

Climate Change vs Nihilism: Leading Meaningful Lives in the Anthropocene

Many people already recognize moral reasons for driving less, eating less meat, supporting public policies aimed at mitigating climate change and so forth. And most will see acting on those moral reasons as calling for personal sacrifices for the sake of distant and future people and life. But the degree of sacrifice called for is as much a function of our values and interests as it depends on what we are actually called on to do or not do. Little philosophical attention to climate change has critically addressed the underlying values and interests that drive climate change. Here, I will argue that these are ultimately nihilistic and that addressing climate change presents an opportunity to lead more meaningful lives. The argument will proceed by first examining some of the blind spots in thinking of climate change as a Tragedy of the Commons (TOC). We'll then consider the variety of nihilism implicit in complacency about climate change. Finally, I'll introduce Irving Singer's naturalistic account of meaning in life and show how on this account, acting on climate change is a path out of nihilism and towards a more meaningful way of life.

Game Theory and its Limitations.

We may be most familiar with hearing climate change addressed as a kind of collective action problem. Indeed the moral problem of climate change does share some of the features of a classic TOC. But this theoretical model has important limitations, perhaps most notably concerning the intergenerational and geopolitical aspects of climate change. The agents who are in a position to do something about avoiding the worst results are not the ones that will suffer the worst of the consequences. Stephen Gardiner has made the moral hazards of such asymmetries a central feature of his treatment of Climate Change.[1] Beginning with well understood models and exploring their limitations can be a reasonable strategy for inquiry. But models can obscure their limitations as well and the TOC does this in assuming a prior understanding of the interests of the parties involved. This pre-empts critical examination of the values that drive climate change and the role these play in leading, or failing to lead, meaningful lives.

Collective action problems like the prisoner's dilemma or the tragedy of the commons reveal how choices that appear rational for individuals can lead to outcomes that are collectively disastrous. The interesting feature of collective action problems is that what seems rational relative to the interests of the individual turns out to be irrational for the collective, including that individual. In the classic case, individual farmers deem it rational to turn another sheep out on the village commons because as part owners of the commons they only bear some of the cost of feeding that additional sheep and yet they reap the full reward when it comes time to take the sheep to market. When every farmer reasons after this fashion for one additional sheep and then another, the commons gets exploited to the point where its carrying capacity is so diminished it's of negligible value to anyone. At the end of the day, the seemingly rational choices of each farmer result in a commons that is of no value to any individual and all are worse off. The general recipe for a tragedy of the commons is just self-interested, rational individuals having free access to a limited commonly held good. As a corollary, we can note that the only way to avoid a tragedy of the commons is to eliminate one or more the ingredients in the general recipe. For practical purposes, this generally means adopting policies that regulate access to the commons.

This much will seem quite familiar to most of you. Here I want to raise concerns about the broadly consequentialist framework presumed by models like the TOC. Game theoretic models like the TOC do not assume anything as specific as classic hedonic utilitarianism. But they do treat our values and rational interests as a given. The conflicts between what is individually and collectively rational in such models are a function of those presupposed rational interests. In the prisoner's dilemma, for instance, the collectively disadvantageous outcome of more jail time arises only on the assumption that each suspect is concerned only with minimizing jail time. But suppose instead that the suspects are in love and care only about maximizing their time outside prison together. In this case, cooperation is rational for each both individually and collectively. No dilemma is generated. Because the interests of individuals are assumed in game theoretic models like the prisoner's dilemma and the TOC, the focus on these models will tend to pre-empt critical evaluation of interests and values. But, the ethical problems we face in addressing climate change concern not just matters of finding rational means to given ends. They are also, perhaps centrally, concerned with the worthiness of the ends we pursue as we dig up and emit

carbon. Considering nihilism and meaning in life affords a useful framework for evaluating the worthiness of our ends.

Nihilism

Nihilism is popularly understood as the view that nothing matters at all. All values are valueless and human life is absurd according to this sort of Nihilism. Paul Katsafanas finds a very different view of nihilism in the thought of Nietzsche.[2] Katsafanas argues that nihilism in Nietzsche should be understood not as the devaluation of values generally, but as the devaluation of “higher values.” Zarathustra’s encounter with the last man is offered as the dramatic portrayal of Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism:

The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest. ‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink. . . . Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion. No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels differently goes into the madhouse ‘Formerly all the world was mad’, say the most refined, and they blink. . . . ‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink.

Nietzsche’s last man has not rejected value all together. He still values his happiness, his comfort, complacency and convenience. What the last man lacks are higher values. These are values that place demands on us, give us purpose, inspire our passions and orient our communities.[3] It is tempting to think that such higher values must be transcendent in some sense. If not set by Divine decree, higher values must, it seems, be found beyond us. How else could they make demands on us. Skepticism about the external reality of higher values could then lead us into the nihilism of the last man. Nietzsche’s last man does provide a prescient vision of our own cultural moment, when students come to philosophy classes assuming as a matter of common sense that all values are subjective. Subjective values place no demands on us and inspire passion or form the basis of community only until our concern shifts to new and different subjective values. A consumerist conception of the good life as the life of getting whatever you happen to want is ideally suited to this sort of nihilist. Nietzsche provides a clear diagnosis of consumerism as a variety of nihilism, and one we might easily ignore precisely because it is so pervasive.

Nietzsche was anxious about the pending loss of higher values and held out little hope for resurrecting the higher values that had previously animated civilization. I don't plan to venture where Nietzsche despaired. Instead, I'll appeal to a more contemporary naturalistic account of meaning in life with the ultimate goal of arguing that the crisis of climate change presents an opportunity to escape from the nihilism of consumerism and Nietzsche's last man and to lead more meaningful lives.

Nihilism doesn't imply caring about nothing, it just involves failing to care about things in the right way. This much in Nietzsche let's keep, but we needn't also follow Nietzsche in thinking that transcendent higher values are essential to leading a meaningful life. In a shift roughly analogous to the move from foundationalism to holism in epistemology,[4] we might instead take caring about things in the right way to involve internal coherence rather than transcendent or fundamental values.

Meaning in Life: Singer's Naturalistic Approach

As a form of life I can identify in specific ways with all other forms of life. Like me, all life forms seek a good of their own. Even when I pluck a fish from a river and obliterate its vital force to feed my own, I can't help but regard that vitality as a good thing. Irving Singer likens this vital force, this seeking a good of one's own, to Spinoza's *conatus* and Nietzsche's will to power[5] and deems it a source of meaning in life. Vitality is not the only or even the most fundamental source of meaning in life on Singer's view. But it is a source of meaning that inexorably binds us to the rest of life on this planet. Pursuing interests that undermine vitality on the planet puts us at odds with ourselves. And this, being at odds with ourselves, I'll suggest, is the essence of nihilism. Leading a meaningful life requires a degree of coherence among our values.

In considering what it takes to lead a meaningful life we needn't assume that our purposes, lives or the fate of humanity matter in any transcendent sense, to the universe at large, for example, or to any supernatural deity. We also needn't assume that there is some correct answer to questions about the meaning *of* life. Our central concern is just with meaning *in* life. We must ultimately contend with arguments for the absurdity of human purposefulness based on the idea that the fate of humanity is of no significance to the universe at large. But we shouldn't assume up front that arguments to this effect are cogent.

Singer argues that absurdist views like those advanced by Sartre, Camus and Nagel overlook the possibility that meaning is something we bring to life through our own purposefulness.[6] On Singer's naturalistic approach, meaning in life doesn't depend on any external grand design. He contends that we bestow value on things through caring about them. For Singer, if something matters to us, it matters, and this is sufficient for meaning. He's prepared to grant that a person who devotes his life to collecting bottle caps still leads a meaningful life. Regarding love as a source of meaning in life, Singer contends that, Love is not merely a contributor – one among others- to a meaningful life. In its own way it may underlie all other forms of meaning. . . Seen from this perspective, meaning in life is the pursuit of love, circuitous and even thwarted as that can often be.[7]

Love, for Singer, has both an appreciative aspect where we find value in the beloved, and an aspect of caring where value is bestowed on the beloved. The beloved is made important through our caring. The value we bestow on things through caring about them is a source of meaning in life. Singer proposes that our regard for vitality understood as a generalized "love for life" in all of its forms can be seen as a kind of bedrock source of meaning in life. But we love many and assorted things beyond this.

Meaning grounded in love appears to be morally neutral since one can love bad things. Nazi's committed atrocities on the basis of their love for an ideology of racial supremacy. Singer must grant that there is meaning in this devotion. However, a point from Harry Frankfurt on the closely related matter of self-love is pertinent. [8] When some of our loves stand in conflict with others, the value we thereby bestow is compromised. The love for an ideology of racial supremacy distorts, obscures or obliterates the love for people generally, grounded in the degree to which we can identify with fellow human beings. Resolving the internal conflict the ideology of racial supremacy demands somehow turning a blind eye to humanity of others. This failure of love represents unrealized, indeed spurned, meaning in life. Meaning in life is compromised by loving incoherently.

In the case of climate change, many of us similarly find ourselves internally conflicted. We do value the convenience and comforts of high consumption lifestyles and yet we value the continued flourishing of humanity and the planet. We now have a view on which it is clear how this internal conflict undermines meaning in our lives. The mere presence of this conflict is not enough to indicate nihilism. When we find a moral crisis in this conflict and strive to

resolve it, we seek a more meaningful life. But to acquiesce in this conflict is to give in to nihilism understood as valuing incoherently.

That self-love and meaning in life demand internal coherence among the things we care about sheds helpful light on the vigor with which climate change is denied by some in spite of the clear scientific evidence. What is at stake isn't just the pleasure of a high consumption lifestyle, but an ill informed and misguided sense of meaning and purpose built around that lifestyle. The coherence required for a sense of meaning can be sustained only by denying the science. Climate deniers can sustain the illusion of leading meaningful lives only at the price of obliviousness. Yet, in spite of their willful ignorance, their loves remain in conflict.

Many more of us are stuck in the middle, grasping the science at some level and yet loving lifestyles that are ultimately at odds with our love for life in general. And so we are at odds with ourselves. Nihilism threatens. The cure is to face our own crisis of values more deliberately, examine our values and re-align our interests with the life-loving values we must ultimately recognize as indispensable.

Final Thoughts

Garrett Hardin argues that appeals to conscience will be self-defeating in the face of a tragedy of the commons. Those who are responsive to appeals to their better nature merely afford greater opportunities for exploitation of the commons by those who lack scruples as the conscientious forego their own interests. Worse yet, appeals to conscience are pathological in that they undermine psychological integrity by placing people in a double bind. We all recognize that we are imposing burdens on future humans and other living things when we burn fossil fuels. Now suppose we make a moral argument for reducing our individual carbon footprints. According to Hardin, the message of this argument will be twofold. We condemn those who don't make sacrifices to reduce their carbon footprints as moral reprobates. At the same time "we secretly condemn [the person who is responsive to the appeal to conscience] for a simpleton who can be shamed into standing aside while the rest of us exploit the commons." [9] The conclusion Hardin drives at is that only mutual coercion mutually agreed upon can save us from a tragedy of the commons.

I fear that Hardin's argument places us further double bind. For how are we to get to mutually agreed upon mutual coercion without appeals to conscience in cases like climate change where the inter-generational and geopolitical aspects give the privileged the option of "buck-passing", as Gardiner puts it,[10] distancing ourselves personally from the worst of the tragic consequences and accountability for those consequences. Ultimately, mutually agreed upon mutual coercion is necessary, but the dynamics of climate change require that this be the product of conscience, not an alternative to it.

There remains an open question concerning whether an individual is morally absolved for exploiting the commons in the absence of mutually agreed on mutual coercion. From a consequentialist perspective it might appear so since futile efforts yield no good consequences. My personal efforts to reduce emissions might be so insignificant as to be deemed futile. But this is shallow even as a consequentialist analysis since it neglects the value I find in leading a more meaningful life. Efforts I make to fight climate change, whether these involve activism or shrinking my personal carbon foot print afford an opportunity for me to build greater meaning in my life by reconciling internal conflicts among my loves. I can't reconcile my love for driving with my general love for life in all its forms. I do, however, have an opportunity to lead a more meaningful life through cultivating a love for cycling. I might even aspire one day to walk. Such shifts in my interests, the things I care about, bring greater unity to my loves and the result is a more meaningful, more coherently purposeful life.

As a callow graduate student I inadvertently started a family. After sharing the news that I was soon to be a parent, one of my professors told me that having a child is something that's rational to do, but only after the fact. The advent of this loving relationship so completely changes one's interests that the resulting value structure will lead us to find many things rational that weren't before. The moral crisis of climate change impresses upon us our kinship with future lives, human and otherwise. As soon as we take up the burden of love for future and distant life, our lives are enriched with meaning and the game theoretic equilibria are upended. As we seek coherence between our present interests and our concern for life like us that is more distant, the interests and values that generate tragedy are displaced by interests and values that heal.

- [1] Stephen Gardiner, *The Perfect Moral Storm* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)
- [2] Paul Katsafanas, “*Fugitive Pleasure and the Mingingful Life: Nietzsche on Nihilism and Higher Values*”, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* (2015) 395-416.
- [3] Katsafanas, 406.
- [4] Katsafanas would resist understanding Nietzsche’s higher values simply as foundational values. His developed view of Nietzsche’s conception of higher values includes a role as final ends that can justify others, but more than this. Foundational values are not necessarily higher values.
- [5] Irving Singer, *The Creation of Value* (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 88.
- [6] Irving Singer, *The Creation of Value*, 33-40.
- [7] Irving Singer, *The Pursuit of Love* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 2.
- [8] On the more specific but highly relevant issue of self-love, Frankfurt argues that conflicted love undermines self-love. Self love demands whole heartedness which in turn requires coherence. This view complements Singer nicely and helps to explain the failure of love that undermines meaning in life when our loves are in conflict. Finding meaning in life demands a kind of internal coherence in the structure of our values, a coherence that can result in harmony in our purposes. Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, New Jersey: The Princeton University Press, 2004), 91-99.
- [9] Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162 (1968): 1246-1247.
- [10] Stephen Gardiner, *The Perfect Moral Storm*, 148-59.