less uncomfortable about performing the harm-causing act. Partly, this reaction can be explained by the fact that *we are biased towards the near future*: we are more concerned about good and bad events that occur in the near future than in the more distant future. This is why we are relieved when an imminent unpleasant event is postponed, and disappointed when an imminent pleasant event is, even though the postponement does not make it much less probable. By contrast, the harm caused by our CO_2 emissions is temporally very remote. CO_2 can accumulate in the atmosphere for hundreds of years, blocking radiation of heat from the Earth's surface, but letting through sunlight, thereby eventually leading to a harmful increase of the global temperature.

(2) *The victim(s) of the act is (are) identifiable*, that is, identifiable in the sense that witnesses of the act of punching can observe who the victim is. It is a familiar fact that we feel more compassion for individuals who suffer before our very eyes. This is much harder for us to bear than suffering that is merely verbally recounted to us, even if it be the suffering of many more individuals. There is a correlation between this factor and temporal proximity: if the harmful effect of an act we perform is temporally proximate to the act, its victim is often within the eyesight of us, whereas if the harmful effect is temporally distant, this is often not the case. In addition, when the harm is temporally very remote as in the case of climate change, we are normally not personally acquainted with the victims harmed.

(3) *The harm caused is caused by a single agent*: it is a single agent who is dealing the harmful punch, no other agent is involved. Contrast this with the harm of global warming where the harm is caused by several agents acting together, either simultaneously or successively. Common sense conceives of moral responsibility *as being heavily based on causation*, so when causation of harm is spread over several agents, the feeling is that each agent involved is correspondingly morally responsible for less harm.

(4) *Concentration of harmful effects to a single victim* rather than diffusion of the harm over several victims, with the result that each suffers merely a fraction of the total harm caused by the agent. Such a diffusion makes each agent feel that he or she has acted less wrongly than they would have if they had caused this quantity of harm to a single victim on one occasion, even though the total sum of the small bits of harm they have caused to many victims is as big. Each agent's contribution to climate harm is typically of this kind: minimal or negligible harm to innumerable victims.

(5) *Perspicuity of the causal process*: the causal connection between a punch in the face and pain and facial injury is so perspicuous that everyone could grasp it. How CO_2 emissions cause harmful climate changes is of course a much more complicated matter. It takes so much of science to understand that it has only

recently been understood by experts, and most of humanity still lacks this understanding. Moreover, a lot of this more precise knowledge is still missing.

(6) *The harmful act is an act out of the ordinary*: acts like punching someone in the face are not a sort of acts that most of us perform regularly or routinely. By contrast, many of us have driven our cars daily for years and years and got accustomed to the idea that there is not anything wrong about it. The fact that we and others around us have got into the habit of doing something routinely and regarding it as permissible makes it hard for us to take to heart an intellectual realization that these acts involve so much harm that they are in fact wrong, and as a result abstain from them. Habit and conformism make us blind to the moral wrongness of status quo.

Along these dimensions, then, our emissions of greenhouse gases are at the opposite end to acts like punches in the face: their harmfulness is discreet or unobtrusive rather than flagrant or obtrusive and, consequently, we are spontaneously inclined to ignore or underrate their harmfulness and, so, their moral wrongness. The overconfidence bias has an easy time persuading us that they are not morally wrong at all, and our self-esteem can remain intact.

It is plausible to hypothesize that evolution has programmed us to adopt moral aversion towards such flagrantly harmful acts as punching people in the face because they are actions that have been elements of our behavioural repertoire throughout the hundreds of thousands of years of our evolution, and their consequences have been invariably the same. But the causation of harm by the emission of greenhouse gases is a recent addition to this repertoire since it presupposes advanced technology. Therefore, it is not surprising that they could be harmful and wrong without this being obvious to us.

With the possible exception of (3) and (4), it seems on reflection uncontroversial that none of the six factors affects how harmful an action *is*; they only affect how harmful it *appears to be*. But (5), the elusiveness of the causal link between our emissions and climate changes facilitates doubt that there *is* such a link and, thus, buttresses climate science skepticism. This lets in a double denialism. Also, (1) the temporal remoteness of climate changes opens the door to wishful thinking to the effect that there will in time be means to prevent any possible harm caused by our emissions. Thus, we can conveniently continue to reap benefits from our use of fossil fuel with a clean conscience.

3. Factors that Make Collective Action to Fight Climate Change Hard

Now, effectively fighting global warming requires coordinated action from people worldwide and for decades into the future. But, unfortunately, the fact that the wrongness of the emission of greenhouse gases is so discreet or unobtrusive makes such coordination harder to accomplish because people fail to realize the wrongness of their behaviour. A familiar illustration of cooperation problems is *the tragedy of the commons*. It consists in the herdsmen of a village trying to agree on restrictions on the grazing of their cattle to avoid overgrazing of the commons, and subsequent starvation for the herdsmen and their families. There is a problem of establishing cooperation here since, although every one of the herders has a self-interested reason to cut down on the grazing of their own cattle as a means of preventing overgrazing – which will ultimately inflict starvation on them and their families – they are likely to have a stronger self-interested reason not to do so. They might hope that a sufficient number of the other herdsmen will reduce the grazing of their cattle, and free ride on this reduction without making any reduction themselves. This strategy has the additional advantage that in the event that the other herders by and large decide not to cut down, they have not made any useless sacrifices of their own welfare. But, obviously, if all or most of them reason and behave in this way, the collective grazing will not be reduced sufficiently to avoid overgrazing and eventual starvation, which is bad for all of them.

There are however significant disanalogies between this model and the problem of reducing global CO_2 emissions which make the latter a more pernicious cooperation problem.

(A) *Cooperation to reduce effectively* CO_2 *needs to be more or less world-wide, involving at least bigger nations which are significantly different from each other*. A global agreement is clearly harder to establish than an agreement in a village in which everyone knows everyone else and shares the same ethnicity and culture. This sharing is something that facilitates the growth of altruistic concern and trust among the herders. By contrast, there are deep ethnic, cultural, and political differences between many of the biggest countries of the world, countries like the USA, China, India, and Russia. Some of them also have long histories of war and conflict with each other. As a result, there will be minimal fellow-feeling between them and trust that any costly agreements will be kept.

(B) *The immense differences between the world's nations regarding their level of welfare, or GDP, and their level of* CO_2 *emissions per capita*. In the tragedy of the commons model, the herdsmen are thought to be roughly equally well off, have a roughly equal number of cattle whose grazing needs to be reduced, and have equally many dependents to feed. This makes it comparatively easy for them to agree on what is required of each and every one: they should divide equally among themselves the cut-downs of the grazing necessary to attain sustainability. The enormous differences in welfare between the world's richest and poorest nations rule out such a simple solution with respect to combatting climate change. These welfare differences make it reasonable to demand that richer nations pay more for measures to reduce the future level of CO_2 in the atmosphere because of their greater ability to pay, and this is likely to generate disagreement about how much more they should pay. This is something that has manifested itself in international negotiations.

A related problem is that the per capita rates of emissions of the big emission countries differ greatly, and this may be so even though their total amount of emissions may be more equal because the size of their populations differs. To illustrate, consider the two countries that emit most CO_2 in the world, China and the USA. The population of China is around four times as large as the population of the US, but its total sum of annual emissions is only roughly twice as large as that of the US, so the per capita emission of the US is roughly twice as high as that of China. This difference is clearly something that might make it tricky for them to agree on what emissions each should be allowed.

(C) *The historic record of CO_2 emissions differs between the more and the less developed nations*. Again, this can be illustrated by a comparison between China and USA: since 1850 USA has emitted more than twice as much of the CO_2 put by human activity in the atmosphere as China has. This might motivate the Chinese to propose that, based on their more modest historical record, they have a right to a per capita rate of emissions in the future that is considerably higher than that of the US.

(D) *The degree to which different countries of the world are harmfully affected by anthropogenic climate change varies widely*. Some countries are likely to suffer devastating damages, while other countries may stand to gain rather than lose by expected climate changes. Great losers are low-lying countries like Bangladesh, the Netherlands, and South Sea Islands – that run serious risks of being inundated by rising sea levels – and regions in Sahel, Australia and the south-west of USA that will probably be exposed to severe droughts and desertification. Geographic regions which may enjoy salutary effects are some northern countries, like Russia. Obviously, the losers have more of an incentive to implement a reduction of emissions of CO_2 than the winners.

Furthermore, it should be noticed that even in countries which are expected to be comparatively severely hit by global warming, the worst effect will not be suffered by the *present* generation, who is making decisions about climate policies, or perhaps even by their children, but by generations further into the future. This is because climate change is such a slow process. Thus, these decision-makers are asked to make sacrifices for people who are to a great extent beyond the range of their limited or parochial altruism. Due to the bias towards the near we are relatively unconcerned about effects in the more remote future even when they affect ourselves – that is why, for instance, smokers find it difficult to quit their hazardous habit. Obviously, we are even less concerned about temporally remote effects if they affect others, especially if they are not near and dear to us, which they will not be if those affected are unknown people in the distant future or in distant countries.

(E) *Controls of compliance are lacking with respect to global treaties to reduce CO_2 emissions*. It is unlikely that there will be an effective surveillance of whether countries over decades will comply fully with treaties to reduce their CO_2 emissions they have entered. And if they are found out to have defected, there will probably be no effective sanctions to apply. Such checks and sanctions are surely necessary for there to be a reasonable guarantee of compliance, since we cannot expect people all over the world to have much altruistic concern for and trust in each other, for reasons recounted above.

(F) *The effectiveness of current compliance to international agreements to reduce CO_2 emissions relies on the compliance of future agents who are not bound by the agreements*. Cooperation about reducing CO_2 emissions has to extend far into the future in order to be effective in alleviating global warming. But future generations who have not consented to agreements about CO_2 reductions could in virtue of this fact claim that they are not bound by them. Thus, there is a risk that when future generations realize that their standard of living is going down because of the reductions of CO_2 emissions implemented by earlier generations – reductions which may benefit primarily even later generations – they will be inclined to discontinue these reductions. This is especially so, since they may fear that even if they keep them, the following generation will not because they will be subjected to even greater hardships, and they have still greater reason to fear that the generations succeeding them will not keep in line because they will be subjected to yet greater hardships, and so on. Such a chain of growing incentives to defect seems fatal to the possibility of reaching viable agreements. It encourages present decision-makers to 'pass the bill' to future generations who cannot retaliate.

Six dimensions, (1)-(6), have been reviewed along which our greenhouse gas emitting acts are at the opposite pole of acts whose harmfulness is so flagrant or evident that it is hard to deny their wrongness in the absence of justifying factors. Thus, it will be easy for the overconfidence bias to persuade us that it is not morally bad to carry on with these emissions. This is especially so, since discontinuing them would mean a sacrifice of our welfare. Consequently, we are little motivated to enter into agreements about cutbacks of greenhouse gases. And the factors (A)-(F) bring out why effective agreements on such cutbacks present an especially hard coordination problem even in the absence of the factors white-washing emissions.

If we live in democratic societies, we shall be reluctant to give our votes in general elections to political parties that favour cutbacks and, thereby, impose sacrifices of welfare on us. If we are doubtful that it is wrong not to cut down on the emission of greenhouse gases, we are likely to think that others too have such doubts and will be disinclined to agree to cut down on them. Therefore, governments in liberal democracies are unlikely to give priority to efforts to mitigate global warming. The parties that gain and retain power in liberal democracies are more likely to prioritize issues of employment, education, health care, restrictions on immigration, etc. which directly benefit their voters. The realism of these speculations is borne out by the fact that no sufficiently effective action against climate change has hitherto been taken, even though the problem has been on the agenda of organizations like the United Nations for more than twenty years.

4. The Problem of Defeating Denialism

To solve the two moral mega-problems of our time, Savulescu and I have argued in *Unfit for the Future* and many other publications that human beings need to undergo moral enhancement by all potential means, including biomedical ones, in order to make them more altruistic or benevolent. But we have now seen that they are unlikely to recognize that they need moral enhancement because of their overconfidence bias and the discreetness of much of their moral wrongdoing that serves their self-interest. Is it possible to break down the obstacle of denialism?

Reasons for pessimism are provided by the fact that denialism flourishes even with respect to issues where it is up against incontestable evidence to the contrary. For instance, in the USA denialism concerning the spread and the fatality of the covid-19 virus was rampant during the presidency of Trump. Another telling example is that, although evidence that human beings have evolved from animals has accumulated for at least 150 years, more than 70% of US citizens still deny it because it is incompatible with their religious beliefs (see Bardon, 2020: 105). One reason that many of them also find it difficult to take on board the fact of anthropogenic climate change may likewise be that it sits ill with these religious beliefs according to which their God is ultimately in charge of the creation.

Additionally, there is the ‘official’ denialism typical of totalitarian or authoritarian regimes to contend with. A recent example is the Chinese authorities’ denial of the discovery of the covid-19 virus in Wuhan in December 2019. The consequences of this cover-up have been disastrous. Had the Chinese authorities acknowledged the occurrence of this virus and taken action against it as soon as it was detected, a world-wide pandemic might have been nipped in the bud. It should however be noted that when denialist political leaders indoctrinate citizens to believe falsehoods because it serves the leaders’ interests, indoctrination may be so effective that the citizens will not be conscious of any evidence contrary to the falsehoods and, if so, they are not guilty of denialism.

These are depressing facts. But despite them and Jonathan Swift’s insightful remark about the belief-formation: ‘Reasoning will never make a man correct an ill opinion, which by reasoning he never acquired’,[3] let us consider whether moral philosophy could be of any assistance in the fight against denialism with respect to anthropogenic climate change. Among the factors listed in section 1 as obscuring or bleaching the moral wrongness of actions, some can surely be seen as morally irrelevant on reflection, namely that the harm is temporally and causally distant, that the victims of it are anonymous or members of a big crowds, and that the harmful acts are routinely performed. This is encouraging, though we have observed that people can easily deny the obvious.

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[3] ‘Letter to a Young Clergyman’, quoted by Bardon (2020: 36).

However, it cannot be denied that controversy is very widespread in moral philosophy. To make moral philosophy fully effective against denialism, it would be necessary for it to establish a *rational consensus* about what, in light of the climatological evidence, we morally ought to do to prevent harmful climate change. Moral philosophy is far from reaching this end with respect to any moral issue of importance. On the contrary, it rather tends to expand our moral disagreement by achieving ever greater precision with sharpened conceptual tools. New distinctions are incessantly drawn and, consequently, moral claims are split up into more precise versions. Since some of these claims will be only marginally different, it will be well-nigh impossible for us to reach a consensus about which alternative version is most plausible. We do have a batch of common intuitions about what is morally right and wrong in many situations, for instance, about it being morally wrong to kill, torture, or rape human beings in most circumstances, and it being right to help if we can those who are without any fault or choice of their own much more needy than we are. But they are intuitions that have been developed to help us navigate in small, close-knit societies with a primitive technology which allows us to affect only our immediate environment. These are the circumstances in which human beings have lived in all but a tiny fraction of their history. The intuitions they have fostered are not sufficiently sophisticated and fine-grained to enable them to choose strategies to deal with novel problems like anthropogenic climate change out of the bewildering variety of theories offered by modern moral philosophy.

Philosophical problems often take the form of a conflict between commonsensical intuitions and philosophical arguments challenging them. An example of such a conflict in normative ethics is the dichotomy between consequentialism and deontology. By ‘deontology’ I mean a type of morality that includes some version of the *act-omission doctrine* – to the effect that it is harder to justify morally harming than omitting to benefit – and/or *the doctrine of the double effect*, declaring that it is harder to justify morally harming someone as a means, or harmfully using someone as a means, to a good end than to harm them as a foreseen side-effect of the good end. Nobody has found any version of these doctrines that satisfies critics. Still, even these critics – which include the present author[4] – continue to feel the tug of these doctrines, a sign of how firmly entrenched they are.

As noted, the act-omission doctrine pops up in the moral mega-problems of present concern. If this doctrine is untenable, affluent countries will be morally required to give aid to less well-off countries to an extent that would be morally supererogatory if this doctrine is sound.

Another moral area in which this opposition to the intuitive and the reflective crops up is *justice or fairness*. An idea that has a good claim to being hard-wired is that there are *property rights* to the effect that we have a moral right to our bodies and what we are the first occupy or appropriate of unowned natural resources, and to what we manufacture out of these resources by our own labour (see Locke, 1690).

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[4] For my view of these deontological doctrines, see Persson (2013: chs. 3, 4 & 6).

Property rights support the idea that we are permitted to omit helping others in situations in which we would be obliged to help them if rights were rejected: if the things that could help others are our property, they are by definition something that we are permitted to keep, though others might need them significantly more than we do. Contemporary technology and trade have vastly increased the means to hoard property to the point at which, according to Oxfam, the 2153 richest individuals on Earth owned more than 4.6 billion of the poorest individuals in 2019. Without understanding the strong grip property rights exercise on us, we could not understand how we can put up with a world with such an enormous economic inequality.

Like rights, *desert* is a consideration of justice: it is just that you receive what you deserve in virtue of what you are responsible for, just as it is generally just that you get and keep that to which you have a right, and it would be unjust or unfair to deprive you of it. There are philosophical arguments against the attribution of moral rights and deserts to us which turn on the claim that this attribution presupposes that we are *ultimately responsible* – i.e. responsible for all the features that allegedly make us responsible for anything – and this is something that beings with a finite past like us cannot be. If, on the basis of such arguments, the notions of rights and desert are discarded, a more egalitarian conception of justice will follow, since it can no longer be claimed that it is just that some are better off than others because they deserve to be better off, or have a right to more.[5] But, although such arguments possess enough power to convince many, it must be admitted that the notions of rights and deserts have a firm hold on our minds. Therefore, another ethical impasse appears inevitable.

A third moral area of deep opposition concerns whether in order to be moral our *benevolence or altruism* must be *strictly impartial or permits some partiality*. We are disposed to be concerned about the welfare of individuals roughly in proportion to how well we know them and cooperate with them in mutually beneficial ways. People to whom we are closest to next to ourselves include family and friends; thus, they belong to the inner circle of those for whom we care most. We are comparatively indifferent towards strangers. In between these extremes, there are various strata of individuals with whom we associate in some circumstances and for whose welfare we have somewhat greater concern. There is a plausible evolutionary explanation for such a stratification of our altruism. It would be risky for us to extend altruism and invitation to cooperation beyond those with whom we are well acquainted to strangers who for all we know might be inclined to free-riding and even hostility.

The question how far we are morally permitted to be partial to ourselves and other individuals whose welfare we are spontaneously more concerned about is then another great divide in normative ethics. Such partiality should not be confused with the special moral obligations we have to those to whom we have made promises, have brought into existence, etc., and who have corresponding moral rights against us; or those who deserve favours in return for favours they have done to us. This is a matter of justice, whereas the partiality now at issue is a matter of benevolence, for instance, the more intense compassion we feel for the suffering of family and friends than the suffering of strangers, or for those who suffer before our eyes than those who suffer faraway and whose identity is unknown to us.

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[5] For such an argument, see Persson (2017: ch. 7). For another type of argument against rights, see Persson (2013: ch. 2).

Everyone agrees that the partiality of our spontaneous concern about our own well-being and the well-being of those who are near and dear often goes beyond what is morally permissible. The pejorative force of such terms as 'egoism', 'nepotism' and 'cronyism' is clear evidence of this. But this does not show that it is not morally desirable that our altruism or benevolence towards others is strengthened; it just goes to show that there are features that wrongly block or filter it: features such as that someone is foreign, temporally or causally distant, anonymous or one among many. These are features that, on reflection, most of us would agree are morally irrelevant; the trick is to implement this insight in practice.

Precisely what such shutters of altruism are morally acceptable is however controversial, but those who accept some shutters can concur with utilitarians, who accept none and demand impartiality, that stronger altruism is morally good thing, albeit not required. Those who endorse some deontological morality or a theory of justice which includes rights and desert assent to this as well. For instance, advocates of the act-omission doctrine will claim that we are not morally required to do as much to help the needy as those who reject it, but they should not deny that we are morally good if we do more than is required. The same goes for those who champion rights, for it is often praiseworthy to give away some things to which you have rights. And desert-theorists should concede that it could be praiseworthy to show mercy and punish people less than they deserve and give them more of the good than they deserve.

However, in the discussion of how to extend common-sense morality to cater for mega-problems, attention will be drawn to the grounds of morality, whether they are solid enough to possess enough authority to prop up the sterner demands this extension apparently generates. Human beings tend to be conformists, that is, they tend to act and react as most people around them do. If they have been brought up to act and react in certain ways because these are ways in which the majority of the citizens of their societies have acted and reacted for as long as anyone can remember, they are inclined to be highly respectful of these ways. Historically, this respect has often manifested itself in the attribution of moral norms to gods or deified ancestors who are thought to watch over their observance.

The authority with which these norms have been imbued will however be undercut if they are questioned. It is improbable that meta-ethicists could deliver a replacement for this loss of authority that could put a revised morality on a foundation seemingly as solid as a supernatural one because there is in meta-ethics a divide as deep as the divides we have come across in normative ethics. To be sure, there are accounts that present moral norms as resting on *objective* grounds, grounds that are external to our subjective states, but these accounts are, and are likely to remain, contested by meta-ethicists who take morality to be something *subjective*, expressive of our attitudes. This debate, too, seems destined to be inconclusive by sparking ever more subtle distinctions that promote confusion and dissension rather than clarity and convergence of opinion. In this way, moral philosophy could erode the authority of morality and, thus, drain our incentive to be more altruistically motivated – unless the meta-ethical debate is too esoteric to seep out of the seminar rooms and affect the general public.

All in all, moral philosophy can contribute little if anything to the solution of moral mega-problems. Still, there is hope of a general agreement that it is morally desirable that human altruism is amplified and extended. Such an agreement is a reason why Savulescu and I have made altruism the main target of our argument for biomedical means of moral enhancement; another reason is it has been the focus of much experimental research into such means. If, additionally, some of the more obviously unacceptable 'shutters' blocking altruism are pulled up and climate science denialism is defeated, then the more devastating effects of climate change may be avoided.

But these conditions are unlikely to be realized in time. The problem of counteracting anthropogenic climate change is probably the hardest moral problem humanity has ever faced. In the words of Tony Leiserowitz, of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication: 'You almost couldn't design a problem that is a worse fit with our underlying psychology', and Daniel Gilbert, professor of psychology at Harvard, joins in: 'A psychologist could barely dream up a better scenario for paralysis'(quoted from Marshall, 2014: 91). Despite its greater foresight, humanity will probably behave as other reproductively successful species and multiply and consume until their natural resources are exhausted.

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