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## CLIMATE CHANGE, VIOLENCE, AND THE AFTERLIFE

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KIRK R. SMITH

### **Abstract**

Climate change poses challenges to decision making because actions today have their most severe consequences many decades in the future. Using perspectives from the moral philosopher, Samuel Scheffler, and the social historian, Steven Pinker, I explore how a shift of human values needed to make difficult and expensive decisions today to protect the future may actually fit existing trends and values in society if the implications of the work of McMichael and others to document climate impacts comes to be fully accepted. Scheffler's 'afterlife conjecture' is that believable threats to even an indefinite human future actually affect today's values profoundly; that we in a sense care more for the future than the present. Some future climate scenarios would place humanity in a world very much altered from today, i.e. threaten Scheffler's afterlife and thus today's values. Pinker, in contrast, documents the worldwide reduction in violence over human history that is still spreading. Climate change will harm many groups not able to protect themselves – arguably violence by one group on another that could be ameliorated by extending Pinker's long-term societal tendency for violence reduction forward in time as well as historically. The insights of philosophers and historians may be essential to learn how to change values in time to avoid the worst impacts from climate change.

### **Introduction**

The first two volumes of the McMichael trilogy served to pioneer and then frame modern understanding of the impacts of global change on human health (McMichael, 1993, 2001). The third puts it into a broad historical context (McMichael, in press). The challenge facing us now is to find ways to place these understandings within the continuum of human experience, extending

also into the future. Without doing so, expecting society to alter behaviour today to reduce climate change a century away seems futile, given numerous, more immediate demands. Scholarly contributions from two entirely different fields, however, together offer a path to start thinking about establishing this continuum. They come from the moral philosopher, Samuel Scheffler, on the 'afterlife' (Scheffler, 2012) and the psychologist and social historian, Steven Pinker, on the history of violence (Pinker, 2011).

## Scheffler's Afterlife

Scheffler has articulated compelling arguments that, in contrast to common understanding, people actually value the future far more than they realise; indeed, in some fundamental ways, this valuation of the future not only exceeds that of the present but also even their own lives. He defines the 'collective afterlife' as the continuation of society through unnamed and non-specific populations, who will carry forward the human experience well past our own lives, and even past the lives of our children and grandchildren.

He uses thought experiments postulating worlds with no 'afterlife'; for example, through a chemical or disease that causes humanity to become infertile, as depicted by P.D. James in her novel, *The Children of Men* (James, 1992). In this scenario, no one dies prematurely, yet, Scheffler argues, people still suffer, because they perceive the absence of an afterlife, i.e. the break in the continuation of human society after their own deaths and those of everyone they know. By asking us to consider how the things we would value in daily life would change in such circumstances, he forces us to recognise that much of what seems of value today is actually premised on the unstated assumed existence of an afterlife.

Indeed, as Scheffler points out, it is hard to imagine what would actually be of value in such a circumstance. Would anyone work on a cure for cancer, for example? Or a solution for climate change? Such tasks are undertaken routinely now by people who know their own lives are as limited as are those of all they know and love. This does not deter them from taking on goals with pay-offs far in the future. Even valuing such simple pleasures as a good book, a good meal and a good holiday may actually be premised on subconscious expectation that humanity will persist following their death. Scheffler states:

- 'The fact that we and everyone we love will cease to exist matters less to us than would the non-existence of future people whom we do not know and who, indeed, have no determinate identities.'

- ‘Or to put it more positively, the coming into existence of people we do not know and love matters more to us than our own survival and the survival of the people we do know and love.’
- ‘The fact that, in certain respects, we care less about our own survival than about the survival of humanity shows something important and insufficiently appreciated about the limits of our egoism.’

Climate change does not threaten human survival in the way that absolute infertility would, but climate scenarios exist that portray major disruptions in the continuum of human experience. Scenarios, for example, in which large areas of Earth are no longer inhabitable, except in cities built like space colonies. These are currently considered low probability events by climate scientists; although not that low, being, for example, far more likely than events that many people dread and which are also less severe, such as nuclear reactor accidents. Neither are climate catastrophes far off in an indefinite future, such as the burn-out of the Sun. Some scenarios start to become severe well within the lifetimes of babies born this decade, i.e. by 2100.

## What is Rational?

Scheffler’s ‘afterlife conjecture’ calls into question the large discount rates used by standard economic and political thinking that assume implicitly that solving today’s short-term problems will be enough to protect the future. Today’s activities have long-term consequences, however, and the conjecture can be stated as:

- What combination of severity and probability of future climates might risk crossing the afterlife threshold, calling into questions actions that still optimise present values today?

That is, might any such combination threaten our reasonable expectation of the continuation of human existence as we know it? If so, this would fundamentally threaten all that we value in this generation, and may force us to reverse the usual discounting rules.

The Nobel economist, Amartya Sen, famously once described the ‘rational economic man’, who operates to maximise present value as if he were alone in space in time, as ‘close to being a social moron’ (Sen, 1977). Others have also criticised *Homo economicus* as a conceit that peppers economic textbooks but rarely, if ever, occurs in life. From the future, actions to maximise short-term well-being (‘optimise present value’) cannot be considered rational if they impose sufficient impacts on the future to cross the Scheffler afterlife threshold, thus also destroying many of the values we place in the present.

## The History of Violence: A Positive Story

For me, Steven Pinker's book presents a detailed and convincing narrative and statistical analysis of trends of violence over human history. He argues that violence in essentially all its forms (*inter alia*, war, crime, torture, terrorism, genocide, slavery, racism, riots, violent sports, animal cruelty, religious fanaticism and intolerance, suppression of minorities, homosexuals and women, duelling, infanticide, burning witches, human sacrifice) has declined dramatically in the world, particularly in the last 200 years. Even the official creed of the US Marine Corps has shifted in recent years from protect god and country and leave no man behind to 'protect all persons at all times, even the enemy'. Not that all forms of violence have been eradicated or that no reversals are possible, but the toll is orders of magnitude less than before, and trends still look good.

War and other institutionalised violence, for example, has decreased globally in the era after World War II, when true global institutions, greatly improved communications and expanded trade has spearheaded the longest peace among great powers in human history. Pinker argues that we are now engaged in the halting process of extending worldwide the right to be violence free.

## Is Climate Change a Form of Violence?

Today's world is not the final frontier, however. The next stage of anti-violence evolution may need to be launched across temporal boundaries into the future. Our science tells us clearly that damage to others, including from climate change, can be propagated across time by our own present actions, even some actions that seem rational or apparently harmless in the short term. Science also informs us that the inadvertent target of most such climate impacts is the most vulnerable; the very groups which rationally should be the focus of contemporary efforts to enlarge the frontier of rights and empathy during anti-violence evolution. In other words, the bulk of climate-threatening actions most endanger the future well-being of the groups society is just beginning to include within the global anti-violence boundary.

Violence, as usually defined, is harmful action taken by one identifiable person or group directly against another identifiable person or group. It is usually framed in the context of trauma in which direct causality and aetiology are not much in question, to use health terminology. This is true whether machetes or nuclear weapons are used, both of which have killed hundreds of thousands in recent memory, although the former much more than the latter – or whether perpetuated by rogue nation states or abusive husbands.

The impacts of climate change, however, although partly acting through trauma, do not have the same immediate direct linkage. Causality and aetiology are still in question for some impacts today, and even as the connections become more statistically clear with increasing global warming, there will not be the direct clarity of cause and effect as when people wield swords against one another.

Nevertheless, people can be harmed by actions taken by others, even if far distant in time and place. This is another form of violence, even if mediated by Earth's climate system. Violence, however, also carries a moral connotation, being made up of clear acts of commission, not merely of negligence, i.e. omission. Climate change has not yet crossed the boundary into clear acts of commission in the minds of most of the world – the visceral recognition that our emissions today are killing people tomorrow. It is more in the realm of a sin of omission today; climate change occurs because we are negligent in doing something about it. Nevertheless, perception is moving in the direction of considering our actions today as a form of commission, as the climate science shows more and more clearly how what we now do affects others, even those whose names cannot ever be known.

## Violence to the Afterlife

Issues of intergenerational equity have long been part of the debate about climate change and other long-term environmental issues, such as nuclear waste (Smith, 1977). The works of Scheffler and Pinker, however, provide important extensions of that perspective from completely different realms – moral philosophy and social history. They give new ways to frame the evidence marshalled in the McMichael trilogy as leading to the needed changes in thinking about climate mitigation and the human future. On one side, understanding the negative changes that could come from the severe climate change that could occur well within the lifetime of children born today pushes us to contemplate what it would mean to cross what might be termed the 'Scheffler Afterlife Threshold'. This would be the point at which threats to the future from climate change might so alter our belief in the nature of what human life and society will become that it threatens how we value ourselves and our own lives today, one of Scheffler's main points about the afterlife. On the other side, strengthening our belief in the connection between current actions and future impacts shifts the moral argument away from omission towards commission, i.e. makes our actions more like conscious violent acts against others. Thus, mitigation of climate change then could be seen as an extension of the long march of violence reduction in human history to our own future.

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