

THE INTERGENERATIONAL ETHICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE:  
ALTERNATIVE ETHICAL RESOURCES

INTERGENERASJONALE KLIMAETIKK:  
ALTERNATIVE ETISKE RESSURSER

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## Abstract

Climate change is a highly complex and multifaceted problem, and addressing it will require input from experts in a variety of fields. When we begin to consider the ethical aspects of climate change, however, we are presented with a widely acknowledged theoretical problem in moral philosophy. According to the Non-Identity Problem, taking drastic action on climate change will lead to a future world with a population completely distinct from the one resulting from a 'business as usual'-style policy. But if this is true, then it appears that the individuals resulting from the business as usual policy would prefer such a policy to drastic action, given that their existence depends upon it. This theoretical problem clashes with our moral intuitions and also creates complications for the Pure Intergenerational Problem, a leading attempt proposed by Stephen Gardiner at a theoretical characterization of what it is in part that makes the climate problem so difficult to address. If we are to approach various ethical questions with regard to climate change, then, it appears that we must do something to address the Non-Identity Problem, both for theoretical and intuitive reasons.

In this thesis, I propose that the consequentialist reasoning inherent in the Non-Identity Problem is at the root of the problem itself, and that an alternative virtue ethical framework is needed when dealing with a problem like climate change. I examine two such potential alternative frameworks: deep ecology as proposed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (which I characterize as a kind of virtue ethic), and a Buddhist virtue ethic as presented by David Cooper and Simon James. In taking a virtue ethics approach, both of these frameworks are able to avoid the Non-Identity Problem. A Buddhist ethic is also attractive as it proposes a different understanding of identity and the self, one which undermines the assumptions about personal identity implicit in the Non-Identity Problem. I argue for a virtue ethical interpretation of Buddhist ethics and then suggest how some specific Buddhist virtues might govern our actions in the face of a long term, temporally diffuse, intergenerational problem like climate change, as well as how such an ethic manages to avoid the quandary presented by the Non-Identity Problem. Finally, I consider two potential critiques of my account and offer responses to them.

## Abstrakt

Klimaendring er et kompleks problem, og løsninger krever innspill fra ulike fagfelt. Når vi vurderer etiske aspekter knyttet til klimaendring, møter vi på 'ikke-identitetsproblemet' (the Non-Identity Problem). I følge dette problemet vil det oppstå to grupper fremtidige mennesker som avhenger av om det blir tatt drastiske grep til å løse klimaendringene, eller dagens politikk ('business as usual'). Om dette stemmer virker det som om befolkningen som oppstår ved dagens politikk vil foretrekke nettopp denne fordi de ikke ellers ville ha eksistert. Dette problemet går imot våre etiske intuisjoner, og skaper også problemer for det 'Pure Intergenerational Problem,' et forsøk av Stephen Gardiner til å gi en teoretisk karakterisering av en av grunnene at klimaendring viser seg til å være så vanskelig å løse. Derfor virker det at om vi skal nærme oss ulike etiske spørsmål som handler om klimaendring, må vi henvender oss til ikke-identitetsproblemet av både teoretiske og intuitive grunner.

I denne avhandling foreslår jeg at roten til ikke-identitetsproblemet kan finnes i konsekvensalistiske moralske vurderinger, og at en alternativ tilnærming, nemlig dydsetikk, er nødvendig. Jeg vurderer to mulige rammer: dypøkologi med presentert av Arne Næss (og som jeg karakterisere som dydsetikk) og en buddhistisk dydsetikk, presentert av David Cooper og Simon James. Som dydsetikk kan begge to unngå ikke-identitetsproblemet. Dessuten undergraver en buddhistisk etikk forutsetningene om identitet som er knyttet til ikke-identitetsproblemet. Jeg argumenterer for en dydsetisk tolkning av buddhistisk etikk og foreslår hvordan noen spesifikke buddhistiske dyder kan styre våre handlinger når det kommer til et intergenerasjonalt problem som klimaendring. Til slutt vurderer jeg to mulige måter å kritisere min beretning, og prøver å svare på dem.

## Contents

Introduction	5
1. The Ethical Aspects of Climate Change	7
2. The Theoretical Challenges of Climate Change	13
2.1. Overview	13
2.2. Climate Change and the Non-Identity Problem	17
2.3. A Virtue Ethical Alternative	22
3. Further Motivating the Non-Identity Problem Within Climate Ethics	26
3.1. Gardiner's Pure Intergenerational Problem	26
3.2. Challenges Presented by the Non-Identity Problem	31
4. Two Alternative Ethical Frameworks	40
4.1. Alternative Ethical Frameworks	40
4.2. Virtue Ethics	41
4.3. Virtue Ethics and the Climate Ethics Literature	44
4.4. Justifying Alternative Virtue Ethical Approaches	46
5. A Deep Ecological Virtue Ethic	53
5.1. Overview	53
5.2. Characterizing Deep Ecology	56
5.3. The Problem of Relativism	60
5.4. Deep Ecology as a Virtue Ethic	66
5.5. Naess and Buddhism	76
6. A Buddhist Virtue Ethic for the Climate	78
6.1. Overview	78
6.2. Foundational Buddhist Concepts	80
6.3. Buddhist Ethics as Virtue Ethical	85
6.4. Buddhist Virtues for the Climate	92

	4
6.5. Buddhist Ethics and the Non-Identity Problem	102
6.6. Objections and Responses	109
7. Conclusion	112
Bibliography	114

## Introduction

Climate change is a highly complex and multifaceted problem, and addressing it will require input from experts in a variety of fields. But while it is tempting to conclude that the problem is primarily a technical and political one — that is, that it can be solved by the combined efforts of climatologists, engineers, and policymakers — such a conclusion fails to recognize an important third dimension: namely, an ethical one.

When we begin to consider the ethical aspects of climate change, however, we are presented with a widely acknowledged theoretical problem in moral philosophy. According to the Non-Identity Problem, any policy we adopt in response to climate change will result in a distinct global population in the distant future. In other words, taking drastic action with respect to climate change will lead to a future world with a population completely distinct from the one resulting from a 'business as usual'-style policy. But if this is true, and so long as we can assume that the individuals in the population which results from business as usual lead lives worth living, then it appears that these individuals would prefer business as usual over a policy which takes drastic action to mitigate climate change. The Non-Identity Problem suggests that, according to a consequentialist line of reasoning, we may have little reason to take action with regard to climate change.

This theoretical problem clashes with our moral intuitions, and also creates complications for the Pure Intergenerational Problem, a leading attempt proposed by Stephen Gardiner at a theoretical characterization of what it is in part that makes the climate problem so difficult to address. Gardiner claims that one of the the unique challenges posed by climate change is best understood as a kind of modified prisoner's dilemma or tragedy of the commons problem. His formal theoretical model for the climate challenge is comprised of two premises, the first of which claims that "it is collectively rational for most generations to cooperate [that is, to reduce emissions]: (almost) every generation prefers the outcome produced by everyone restricting pollution over the outcome produced by everyone

overpolluting.”<sup>1</sup> But following the Non-Identity Problem, this premise appears to be false: any generations brought into existence as a result of overpolluting would presumably prefer overpolluting to the reduction of emissions. If we are to approach various ethical questions with regard to climate change, then, it appears that we must do something to address the Non-Identity Problem, both for theoretical and intuitive reasons.

In this thesis, I propose that the consequentialist reasoning inherent in the Non-Identity Problem is at the root of the problem itself, and that an alternative virtue ethical framework is needed when dealing with a problem like climate change. I examine two such potential alternative frameworks: deep ecology as proposed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (which I characterize as a kind of virtue ethic), and a Buddhist virtue ethic as presented by David Cooper and Simon James. In taking a virtue ethics approach, both of these frameworks are able to avoid the Non-Identity Problem. A Buddhist ethic is also attractive insofar as it proposes a different ontological understanding of identity and of the self, one which undermines the assumptions about personal identity implicit in the Non-Identity Problem. Ultimately, I conclude that deep ecology, while it is interesting for its intense popularity among philosophers throughout the 1970's and 1980's, is unappealing as an ethical framework due to its lack of a detailed ethical account from which to work. I suggest that a virtue ethics approach to deep ecology could generate such an ethic, but that such an attempt would be beyond the scope of this paper. Deep ecology as proposed by Naess points in the direction of a Buddhist ethic, however, and it is such an ethic that I believe offers a useful alternative ethical framework for thinking about a difficult intergenerational problem like climate change. Following David Cooper and Simon James, I will argue for a virtue ethical interpretation of Buddhist ethics. I will then suggest how some specific Buddhist virtues might govern our actions in the face of a long term, temporally diffuse, intergenerational problem like climate change, as well as how such an ethic

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen M. Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: the Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 404.

manages to avoid the quandary presented by the Non-Identity Problem. Finally, I will consider two potential critiques of my account and offer responses to them.

### **1. The Ethical Aspects of Climate Change**

Climate change has presented us with a frightening predicament. Hyperbole aside, it is difficult to overstate the seriousness of the situation. The major media outlets varyingly present climate related coverage — stories about natural disasters, heat waves, political debate, protests, and so on — without much in the way of fanfare. These sorts of stories crop up on an almost daily basis, typically failing to stand out as they make their way through the news cycle. Occasionally, though, something particularly dire appears as a major headline. In October 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a Special Report entitled “Global Warming of 1.5 °C.”<sup>2</sup> This is the sort of report one might point to when engaged in an argument with a climate skeptic: the report includes more than 6,000 individual citations, features 91 authors from 40 countries, and offers a rather comprehensive overview of the current state of affairs with respect to climate change.

One of the major takeaways of the report is the need for “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” if we are to stay below the important 1.5 °C warming threshold.<sup>3</sup> This quote circulated in the major media outlets for a number of days following the release of the report, and briefly became a talking point. Rapid, far-reaching, and unprecedented would indeed seem to describe the sort of shift that needs to occur, particularly given the current state of affairs. Consider, for example, that 1.5 °C of overall warming was the stated goal of the Paris Agreement. Meanwhile, current global energy

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<sup>2</sup> “Global Warming of 1.5 °C” (International Panel on Climate Change), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Special Climate Report: 1.5°C Is Possible But Requires Unprecedented and Urgent Action” (United Nations, Oct 8, 2018), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2018/10/special-climate-report-1-5oc-is-possible-but-requires-unprecedented-and-urgent-action/>.



policies result in a higher than 97% likelihood of exceeding 2.0 °C of warming by the end of the current century.<sup>4</sup>

The projected differences in living conditions resulting from 1.5 °C and 2.0 °C of warming are quite significant and include an increase in “mean temperature in most land and ocean regions (high confidence), hot extremes in most inhabited regions (high confidence), heavy precipitation in several regions (medium confidence), and the probability of drought and precipitation deficits in some regions (medium confidence).” Holding warming to 1.5 °C or below would also limit the otherwise potentially devastating impact of climate change on global ecosystems, minimize the number of species extinctions, and reduce “climate-related risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth.”<sup>5</sup> In short, there is a massive difference between 1.5 °C and 2.0 °C of warming — but our current policies have us exceeding the latter with a probability of more than 97%. In fact, current policies have a median probability of landing us at 3.2 °C of warming by 2100 — a number far more disastrous than even the much maligned 2.0 °C.<sup>6</sup>

But as frightening as all of this sounds, the IPCC Special Report has apparently had little effect on global policy. Time will tell, of course, but it certainly did not stick around in the news cycle for long. For those of us following the climate situation closely, this is (sadly) far from surprising.

And so we find ourselves in a rather strange situation. On the one hand, we have almost complete scientific consensus pointing to an impending (and to some degree, already present), catastrophic, historically unprecedented reality characterized by floods, famines, extinction, and extreme weather. On the other, we see both nations and individuals only passively concerned with the problem (or downplaying its seriousness, or even denying its

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<sup>4</sup> “The CAT Thermometer” (Climate Action Tracker, Sep. 2019), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://climateactiontracker.org/global/cat-thermometer/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Summary for Policymakers — Global Warming of 1.5 °C” (International Panel on Climate Change, 2018), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/spm/>.

<sup>6</sup> “The CAT Thermometer.”

existence altogether in the case of some important major players), all seemingly unwilling to take the necessary action to properly do something about it. Those of us who are convinced that the problem is serious and needs to be addressed — and there are quite a lot of us, to be sure — are left scratching our heads, wondering what we ought to do.

What, if anything, can philosophers contribute to this challenging situation?

On the one hand, climate change seems to be a problem of science and technology, at least predominantly. We need climatologists to design and interpret complex climate models so that we can thoroughly understand how our actions may impact overall warming over time. We also need engineers to develop new and more efficient means of sustainable energy production, amongst other things. And, of course, we need both the policy and the political will to transition to these sustainable forms of energy production, and to ensure that we do so in a way that stays on track with the targets proposed by the climatologists.

As of now, we are failing rather miserably at this.

But does this really capture the way that we need to approach the climate problem?

At first, this picture appears to be relatively complete. If we can identify the problem, determine how we have to respond in order to address it, develop the tools necessary to do so, and then use those tools to address the problem, it seems that we have accounted for the entire situation. But I would argue that this analysis is missing something very important, and other philosophers (climate ethicists in particular) would agree with me. Namely, it is missing the important element of ethical analysis.

I have not arrived at this conclusion simply because I am writing from a philosopher's perspective. The importance of ethics when it comes to climate change is recognized by other important players in the climate discussion. In fact, the IPCC itself sums up the grand challenge that is climate change thusly in a report from 2001:

Natural, technical, and social sciences can provide essential information and evidence needed for decisions on what constitutes 'dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.' At the same time, such decisions are value judgments determined through sociopolitical processes, taking into account

considerations such as development, equity, and sustainability, as well as uncertainties and risk.<sup>7</sup>

This quotation is the basis for Stephen Gardiner's initial foray into climate ethics, and he underscores the point that "such decisions are value judgments." As he puts it, "the temptation to refer to experts in other disciplines should be resisted. Climate change is fundamentally an ethical issue. As such, it should be of serious concern to both moral philosophers and humanity at large."<sup>8</sup> In other words, it is indeed true that we need climatologists to create complex climate models and interpret them for us, and we need engineers to develop new and sustainable energy technologies. And, yes, we need the political will to get the job done. But deciding *what exactly we ought to do* as individuals, as nations, and as a planet, is still fundamentally a matter of ethics.

To illustrate this point further, consider some of the central questions surrounding how we ought to go about combating climate change. First, there is the question of who ought to bear the burden of the transition. This gives rise to a further set of considerations. Should it be those who are historically responsible for doing the most polluting, or those who are currently polluting the most? Should less developed countries who are currently polluting heavily bear just as much of the burden as developed countries, or should they bear less of it? Should these countries be allowed to continue to develop until they reach the level of material wealth currently enjoyed by some of the world's richest countries, or should they slow their development? This list goes on, but these questions all have something in common: each of them is fundamentally ethical, and any arguments posited for or against them must appeal to some sort of ethical framework. This fact is underscored by the prevalence of these topics in the philosophical literature. The past few years have seen an increasing amount of discussion surrounding these issues in major philosophical

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<sup>7</sup> "IPCC Climate Change 2001: Synthesis Report" (International Panel on Climate Change, 2001), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://archive.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/tar/vol4/index.php?idp=17>. Quoted in Gardiner, "Ethics and Global Climate Change," 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Gardiner, "Ethics and Global Climate Change," *Ethics* 114, no.3 (Apr. 2004): 556.

publications, although there is little consensus when it comes to historical responsibility and the question of who should pay for climate mitigation and adaptation.<sup>9</sup>

Consider another set of questions related to transitioning to sustainable energy sources. In adopting new and more sustainable sources of energy, should we aim to maintain the same level of per capita consumption currently enjoyed in, say, the United States? Or, should we as individuals aim for a different standard of living? The UN 2011 World Economic and Social Survey posits that individual annual carbon emissions may need to be limited to 3 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per person, per year by 2050 in order to reduce pressure on the need to immediately and drastically transform the energy sector.<sup>10</sup> Linnerud et al. suggest a per capita carbon budget (that is, an upper threshold per person annually) of 3.6 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>, which they derive by dividing the lower boundary of the 2030 global carbon waypoints (31 gigatons of CO<sub>2</sub>) by the “medium-variant global population in 2030” (8.5 billion).<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the current World Bank estimate has the average U.S. citizen emitting more than 16 tons per year.<sup>12</sup> It may well be the case that a full transition to sustainable methods of energy production could completely offset the annual difference between these two numbers (that is, 13 tons per capita), but it seems doubtful whether such a transition will take place at the rapid pace required to offset the difference. Rather, it may be more efficient, realistic, and practical to simultaneously reduce our emission levels as we attempt to transition our energy systems.

But if we’re going to transition our energy systems while also cutting back on consumption, where should we do it? Should we limit car travel and build better public transit

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<sup>9</sup> See for example Henry Shue, “Global Environment and International Inequality,” *International Affairs* 75, no. 3 (Jul. 1999): 531-545, and Simon Caney, “Climate Change and the Duties of the Advantaged,” *Social and Political Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (2010): 203-228.

<sup>10</sup> “World Economic and Social Survey 2011” (United Nations, 2011), p. 27, accessed October 29, 2019, [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wess/wess\\_current/2011wess.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wess/wess_current/2011wess.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Kristin Linnerud et al., “A Normative Model of Sustainable Development: How Do Countries Comply?,” in *What Next for Sustainable Development? Our Common Future at Thirty*, ed. James Meadowcroft et al. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2019), 33.

<sup>12</sup> “CO<sub>2</sub> Emissions (Metric Tons Per Capita)” (World Bank, 2019), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/en.atm.co2e.pc>.

infrastructure? Should we reduce our consumption of beef in favor of eggs, or pork in favor of lentils?<sup>13</sup> For that matter, do we need to completely reimagine what a “good life” really looks like, confronting the enormous challenge of curbing our desire for unlimited consumption and acquisition in favor of a simpler way of life? These are also ultimately ethical and philosophical questions, and difficult ones at that.

Finally, we might also consider a third group of questions centered around individual responsibility. Anyone even remotely concerned with the personal impact they have on the environment finds themselves confronted with these sorts of questions on a daily basis. Should I go out of my way to recycle this plastic bottle, rather than tossing it in the trash? Should I drive my car less this week? Is it unethical for me to fly somewhere for vacation, knowing that jet fuel makes a significant contribution to global carbon emissions? The problem is that no single individual’s actions amount to much in the grand scheme of climate change. As philosopher James Garvey puts it: “What’s my 5 tons or so of greenhouse gas emissions per year compared to 1,000 tons per second? Sort the recycling into neat piles, insulate your house, choose local produce, travel only by bicycle and on and on...and none of it can possibly make the slightest real difference to our world.”<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to see at first glance why we should have any reason to “go green,” considering that there appears to be no direct causal link between, say, eating a salad rather than a hamburger and the melting of the Greenland Ice Sheet. If we’re going to come up with reasons for why any of us as individuals ought to do anything at all in our daily lives in order to limit our impact on the climate, we’re going to need a good argument. And that argument will be one that is grounded in ethics.

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<sup>13</sup> Beef and pork consumption results in the emission of significant amounts of CO<sub>2</sub>, particularly when compared to other protein sources such as eggs and lentils. See for example “Carbon Footprint Factsheet” (Center for Sustainable Systems, University of Michigan, 2018), accessed October 29, 2019, <http://css.umich.edu/factsheets/carbon-footprint-factsheet>.

<sup>14</sup> James Garvey, “Climate Change and Causal Inefficacy: Why Go Green When It Makes No Difference?”, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 59 (2011): 160.

There are many more such questions that we might consider when deciding what we ought to do to address climate change, both on the individual and policy level, but these few are sufficient to make my point: namely, that the question of how we go about solving the climate problem is as much an ethical as it is a scientific or technological one. In fact, even the question “how *ought* we go about solving the climate change problem?” is a normative question, acknowledging the potential existence of multiple routes to the solution. As philosophers and ethicists, we are in no position to sit back and pass the buck to climatologists, engineers, and policy makers. Rather, we ought to make whatever contribution we can to the ethical side of the climate crisis.

But as soon as we open the door to moral philosophy, we have a whole host of considerations to take into account. After all, we will need to develop reasoned arguments in attempting to respond to any and all of the above questions — and those arguments have to be couched in ethical theory of one sort or another. Otherwise, they are unlikely to be particularly forceful arguments. But when we turn to ethical theory, we find that climate change in particular presents a number of major theoretical difficulties, both in terms of determining how and why we ought to be concerned about it in the first place, and in deciding how and what we ought to do about it. Addressing one of these major theoretical difficulties will be a central topic of this thesis.

## **2. The Theoretical Challenges of Climate Change**

### **2.1. Overview**

What is it that makes one action ethical, and another unethical? How do we know whether something we are doing (or considering doing) or allowing is right or wrong? Where does the difference lie? At the most basic level, the way we attempt to answer these questions will have to be grounded in a particular approach to ethics — that is, a particular ethical framework.

Philosophers generally agree that there are three primary ethical frameworks which we might use in conceptualizing, analyzing, and constructing arguments around various ethical issues: consequentialism (or utilitarianism), deontology, and virtue ethics. What I will argue here is that the first of these frameworks is poorly suited to a problem like climate change, and that the third framework may present us with some distinct advantages in terms of how we go about addressing that problem. But before I can make that argument, there is a considerable amount of theoretical ground that I have to cover.

First, a brief overview of these three major frameworks within normative ethics. While such an overview is elementary, I believe it is important to review the foundational aspects of these ethical frameworks, as it is the foundations of the first two (particularly consequentialism) which result in such difficulty when attempting to apply them to the climate problem — and, similarly, it is the formal character of virtue ethics that may make it a more useful approach to thinking about the climate.

Imagine that we are asked to determine whether an action is right or wrong. What considerations would we take into account according to these approaches? A consequentialist would focus on the expected consequences that the given action would have, and determine its rightness or wrongness based on those consequences. Further, a utilitarian (for my purposes here, essentially a specific type of consequentialist) would consider whether or not the action would result in the greatest amount of good being produced — that is, whether or not it would maximize utility. Meanwhile, a deontologist would think in terms of principles, rules, and duties that are said to provide us with normative ethical guidance. If the action violates some moral principle, the deontologist would likely conclude that the action is wrong, even if it appears to produce good consequences. Conversely, an action which is in alignment with some deontological duty or rule of conduct will likely be assessed as a morally right action, even if that action results in terrible consequences. Lastly, a virtue ethicist would focus on the virtues and vices elicited by and

implied in the action: would a person engaging in said action be considered virtuous? Could we say that their action was courageous, honest, or compassionate, rather than cowardly, deceitful, or cruel? If the action elicits one or more of these virtues, then the virtue ethicist would likely deem it good. If a person engaging in the action could be characterized in terms of one or more of these vices, the virtue ethicist would likely deem that action bad. Further, these virtues and vices are understood in terms of a particular picture of what the virtue ethicists deems to be ‘the good life.’<sup>15</sup>

Of course, attempting to pigeonhole our ethical thinking into three distinct frameworks is inherently problematic. Aren’t virtue ethicists concerned with consequences? Couldn’t a deontologist take virtues and vices into consideration in determining our duties to one another as moral agents? The lines between these three ethical frameworks are blurry, and there is a certain liminal character about them. For this reason, it is probably better to conceive of these frameworks not as distinct columns to be treated and considered separately, but rather as three circles which overlap one another in a Venn diagram. It is not that the virtue ethicist ignores consequences, or that the consequentialist is not concerned with what type of person someone can be said to be (courageous, honest, compassionate) as a result of their actions. Rather, it is a question of where the focus lies. Hursthouse and Pettigrove sum this up quite succinctly:

Each of the above-mentioned approaches [consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics] can make room for virtues, consequences, and rules. Indeed, any plausible normative ethical theory will have something to say about all three. What distinguishes virtue ethics from consequentialism or deontology is the centrality of virtue within the theory...Whereas consequentialists will define virtues as traits that yield good consequences and deontologists will define them as traits possessed by those who reliably fulfil their duties, virtue ethicists will resist the attempt to define virtues in terms of some other concept that is taken to be more fundamental. Rather, virtues and vices will be foundational for virtue ethical theories and other normative notions will be grounded in them.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> A much more detailed account of what I intend by a ‘virtue ethic’ is provided in section 4.2. This superficial characterization is sufficient for comparative purposes in this section.

<sup>16</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove, “Virtue Ethics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>. See also Gary



Consequentialism and deontology are standard ethical frameworks for many philosophers. The latter takes a number of forms, including rights-based theories as well as Kantian ones. But hardline deontology is problematic, and certainly appears too simplistic for a problem as complex as climate change. A hardline deontological theory would maintain, for example, that there are duties which we are obliged to follow in order to act in a morally right manner, regardless of the specifics of a given scenario. We could thus say that if we believe for example that there exists a duty to tell the truth, lying would always be morally inferior to truth telling. But we can imagine many scenarios in which telling a small lie (a very small harm) could prevent something terrible (a much larger harm) from happening, and where telling the truth (acting in accordance with duty) could result in a terrible outcome. Such scenarios seem to speak in favor of consequentialist reasoning of one sort or another.

Of course, hardline consequentialism is equally problematic. Various thought experiments in moral philosophy illustrate this: for example, we would likely not conclude it right to kill someone for the sake of harvesting their organs, even if doing so could save the lives of several other individuals. The balance of utility appears to speak in favor of harvesting the organs, but doing so runs up against our moral intuitions. Our respect for persons — perhaps a deontological respect for a person's rights — would appear to dictate that such an action would be morally wrong.

Still, consequentialist reasoning of one form or another often dominates discussion when it comes to policy debate, including debates around climate change. Cost-benefit analysis (CBA) is a clear example of this. Further, according to a consequentialist ethical framework, one will struggle to account for why an action is morally wrong if it does not

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Watson, "On the Primacy of Character", in *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology*, ed. Owen Flanagan and Richard Rorty (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 449–83, reprinted in Daniel Statman, *Virtue Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1997), and Jason Kawall, "In Defence of the Primacy of Virtues," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (2009): 1–21.

cause any harm to anyone (that is, has no apparent bad consequences), and is simultaneously a good for many people (that is, has many good consequences).

But in the case of climate change, this way of reasoning falls apart.

To be sure, there are many situations which are well suited to consequentialist ethical thinking, policymaking amongst them in many cases. But when we start to consider highly complex ethical problems that extend over long time scales — particularly those that are intergenerational — consequentialist reasoning becomes less appealing, and perhaps even completely unusable. It also fares poorly when attempting to motivate action in such scenarios, particularly in the case of something like climate change. These problems — the problem of time scale for ethical thinking in general, and the particular issues that arise from attempting to use a consequentialist framework for this kind of ethical reasoning — are particularly well captured by Derek Parfit's Non-Identity Problem (NIP), and it is to Parfit that I will now turn my attention.

## 2.2. Climate Change and the Non-Identity Problem

The Non-Identity Problem is concerned with the question of how we can account for an action's rightness or wrongness in terms of its impact on future people, considering that those people do not yet exist. Parfit compares and contrasts two scenarios to highlight this difficulty: namely, what he terms "The Nuclear Technician" and "The Risky Policy."<sup>17</sup> In the case of the first scenario, Parfit asks us to imagine a nuclear technician in charge of performing routine checks on a nuclear power plant. The technician neglects to perform one of these checks, and as a result there is a leak in a tank containing nuclear waste. The negative effects of this leak are severely delayed: they do not have any immediate impact on any human population. However, 200 years in the future, this leak results in severe injury and death for thousands of individuals. Parfit wonders: were the nuclear technician's actions

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<sup>17</sup> Derek Parfit, "Energy Policy and the Further Future," in *Energy and the Future*, ed. Douglas MacLean and Peter G. Brown (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983), 112-123.

subject to blame at the time they occurred, even though no one would be harmed for 200 years? The apparently obvious answer is yes. The fact that the people who will eventually be harmed have not yet come into existence would appear to have no bearing on the rightness or wrongness of the technician's action. We can judge the technician's action to be wrong regardless, and this is well in alignment with our moral intuitions.<sup>18</sup>

As it turns out, though, things are not so simple. Parfit challenges our ethical intuitions by asking us to consider "The Risky Policy" scenario. Here, we imagine a society that must adopt one of two energy policies. The first energy policy carries with it no negative consequences. However, much like the leak produced by The Nuclear Technician, the second energy policy — what Parfit terms The Risky Policy — will result in severe injury and death for thousands of people 200 years into the future. In the meantime, however, the second policy will provide a slightly better standard of living for members of this imaginary society.<sup>19</sup> Do we have good reason to conclude that there is something morally wrong with the second energy policy? Assuming that we believe the future injury and deaths of thousands of people is a negative consequence, and one which is hardly outweighed by a slightly improved standard of living in the meantime, it appears that we must indeed judge the second policy to be morally reprehensible.

But Parfit argues otherwise. He asks us to imagine what would happen over the course of the 200 year period in question as a result of the two differing energy policies. We can safely assume that the second policy would create entirely different conditions of possibility for the society's inhabitants. Their higher standard of living would engender meaningful changes in lifestyle and decision making. Over time, the cumulative effects of the differences between the societies resulting from each policy would be enormous. After 200

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<sup>18</sup> Parfit, "Energy Policy," 112.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

years, we can say without any hesitation that the people living in these societies would be *completely* different people.<sup>20</sup>

Now, following Parfit, we have to ask ourselves whether the people who come into existence as a result of The Risky Policy have lives worth living. If they do not have lives worth living, then it is easy to conclude that The Risky Policy is morally wrong, and that this policy should be avoided. But let us assume that the people who come into existence as a result of The Risky Policy do, in fact, have lives worth living. If this is the case, it is difficult to see how The Risky Policy could be morally wrong. After all, it is only because of The Risky Policy that these individuals ever come into existence. Had the imaginary society engaged in the first policy, these individuals simply would not exist. And so The Risky Policy does them no harm.<sup>21</sup> In fact, if we believe that being brought into existence to lead a life worth living is a moral good, then from a consequentialist perspective it would appear that The Risky Policy is actually a *moral good* for these individuals.

According to Parfit, the only way for us to account for why The Risky Policy is bad from within a utilitarian framework is to develop a new theory, what he terms “Theory ‘X.’” This theory would utilize a consequentialist framework to account for moral wrongdoing, but without any appeal to person-affecting harms — more specifically, without any appeal to the idea that an action is morally wrong because it harms some existing individuals, or fails to maximize the good for certain existing individuals.<sup>22</sup> A standard consequentialist ethical theory is not up to this task, as it appeals to the notion that an action is wrong insofar as it has negative consequences *for some existing individuals*. It is quite difficult to imagine how an action can be “harmful” when it harms no one, a difficulty which the Non-Identity Problem highlights.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 113-114.

<sup>22</sup> Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 378.

The relevance of this theoretical problem for the situation presented to us by climate change is, I believe, rather obvious. Consider for a moment the parallels between the climate change problem and *The Risky Policy*. In the case of climate change, we can imagine that we might pursue one of two different courses of action. The first course of action, which I will refer to as Business As Usual (BAU), is just that: our current course of action with respect to global policy. Following this policy, there is a median probability of hitting 3.2 °C of warming by the end of this century. The effects of this much warming on the climate would be severe, as discussed above. Meanwhile, we might imagine adopting a second and dramatically different global policy which I will refer to as Drastic Action (DA). This is the recommendation proposed by the IPCC in 2018: the “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” that will keep us below the 1.5 °C of warming threshold.<sup>23</sup> Much like the conservative and risky policies posited by Parfit in *The Risky Policy*, we can safely conclude that DA and BAU will result in two completely different global populations in the space of 200 years. In fact, the kind of sweeping changes to infrastructure, energy systems, commerce, and lifestyle necessary to stay below the 1.5 °C threshold would likely produce entirely distinct global populations much sooner than that — perhaps within a single generation. This is especially true when we consider the cumulative effects of the differing energy policies themselves on the one hand, and the altered living conditions of life on earth on the other (for example, rising sea levels, shifting coast lines, expanding deserts, disappearing forests, displaced populations, and so on).

Our moral intuition is to conclude that there is something morally wrong with engaging in BAU, rather than taking the necessary steps to adopt the DA policy. To be sure, BAU would provide us with materially superior living conditions over the short term — and, of course, it would simply be easier. But it is hard to imagine someone constructing a cogent, persuasive ethical argument for BAU after reading through the details of what sort of

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<sup>23</sup> “Special Climate Report.”

conditions await future planetary inhabitants as a result of 3.2 °C of warming. And yet, the Non-Identity Problem tells us that this moral intuition cannot be adequately explained by traditional consequentialist moral reasoning. If the global population that comes to exist as a result of BAU can be said to consist of individuals with lives worth living, then it appears that we cannot conclude that BAU is morally wrong. Without the negative effects of climate change — the extinct species, the unpredictable and severe weather, the disappearance of forests and agricultural land, the growing uninhabitability of large areas of the planet — these people would never have come into existence in the first place.

Since Parfit first proposed the NIP in the 1980's, philosophers have struggled with these sorts of questions. Many of them have proposed consequentialist solutions to the problem, although these various solutions all come with serious problems. Consider first a consequentialist theory which is at least partially impersonal. Such a theory would lead us to what Parfit calls the "repugnant conclusion": "for any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better even though its members have lives that are barely worth living."<sup>24</sup> Parfit himself made attempts to generate a Theory X, right up until his death in 2017. In a recent publication, Parfit considered an ethical principle which would allow us to weigh two potential courses of action (along consequentialist lines) based on which of the outcomes produced would result in more collective good for more people, and/or more good for each of those people individually.<sup>25</sup> But as M. A. Roberts points out, such a pluralistic account may be *too* sweeping in its attempt to address the Non-Identity Problem and avoid the repugnant conclusion. It is only the beginnings of a solution, and may itself result in the generation of problem cases. At the

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<sup>24</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 388.

<sup>25</sup> Derek Parfit, "Future People, the Non-Identity Problem, and Person-Affecting Principles," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 45, no. 2 (2017): 154. Quoted in M. A. Roberts, "The Non-Identity Problem," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2019 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nonidentity-problem/>.

time of writing, Parfit's suggested theory is only two years old, and has yet to be thoroughly conceptualized, considered, discussed, and tested.

### 2.3. A Virtue Ethical Alternative

I suspect that, like many other attempts to solve the Non-Identity Problem through the use of consequentialist reasoning, Parfit's suggestion will ultimately fall short. This is because I believe the Non-Identity Problem is not a problem to be solved via a consequentialist ethical framework. Rather, we can consider the NIP in the same way that logicians have increasingly come to approach problems such as the Liar's Paradox. The NIP points to problems with consequentialist reasoning, much like the Liar's Paradox points to a theoretical weakness in the fabric of classical logic. If we are to deal with the an ethical issue like climate change in a satisfactory way in light of the NIP, we ought to attempt to do so by utilizing an alternative ethical framework — just as logicians propose a way around paradoxes like the Liar with nonclassical logics and dialethic truth theories. Specifically, I suggest that we attempt to deal with the problems presented by the NIP with the help of a virtue ethical framework.

I am not the first to point to the fact that a utilitarian moral framework may be poorly suited to addressing the climate problem, nor am I the first to suggest that virtue ethics may make for a superior alternative. Perhaps one of the earliest examples of the latter claim comes from Dale Jamieson in the aptly titled "When Utilitarians Should Be Virtue Theorists."

<sup>26</sup> Jamieson first asks how a utilitarian ought to act in order to maximize the good in response to the challenge posed by climate change. He suggests that there are at least three possibilities: a utilitarian could be a hypocrite, maximizing their own emissions in an effort to motivate others to change their behavior (for example, flying around the world

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<sup>26</sup> Dale Jamieson, "When Utilitarians Should Be Virtue Theorists," in *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*, ed. Stephen M. Gardiner, Simon Caney, Dale Jamieson, and Henry Shue (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 315-331.

advocating for climate-friendly activity). Or, one could become an “ascetic,” restricting their own emissions as much as possible. Or, finally, one could engage in actions which are somewhere between these two extremes. He suggests that for the utilitarian, it is “plausible to suppose that...under most conditions, the most effective strategy for addressing the problem would involve both actions primarily directed toward minimizing their own contributions, and actions primarily directed toward causing others to minimize their contributions.”<sup>27</sup>

But how should this line of action be determined? This is where consequentialist thinking runs into trouble. Jamieson traces a line of reasoning from abandoning any attempt at comprehensive calculation to, in turn, abandoning contingency and adopting a commitment to “noncontingency,” which “requires agents to act in ways that minimize their contributions to global environmental change, and specifies that acting in this way should generally not be contingent on an agent’s beliefs about the behavior of others.” Following Jamieson:

The case for noncontingency flows from the failure of contingency with respect to this problem [that is, global environmental change]. Contingency, if it is to be successful from a utilitarian point of view, is likely to require sophisticated calculation. But when it comes to large-scale collective-action problems, calculation invites madness or cynicism — madness because the sums are impossible to do, or cynicism because it appears that both morality and self-interest demand that “I get mine,” since whatever others do, it appears that both I and the world are better off if I fail to cooperate. Indeed, it is even possible that in some circumstances the best outcome would be one in which I cause you to cooperate and me to defect. Joy-riding in my ‘57 Chevy will not in itself change the climate, nor will my refraining from driving stabilize the climate, though it might make me late for Sierra Club meetings...Nations reason in similar ways. No single nation has the power either to cause or to prevent climate change. Thus nations talk about how important it is to act while waiting for others to take the bait. Since everyone, both individuals and nations, can reason in this way, it appears that calculation leads to a downward spiral of noncooperation. This should lead us to give up on calculation, and giving up on calculation should lead us to give up on contingency. Instead of looking to moral mathematics for practical solutions to large-scale collective-action problems, we should focus instead on noncalculative

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 318.



generators of behavior: character traits, dispositions, emotions, and what I shall call virtues.<sup>28</sup>

But there is a major problem with Jamieson's reasoning here. While it may be true that calculation *can* invite cynicism, and that there are indeed global problems which no single nation is capable of addressing on its own (including climate change), this does not necessitate that utilitarian calculus is inadequate for addressing environmental problems. Far from it. As I discuss in the next section, the Montreal Protocol is an excellent example of nations coming together, identifying a global commons-type problem that requires mutual cooperation, and imposing various penalties on one another in order to encourage compliance and avoid the supposedly "inevitable" spiral into self-interested action described by Jamieson above.

Jamieson incorrectly lumps both the ozone depletion problem and climate change into the same category of what he terms "the problem of global environmental change."<sup>29</sup> But there is good reason to think that these problems are not comparable from the perspective of ethical reasoning, and to draw a distinction between the two.

Indeed, it is not simply the fact that climate change is a global problem which renders utilitarian calculus inadequate for engaging in ethical thinking surrounding the issue. If it were, such reasoning would fail us in the case of ozone depletion — but, arguably, it has not. The problem is that Jamieson fails to consider what is unique about climate change in his formulation above: namely, its protracted time scale, its intergenerational nature, and the intense demands placed on individual agents (whether individuals or nations, if we are to understand nations as agents) in attempting to significantly lower their emissions. This is further compounded by differences in terms of public perception of climate change over the past few decades as compared to public perception of the ozone problem in the 1970's and 1980's. The perception of an ozone 'hole' arguably made the danger of ozone depletion

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 315.

much more imminent than the gradual process of ‘climate change.’ The public was quite clearly concerned with the problem from the very beginning: in fact, US consumers were voluntarily switching away from aerosol sprays before any aerosol bans were put into place.

<sup>30</sup> The dangers of ozone depletion were arguably clearer, too: the evidence at the time showed that without the provisions and restrictions in the Montreal Protocol, by 2050 “the Earth’s ozone layer would have collapsed...with catastrophic consequences.” In the United States alone, we “would have seen an additional 280 million cases of skin cancer, 1.5 million skin cancer deaths, and 45 million cataracts—and the world would be at least 25 percent hotter.”<sup>31</sup>

By contrast, climate change has been mired in decades of supposed disagreement over the details and specifics of the problem. Deeply entrenched moneyed interests have made concerted attempts to sway public opinion by engaging in climate denialism, despite broad scientific consensus.<sup>32</sup> Dealing with the problem of climate change requires drastic, sweeping changes to energy systems and ways of life, while combating ozone depletion had only a comparatively minor impact on industry and lifestyle. All of this makes for a significant difference in how we might conceive of the ethical difficulties surrounding ozone depletion versus those connected to climate change.

All of this is thoroughly described and well characterized by Stephen Gardiner’s Pure Intergenerational Problem, which I will examine below. What is particularly ironic and perplexing is the fact that despite the apparent accuracy of Gardiner’s formulation in capturing one aspect of what is so difficult about dealing with the climate problem (and in helping to highlight some of the details that are missing from Jamieson’s argument above),

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<sup>30</sup> Sheldon Ungar, “Knowledge, Ignorance and the Popular Culture: Climate Change Versus the Ozone Hole,” *Public Understanding of Science* 9, no. 3 (2000): 297-312.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Leahy, “30 Years Old, the Montreal Protocol Saved the Ozone Layer, But Its Work is Unfinished” (National Geographic, Sep. 25, 2017), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/09/montreal-protocol-ozone-treaty-30-climate-change-hcfs-hcfs/>.

<sup>32</sup> See Catriona McKinnon, “Should We Tolerate Climate Change Denial?,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 40, no. 1 (2016): 205-216.

the Non-Identity Problem appears to render one of the premises of Gardiner's argument false. Thus the Non-Identity Problem is *doubly* problematic with respect to climate change: it both highlights the difficulty of using purely consequentialist reasoning for thinking about a problem like climate change, *and* creates challenges for developing adequate theoretical representations of what is unique about the climate crisis. I discuss the latter in detail presently.

### **3. Further Motivating the Non-Identity Problem Within Climate Ethics**

#### **3.1. Gardiner's Pure Intergenerational Problem**

Is the Non-Identity Problem *really* such a big problem for climate ethics? Do we actually need to 'do something about it' in order to reason ethically about climate change? I believe we do, for two reasons. The first is because of how sharply it disagrees with our ethical intuitions, as noted above. Those of us who are aware of the catastrophic consequences posed by climate change and 2.0 °C (or, much worse, 3.2 °C) of warming tend to have an ethical intuition that we ought to do something about it. But according to the NIP, there seems to be no explanation for this intuition. And, on the contrary, consequentialist reasoning appears to dictate that we have no real responsibility to take any action whatsoever, at least insofar as we are concerned with potential benefits and harms to future people.

But there is another important reason for tackling the Non-Identity Problem, aside from how forcefully it seems to clash with our moral intuitions. From a theoretical perspective, the NIP actually poses significant difficulties for developing a theoretical framework that adequately captures just what it is about the climate change problem that makes it so difficult to solve. That is to say, the planet is faced with all sorts of challenges in addition to climate change, some of which are perhaps more urgent than others. But there appears to be something special about the climate change problem that makes it particularly

difficult to deal with. This special status is rooted amongst other things in its displacement across time — that is, in its intergenerational nature. If we are to do something about climate change, it would be helpful to fully understand what it is about the problem that leads to such a serious stumbling block for us both in terms of public policy and individual responsibility. If we could accurately capture *precisely* what it is about climate change that's unique, then we would be closer to understanding what it is that we ought to do in order to address the problem, perhaps while steering clear of more standard approaches to global challenges that may not adequately fit the climate change situation.

Perhaps the most well developed attempt at a theoretical representation of the unique challenges posed by climate change is the one offered by Stephen Gardiner, first in his 2006 article "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption,"<sup>33</sup> and later in his 2011 book *A Perfect Moral Storm: the Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*. For those unfamiliar with some of the central debates in philosophy surrounding climate ethics, it is worth noting that Gardiner's work is arguably some of the most comprehensive and relevant. His work in the early 2000's was some of the first to begin focusing attention in contemporary ethics on the problem of climate change, particularly when it comes to the relevance of philosophy and ethical inquiry for addressing the problem.<sup>34</sup>

Gardiner offers a characterization of the unique problems posed by climate change in terms of what he calls a "perfect storm," alluding to the Sebastian Junger book of the same name wherein a ship at sea is caught in the middle of three converging storms simultaneously.<sup>35</sup> For Gardiner, the three metaphorical storms presented by climate change

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen M. Gardiner, "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption," *Environmental Values* 15, no. 3 (2006): 397-413. See also Stephen M. Gardiner, "The Pure Intergenerational Problem," *The Monist* 86, no. 3 (2003), 481-500.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Stephen M. Gardiner, "Ethics and Global Climate Change," *Ethics* 114, no. 3 (Apr. 2004), 555-600.

<sup>35</sup> Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm*, 6. For the book by Sebastian Junger, see Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men Against the Sea* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997).

are the “global storm,” the “intergenerational storm,” and the “theoretical storm,” corresponding to the uniquely global, intergenerational, and theoretically challenging nature of climate change.<sup>36</sup> In terms of the global storm, Gardiner highlights three important characteristics of the climate change problem which are especially problematic: dispersion of causes and effects; fragmentation of agency; and institutional inadequacy.<sup>37</sup> Causes and effects are dispersed in the case of climate change in the sense that the consequences of a particular agent’s actions are not realized by that same agent in the same time and space. My taking a flight from Norway to Los Angeles and back results in nearly a metric ton of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, but I do not directly experience the impact of those emissions *in particular* in terms of the overall effect of climate change on global conditions.<sup>38</sup> Fragmentation of agency refers to the fact that climate change can’t be blamed on a single agent, but rather the collective action of many different agents. Finally, institutional inadequacy is reflected in the lack of proper global institutions to handle the complex nature of the climate change problem.

But while all of this would seem to imply — particularly in the case of institutional inadequacy — that all we need to do in order to address the climate change problem is implement some sort of global structure of decision making and enforcement that can address it, the reality is actually much more complicated. This complication is captured by what Gardiner calls the intergenerational storm. But before looking closer at these complications, let us first examine a rather deceptive theoretical representation of climate change proposed by Gardiner — deceptive in the sense that, as we will see, while it appears adequate at first, it is actually incapable of capturing the intergenerational aspect of climate change.

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<sup>36</sup> Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm*, 24-44.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-29.

<sup>38</sup> Calculated using <https://www.icao.int/environmental-protection/CarbonOffset/Pages/default.aspx>.

The dispersion of cause and effect on the one hand and the fragmentation of agency on the other are not in any way unique to the climate change problem. In fact, these two characteristics are inherent in what we might typically represent as a Prisoner's Dilemma- or Tragedy of the Commons-type problem. Gardiner articulates the classic Prisoner's Dilemma thusly:

(PD1) It is *collectively rational* to cooperate: each agent prefers the outcome produced by everyone cooperating over the outcome produced by no one doing so.

(PD2) It is *individually rational* not to cooperate: when each agent has the power to decide whether or not she will cooperate, each (rationally) prefers not to do so, whatever the others do.<sup>39</sup>

As Gardiner puts it, an agent in this situation is caught in a paradox. They know that, considering PD1, they ought to cooperate, since this would be better for all agents, including themselves. But given PD2, the most individually rational thing to do is *not* cooperate. Consider the example of whether or not an agent ought to reduce their emissions in order to combat climate change. If every other agent cooperates, pollution is still severely reduced, while the agent in question reaps the benefits of noncooperation (for example, reduced expenditures connected to pollution reduction, etc). Meanwhile, if the other agents opt to pollute after all in accordance with PD2, it makes no difference whether the agent in question decides to act in a collectively rational way or not: their restriction of pollution will not make a difference, and so it is in their best interest to pollute as well. "These claims are paradoxical," according to Gardiner, "because given the first it is better for all parties to cooperate than to defect, but given the second the structure of the situation undermines their doing so."<sup>40</sup> A problem like climate change appears to fit this description, although it would technically be a Tragedy of the Commons-type problem rather than a simple Prisoner's Dilemma (following

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<sup>39</sup> Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm*, 160.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

Gardiner's characterization of the former as Prisoner's Dilemma involving a common resource).<sup>41</sup>

Oddly enough, this seems at first to be encouraging news if it can indeed adequately capture the problem of climate change. For as Gardiner points out, "commons problems are often resolvable under certain circumstances...In particular, it is widely said that parties facing a commons problem can resolve it if they benefit from a wider context of interaction." The commons problem is, in fact, the "standard analytical model for understanding regional and global environmental problems in general," including climate change.<sup>42</sup> And, as it turns out, this modeling has resulted in success in the past. Consider the case of the ozone layer. It fit the PD1 and PD2 conditions quite well in the 1970's. But as awareness of the use of ozone depleting substances (ODS) increased and knowledge of their contribution to the ozone layer problem became more widespread, nations came together in mutual cooperation to solve the problem. By entering into various agreements in accordance with the Montreal Protocol, they were able to essentially eliminate the validity of PD2: collective and individual rationality collapsed into one, and the rational thing to do was to reduce ODS emissions.<sup>43</sup>

But following Gardiner, a standard Tragedy of the Commons-type problem representation of climate change is inaccurate. Climate change is an intergenerational problem, as represented by Gardiner's intergenerational storm. Following the IPCC, CO<sub>2</sub> molecules can remain in the atmosphere for up to 200 years, and some for many thousands of years. Climate change is thus "backloaded" in the sense that we are currently

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>43</sup> See "International Treaties and Cooperation about the Protection of the Stratospheric Ozone Layer" (United States Environmental Protection Agency, Sep. 24, 2018), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://www.epa.gov/ozone-layer-protection/international-treaties-and-cooperation-about-protection-stratospheric-ozone>, and "International Actions - The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer" (United States Environmental Protection Agency, Aug. 7, 2019), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://www.epa.gov/ozone-layer-protection/international-actions-montreal-protocol-substances-deplete-ozone-layer>.

experiencing the result of past emissions, and “substantially deferred” in the sense that our current actions will come to impact generations far into the future.<sup>44</sup> Gardiner represents the intergenerational aspect of climate change in terms of a modified version of the prisoner’s dilemma cited above — what he calls the “Pure Intergenerational Problem (PIP).”<sup>45</sup> He characterizes it thusly:

(PIP1\*) It is *collectively rational* for most generations to cooperate: (almost) every generation prefers the outcome produced by everyone restricting pollution over the outcome produced by everyone overpolluting.

(PIP2\*) It is *individually rational* for all generations not to cooperate: when each generation has the power to decide whether or not it will overpollute, each generation (rationally) prefers to overpollute, whatever the others do.<sup>46</sup>

We see, then, how this representation differs from the prisoner’s dilemma outlined earlier. PD2 obviously presents a problem for collective rationality, but it can be overcome through the imposition of various conditions which render it invalid, as in the case of the Montreal Protocol and the depletion of the ozone layer. Here, the claim made by PIP1\* is, first of all, worse than PD1, because the first generation is not included. It is not collectively rational for the first generation in this sequence to reduce their pollution, since they will not reap the benefits of this reduction. Further, unlike PD2, PIP2\* cannot be resolved by bringing the various parties to the table and so that they can impose certain agreements and sanctions upon one another, because the vast majority of the parties — that is, all of the future generations — do not yet exist. Their lack of contemporaneity makes it impossible to render PIP2\* invalid the way that PD2 was rendered invalid.

### 3.2. Challenges Presented by the Non-Identity Problem

Gardiner continues by further expanding upon the ramifications of the PIP for climate change, but I will not go into any additional detail here. For my purposes, the more important

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<sup>44</sup> Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm*, 198.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.



issue at hand is whether or not the PIP is a theoretically accurate representation of a large part of what makes climate change such a unique problem: that is, its intergenerational nature. On the surface, it seems that Gardiner's PIP, conceived of as a kind of modified prisoner's dilemma, is indeed a useful theoretical representation of what makes climate change such a challenging problem. But in fact, there is one major challenge that one might pose to the PIP: namely, the Non-Identity Problem. For when we consider the NIP, it appears that Gardiner's first premise, PIP1\*, is actually not true. It is not the case that almost every generation prefers cooperation, since those generations that would come into existence as a result of noncooperation — that is, as a result of further pollution and a continued progression towards, for example, 2.0 °C or even 3.2 °C of warming — would in fact prefer noncooperation, so long as they believe that they lead lives worth living.

Gardiner recognizes this potential challenge and addresses it at length, offering several potential responses.<sup>47</sup> Here, I will examine each of them in turn. First, Gardiner claims that there would be some instances of the PIP which would not be subject to the threat posed by the NIP. For example, if we can assume that the generations produced by cooperation and noncooperation are identical, then it would appear that PIP1\* holds. Or, if it turns out that the members of the generation resulting from noncooperation do not lead lives worth living, PIP1\* would appear to hold.<sup>48</sup> But in the case of climate change, I do not believe either of these responses is adequate. Following my outline of the NIP above, it is quite clear that the future generations resulting from cooperation and noncooperation would be completely distinct. Further, the living conditions experienced by future generations resulting from noncooperation would have to be quite unpleasant indeed for us to safely assume that such generations would not lead lives worth living. From the standpoint of ethics, at least, this would be a rather dangerous (and, arguably, spurious) assumption to make. Rather, it is more interesting to examine the effects of the NIP on the PIP under the assumption that

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<sup>47</sup> Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm*, 179-183.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

cooperation and noncooperation produce distinct future generations, and that the members of any particular generation resulting from noncooperation do in fact lead lives worth living.

Let us refer to the members of a particular future generation resulting from cooperation as Group A, and to those members of a future generation resulting from noncooperation as Group B. According to the NIP, we can conclude that the members of Group B would prefer noncooperation, and that this would thus render PIP1\* invalid. But Gardiner disagrees. According to Gardiner, the key here is to take a closer look at what we mean by the concept of a “future generation.” At first, it appears that these two groups, Group A and Group B, constitute two separate, hypothetical, contemporaneous future generations. But Gardiner argues that this is not actually so. Rather, if we consider a generation to be “a group that occupies a specific temporal period and is in a given causal relationship to its predecessors and successors,” then we arrive at the characterization of a generation as something like “those alive at time  $t$ .” And following this characterization, Group A and Group B are not actually two distinct generations; rather, they are all members of a *single* generation.<sup>49</sup>

Now, in order to determine what the NIP would imply here, we have to determine what the attitude of the future *single generation* in question would be toward cooperation and noncooperation, which would involve determining what Gardiner calls the generation’s “joint attitude” — that is, the combined attitudes of, in this case, the members of Group A and Group B. Gardiner himself acknowledges that it is not at all clear how we ought to go about this, but makes a further point and a suggestion. First, the fact that we now need to form this joint attitude casts doubt on whether the Non-Identity Problem really poses such a challenge for the PIP. Additionally, and most importantly for my analysis here, Gardiner suggests that we might be able to use some sort of Rawlsian approach to form the joint attitude in question. Following this Rawlsian approach, we would ask the members of both Group A

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 182.

and Group B which policy they would prefer — that is, cooperation or noncooperation — “from behind an appropriate veil of ignorance” where they are unaware of “who they will be or which policy is to be chosen.” Gardiner argues that these individuals will choose cooperation, and that PIP1 remains valid as a result.<sup>50</sup>

But Gardiner’s response is far from satisfactory. There are three serious problems for his account, the combination of which gives us reason to believe that PIP1\* is indeed rendered invalid by the NIP, and that the PIP as a theoretical model for understanding the difficulties imposed by climate change falls apart as a result. The three problems I identify here are: the problem of choosing non-existence; the problem of the unknown hypothetical; and the problem of future conditions.

Before examining these problems, it is useful to briefly consider Rawls’ characterization of the veil of ignorance and the original position. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls asks what theory of justice we would prefer if we had to choose such a theory from the original position, behind what he calls a veil of ignorance. In the original position, we should imagine ourselves as free, equal, rational participants in the decision-making process. Further, the veil of ignorance implies that we do not know what our life circumstances will be when this theory of justice is applied to us. That is, we know nothing of our race, gender, social circumstances, and so on.<sup>51</sup> Under these conditions, Rawls claims that we will opt for two principles of justice: one which provides us with equal access to basic liberties, and a second wherein socioeconomic inequalities benefit the least among us and are attached to various positions in society in such a way that all such positions are available to everyone — that is, in such a way that there is equal opportunity afforded to all members of society.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 182-183.

<sup>51</sup> Samuel Freeman, "Original Position", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2019 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/original-position/>.

<sup>52</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 266.

With this in mind, let us return to the NIP and the PIP. It appears that Gardiner's aim with applying the veil of ignorance is to suggest something like the following: in determining whether the NIP renders PIP1\* invalid, we should ask all the members of Group A and Group B whether they would prefer cooperation or noncooperation, given that they do not know which group they will be born into or which policy will be put into action. It appears at first that these individuals would choose cooperation, following a Rawlsian account. But upon further examination, this conclusion is absurd. Gardiner is suggesting that we ask hypothetical members of Group B, who can only come into existence as a result of noncooperation, whether they would prefer cooperation or noncooperation. He is, in other words, suggesting that we ask the members of Group B whether they would prefer the conditions for their nonexistence or the conditions for their existence, with the understanding that the conditions for their nonexistence would be "better" (that is, the climate would be less erratic and so on), whereas the conditions for their existence would be "worse" (that is, an erratic climate, serious storms, rising sea levels, and so on). But how is this a sensible question to ask? Any hypothetical member of Group B who chooses cooperation would be choosing their own nonexistence. If we imagine posing this Rawlsian choice to any one member of Group B, it is something like asking them if they would rather that things be as they are (that is, the world is warmer, the climate is more erratic) or if they would prefer that things were different (the climate is more conducive to human prosperity), the latter of which would result in a state of affairs where all people currently existing no longer exist and are, instead, different individuals. By contrast, Rawls' veil of ignorance thought experiment does not ask anyone to choose their own nonexistence, but rather to choose a theory of justice without any knowledge of what their life circumstances will be. These are not commensurate questions.

Another problem for Gardiner's response here is what I call the problem of the unknown hypothetical. To illustrate this, it's useful to consider where much of the appeal of

Rawls' proposal comes from. If I am a white male in a developed country who enjoys a good standard of living, the veil of ignorance asks me to consider what theory of justice I would choose given that I have no knowledge of who I will become. I might therefore imagine myself growing up as a member of a marginalized group and choose a theory of justice accordingly. While I have no firsthand knowledge of what it is like to grow up as, for example, a poor female Mexican immigrant in the United States, I do at least have enough secondhand knowledge — from personal encounters, film, television, literature, and so on — to construct a reasonably accurate picture in my mind that allows me to compare my current situation with the imagined one. It is this stark contrast between two relative knowns (I say “relative” given that it is, of course, impossible for me to truly “know” what this alternative experience would be like) which lends so much weight to Rawls' thought experiment.

But consider how different the thought experiment becomes in the case of Group A and Group B, the hypothetical members of a future generation. We are asking members of Group B to choose between cooperation and noncooperation, and while they are well aware of the reality presented by noncooperation, asking them to compare their scenario with that of cooperation seems nonsensical. They are being asked to imagine an unknown hypothetical. This is akin to asking us to choose between our current situation and some alternative past in which the extent of glacial coverage in the last ice age was quite different, or in which the Pleistocene came to a close 15,000 years ago rather than closer to 11,000 years ago. Am I to assume that one of these scenarios is definitely ‘better’ than the current one? It would certainly be different, but would it be better for *me*, given that it is both a complete experiential unknown *and* that it would result in my nonexistence? This unknown hypothetical is neither possible for me to conceive of, nor is it epistemically useful. And, in any case, it would result in my nonexistence — something which leads us back to the first problem.

Finally, there is the problem of future conditions. In the case of Rawls' thought experiment, an individual is forming their opinion about what sort of theory of justice they would prefer. But in the case of Gardiner's proposal, we are assuming that we can predict the choices made by members of a future generation — following the NIP, perhaps a generation 200 years from now. Consider the absurdity of asking an individual in the early 19th century to make such a decision about living conditions in the early 21st century. One of two possibilities exists here: either we acknowledge that this would be impossible (how could an individual alive in the early 19th century in any way imagine the future conditions present in the early 21st century?), or that the individual in question would express an opinion under the assumption that they can in fact make a reasonable guess as to our future conditions — something that seems very unlikely upon reflection. We have no way of *really* projecting what future conditions would be like, and so our assumption that Group B will choose cooperation is on shaky ground, even with the problems of choosing nonexistence and the unknown hypothetical aside. But let us assume that we *can* accurately predict the future conditions of Group B, some dystopian scenario involving horrendous weather, an inhospitable climate, poor air quality, and so on. What reason do we then have for assuming that members of Group B would choose anything else? Humans exhibit a wide range of varying and often diametrically opposed preferences. I have no desire to live in Manhattan. I prefer to live in rural Norway. But many Manhattan residents would find my life here highly undesirable. Why should the members of Group B choose the “better” conditions presented by cooperation, even if we set aside the problem of choosing nonexistence?

Of course, Gardiner's response to all of this may be that his Rawlsian proposal was not intended to be *the* solution to the threat posed by the NIP. Rather, it was simply to highlight that such a proposal underscores the fact that there is “logical space” through which the PIP may “escape [the NIP's] clutches.”<sup>53</sup> But I do not believe this response would

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<sup>53</sup> Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm*, 183.

be adequate. The problems of choosing nonexistence, the unknown hypothetical, and future conditions do not disappear simply because we opt for an alternative to the Rawlsian account. Rather, the problem lies with the more basic proposal made by Gardiner as a means of attempting to dispel the force of the NIP: namely, that we attempt to somehow adjudicate between the preferences of the members of a future generation and form some sort of collective preference amongst them. It is difficult to see how any other approach to forming such a collective opinion could avoid these three problems. They are not specific to the Rawlsian approach: I believe they will present themselves no matter how we attempt to go about it.

Gardiner can offer three responses to my critique here.<sup>54</sup> First, Gardiner can reiterate the point highlighted above: namely, that he does not claim that his Rawlsian defense of the PIP is impervious to critique. Rather, his point in advancing the argument is to demonstrate that “the PIP *need not be undermined by the NIP*.”<sup>55</sup> But given my critique above, I do not believe Gardiner’s Rawlsian position actually holds. If it does not, then it appears that the PIP *is* undermined by the NIP, unless another defense can be offered. I doubt whether such a defense exists.

Second, Gardiner may cast doubt on the importance of the NIP for the question of climate change. Given that very young people alive now — that is, the youngest present generation — will be impacted for good or ill by whatever policy we adopt, one could argue that the NIP plays no role in motivating our actions with respect to climate change. We could, for example, ignore the question of distant future generations, simply looking to the wellbeing of young people alive today as a reason to adopt climate-friendly policies. To my mind, however, this ignores the point entirely and actually begs the question. The fact that there

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<sup>54</sup> During the discussion following the presentation of a paper which included an abridged version of my arguments here, Gardiner offered three responses to my critique. I present them here and respond to them in turn. See Matthew Coffay, “Climate Change, the Non-Identity Problem, and Buddhist Virtue Ethics” (paper presented at Climate Change and Asian Philosophy: A Dialogue in Environmental Ethics, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway, Oct 4-5, 2019).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

may be reasons to act on climate change which are unrelated to future generations — and which would therefore have nothing to do with the NIP — does not in any way address the critique leveled here against the problems that the NIP poses for Gardiner’s formal theoretical representation of the intergenerational ethical challenge presented by climate change. It may indeed be the case that consideration of the wellbeing of young people alive today can give us reasons to act on climate change. But as soon as we begin to consider the wellbeing of future generations, the NIP becomes a concern. For Gardiner’s ‘intergenerational storm,’ such a concern must be addressed.

Finally, Gardiner can push back on the assumption that the individuals in Group B would actually lead lives worth living. Recall that in order for there to be a theoretical problem for Gardiner’s formulation, we must assume that these individuals *do* lead lives worth living. The thought is that, otherwise, they would presumably prefer a policy of cooperation. There are several points to make in response. First, the fact that individuals do not lead lives worth living does not necessitate their concluding that they would rather never have come into existence. The human potential for hope and optimism — the idea of a better future, changing conditions, and so on — may mean that these individuals would still choose the noncooperation policy, rather than choosing a policy which would result in their non-existence. Second, this is at least partly an empirical question. In other words, we are speculating about the quality of life of individuals far into the future and attempting to conclude that their lives would be so miserable that they would prefer never having come into existence. But this sort of speculation seems like a rather weak basis on which to conclude that individuals in Group B would choose a policy of cooperation. Finally, it is worth asking whether we are even clear on what we mean by the concept of ‘a life worth living.’ Recent philosophical literature on the topic casts doubt on whether the concept is actually useful or meaningful.<sup>56</sup> If it is, my first two responses still presumably hold. If it is not, then it

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<sup>56</sup> See for example Roberto Fumagalli, “Eliminating ‘Life Worth Living,’” *Philosophical Studies* 175, no. 3 (2017): 769-792.



would seem that we must forego the consideration of whether or not members of Group B would lead lives worth living in the first place, in which case Gardiner's response on this point would dissolve.

And so, given the lack of a stronger argument from Gardiner, I believe we must conclude that the NIP *does* indeed render PIP1\* invalid. And so we are left in a rather strange situation, much like the situation we find ourselves in when considering the NIP's incongruency with our moral intuitions. That is, we are presented with a seemingly reasonable, arguably highly representative, formulation of how the climate change problem differs from other global problems in the form of the Pure Intergenerational Problem. But when we recall the Non-Identity Problem, we realize that the PIP is actually not a valid representation of the intergenerational aspect of the climate change situation. And so we are left scratching our heads.

#### **4. Two Alternative Ethical Frameworks**

##### **4.1. Alternative Ethical Frameworks**

We have seen, then, that there are two important reasons for addressing the Non-Identity Problem when it comes to the challenge posed by climate change. On the one hand, the NIP challenges our moral intuitions: what reason is there to take action to curb climate change if we can assume that the future individuals coming into existence as a result of nonaction would actually *prefer* that nonaction? And, on the other, we see how a seemingly accurate theoretical representation of one major challenge posed by climate change, namely the Pure Intergenerational Problem as presented by Gardiner, runs into major problems in its attempt to account for the preferences of future generations.

The key to addressing both of these concerns — incongruency with our moral intuitions on the one hand, and potential theoretical quandaries on the other — lies in thinking about climate change from a non-consequentialist perspective. By adopting a virtue

ethical framework in thinking about climate change, the problems presented by the NIP can be avoided: taking action on climate change is no longer dependent upon consequentialist calculation. In the remaining sections of this thesis, I will examine two such alternative virtue ethical frameworks: namely, deep ecology and Buddhist ethics.

While I aim to present both of these ethical positions as virtue ethical ones, I acknowledge here that there are others means of characterizing and classifying both deep ecology and Buddhist ethics. There are those who might, for example, argue that a Buddhist ethic can be better characterized in utilitarian terms. But I believe that both positions are best characterized in terms of virtue ethics, and that is how I will present them here. I will address the question of whether it is sensible to classify deep ecology as a virtue ethical position once I have laid out the basic framework of deep ecology in the next section, and I will follow the same process with Buddhist ethics (that is, describing what characterizes Buddhist ethics and then explaining my reasons for classifying it as a virtue ethical position) in section 6.3. I will therefore say no more at this point about why I consider these positions to be virtue ethical ones, since such a discussion follows later in this thesis.

#### 4.2. Virtue Ethics

I believe it would be useful, however, to make some preliminary remarks about virtue ethics more generally (particularly when it comes to the state of the philosophical discussion around virtue ethics as related to the issue of climate change), environmental ethics, and my motivations for considering two decidedly nontraditional ethical frameworks here. Once this is done, I will continue with a full characterization of a deep ecological ethic in the next section.

First, some preliminary remarks about virtue ethics generally, as well as the place of virtue ethics in the climate ethics literature. I have already mentioned in broad strokes what sets a virtue ethical approach apart from a consequentialist or deontological one: namely, a

focus on questions of character, motives, and what it means to live a good life, rather than questions of consequences, maximizing utility, or fulfilling moral obligations. But before going any further, it would be useful to offer a more specific characterization of what exactly I mean by 'virtue ethics.' This is helpful not just for the sake of philosophical precision, but also in terms of my arguments below for characterizing both deep ecology and Buddhist ethics as distinctly virtue ethical systems. By specifying exactly what I take a prototypical characterization of 'virtue ethics' to be, it will be possible to assess how closely deep ecology and Buddhist ethics map onto this description. As we will see, deep ecology maps onto it surprisingly well, although it is Buddhist ethics which is in a position to readily adopt a virtue ethical framework.

Given its status as an umbrella term on par with 'consequentialism' and 'deontology,' there are conflicting views about what precisely 'virtue ethics' ought to mean, as well as what qualifies a system as virtue ethical. I opt to follow a middle of the road interpretation here, along the same lines as the conception presented by David E. Cooper and Simon James. Cooper and James draw inspiration for their work from (amongst others) Julia Annas, who argues in *The Morality of Happiness* that most philosophical writing on ethics is missing "those aspects of commonsense moral thinking which involve virtue and character."<sup>57</sup> The result is an ethical discourse which is, according to Cooper and James, disconnected from an important part of "everyday moral discourse." Following Cooper and James, virtue ethics "takes as serious and central the everyday concern of people with the evaluation of character and motivation. Such evaluation, it is held, is neither disjoint from those of actions and their results, but nor is it a function of these latter modes of evaluation."<sup>58</sup>

But virtue ethics is not simply a matter of contemplating whether an action is virtuous or vicious and then acting accordingly. On the contrary, the concept of virtue is inextricably

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<sup>57</sup> Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1-2, quoted in David E. Cooper and Simon P. James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 7.

<sup>58</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 9-10.

linked to the notion of human happiness, wellbeing, and flourishing, or *eudaimonia* as the ancient Greeks characterized it. What is important here is not the precise content of *eudaimonia* as a concept: Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics all had somewhat different conceptions of what human flourishing looked like (though there were certain basic similarities between their conceptions), and no one picture of *eudaimonia* has a corresponding monopoly on what is virtuous or vicious. The point to emphasize, however, is the nature of virtue as *constitutive of* human flourishing. Virtuous actions are not something that we do *in order to bring about* specific eudaimonic consequences — not even the ‘consequence’ of a fully realized eudaimonic life. Rather, virtuous actions are *constitutive of* the concept of *eudaimonia*. The idea of human flourishing is, for the virtue ethicist, inconceivable when divorced from virtue, and this is precisely how we arrive at the conclusion that some particular character quality is distinctly virtuous. As Cooper and James put it, for the ancient Greeks “it was not taken to be self-evident...that courage, say, or kindness is a virtue. Rather, for some quality...to count as a virtue it had to make a discernible contribution to...the well-being, happiness and flourishing” of a given individual.<sup>59</sup> Given that the virtues are irreducible, it follows that virtue and human flourishing do not exist in a means-end relationship. For example, if we were to suppose that *eudaimonia* consists fundamentally in acquiring as much wealth as possible, then we could conceive of virtue as a function of the value of material wealth. But this cannot be the case: there is something about the exercise of virtuous qualities that is actually part of what it means to achieve well-being and live a good life. Virtue has an independent and irreducible value. Further, following Aristotle, virtue can only be fully realized in combination with practical wisdom (*phronêsis*), or a correct understanding of how the virtues ought to be exercised in order to

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 10.

live a good life.<sup>60</sup> As we will see below, practical wisdom plays an important role in my characterization of both deep ecology and Buddhist ethics as virtue ethical.

To sum up, then, I would characterize virtue ethics as follows. Virtue ethics is primarily concerned with questions of character and motivation, and sees the virtues themselves as irreducible. While the virtue ethicist does not claim that the virtues are always the best or only means of engaging in moral thinking — that is, that all moral considerations can or should be boiled down to questions of virtue rather than ones of duty or consequences — she does claim that the virtues themselves are fundamental in some sense, and that considerations of virtue cannot simply be reformulated in deontological or consequentialist terms. Further, virtue ethics places great importance on the relationship between human flourishing (however one chooses to characterize it) and the virtues themselves, and sees the virtues as partially constitutive of this flourishing. Additionally, the virtues can only be fully realized in combination with a proper understanding of how we ought to be in the world, whatever we take such an understanding to contain. That is, development and possession of the virtues must coincide with the development and possession of practical wisdom, or *phronêsis*, which can guide our actions so as to ensure that we act virtuously. Finally, it is important to add that, following Annas, this flourishing or well-being is understood in terms of “one’s life as a whole.”<sup>61</sup> The virtues are thus best considered in terms of “their integration into the larger whole of a person’s life.”<sup>62</sup>

#### 4.3. Virtue Ethics and the Climate Ethics Literature

While virtue ethics has seen a resurgence amongst philosophers in recent years, much of the philosophical debate in twentieth century ethics soundly ignored it. A similar

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<sup>60</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. and trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1144b14–17. See also Simon P. James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 36.

<sup>61</sup> Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, 27, quoted in Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 10.

pattern has emerged in environmental ethics, with very little attention being paid to the idea of a virtue ethical approach until the past decade or so. Beginning with Philip Cafaro and Ronald Sandler's *Environmental Virtue Ethics* in 2005, however, environmental philosophers have now begun to take note of the potential for virtue ethics to tell us something about our normative relation to the environment.<sup>63</sup> While it may have been necessary some decades ago (in terms of the state of the philosophical literature) to provide a more general justification for the idea of taking a virtue ethical approach with respect to a question like climate change, this is no longer the case.

Indeed, Willis Jenkins has recently pointed to a turn to virtue ethics in the climate ethics literature.<sup>64</sup> Following Jenkins, it is fair to say that climate ethicists now “regularly turn to virtue in order to negotiate features of climate change ethics that seem to overwhelm moral agency.” Jenkins argues that virtue ethics offers those of us who feel overwhelmed by the sheer scope of climate change with “new possibilities of moral agency.”<sup>65</sup> The point that I aim to make in arguing for a virtue ethical approach to the challenges presented by the Non-Identity Problem is, of course, a somewhat different one: I want to suggest that there is something fundamentally useful about taking a virtue ethical approach to climate change, a problem which is morally decentered in terms of the number of agents, multitude of possible outcomes, and time scale involved, and for which consequentialist moral thinking can be problematic. My point, then, is not centered around the idea of alternative forms of moral agency per se. But I am sympathetic to Jenkins' focus, as is arguably Gardiner. As Jenkins points out, Gardiner claims that ethics ought to “[bear] witness to serious wrongs even when there is little hope of change.”<sup>66</sup> “Here,” Jenkins writes, “virtue seems to offer tragic consolation: when responsibility becomes impossible, one can at least exercise integrity by

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<sup>63</sup> Philip Cafaro and Ronald Sandler, *Environmental Virtue Ethics* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

<sup>64</sup> Willis Jenkins, “The Turn to Virtue in Climate Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 38, no. 1 (2016): 77-96.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>66</sup> Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm*, 437, quoted in Jenkins, 80.

bearing witness to humanity's failure." Taking the idea of appealing to virtue even further — and casting it in a much more optimistic light — Jenkins argues that Gardiner is suggesting that "good character can forestall and counteract the way wickedness foments vice," where climate change is characterized as a "wicked problem" in that it is a commons problem with "no definitive formulation...involving puzzling information, multiple scales, and stakeholder debates over what the problem means."<sup>67</sup> This "wicked commons problem" characterization is in alignment with the "perfect moral storm" characterization offered by Gardiner, and which I discussed in detail in section 3.1. It is easy to see the appeal of virtue ethics here in providing individual agents with reasons to act — to exercise moral agency — despite overwhelming evidence of, for example, institutional inadequacy to deal with the problem of climate change. If we are primarily concerned with questions of motivation, character, and what it means to lead a good life, the fact that climate change is a confusing (perhaps even insurmountable) problem will not result in a failure to act on our part. On the contrary, a virtue ethicist may argue that the gravity, difficulty, and complexity of the situation — its "wickedness," as Jenkins puts it — gives us even more reasons to act. As Gardiner himself argues, an aspect of the climate change problem such as institutional inadequacy simply means that "responsibility falls back on the citizens again, either to solve the problem themselves, or if this is not possible, to create new institutions to do the job."<sup>68</sup>

#### 4.4. Justifying Alternative Virtue Ethical Approaches

It is, then, far from unusual to take a virtue ethical approach in addressing the ethical considerations surrounding climate change, given Jenkins' acknowledgment of a virtue ethical turn in the climate ethics debate. My aim here, however, is not to provide a survey of all the virtue ethical literature in environmental ethics generally, or in climate ethics

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<sup>67</sup> Jenkins, 79-80.

<sup>68</sup> Stephen Gardiner, "Is No One Responsible for Global Environmental Tragedy? Climate Change as a Challenge to Our Ethical Concepts," in *The Ethics of Global Climate Change*, ed. Denis Arnold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 57, quoted in Jenkins, 82.

specifically; rather, its is simply to highlight the fact that there is ongoing debate in this area, and that I aim to offer an alternative virtue ethical framework from which to approach climate-related questions. But it is perhaps less obvious why one would opt for something as nontraditional as deep ecology or Buddhist ethics. Why not take a more standard virtue ethical approach?

Here, I would like to make three points. First, to my knowledge, there has been no specific attempt in the philosophical literature to take a nontraditional virtue ethical approach to climate change *in light of the Non-Identity Problem* specifically. It is therefore an open question whether a somewhat nontraditional approach — such as a deep ecological or Buddhist one — might be the best way of going about this. But I suspect that it might be for a rather surprising reason: namely, that both of these traditions have a rather unusual and perhaps useful conception of what constitutes an individual. As I will show in section 5.2, the deep ecologist conceives of the individual as something like the sum of the individual's 'identifications' (although the term 'sum' is perhaps misleading here, and something which I will address in greater detail) realized on the path towards complete 'Self-Realization', wherein individual identity is understood in terms of an expansive, capital 's' Self — something perhaps analogous to the Advaita Vedanta *ātman* concept of an all-inclusive, 'all is self' metaphysics<sup>69</sup> — while the Buddhist tradition takes the opposite approach, destabilizing our standard conception of the self via the concepts of 'emptiness' and 'no-self', or *anātman*, wherein the idea of a sustained, persisting, essential self is understood to be an illusion. While these conceptions are in direct opposition to one another, they both share a fundamental departure from our everyday sense of what constitutes the individual human self. This assumption — namely, something like the assumption that there is a persisting,

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<sup>69</sup> This is the standard reading of the deep ecological self. I will complicate this reading somewhat in sections 5.2 and 5.3. In section 5.2, I consider a more nuanced version of the standard reading, questioning whether the process of identification should be properly understood as 'additive.' In section 5.5, I point to an essay in which Naess compares the deep ecological Self with the no-self of Buddhism, apparently contradicting the standard reading.



atomistic, individual self which each of us is comprised of, which comes into being at some definite point in time (either at the time of conception, or at the moment of birth, or over a period of development following birth, or some combination of these), and which goes out of existence at a particular point in time — is closely connected to the Non-Identity Problem. It is the basis upon which we might conceive of the ‘future individuals’ who will be brought into existence, either as a result of a risky climate policy or as a result of our taking drastic action on climate change. If we conceive of the individual as something fundamentally different, however — if we call into question the idea that each of us is a persisting, atomistic individual with definite boundaries in time and space — then the Non-Identity Problem loses some of its force. I will not explore this idea in detail with respect to deep ecology, as Naess’ position on the nature of the self is somewhat unclear and requires exegesis outside the scope of this paper. I will, however, discuss how the Buddhist concept of no-self may have significant consequences for the NIP in section 6.5.

I am however quite sympathetic to the fact that many will struggle with this idea of remarking what constitutes an individual self, and this is therefore not my only reason for considering these two alternative ethical approaches as viable virtue ethical means of addressing the NIP with respect to climate change. In addition to this first point, I would like to highlight that, secondly, the Aristotelian virtue ethical tradition is far from an obvious choice when it comes to addressing environmental issues. Indeed, whether we look to an Aristotelian, Epicurean, or Stoic conception of virtue ethics — the three most prominent ancient traditions that come to mind as prototypical examples of virtue ethical thinking — there is, following Cooper and James, nowhere a “serious attempt...to integrate attitudes to non-human life into a rounded account of a virtuous, eudaimonic human life as a whole.”<sup>70</sup> Cooper and James suggest various ways that we might account for this lack environmental concern in traditional virtue ethical approaches. First, we might simply think that virtue ethics,

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<sup>70</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 22.

given its concern with human flourishing and character, is bound to pay scant attention to environmental issues — in other words, that virtue ethics is somehow inherently anthropocentric. But even brief consideration shows this to be a fallacious argument: concern with human well-being need not exclude environmental concerns. On the contrary, if we believe that clean water or wild nature are partly constitutive of human well-being — that we need these things in order to truly flourish — then there is reason to think that virtue ethics *must* be concerned with these issues.<sup>71</sup>

More interesting for my purposes here is the claim that virtue ethics being historically devoid of environmental concern correlates with a conspicuous lack of a “‘love of nature’ tradition” in Europe as a whole during classical and medieval times, and that this lack extended into the philosophical tradition.<sup>72</sup> This lack of a nature tradition is particularly glaring when we compare the European tradition with the Asian one. I acknowledge, of course, that one cannot speak conclusively or without significant qualification of a distinct ‘European’ or ‘Asian’ philosophical or cultural tradition. Nevertheless, the differences are quite striking. For example, Cooper and James point out that the first recorded instance of a European intellectual climbing a mountain purely for recreational purposes comes from a fourteenth century account written by Petrarch. What is surprising here is not simply the fact that this happened rather late from a historical perspective, but that it resulted in Petrarch reflecting on his discomfort with enjoying such “earthly things,” given his belief that “nothing is admirable besides the mind.”<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile, ancient Chinese and Japanese philosophy and literature are replete with examples of poets and philosophers climbing mountains or seeking refuge in the wilderness — not just for the sake of contemplation, but for the sheer appreciation of nature itself as something valuable.<sup>74</sup> Buddhist thought is no exception, this

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>72</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 24.

<sup>73</sup> Petrarch, “The Ascent of Mt Ventoux,” in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 44, quoted in Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 24.

<sup>74</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 24.

inclination towards an appreciation for the environment is one reason to think that such an ethic might be a useful resource for issues related to the climate.

In direct opposition to the Buddhist tendency to cultivate an appreciation for the natural world, one can point to numerous examples in Aristotle's thought of the superiority of man to nature, and of the idea that non-human life exists primarily for the benefit of humans, an idea elaborated by Cicero and then codified in combination with Christian orthodoxy by various medieval Christian philosophers.<sup>75</sup> Contrast such a concept with the deep ecological position elaborated in section 5.2 — that 'identification' with all of nature leads to Self-realization, something which I will present as analogous to *eudaimonia* — or with the thirteenth century Zen Buddhist philosopher Dōgen's claim that "all is sentient being, all beings are (all being is) the Buddha-nature,"<sup>76</sup> that "the very impermanency of grass and tree, thicket and forest, is the Buddha-nature."<sup>77</sup> My point here is not that the absence of environmental concern in traditional Greek or Roman virtue ethics *excludes* the possibility of applying such an ethical tradition to addressing issues surrounding climate change, or that such a task is impossible. However, the comparative 'environmental friendliness' of deep ecology and Buddhist ethics should, at the very least, give us a reason to think that these traditions can be just as useful as (if not more useful than) a traditional ancient Greek virtue ethical conception for my purposes here.

Finally, I come to my third point in responding to the question, 'Why not take a more standard (or traditional, or typical) virtue ethical approach?' This final response is primarily directed at any suspicion the reader might have regarding an appeal to a Buddhist ethic, although it is to a less extent also relevant for my treatment of deep ecology (given its decidedly non-Western flavor and appeal to various non-Western traditions). Here, I think it

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<sup>75</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 25.

<sup>76</sup> Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989), 114, quoted in Simon P. James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*, 22.

<sup>77</sup> Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History, Volume 2* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 85, quoted in James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*, 22.

is important to be more specific about the content of the question itself, for I believe the question is a rather deceptive one. Whether we speak of a ‘standard,’ ‘traditional,’ or ‘typical’ virtue ethical approach, the idea is that something like a Buddhist virtue ethic is distinctly different from a more ‘normal’ approach to virtue ethics, and that one ought to provide some sort of justification for taking such an ‘unusual’ approach to, in this case, the Non-Identity Problem and climate ethics. But consider what this question actually implies. The question itself makes two implicit claims: that there is some more ‘standard’ approach to virtue ethics, and that this ‘standard’ approach is a norm against which other approaches should be measured. But let us be clear: when ‘virtue ethics’ is used without any qualifier, it is generally understood as something like ‘(Aristotelian) virtue ethics,’ or ‘(ancient Greek) virtue ethics,’ or at the very least ‘(the tradition of) virtue ethics (in contemporary philosophy which owes much of its foundational thinking to ancient Greek and Roman thought, particularly Aristotle).’ It then becomes clear that there is a third normative claim implicit in the question, which is something like: ‘Western (that is, Aristotelian or ancient Greek) philosophy is a standard against which other approaches ought to be measured.’

By highlighting what is implicit in the question of ‘Why not take a more standard virtue ethical approach?’ as I have done here, my aim is not to enter into a debate about the relative worth of conventional Western versus non-Western philosophy, or to lament the degree to which Eastern philosophy has long been ignored within the Western tradition (although this is, in my view, lamentable). Rather, it is to simply point out the absurdity of pretending that virtue ethics as it is typically conceived of — that is, as emerging out of the Aristotelian philosophical tradition — is somehow a norm against which other approaches ought to be judged, or that it is somehow a ‘neutral’ or ‘baseline’ position. Of course, one can make a *formal* comparison between, say, Buddhist ethics and ancient Greek virtue ethics in order to determine whether they are *formally* similar enough to call Buddhist ethics a ‘virtue

ethic' in the same sense. But this is entirely distinct from needing to offer an account of why I opt for, say, a Buddhist ethical approach rather than a 'traditional' Aristotelian one.

Still, I have opted to offer two such reasons above (which apply to both the deep ecological and Buddhist accounts that I will offer here) regardless, as I imagine many readers keen on more traditional Western approaches may be skeptical of my project here. In addition to these, I would add that I believe it valuable to add to the current virtue-based discussion within climate ethics from a distinctly nontraditional, non-Western perspective, both in terms of deep ecology as well as Buddhist ethics (the former of which is, as we will see, heavily influenced by non-Western thought, including Advaita Vedanta as presented by Gandhi as well as Buddhist thought). It goes without saying that climate change is a global problem. I believe that a non-Western approach has something unique to contribute, and that such an approach at the very least deserves consideration alongside more traditional approaches. Further, I would add that while the ethical systems outlined below — particularly the ethical conclusions one might draw from a Buddhist virtue ethic, for instance — may seem radical, at least when considered in the context of what we take to be normal, everyday, perfectly 'moral' behavior — a radical ethic may be necessary for dealing with a problem like climate change. As Dale Jamieson points out, "what produces global environmental change is everyday behavior that is innocent from the perspective of common sense." By the standard of common sense — that is, the standard which concludes that there is nothing wrong with, say, driving one's car for fun or eating a steak several nights per week — "a moral theory that would prescribe behavior that would prevent or seriously mitigate global environmental change would be shockingly revisionist."<sup>78</sup> I thus believe it worth considering the value of something like a Buddhist virtue ethic, even if appears particularly revisionist at first glance.

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<sup>78</sup> Jamieson, "When Utilitarians Should Be Virtue Ethicists," 316.

With all of this in mind, I will now proceed to the first theory I wish to examine here: namely, deep ecology.

## **5. A Deep Ecological Virtue Ethic**

### **5.1. Overview**

Before diving into deep ecology and the idea of a deep ecological virtue ethic, I believe it would be helpful to situate the tradition within the history of environmental ethics and environmental philosophy more generally. As we will see, ‘deep ecology’ itself is a difficult concept to pin down. An understanding of the evolution of the ‘deep ecology movement’ both in concert with and occasionally as a divergence from the philosophical writings of its originator, Arne Naess, will help to clarify why and how the concept has taken on so many different shades of meaning over the past few decades. It will also allow me to ‘precisise’ (to attempt to coin a Norwegian word employed by Naess, *presisere*, ‘to pinpoint’ or ‘to specify more precisely’) what I am referring to when I use the terms ‘deep ecology’ and ‘deep ecological ethic’ here.

Broadly speaking, environmental ethics (and environmental philosophy in general) grew out of the burgeoning environmental movement of the 1960’s. Beginning with Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring*,<sup>79</sup> scientists, academics, and other public figures began to express growing concern for the state of the environment. Philosophers in particular started to wonder whether moral philosophy as it was practiced at the time could actually offer helpful guidance when it came to these environmental concerns. Perhaps something fundamentally new was needed: an environmental ethic. Before long, environmental ethics emerged more or less simultaneously in the United States, Norway, and Australia, though in somewhat different forms on each continent.<sup>80</sup> Over the past fifty years, various schools of

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<sup>79</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

<sup>80</sup> Andrew Brennan and Yeuk-Sze Lo, “Environmental Ethics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University,

thought under the 'environmental ethics' banner have arisen surrounding how we ought to think about and address various environmental issues. Some are more theoretically focused, while others are distinctively pragmatic. Aldo Leopold's so-called 'land ethic,' as presented in *A Sand County Almanac* years before the emergence of environmental ethics, was used by Richard Sylvan (then Routley) to argue that an anthropocentric worldview was largely to blame for the failure of ethics to adequately account for and navigate environmental concerns.<sup>81</sup> Holmes Rolston III argued for intrinsic value in nature, claiming that such value was intrinsic insofar as it existed objectively in nature, apart from any act of human valuing.<sup>82</sup> Other philosophers such as Bryan Norton, Andrew Light, and Eric Katz have argued from a pragmatist perspective, claiming that an anthropocentric ethic can in fact handle environmental issues, and that such an ethic brings with it various benefits when it comes to involving key players and stakeholders (who are themselves, presumably, motivated by primarily anthropocentric concerns). In their view, environmental ethics would have more to offer to public policy if it turned its attention away from theoretical matters and focused more on practical approaches to specific aspects or instances of the environmental crisis.<sup>83</sup>

Juxtaposing the work of writers like Routley and Rolston with that of Norton, Light, and Katz gives some sense of the wide spectrum of work that has emerged under the general heading of 'environmental ethics' over the past few decades. But while some environmental philosophers have been primarily concerned with metaethical (and even metaphysical) questions and others have focused primarily on what environmental ethics has to offer when it comes to policymaking, there are some philosophers who have made a concerted and sustained attempt at both.

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2016), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/ethics-environmental/>.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. See also Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), and Richard Routley, "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?" in *Proceedings of the 15th World Congress of Philosophy* (Varna, Bulgaria: Sofia Press, 1973), 205–10.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. See also Holmes Rolston III, "Is There an Ecological Ethic?" *Ethics* 85 (1975): 93–109.

<sup>83</sup> See Andrew Light and Eric Katz, *Environmental Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996), and Bryan G. Norton, *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Arne Naess falls into this last category. The beginnings of ‘deep ecology,’ the philosophical system and activist movement that would develop throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s, is traditionally understood as beginning with Naess’ seminal 1973 article, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement.” Here, Naess argues for the existence of two contemporary environmental movements competing for public attention: a shallow (but influential) and a deep (though less influential) one. Where Naess characterizes the shallow ecology movement as exclusively focused on the fight against resource depletion and pollution, with its primary goal taken to be the wellbeing of people in developed nations, he distinguishes the deep ecology movement as characterized by seven specific features: relationality; biospherical egalitarianism; diversity and symbiosis; an anti-class attitude; the resolution to combat pollution and resource depletion; increased complexity; and local autonomy and decentralization.<sup>84</sup>

From this rather humble beginning (a brief presentation which amounted to a fairly concise, six page article), deep ecology would evolve into a loosely connected network of global activism inspired by a set of platform ideas developed by Naess in cooperation with George Sessions. Meanwhile, Naess would develop his own ‘ecosophy,’ known as ‘Ecosophy T’ (generally thought to be named for his cabin, Tvergastein, located near Ustaoset, Norway) as an ultimate set of principles — a philosophical system, a complete worldview — from which one is compelled to act. It is rather difficult to know where to start when attempting to summarize and recapitulate Naess’ thought, given its rather abstruse nature. An added difficulty is the degree to which his thought shifted over time: as I will argue later in this section, he appears to move from a monistic metaphysics of the self grounded in something like a combination of Spinoza and Advaita Vedanta in his early career to a Buddhist no-self metaphysics later on. But for my purposes here, I believe the summary and general discussion offered by Espen Gamlund in an unpublished article, “Will the Defenders

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<sup>84</sup> Arne Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement. A Summary,” *Inquiry* 16, no. 1–4 (January 1, 1973): 95–100.



of Deep Ecology Please Rise?” offers as good a starting point as one could hope for in summarizing Naess’ thought. I base my initial characterization of deep ecology, then, on Gamlund’s characterization.<sup>85</sup>

## 5.2. Characterizing Deep Ecology

Before proceeding any further, however, it is worth clarifying what exactly I am referring to when using the term ‘deep ecology.’ As already mentioned, this could refer to any of several different things: the loosely organized international political movement inspired by Naess; the distinction drawn by Naess in his 1973 article (understood as contrasted with ‘shallow ecology’); an expression of the platform principles put forward by Naess and Sessions; or Naess’ Ecosophy T, amongst other things. For his part, Gamlund opts to draw a distinction between what he terms the “broad” meaning of ‘deep ecology,’ which he considers to refer to the “eight points of the deep ecological platform” as a “world-wide, grassroots movement,” and a “narrower” sense of the term, as referring to Naess’ Ecosophy T. Gamlund points out that many in the philosophical *and* deep ecological literature sometimes use the term ‘deep ecology’ to refer to Naess’ Ecosophy T, while other times it is used to refer to the “deep ecological movement.” While we are of course always concerned with these sorts of distinctions in terminology as philosophers, Gamlund highlights just how important it is to make a distinction here, as there is a considerable difference between deep ecology as, say, a political movement based on the guiding principles of an environmental platform, and the ecosophy proposed by Naess in the form of Ecosophy T. Indeed, Ecosophy T is a “distinct theory in *environmental philosophy*,” rather than an ethical or political theory or position: “it aims to offer a systematic and fundamental view of [the human] relationship with the environment. In this light, it can be appropriately

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<sup>85</sup> Espen Gamlund, “Will the Defenders of Deep Ecology Please Rise?” (unpublished manuscript). This is an elaborated English version of a shorter (but published) article in Norwegian: see Espen Gamlund, “Hva er galt med dypøkologien? Noen kommentarer til Arne Naess’ Økosofi T,” *Norsk Filosofisk Tidsskrift* 45, no. 4 (2012): 229-244.

described as a cosmology.”<sup>86</sup> It is in this latter sense of an ecosophy, namely Naess’ Ecosophy T, that I will use the term ‘deep ecology.’

Difficult though it may be to sum up deep ecology as a philosophical system in just a few words, Gamlund offers three features which he considers central and defining characteristics: “(1) identification with nature or the environment, (2) self-realization, and (3) a relational ontology.”<sup>87</sup> The term ‘identification’ is a loaded one, as is the concept of ‘Self-realization.’ I will attempt to address them individually while accounting for how they are related. Following Gamlund, ‘identification’ is the idea proposed by Naess that human beings have a unique ability to “identify with other living beings.” This capacity is uniquely human in that it is realized through various human faculties. Imagine that you see another human being experiencing physical pain. Your human capacity for empathy allows you to imagine what it might be like to feel that pain yourself, and so you empathize with the sufferer. In Naess’ terms, this is an act of identification. What this portends for Naess’ deep ecology, however, is more significant: Naess envisions us identifying not only with humans, but also with other non-human animals as well as plants. Thanks to our ability to “internalize” the interests of other beings (both human and non-human) while simultaneously exercising our cognitive capacity to appreciate the ways in which our interests overlap with theirs, we are able to undergo a process of ‘identification’ with others.

Naess seems to imagine the process of identification taking place in progressively wider circles, which takes us to the second central concept in deep ecology: Self-realization. This concept is so fundamental to deep ecology that Naess refers to it interchangeably as the system’s “top norm,” “key term,” and “ultimate goal” in *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, the culmination of his thought published in 1989.<sup>88</sup> It is worth noting that while Naess’ work in deep ecology spans several decades’ worth of articles, books, and lectures, *Ecology*,

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<sup>86</sup> Gamlund, “Defenders,” 5.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, ed. and trans. David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 84-85.

*Community and Lifestyle* is widely considered to be the most complete and essential take on Ecosophy T. It was first published in Norwegian in 1976 as *Økologi, samfunn og livsstil*, and went through a series of edits before finally being published in English in 1989. Importantly for my purposes here, Naess also refers to Self-realization in *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* as an ultimate goal “known in the history of philosophy under various names: ‘the universal self’, ‘the absolute’, ‘the *ātman*’, etc.”<sup>89</sup> Gamlund argues that with Self-realization, Naess intends to communicate something like the cultivation of “a larger and more comprehensive conception of ourselves,” one which “includes the interests and desires of all those non-human living beings with which we can identify.” In effect, “our sense of self grows”: we become “the sum of our identifications” as we progress through various stages of Self-realization.<sup>90</sup> That is to say, the narrow, egoistic self becomes a wider, all-inclusive Self.

While this comes close to capturing what Naess means by “Self-realization,” I diverge from Gamlund when it comes to the idea of our sense of self ‘growing’ into a ‘sum’ of our various identifications. Naess himself writes:

How do we develop a wider self? What kind of process makes it possible? One way of answering these questions: There is a process of ever-widening identification and ever-narrowing alienation which widens the self. The self is as comprehensive as the totality of our identifications. Or, more succinctly: Our Self is that with which we identify. The question then reads: How do we widen identifications?<sup>91</sup>

It is tempting to conclude that ‘widening’ involves something additive, like ‘summing.’

But Naess writes elsewhere:

We, as egos, have an extremely limited power and position within the whole, but it is sufficient for the unfolding of our potential, something vastly more comprehensive than the potential of our egos...By identifying with greater wholes, we partake in the creation and maintenance of this whole....The egos develop into selves of greater and greater dimension, *proportional to the extent and depth of our processes of identification*.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>90</sup> Gamlund, “Defenders,” 6-7.

<sup>91</sup> Arne Naess, “Identification as a Source of Deep Ecological Attitudes,” in *Deep Ecology*, ed. Michael Tobias (San Diego, California: Avant Books, 1985), 261.

<sup>92</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 173-174, emphasis added.

The idea of a ‘proportional widening’ casts doubt on the idea that the process of identification is ‘additive,’ at least in the sense of cobbling together ‘self’ upon ‘self’. This distinction is meaningful, incidentally, particularly insofar as Naess mentions identifying with “greater wholes,” as this concept is in metaphysical alignment with the kind of monism posited by Spinoza and Advaita Vedanta: the *ātman* mentioned in the above quote.

At this point, the reader unfamiliar with deep ecology may be wondering where exactly an ethic comes into play. Naess himself was, for his part, somewhat famously disinterested in ethical discourse. Speaking in 1984 in Australia, Naess said: “I’m not much interested in ethics or morals, I’m interested in how we experience the world...Ethics follows from how we experience the world.”<sup>93</sup> Ontology was primary for Naess: he believed that the correct metaphysical understanding of the world would lead one to act in an ethical way. Naess made a point of distinguishing between this sort of ontologically grounded ethical action and a traditional, Kantian sense of ethical action derived from duty. He argues that through Self-realization, we can come to engage in what Kant called “beautiful actions.” Where “moral actions are motivated by acceptance of a moral law, and manifest themselves clearly when acting against inclination” — that is, when acting according to duty — beautiful actions are by contrast characterized exhibited by someone who acts “benevolently from inclination. Environment is then not felt to be something strange or hostile which we must unfortunately adapt ourself to, but something valuable which we are inclined to treat with joy and respect, and the overwhelming richness of which we are inclined to use to satisfy our vital needs.” Self-realization, then, is a kind of “condensed expression of the unity of certain social, psychological, and ontological hypotheses: the most comprehensive and deep maturity of the human personality guarantees *beautiful action*.”<sup>94</sup> I will return to this distinction between Kantian ‘moral’ and ‘beautiful’ actions shortly, as I believe it is essential

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<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 219.

<sup>94</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 85-86.

in understanding deep ecology in terms of a virtue ethic. But first, I will address the third defining feature of deep ecology as laid out by Gamlund: namely, the idea of a relational ontology.

An appreciation for Naess' relational ontology is essential to understanding identification and Self-realization, as well as for generating a deep ecological ethic. "What I am suggesting," he writes, "is the primacy of environmental ontology and realism over environmental ethics."<sup>95</sup> By a 'relational' ontology, Naess means to imply an ontology wherein all things are deeply interconnected. We cannot understand individual organisms in and of themselves as independent, separate entities; rather, they are "knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations."<sup>96</sup> On the one hand, this is a rather straightforward ecological claim: an organism can only be understood in the context of an ecosystem; that is, in terms of its relationships with other organisms. These relationships are partially constitutive of what the organism itself 'is.' If these gestalt connections (a term often employed by Naess in referring to his relational ontology) were changed or reconfigured in some way, the organism itself would quite literally 'be' something different. While this is perhaps uncontroversial when considering, say, a squirrel in the forest canopy, Naess' point is that humans ought to be understood in precisely the same way: "human beings are not *in* nature," but are instead understood to be "connected through their internal relations to other organisms and to nature as a whole."<sup>97</sup>

### 5.3. The Problem of Relativism

A gestalt view of the world has important epistemological consequences as well. According to Gamlund, the gestalt view has a kind of epistemological relativism built into it:

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<sup>95</sup> Arne Naess, "Self-Realization. An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 236, quoted in Gamlund, "Defenders," 9.

<sup>96</sup> Naess, "The Shallow and the Long-Range," 95.

<sup>97</sup> Gamlund, "Defenders," 10.

things are “relational in the sense that they are dependent on the perceiver’s perspective.”<sup>98</sup> How does this work? Naess gives the example of two people sticking their hand into a bucket of water. One person experiences the water as cold, while another experiences it to be warm. So what ‘is’ the water: warm or cold? According to Naess, it is both. But does this not generate a logical contradiction? Naess develops an idea here which he calls “Protagorean ‘both-and’ theory.” Following the ancient Greek philosopher’s claim that “matter *in itself* has all the properties which are perceived by each individual,” Naess believes that there is no contradiction posed by these two seemingly opposite observations. According to Naess, there is a difference between, on the one hand, a claim such as “the water is both cold and not cold” — which creates a logical contradiction because it “violates the identity principle” — and a claim like “the water is cold in relation to Person A and not cold in relation to person B.”<sup>99</sup> It is the latter which Naess intends when speaking of his relational ontology, and which Gamlund is pointing to when he claims that Naess’ ontology results in a relativistic epistemology.

But, of course, there is a major problem lurking here. As Gamlund correctly points out, what Naess is really proposing here is “nothing more than subjective relativism.”<sup>100</sup> It almost goes without saying that an epistemology grounded in subjective relativism could not simultaneously serve as the basis for an environmental ethic — particularly an environmental ethic that is intended to deal with a problem as complex, multifaceted, and temporally protracted as climate change. The bucket of water example might seem harmless enough: perhaps we are comfortable coming to the conclusion that the water ‘is’ cold in one sense, and ‘is’ warm in another. But what if we consider an example where ethical decision making is of paramount importance, and where our understanding of what something ‘is’ would then have some bearing on how we ought to act?

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 54-56.

<sup>100</sup> Gamlund, “Defenders,” 13.

Imagine a debate between a deep ecologist and a politician. The debate concerns whether or not the polity represented by the politician ought to allow an oil company to undertake new drilling projects off the country's coast, or whether such exploratory drilling should, in light of the climate problem, be prohibited. The deep ecologist argues that, following from her gestalt understanding, the ocean is first and foremost a vast and complex ecosystem, an interconnected web of being where even the slightest imbalance can result in a disastrous chain of events. An oil spill would be devastating for the coastline, not only for the marine life inhabiting the water, but also for those engaged in fishing, aquaculture, tourism, and so on. In this sense, the deep ecologist's gestalt understanding of this swath of ocean is more than simply an ecological appreciation for the complexity of an ecosystem: it is genuinely gestalt from a deep ecological sense insofar as it understands the ocean not only as an ecosystem, but as a system of gestalt connections extending beyond the ocean itself, onto land and into the lives of people. And, of course, the deep ecologist could go further and discuss the wider ramifications of an oil spill, including the clean up involved, the emissions resulting from such a clean up, and so on. She could also engage in a discussion of the wider impacts of fossil fuels on climate change, and the ill effects of continuing to develop the energy sector of the polity in question in the direction of further exploitation of and reliance on fossil fuels. But we can stop here with at least a partial appreciation of the deep ecologist's position.

But consider how the politician might respond. From her perspective, it may be the case that the ocean is home to a variety of marine life, but the ocean 'is' also many other things from a gestalt perspective: it 'is' a significant economic opportunity, home to billions of dollars of potential profit. We can even imagine a not unlikely hypothetical here: perhaps for the politician, the debate is also connected to a promise by the oil company in question to fund her opponent if she fails to deliver on a previous promise to approve exploratory offshore drilling. At any rate, the situation here clearly highlights the problem of subjective

relativism for the deep ecologist. What basis does she have to claim that the politician's perception of the ocean is 'wrong,' and that her perception is the 'correct' one?

At first blush, it appears that the deep ecologist would answer by claiming that the politician in question has failed to adequately cultivate their Self: she is not properly engaged in the process of Self-realization, and has a 'false' gestalt understanding of the ocean. But as Gamlund points out, this response begs the question. Even more problematic for the deep ecologist, however, is that "gestalt theory provides no basis for saying that some people's understanding of nature is inadequate or wrong."<sup>101</sup> There is actually an additional problem here as well, one which Gamlund does not identify. It is not simply that deep ecology appears to have no basis for saying that a given person's understanding of nature is wrong when two people disagree — that is, it appears to offer no well-described ethical basis from which to act. What's more, it must somehow provide this basis while *simultaneously* managing to affirm the truth of *both* of two parties' claims about nature in *other* situations. In other words, deep ecology must somehow say that 'is hot' and 'is cold' is perfectly fine in the case of the bucket of water — that both interpretations are equally true — while managing to negotiate the truth of opposing claims in the case of ethical debate. It thus appears that deep ecology is not just lacking in the sort of basis for understanding and action which Gamlund points to: it also seems that deep ecology simply *cannot* offer such a basis with the use of 'Protagorean both-and theory.'

I would not deny Gamlund's claim that Naess' gestalt ontology, particularly in light of his 'Protagorean both-and epistemology,' devolves into subjective relativism. It is also far beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to offer a detailed defense of how Naess' ontology might be salvaged in light of this problem. I would, however, like to briefly sketch the outlines of what such a solution might look like. At its core, I believe Naess' problem stems from a desire (perhaps an entirely unconscious one on his part) to remain within the bounds of

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.



classical logic. As noted above, Naess was concerned with avoiding contradiction: he needed a way of accounting for opposing truth values without violating the identity principle. But, as Gamlund shows, Naess' Protagorean both-and theory trades the avoidance of contradiction for the ability to hold a defensible ethical position. What Naess needs is not some bolted-on 'both-and' solution, conceived as an epistemological addition to his gestalt ontology as constructed within the framework of classical logic. Rather, Naess needs to appeal to something completely different: a dialethic truth theory, couched in non-classical logic.

To further clarify what I mean, it is useful to represent the problem of contradiction in formal terms. Within classical logic, something known as 'logical explosion' follows from any internal inconsistencies which are allowed to enter into the system — that is, from a contradiction. In other words, once we agree that any single contradiction is to be 'permitted' within the logical system, we immediately end up in a situation where *any* statement can be rendered true. This is what is intended by the term 'explosion.' The problem can be expressed in formal terms as follows. Takes two propositions,  $y$  and  $z$ . We first assume that proposition  $y$  is true, and assign is the truth value  $t$ . It follows then that the proposition 'y or z' must also be true. This is because we have already determined that  $y$  is true, and the truth value of  $z$  is therefore immaterial to the truth of the proposition 'y or z.' (Were the operator *and* rather than *or*, this would not be the case.) Now, let us introduce a contradiction into the system:  $\neg y$ . If  $\neg y$ , then  $y$  is false,  $f$ . But because 'y or z' must be true, and given that we have now determined that  $\neg y$ , it must be the case that  $z$  is true. And this is so regardless of what 'z' is. It could be literally any proposition under the sun, and we must still count it as true. What we have, then, is a formal representation of something like the subjective relativism that results from Naess' epistemology.

Now, this seems uncontroversial. But what if we opt to change the rules of our logic? The problem with contradiction in classical logic is rooted in the fact that it only allows for

one designated truth value,  $t$ . But let us imagine a logic with more than one designated truth value: a logic which allows for, say,  $t$  as well as  $b$ , which we will take to designate ‘both true and false.’ Such a logic would be what is called “paraconsistent.”<sup>102</sup> In a system of classical logic, it is impossible to say both  $y$  and  $\neg y$  without ending up with logical explosion. But in a paraconsistent logic, ‘ $y$  and  $\neg y$ ’ simply means that we assign  $y$  the designated truth value  $b$ , meaning both true and false. If we then say ‘ $y$  or  $z$ ,’ there is no longer any need to conclude that  $z$  is true, as  $y$  retains its designated value despite the supposed contradiction. Such states as ‘ $y$  and  $\neg y$ ’ are what Graham Priest calls ‘dialetheia.’ “A *dialetheia* is a sentence,  $A$ , such that both it and its negation,  $\neg A$ , are true. If falsity is assumed to be the truth of negation, a dialetheia is a sentence which is both true and false.”<sup>103</sup>

Is this not still subjective relativism? In fact, it is not. This is because of a key detail which is easy to overlook: namely, that a paraconsistent logic still provides for the possibility that any given proposition (or statement, or sentence, or whatever you want to call a given truth-bearer) can be false. The fact that dialetheia exist — that there are things which are both true and false — does not necessitate that *anything* can be true or false. For Naess, this is essential. It is thus possible to say that ‘the bucket of water is both cold and not cold,’ but this does not then necessitate that ‘the ocean both is and is not primarily to be understood as an opportunity for financial gain.’ Consider the structure of the kinds of truth claims proposed by Naess above: that the bucket of water was cold ‘relative to’ one individual, and warm ‘relative to’ another. This ‘relativism’ is precisely what Gamlund takes issue with. If we remove the ‘relative to’ and replace it with a dialethic theory of truth grounded in a paraconsistent logic, we are no longer obliged to simply take all supposedly

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<sup>102</sup> Graham Priest, Koji Tanaka, and Zach Weber, “Paraconsistent Logic,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/logic-paraconsistent/>. See also Graham Priest, “The Logic of Paradox,” *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8, no. 1 (1979): 219-241, which includes truth tables that illustrate the various logical consequence relations in a paraconsistent logic.

<sup>103</sup> Graham Priest, Francesco Berto, and Zach Weber, “Dialetheism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/dialetheism/>.

‘gestalt interpretations’ (such as the one advanced by the politician above) as true. The deep ecologist can argue against the truth of such a claim, as the truth of a given proposition is no longer *purely* a matter of subjective perspective.

Recall that part of Gamlund’s critique of Naess’ position was the failure of deep ecology to account for *why* one understanding of reality is false while another is true. My addition to this claim was the further clarification that such a specification was not even possible, at least not with Naess’ poorly conceived ‘Protagorean both-and theory’ of truth. What I would like to suggest, then, is that Naess’ theory gains the ability to respond to Gamlund by adopting a paraconsistent logic and dialetheic theory of truth. It is now no longer relativistic: deep ecology is now capable of constructing the account that Gamlund identifies as lacking — that is, of offering an ethic. The question now shifts to what such a construction might look like, and it is with this consideration in mind that I turn to my characterization of a deep ecological ethic in terms of a virtue ethical position.

#### 5.4. Deep Ecology as a Virtue Ethic

As already mentioned, Naess himself was not particularly concerned with ethics as traditionally conceived. Rather, he believed an ethical position would follow naturally from his ontology. However, he failed to spell out precisely what such an ethical position would look like. It is this paucity of detail that invites the type of criticism leveled by Gamlund. I will argue here that, although many deep ecologists may not characterize their position as strictly virtue ethical, if we are indeed to place a label on the type of ethical system derived from deep ecology, ‘virtue ethics’ would be the best such label. A deep ecological ethic could then be generated in such a way as to cohere with a virtue ethical framework. Naess’ comments in *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* regarding Kantian moral duty as contrasted with “beautiful action,” combined with his treatment of Spinoza, will make this clear. Once I have made this argument, I will go on to highlight what is missing from deep ecology (as presented by

Naess) in fully constructing such a virtue ethic. Ultimately, I will conclude that the lack of a clear connection between virtue, wisdom, deep ecological *eudaimonia*, and ethical action renders deep ecology unsuited to the task of determining how we ought to act with respect to a problem like climate change. Further exegesis of Naess' work would be needed, which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, as I will show, various strains in Naess' thought lead us in the direction of a Buddhist virtue ethic: one which offers a more complete picture of what constitutes the good life, and of the clear connection between virtue, wisdom, and the Buddhist conception of *eudaimonia*.

To begin, it is worth clarifying what exactly I mean by the claim that a deep ecological ethic is best understood in virtue ethical terms. Do I mean that there are deep ecologists with ethical frameworks based in Naess' Ecosophy T who would describe themselves a virtue ethicists? Or, do I mean that there is a virtue ethic 'hidden' in Naess' deep ecology, and that this virtue ethic can be revealed with proper exegesis? In fact, I do not intend either of these with my claim. First, I do not know of any instances in the deep ecological literature where Naessian deep ecologists take on a self-described virtue ethical position. In fact, some deep ecologists go even further than simply failing to identify their position as virtue ethical, instead openly questioning the importance of virtue altogether. In arguing that the Buddhist idea of dependent origination can be expressed in "secular terms" as "deep ecology," Joanna Macy is quick to point out:

Please note: virtue is not required for the emergence of the ecological self! This shift in identification [associated with the widening of the sense of self while undergoing the process of Self-realization] is essential to our survival at this point in history precisely because it can serve in lieu of ethics and morality. Moralizing is ineffective; sermons seldom hinder us from pursuing our self-interest as we construe it.<sup>104</sup>

Here, it appears that Macy is not only failing to adopt a virtue ethical position: additionally, she goes so far as to claim that the whole notion of virtue is entirely

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<sup>104</sup> Joanna Macy, "The Ecological Self: Postmodern Ground for Right Action," in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, ed. Mary Heath MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 266-267. Quoted in part in Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 32.

unnecessary for the processes of identification and Self-realization, both of which are central to the deep ecological project. Does this imply that ascribing some sort of virtue ethical position to deep ecology is impossible, or at least wrongheaded? I do not believe that it does. Macy does not offer any further discussion of what she considers to be virtue ethical, but the picture painted in this excerpt — where an equivocation is made between virtue and “moralizing” — is wholly out of keeping with the spirit of virtue ethics. Recall the characterization of virtue ethics that I offered in section 4.2: virtue ethics is primarily concerned with questions of character and motivation; sees the virtues themselves as irreducible; places great importance on the relationship between the virtues and human flourishing; and, finally, considers this flourishing in terms of one’s whole life, as opposed to any particular instance of ethical consideration. The focus on motivation, flourishing, and one’s whole life are not at odds with the deep ecological project of Self-realization, nor are they to be confused with something like “moralizing.” Macy’s conception of “ethics and morality,” then, seems to be a rather narrow one: a conception which “seems to conflate morality with moralizing, as if morality were concerned only with *preaching* on the rules governing what we ought and ought not to do.”<sup>105</sup>

For his part, we have already seen that Naess expresses a disinterest in ethics in general. Nowhere does he appear to represent deep ecology in virtue ethical terms. He does, however, devote some space to the discussion of Kantian morality in *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Should this lead us to think that deep ecology is best understood in Kantian terms? On the contrary, Naess actually contrasts the deep ecological project with Kantian morality. He points to a distinction which Kant draws between “beautiful actions” and “moral actions.” As mentioned above, Naess argues that through Self-realization we can come to engage in “beautiful actions.” Where “[m]oral actions are motivated by acceptance of a moral law, and manifest themselves clearly when acting against inclination,” beautiful

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<sup>105</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 33.

actions are by contrast exhibited when a person acts “benevolently from inclination.

Environment is then not felt to be something strange or hostile which we must unfortunately adapt ourself to, but something valuable which we are inclined to treat with joy and respect, and the overwhelming richness of which we are inclined to use to satisfy our vital needs.”<sup>106</sup>

Naess appears to conceive of morality in a rather narrow sense here: acting against our own inclinations, but in alignment with some kind of moral duty, is deemed “moral action.” This is, of course, Kant’s conception. Imagine two people taking the same environmentally-friendly action. One engages in this action out of a sense of moral duty, even though they are inclined to do something else (but which they recognize is immoral). The other has no sense of moral duty, but engages in the action out of inclination. For Kant, the former would be the morally superior person, for this person recognizes and engages in the proper duty. Meanwhile, in Kant’s eyes, the latter is simply acting in accordance with moral duty out of sheer luck — something which could hardly be praised from the standpoint of Kantian deontological ethics. But if this is Naess’ picture of ‘ethics’ writ large, it is no surprise that he saw such a focus on ethical action as superfluous to the project of deep ecology.

It is clear, then, that deep ecology is not a self-described virtue ethical position. Naess did not present or defend any particular ethical position or theory in his work. Interpreting Naess is also notoriously difficult to do, as his work can be inconsistent. What I intend to argue here, however, is the notion that if we are to attempt to generate some sort of ethical position from deep ecology, and if this position is to conform with one of the three dominant ethical frameworks — that is, with consequentialism, deontology, or virtue ethics — then virtue ethics is the best fit of the three. Given Naess’ focus on identification, Self-realization, ontology, and epistemology, little more need be said to dismiss the idea that a deep ecological ethic could be consequentialist in nature. It is difficult to imagine Naess

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<sup>106</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 85.

discussing the project of identifying with nature in terms of maximizing benefits. Meanwhile, the citation above makes it clear that deontology is actually diametrically opposed to the idea of engaging in beautiful action, making it a poor fit for a deep ecological ethic.

But if a deep ecological ethic is to be understood in virtue ethical terms, it must at least fit with a formal virtue ethical structure: that is, there must be some deep ecological notion of the good life, or *eudaimonia*; there must be a kind of practical wisdom which is both necessary for the exercise of virtue and conceptually inseparable from these virtues; and there must be virtues which, similarly, are at least partially constitutive of the deep ecological good life. It is not necessary for there to be any overlap in *content* with, say, an Aristotelian or Stoic virtue ethic — there need only be formal equivalence of some kind. Can we find correlations for practical wisdom, *eudaimonia*, and the virtues in deep ecology?

First, the question of what practical wisdom might look like in deep ecological terms. Recall the discussion of identification offered above: following Gamlund, the concept of identification is understood as the contention that “human beings have the capacity to identify with other living beings.” This is due at least in part to various rational human capacities. For example, our ability to feel empathy means that we can identify with the needs of other humans, as well as the needs of animals and plants. We’re able to “internalize their interests,” at which point our actions can take those interests into account. Additionally, our cognitive capabilities allow us to “understand complex structures and relations in nature,” including the ways in which our interests overlap with those of other creatures.<sup>107</sup> But this makes the process of identification sound rather bland: if it is simply a question of engaging in empathy and understanding that things are interconnected, it is difficult to see what is so unique about the process — or, perhaps more importantly, how this process could possibly contribute to something as grandiose as Self-realization.

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<sup>107</sup> Gamlund, “Defenders,” 6.

As Naess points out, however, identification is not *purely* a rational, cognitive process. On the contrary, in one passage he argues that identification is a “spontaneous, non-rational, but not irrational, process through which the...interests of another being are reacted to as our own.”<sup>108</sup> At first glance, it is unclear what to make of the claim that identification is “non-rational, but not irrational.” Recall, however, the argument above for the necessity of a dialethic theory of truth in reconciling Naess’ gestalt epistemology. Such a truth theory is quite well-suited to a kind of cognition would be “non-rational,” but not entirely “irrational”: that is, which *appears* to lead to logically problematic conclusions due to contradiction, but which in reality makes space for such unconventional conclusions. For example, the idea that we can identify not just with other humans, but with animals and plants — that we can somehow internalize their interests — is not intended as a superficial claim, but a radical one. As Robert Aitken writes: “Deep ecology...requires openness to the black bear, becoming truly intimate with the black bear, so that honey dribbles down your fur as you catch the bus to work.”<sup>109</sup> This is the kind of identification which is “non-rational, but not irrational.” And it is precisely the cultivation of this awareness — the awareness of the overlap between ourselves and the natural world — which is constitutive of the development of a deep ecological practical wisdom in the form of identification.

But what about a deep ecological analogue for *eudaimonia*? This analogue must not only take on the role of the good life for Naess — it must also be deeply connected with deep ecological practical wisdom, or identification. Self-realization is the obvious candidate here. To appreciate the connection between Self-realization and the idea of a life well-lived, it is useful to highlight the connection between Naess’ thought and Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Naess was, of course, a preeminent scholar of Spinoza, and was clearly influenced by his work. For his part — particularly when it came to his ethical thinking — Spinoza was heavily influenced by Aristotle, especially his thought surrounding virtue and *eudaimonia*. Gamlund offers the

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<sup>108</sup> Naess, “Identification as a Source,” 261, quoted in Gamlund, “Defenders,” 6.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, 239.



beginnings of a description of the connection between Self-realization and *eudaimonia*, as well as between Naess and Spinoza:

[I]t is reasonable to interpret 'self-realization' as equivalent with happiness in one form or the other. Naess was heavily influenced by Spinoza, so I believe we can interpret the notion of self-realization in light of Spinoza's conception of happiness. Against this background, self-realization involves an understanding and joyful activity where a person conceives of him or herself as a participant in the unfolding of life on earth. Thus, Naess contends that there is a close connection between identification with nature, self-realization, and happiness: complete human happiness is only possible, according to Naess, if we identify with nature as a whole.<sup>110</sup>

But the connection can be made even clearer if we examine Naess' discussion of this notion of "unfolding" as presented in *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. First, however, what does Gamlund mean by "Spinoza's conception of happiness?" Elsewhere, Gamlund appears to equate happiness for Spinoza with *conatus*, or self-preservation. For Spinoza,

humans can become free from the bondage under the emotions by gradually coming to understand ourselves and our emotions. Increase in such understanding implies increase in power, virtue and perfection, which ultimately leads to feelings of joy. The concept of joy [i.e. happiness] is connected by definition with his idea of self-preservation (*conatus*): 'Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, endeavours to persist in its own being' (3P6). 'Joy is the emotion through which the power of the body to act, increases or is furthered' (4P41D).<sup>111</sup>

Gamlund quotes Naess' interpretation of Spinoza as claiming that "[e]very human being strives to be joyous."<sup>112</sup> Naess makes the connection even more explicit in *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Following Naess, "happiness, or well-being, has a dimension of positive emotion, primarily of joy...The Spinozist teaching on human nature seems to contend that increase in perfection and joy merge into one totality, a gestalt where the increase is internally related to joy. Joy as a sensation is merely an abstract and perfection is nothing more than an unfolding of that which lies deepest in human nature."<sup>113</sup> Elsewhere, Naess writes that human life as a whole can be understood as a kind of "vast historical

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<sup>110</sup> Gamlund, "Defenders," 7-8.

<sup>111</sup> Gamlund, "Living," 10.

<sup>112</sup> Arne Naess, *Freedom, Emotion and Self-Subsistence: The Structure of a Central Part of Spinoza's Ethics* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1975), 92, quoted in Gamlund, "Living," 10.

<sup>113</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 83.

process” of “unfolding.” Here lies a connection with practical wisdom, insight into the connections between our individual lives and the lives of those around us: seen from a wider perspective, this totality of unfolding is “an *integrated process*,” one in which we all participate through the basic striving of *conatus*.<sup>114</sup>

But for Naess, the idea of self-preservation is not adequate for capturing the totality of *eudaimonia*. It is too passive, in that it lacks the ability to “account for the dynamics of expansion and modification” which characterize the human experience. Instead, Naess substitutes the concept of Self-realization for self-preservation. He traces this term “back to Spinoza’s *perseverare in suo esse*, to persevere in one’s own (way of) being, not mere keeping alive. Ecosophy T concentrates especially upon the aspect of general unfolding *in suo esse*.” For Naess, then, “human ecological consciousness” is something “philosophically important,” as for the first time in history evolution has resulted in a creature which is “capable of understanding and appreciating its relations with all other life forms and to the Earth as a whole.”<sup>115</sup> This further shores up the idea that the practical wisdom of identification is constitutive of the eudaimonic goal of Self-realization: it is our ability to identify with “other life forms” and “the Earth as a whole” which is deeply intertwined with the development of “ecological consciousness,” as well as the widening of our sense of self to encompass the whole of nature. This brings us full circle to Gamlund’s point that “complete human happiness is only possible, according to Naess, if we identify with nature as a whole.”

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But if identification is an analogue for practical wisdom, and Self-realization for *eudaimonia*, what about deep ecological virtues? Are such virtues explicit in the writings of Naess? Cooper and James note that “in places, Naess’s rejection of morality actually implies a virtue ethical treatment of his position: ‘We need not say that today man’s relation to the

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 165-166.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>116</sup> Gamlund, “Defenders,” 8.

nonhuman world is *immoral*. It is enough to say that it lacks generosity, fortitude, and love.”

<sup>117</sup> Further, following Andrew McLaughlin, “the concern of deep ecology with the development of the self harks back to the concerns of Greek philosophy with the development of *character*.”<sup>118</sup> As Cooper and James point out, Naess’ talk of generosity, fortitude, and love sounds quite virtue ethical. And, of course, the virtue ethicist could readily agree that a lack of virtues like generosity and fortitude, as well as perhaps a virtue like ‘love of nature’ (assuming this is at least in part what Naess intends), would be problematic from a moral standpoint apart from any considerations of moral duty or consequentialist reasoning. Further, if McLaughlin is right and it is sensible to equate the fully realized Self with something like the fully-developed human being — the state of eudaimonic existence wherein the exercise of virtue is constitutive of one’s good character, and that good character is exemplary of the life well lived — then there would presumably be readily identifiable virtues (such as love of nature) which are both constitutive of Self-realization, and which lead one down the path of identification and the widening of the deep ecological Self.

But aside from the kind of passing mention of “generosity, fortitude and love” identified by Cooper and James above, it is difficult to find specific discussion of the development of deep ecological ‘virtues’ in Naess’ writing. And so while one could posit various deep ecological virtues — a virtue for the love of nature, or for the kind of apparently selfless action which one would expect the fully Self-realized deep ecologist to undertake — there appears to be a lack of a strong (or at least obvious) textual basis for such virtues in Naess’ work.

This, then, is where deep ecology comes up short as a fully fledged virtue ethic. On the one hand, there is not a clear and concise picture presented in Naess’ work of the

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<sup>117</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 33.

<sup>118</sup> Andrew McLaughlin, “The Critique of Humanity and Nature: Three Recent Philosophical Reflections,” *The Trumpeter* 4, no. 4 (1987): 1-6, quoted in Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 33.

*constitutive* relationship between the virtues, practical wisdom, and *eudaimonia* — that is, between the virtues, identification, and Self-realization — which would render it a clear virtue ethic. I have drawn such a picture here; but, as can be deduced from the need to refer not only to other unrelated sections of Naess' seminal deep ecological work, but also to other of Naess' work spanning several decades, along with Gamlund's exegesis and terminology from Spinoza, such a constitutive picture is far from *explicit* in Naess' writing. To render a complete virtue ethic from deep ecology, such a picture would need to be colored in further. But, given the lack of explicit discussion of deep ecological virtues in Naess' work, we lack the kind of readily available ethical content which might lend itself to addressing an intergenerational ethical challenge like climate change.

This brings us back to Gamlund's original critique of deep ecology which I augmented: that it lacks both the logical grounds *and* the ethical foundation from which to, for example, criticize one environment-affecting action while awarding moral approbation to another. Earlier, I presented an alternative logical system which could answer to the first part of this critique. Here, I have attempted to address the second: one could, I think, generate a virtue ethic from deep ecology, one which could offer ethical guidance for actions that impact the environment, including actions related to a problem like climate change. I believe such a virtue ethical approach to be a promising way to render an ethic from deep ecology, despite the fact that Naess never explicitly presented such an ethic himself. More work would need to be done, however. First, a set of deep ecological virtues would need to be exegeted from Naess' texts, presumably in large part from *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Further, it would need to be made explicit how these virtues are *constitutive of* the eudaimonic ideal of Self-realization, as well as inextricably linked with the practical wisdom of identification.

### 5.5. Naess and Buddhism

The formulation of such a virtue ethic seems entirely possible, but is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather than attempting to develop such an ethic, I would like to follow a particular strain of deep ecological thinking which emerges late in Naess' body of work (that is, after the many redactions leading up to the publication of *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*), and which leads directly to an alternative ethical system: one which offers a considerably more robust virtue ethical picture, complete with virtues which are directly relevant for our thinking about climate change. I am referring here to Buddhist ethics, in particular a virtue ethical conception of Buddhist ethics. And while mention of Buddhism can be found throughout Naess' work over the years, his discussion of it crystallizes in a previously unpublished manuscript from 1985 (later published in 2005 as part of the complete collection of his works) entitled "Gestalt Thinking and Buddhism."<sup>119</sup>

Recall that elsewhere in his work, Naess refers to the ultimate goal of Self-realization as something found elsewhere throughout "the history of philosophy under various names: 'the universal self', 'the absolute', 'the ātman', etc."<sup>120</sup> The Advaita Vedanta notion of *ātman* which Naess points to here refers to the notion of a "permanent and eternal reality unsmearred by all the change and fluctuations that take place in the world of experience."<sup>121</sup> It is a permanent, unchanging, monistic, all-encompassing picture of the self. Meanwhile, recall that Naess talks about identification in terms of a widening of our notion of the self to take into account other beings: following Deane Curtin, such a conception "preserves diversity; we identify with the interests of 'another being'" on the path to Self-realization.<sup>122</sup> But as Curtin points out, this makes Naess' choice of terminology in employing the concept

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<sup>119</sup> Arne Naess, "Gestalt Thinking and Buddhism," (2005) in *The Selected Works of Arne Naess*, ed. Harold Glasser and Alan Drengson (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 8:333-342.

<sup>120</sup> Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 85.

<sup>121</sup> David J. Kalipahana, *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 12, quoted in Deane Curtin, "Dōgen, Deep Ecology, and the Ecological Self," in *Environmental Philosophy in Asian Traditions of Thought*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and James McRae (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 276.

<sup>122</sup> Curtin, "Dōgen," 275.

of *ātman* “deeply puzzling,” as its “precise meaning *contradicts* what Naess says about the recognition of diversity.”<sup>123</sup> How can there be diversity of things, after all, if everything is actually one? What ‘else’ is there for us to identify with in the first place?

In “Gestalt Thinking and Buddhism,” Naess appears to abandon this *ātman*-based conception of Self-realization for one grounded in a diametrically opposed metaphysical concept: the notion of *anātman*, or ‘no-self,’ as presented in Buddhist thought. The concept of *anātman* was intended by the Buddha to clearly contradict the notion of *ātman*, and is central to a Buddhist understanding of both the world around us as well as what it means to live a good life (something that will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter).

Naess writes:

The “doctrine of no (permanent) Self” is essential to both Buddhism and gestalt thinking. In my personal outline of a deep ecological philosophy (Ecosophy T), “Self-realization!” is the logically (derivationally) supreme norm, but it is not an eternal or permanent ‘Self’ that is postulated. When the formulation is made more precise, it is seen that the Self in question is a symbol of identification with an absolute maximum range of beings. Selves are frequently recurring entities, or “knots,” in the structure of contents, but they do not have the concreteness of contents!...“Only through one’s self-realization can one attain nirvana...,” says Masao Abe in his article (1985: 31) concerned Dōgen’s term *buddha nature*.<sup>124</sup>

It seems that Naess appears quite ready not only to grant that the Buddhist conception of no-self is relevant for deep ecological thinking, but also perhaps even allow for the concept of nirvana. This is curious, as it would have serious implications for Naess’ deep ecology (that is, for Ecosophy T). In this passage, Naess has just reminded us that ‘Self-realization!’ holds the status of being the supreme deep ecological norm. But if we follow Masao Abe, Self-realization is only a step on a much longer path which ultimately leads to nirvana. Much in the same way that the deep ecological notion of identification is essential for Self-realization, Abe seems to suggest that Self-realization is constitutive of the path to complete awakening. As I will discuss at greater length in section 6.3, nirvana can be

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 276.

<sup>124</sup> Naess, “Gestalt Thinking,” 334.

understood as a kind of equivalent of *eudaimonia* in Buddhist thought. Given the argument above that, following Naess' work, we are to understand Self-realization as taking on a eudaimonic role in deep ecology, it is difficult to see how Naess could preserve the 'supreme norm' status of this concept while still making room for nirvana. Of course, it may be that Naess intends to draw a distinction between Abe's use of the term 'self-realization' and the concept of 'Self-realization' in deep ecology. But if this is his intention, he does not make it explicit.

In any case, Naess' paper illustrates a growing fondness for Buddhism which emerges later in his thought. If one were to embark on the project I suggested above — namely, constructing a deep ecological virtue ethic — I believe the nuanced understanding of some of Naess' central metaphysical concepts as described in "Buddhism and Gestalt Ontology" would be essential to such a project. But rather than attempting to graft Buddhism onto Naess (or Naess onto Buddhism), I would like to sketch an outline of a Buddhist virtue ethic for the climate on its own terms: one which, out of its concern for the types of people we are today and what it means to live a good life, manages to avoid some of the consequentialist difficulties which follow from the Non-Identity Problem.

## **6. A Buddhist Virtue Ethic for the Climate**

### **6.1. Overview**

In these final sections of the thesis, I will offer an account of a Buddhist virtue ethic and touch upon how such an ethic might approach a problem like climate change. My aim here is to both open up the climate ethical discussion to include non-traditional, non-Western ethical systems as part of the discourse (it is worth keeping in mind that at least 488 million people, or 7% of the world's population, identify as Buddhist, and that such an ethical system is far from irrelevant<sup>125</sup>) as well as to demonstrate how virtue ethical thinking in general might

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<sup>125</sup> "Buddhists" (Pew Research Center, Dec. 18, 2012), accessed October 29, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-buddhist/>.

inform our thinking about climate change, and how such a way of thinking manages to avoid the problem of future generations altogether as captured in the Non-Identity Problem.

I will proceed as follows. First, I will briefly revisit what I consider to be constitutive of a virtue ethic. Next, I will present a brief outline of some of the foundational concepts we encounter in Buddhist thought. Given the scope of this paper, such an outline must be brief, but some understanding of these concepts is needed in order to appreciate how a Buddhist virtue ethic would function. With these concepts explained, I will argue for why a Buddhist ethic is best understood in virtue ethical terms. Following from this, I will present what I consider to be some of the core virtues of a Buddhist virtue ethic, following the work of David Cooper and Simon James. I will then consider which of these virtues may be most relevant for thinking about climate change, and look at how these virtues might inform both our thoughts and actions with respect to the climate. Finally, I will consider two critiques of such an ethic and offer responses.

To begin, let us briefly recall the characterization of a virtue ethic which I offered earlier in this paper. First, a virtue ethic is primarily concerned with questions of motivation and character. Further, such an ethic sees the virtues themselves as irreducible. While this does not necessarily imply that all moral thinking should always take place *solely* in terms of consideration of the virtues, it *does* imply that virtue cannot simply be reformulated in consequentialist or deontological terms. Additionally, virtue ethics posits a constitutive relationship between human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) and the virtues themselves — that is, a eudaimonic life is one which is lived virtuously, and engaging in virtuous action is part of what makes one's life eudaimonic. The virtues cannot be understood, therefore, as means to the end of *eudaimonia*. Further, the virtues are only fully realized in combination with a proper understanding of how we ought to be in the world (whatever we take such an understanding to contain) and how to act virtuously in any given situation — that is, alongside *phronêsis*. Finally, the idea of the eudaimonic life is just that: an entire life.



*Eudaimonia* cannot be understood in terms of individual instances in one's life, but rather should be considered in terms of one's life as a whole.

In what way would a Buddhist ethic be virtue ethical? In order to present a case for a Buddhist virtue ethic, it is important to first have some understanding of a number of central Buddhist concepts. For the reader entirely unfamiliar with Buddhist thought, it would be useful to present these concepts in their historical context rather than in isolation: that is, in terms of both the life of the Buddha (when many of the core concepts were developed) as well as the further evolution of Buddhist thought into various 'families' and 'schools' (where additional concepts were added and/or greater or lesser importance placed on existing concepts). Given the scope of this paper, it is not possible to offer a highly detailed or nuanced account of Buddhist thought here. I will, however, attempt to touch on the concepts which I believe to be most fundamental — not only to Buddhist thought taken on its own, but also in order to appreciate what would constitute a Buddhist virtue ethic.

## 6.2. Foundational Buddhist Concepts

The historical personage of the Buddha, also known as Siddhattha Gotama, lived and taught during the fifth century BCE. Gotama was a prince, raised within the confines of a life at court. Upon leaving the palace for the first time as a young adult, he was shocked to encounter the poverty, illness, and misery experienced by the common people. Moved by this experience, Gotama abandoned the palace and embarked on a religious quest for the cause of and solution to suffering. After various failed attempts which included years spent as a wandering ascetic, the story goes that Gotama sat down under what is referred to as the Bodhi tree (located in Bodh Gayā in Northern India) and meditated through the night. By the time morning came, Gotama was enlightened: he had gained insight into the nature of suffering, as well as how suffering could be eliminated. Gotama was no longer Gotama, but

was now known as the Buddha, or the awakened one.<sup>126</sup> Amongst the various insights which revealed themselves to the Buddha — and which he would proceed to disseminate to his followers — there are several which I would like to outline here, as they are central to an appreciation of Buddhist thought. These are the Four Noble Truths; the Eightfold Path; no-self (*anātman*); and nirvana.

The Four Noble Truths is perhaps the most central of all the Buddhist teachings, insofar as it serves to lay the foundation not only for other concepts but also for the entire enterprise of Buddhism. If we were to attempt to capture Buddhism in a single sentence, it might be something like: the path which leads to the cessation of suffering. With this in mind, consider the Four Noble Truths espoused by the Buddha in his first sermon (*sutta*): “Suffering is inherent in life. Suffering is caused by craving. Craving and hence suffering can be destroyed. The Holy Eightfold Path is the course leading to this.”<sup>127</sup>

The Four Noble Truths raise a number of questions. First, what does the Buddha intend by the word ‘suffering’? Although we commonly use the term ‘suffering’ in English translations of the Buddhist scriptures, the Pali word *dukkha* is notoriously difficult to translate, and I am not aware of a single term in English which could adequately capture its meaning. On the one hand, what the Buddha intends by ‘suffering’ is rather straightforward. He’s referring at least in part to obvious instances of suffering in our everyday lives: a headache, a sleepless night, or something more severe such as the loss of a loved one. But the Buddha does not *only* intend these forms of suffering when he speaks of suffering as “inherent in life.” In addition to everyday forms of displeasure, the Buddha also sees the entire human condition as tinged with suffering. When we are supposedly at our happiest and most content, there is a lurking angst that interferes with our apparent contentment: we are constantly confronted with the knowledge that life and all of its experiences are transient,

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<sup>126</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 41.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 42. See also *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000).

and that nothing will last. It is the impermanent nature of our existence which gives rise to craving and desire, and it is our attachment to craving and desire which results in suffering: “we suffer because we crave things we cannot have; and because we want to be rid of things from which there is no escape (like aging, sickness and death).”<sup>128</sup>

But there is an important distinction to make here, and one which is often missed in superficial readings of the Buddhist teachings. Craving itself is not to be understood as the *root cause* of suffering. This is because craving itself is dependent upon other conditions: namely, upon the existence of so-called “spiritual ignorance.”<sup>129</sup> It is because of a lack of proper insight into the nature of things (for example, the impermanence of things, or the truth of no-self as discussed below) that we experience craving. Proper insight, then, will eliminate spiritual ignorance, and the elimination of spiritual ignorance will lead to the cessation of craving. This, in turn, will eliminate suffering. I will return to the importance of insight and its role in a Buddhist virtue ethic below.

The elimination of suffering in Buddhism is expressed by the term nirvana (Pali *nirvāṇa*, though I render it here without italics given its general lexical familiarity). Literally, nirvana is an ‘extinguishing’ of the ‘flame’ of suffering. Describing this state in concrete terms is a challenge, and something which many Buddhist texts advise against doing. Some refer to it as “beyond abstract reasoning” or “difficult to understand,” while others (particularly in the Mahāyāna tradition, a later development in Buddhist thought which takes root in East Asia and includes such familiar schools of Buddhism as Zen) often equate it with ‘emptiness’, or *śūnyatā* (discussed in greater detail below). Still others call it the “highest bliss.”<sup>130</sup> For the Buddha, attainment of nirvana also meant putting an end to the cycle of rebirth: the individual who reaches the state of nirvana can be said to be released from the

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>130</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 62-63. Quoted in Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 43.

‘wheel’ of birth and death. The rather metaphysically loaded concept of reincarnation is not as prevalent in later forms of Buddhism, however, particularly in East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist thought — and such a concept is also not essential for an appreciation of the Four Noble Truths, or for the development of a Buddhist ethic.

What of the Eightfold Path? The standard analogy that one finds in Buddhist scholarship is to a medical diagnosis and course of treatment. If the first three of the Four Noble Truths manage to diagnose the illness of suffering, the fourth Noble Truth prescribes the Eightfold Path as the means of eliminating it. A full exposition of the Eightfold Path would be rather lengthy, and at any rate is unnecessary for my purposes here. Briefly, the Eightfold Path characterizes the path to a healthy spiritual life, one which will lead to the cessation of suffering and culminate in nirvana. The eight ‘factors’ of the path include prescriptions for how one ought to live (for example, abstaining from alcohol and the use of weapons, or from engaging in certain destructive behaviors such as stealing), as well as imperatives directing the Buddhist practitioner towards proper insight into the nature of things. Specifically, the first aspect of the Eightfold Path urges the practitioner to develop an appreciation for the Four Noble Truths through a so-called “right understanding.” It is no coincidence that the imperative to develop insight into the nature of things appears as the first item on the Eightfold Path: as mentioned above, insight into the nature of reality (that is, the nature of suffering, the truth of no-self, and the ability to attain nirvana) is critical for embarking on the Buddhist path which leads to the cessation of suffering.<sup>131</sup>

So much for the Four Noble Truths. But what of another essential aspect of Buddhist insight, namely no-self (*anātman*)? We first encountered this term above with Naess’ foray into Buddhist thought. According to Mark Siderits, it is no-self which “plays the central role” in the Buddha’s diagnosis of suffering.<sup>132</sup> The concept of *anātman* points to a central Buddhist

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 43-44. See also Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (London: MacMillan Press, 1992), 35-38.

<sup>132</sup> Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 32.

truth: that our conception of ourselves as persisting, individual entities is a delusion. There is nothing essential to ‘me’ that makes ‘me’ who I am, nor is there a persisting entity which can be said to exist throughout the course of ‘my’ life and constitute the ‘I’ who is doing the speaking (or, in this case, writing). In other words, there is nothing essential to an individual person which can be said to persist over time as constitutive of their identity. For the Buddhist, a person is properly understood as a “constantly changing bundle of mental and physical factors.” There is a traditional analogy used in Buddhism to illustrate this point. Imagine that we have a cart, complete with a wagon, wheels, axles, screws, and so on. Over time, each of the parts is replaced. Eventually, the entire cart has undergone replacement: there are no longer any parts present which were constituents of the original cart. From our perspective, it appears that there was ‘a cart’ there the entire time — but it would be absurd to posit that there is some essence to the cart which persisted as it underwent various changes. In the same way, Buddhists believe it absurd to posit that there is some essential self which persists throughout the changes I experience during the course of my life.<sup>133</sup>

An interesting implication of the doctrine of no-self is the scope of its application. I mentioned above that nirvana is sometimes equated with the concept of emptiness. For Buddhists, it is not just human beings which are absent of some underlying essence; rather, *everything* is empty of an abiding self. As the concept of ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*) became especially prevalent in Mahāyāna Buddhist thought in the centuries following the Buddha’s death, the concept came to be understood more precisely in terms of what is known as ‘conditioned arising’: namely, that “all things arise and persist in dependence upon other things.”<sup>134</sup> Things are as we perceive them not because of factors internal to those things per se, but “because of the presence of various conditions seemingly outside” of those things. Further, “things persist only for as long as their conditioned factors obtain, disappearing

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<sup>133</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 45.

<sup>134</sup> James, *Zen Buddhism*, 9. See also Kenneth K. Inada, *Nāgārjuna: A Translation of his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā with an Introductory Essay* (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1970), 148.

when these conditions disappear. Hence all things...are impermanent...and so reality is marked by change.”<sup>135</sup> It is easy to see, then, how insight into no-self and emptiness is essential for embarking on the Buddhist path to nirvana, as ‘right understanding’ of these concepts can lead to the elimination of craving: insight into the changing and impermanent nature of existence shows that any attempt to put an end to suffering through the indulgence of craving — that is, attempting to shield oneself from the inevitability of illness and death, or to pile on various sensory pleasures in an attempt to escape various forms of suffering — is nothing more than folly. “Once one has fully accepted that objects are both insubstantial and impermanent,” one should be “less inclined to crave them.”<sup>136</sup> Further, if we acknowledge that there is no abiding ‘self’ which can be the receiving subject of the things obtained through craving, who exactly is doing this craving in the first place? Who is it that wishes to avoid the inevitability of illness or death? And particularly important for the virtue ethical discussion to follow: who is it that acts selfishly, attempting to satisfy their own desires rather than acting with compassion towards others?

### 6.3. Buddhist Ethics as Virtue Ethical

While a complete account of the foundational aspects of Buddhist thought would require significantly more detail, the above is adequate for my purposes here. With these concepts in mind, I can now proceed to illustrate how and why a Buddhist ethic is best understood in virtue ethical terms. As I will show, Buddhist ethics maps well onto the conception of a virtue ethic which I outlined above: it has its own analogues for *eudaimonia* and *phronêsis*, as well as its own set of virtues which are constitutive of the Buddhist picture of *eudaimonia*.

First, the question of an analogue for *eudaimonia*. As in the case of deep ecology, it is not necessary that the Buddhist idea of flourishing have any overlap with the various

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<sup>135</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 46.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

ancient Greek notions of *eudaimonia* in terms of content. Rather, all that matters here is a formal equivalence. In other words, Buddhism must posit a kind of *eudaimonia* which is an end in itself to which the rational individual will aspire, and to which the exercise of virtue will contribute. Further, Buddhism must characterize the life of such an individual (taken as a whole) as involving something like flourishing: it must involve a kind of happiness, felicity, or well-being.<sup>137</sup> As Damien Keown succinctly states,

I believe that the formal characterisation of *eudaimonia* provided by Aristotle can be applied to nirvana. Whatever else nirvana is, it is indisputably the *summum bonum* of Buddhism...This formal equivalence of *eudaimonia* and nirvana seems unexceptionable, and in fact involves little more than the conceptual unpacking of the notion of an inclusive final goal.<sup>138</sup>

There is an obvious difference between the two, however, which Keown fails to acknowledge, but which someone skeptical of such a comparison might readily point out: isn't the Buddhist conception of nirvana, insofar as nirvana is described as the 'cessation of suffering,' a rather *bleak* picture of a 'flourishing' life, particularly as contrasted with the kind of eudaimonic flourishing posited by the ancient Greeks? It would appear that, for the ancient Greeks, a eudaimonic life would, of course, involve a lack of suffering. But it would also involve a lot more besides, including a good deal of positive experiences. And, of course, there's another complication: the Stoic notion of *eudaimonia* is famously characterized by the "happy man on the rack." That is, someone fully virtuous in the Stoic sense could apparently lead a eudaimonic life even *while* undergoing a considerable amount of suffering.<sup>139</sup> All of this appears to cast serious doubt on the equivalence of nirvana with *eudaimonia*.

But as Cooper and James are quick to point out, such doubt rests upon a misunderstanding of the Buddhist notion of suffering. First, recall the discussion of *dukkha* above. Clearly, Buddhist suffering is not simply the suffering of everyday life as we typically

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>138</sup> Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 199.

<sup>139</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 69.

understand it. Rather, *dukkha* is the suffering which plagues all of our experience, given the impermanent nature of our existence. With this in mind, a life free of suffering in the Buddhist sense is not a life in which certain disagreeable physical states have been removed. Rather, it is

a life transformed: one that is stable, secure, harmonious and disentangled...When *dukkha* ceases, it is not that this or that unpleasantness has disappeared: rather, in and through the overcoming of 'attachment', a person attains to a life of 'self-mastery' and 'freedom.'...Once understood in such 'positive' terms, Nirvana no longer sounds remote from *eudaimonia*. The 'great happiness' of Nirvana is no longer the mere absence of suffering, as familiarly viewed, but the condition enjoyed by a life as a whole that is well-led.<sup>140</sup>

Earlier, I mentioned that Buddhist texts have traditionally struggled to characterize nirvana in just a few words, and that some texts even caution against the project altogether. One interesting contemporary attempt at such a characterization, however, is made by Steven Collins in *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*.<sup>141</sup> What is particularly interesting about Collins' interpretation of the concept — and also especially useful for the argument which I am making here — is the way he accounts for the role of the virtues in his conception of nirvana. Collins' aim is to situate nirvana amongst the other Buddhist felicities, including those associated both with the monastic life and the life of the Buddhist lay practitioner. An exposition of these other felicities is unnecessary for my purposes here. Rather, what is interesting is Collins' notion that nirvana "structures and systematizes" the other felicities: it is the "implicit culmination and unification of the entire spectrum of well-being."<sup>142</sup> Following Cooper and James, amongst these felicities will be such things as "equanimity" and "self-mastery," which "the [Buddhist] texts contrast with *dukkha*."<sup>143</sup> Equanimity and self-mastery are, as we will see, amongst the Buddhist virtues. In this sense, the virtues are

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>141</sup> Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 116-117, quoted in Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 72.

<sup>143</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 73.



constitutive of nirvana, just as the ancient Greek virtues are constitutive of *eudaimonia*. More on this shortly.

In order to fully appreciate how the Buddhist virtues are constitutive of *eudaimonia*, there is another formal element to discuss first — one which is needed for a Buddhist ethic to be virtue ethical in structure. This is, of course, practical wisdom. The analogue here is obvious. The Four Noble Truths are foundational for Buddhist thought, and the first aspect of the Eightfold Path counsels “right understanding” of the Four Noble Truths as well as the concepts of no-self and emptiness. Clearly, this insight (*prajñā*) into the nature of things is essential to the realization of nirvana — just as *phronêsis* is essential for a eudaimonic life.

But the relationship between practical wisdom and nirvana reveals itself to be even more intimate once we also take the role of the virtues themselves into account:

Buddhism...regards virtue as *constitutive* of its goal of nirvanic felicity...[which] is not even notionally independent of virtuous character and behaviour...Whatever else or more the condition of someone ‘in’ Nirvana might be, it is that of someone possessed of full understanding of ‘the way of things’ — of wisdom...[Further], the possession of this understanding or wisdom is conceptually inseparable from that of virtue. Given these two premises, our conclusion follows. If virtue is constitutive of wisdom, and wisdom [is constitutive] of nirvanic felicity, then virtue itself is constitutive of the Buddhist goal...The textual evidence for the two premises is overwhelming.<sup>144</sup>

Cooper and James highlight three other important considerations with respect to the relationship between wisdom and virtue in Buddhist thought. First, wisdom and virtue are understood in terms of each other, not as two separate components to be combined in our characterization of nirvana. Second, wisdom and virtue are perfected alongside one another, not independently. Finally, the perfection of Buddhist wisdom is not a purely intellectual endeavour; rather, it is highly practical in nature: it involves the practice of virtue and the incorporation of virtuous action into the life of the Buddhist practitioner.<sup>145</sup> One could not, in other words, possess insight into the truths of Buddhism, but fail to live a virtuous life. Neither could someone act virtuously in the Buddhist sense of the word unless she also had

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 80.

insight into the nature of things, as conceived in Buddhist terms. The two are constitutive of one another and therefore inseparable.

Before proceeding to a discussion of some key Buddhist virtues and how these virtues relate to the problem of climate change, it's worth briefly considering whether a Buddhist ethic could also simply be framed in consequentialist or deontological terms. After all, the reader unfamiliar with Buddhist ethics might suspect that the above characterization is one-sided, and that one could make an argument for Buddhism as act utilitarianism, or Buddhist ethics as duty-based. However, a Buddhist ethic would be poorly conceived in deontological or consequentialist terms. First, as Keown points out, Buddhists are particularly concerned with the question of intention. According to Keown, "an act is right if it is virtuous....It is the preceding motivation (*cetanā*) which determines the moral quality of the act and not its consequences. In Buddhism acts have bad consequences because they are bad acts — they are not bad acts because they have bad consequences, as a utilitarian would maintain."<sup>146</sup> Consequentialism, then, is clearly a poor fit for a Buddhist ethic.

What about a deontological framework? Here, there are a couple of points worth making. First, consider the Kantian ideal of morality as described in section 5.4 on deep ecology. We saw there that for a Kantian, an act which goes against one's natural inclinations but which accords with duty would be moral, whereas the same act would be lacking in moral status if it were engaged in not out of a sense of duty, but simply because of someone's inclination. Someone who has a desire to behave immorally but forces themselves to adhere to a moral duty would be the ethically superior person for Kant, as compared to someone who is simply inclined to act morally but has no respect for duty. The Buddhist ideal is precisely opposed to this: it is "antinomian" in the sense that "the actions of one who acts morally against his or her will are compared unfavourably with one who does the right thing naturally and spontaneously, without 'external' pressure." Further, consider

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<sup>146</sup> Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 178.

the central role of nirvana in Buddhist thought. For the Buddhist practitioner, the well-being associated with nirvanic felicity “is thought partly to be constituted by the performance of right (i.e., virtuous) actions.” For the deontologist, however, morality has little or nothing to do with the contribution of certain actions to human flourishing. Morality is a question of duty, and acting according to duty is what renders an action right in the eyes of the deontologist.<sup>147</sup> I will briefly return to these points later in discussing the relative advantages of virtue ethics to deontology for thinking about a problem like climate change.

Buddhist ethics is, then, best conceived of in virtue ethical terms, as Keown, Cooper, and James all agree. I will now turn to a brief account of some of the virtues central to Buddhism, and then proceed to examine how some of these virtues might guide our thoughts and actions with respect to climate change, as well as how this sort of thinking avoids the problem of considering future generations as presented in the Non-Identity Problem.

I follow Cooper and James in their interpretation of the essential Buddhist virtues. Attempts to describe the Buddhist virtues often get stuck in a peculiar trap: in attempting to account for the full breadth of the Buddhist texts, they end up with a long list of virtues which, although admittedly quite exhaustive, leaves the reader without a good sense of the core of what virtuous action would look like for a Buddhist. One contemporary scholarly account includes seventeen individual virtues<sup>148</sup>, while a core text of the Buddhist canon, the *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa, divides virtue into nineteen categories, with a total of 56 “varieties” of virtue.<sup>149</sup> Cooper and James’ account is helpful, then, as it manages to distill the virtues of Buddhism from ostensibly 56 into a much more manageable six.

How is this possible without losing a considerable amount of detail and content?

Cooper and James first define Buddhist virtues as “the qualities or dispositions of a person

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<sup>147</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 88-89.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>149</sup> Damien Keown, “Morality in the *Visuddhimagga*,” *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 6, no. 1 (1983): 62.

that both enable liberation from *dukkha* and, in their more perfected forms, partly constitute the enlightened life of nirvanic felicity.<sup>150</sup> With this in mind, they argue that while there appears to be a vast array of virtues at first glance, there is actually considerable overlap between them. In fact, it quickly becomes problematic attempting to prevent “the collapse of all the virtues into some single, amorphous one.”<sup>151</sup> This is actually what we observe in Mahāyāna Buddhism: an increasing amount of importance is placed on the virtue of compassion, until it becomes so central to the Buddhist moral enterprise that it appears to overshadow (and indeed perhaps overtake) all of the other virtues.

An interesting distinction that Cooper and James draw is that between so-called “self-regarding” and “other-regarding” virtues. They do this in the spirit of Mill’s self-regarding and other-regarding actions, with the idea of making the virtues more manageable and highlighting the connections between them. The self-regarding virtues are given by Cooper and James as “humility, self-mastery and equanimity,” while the other-regarding virtues are “solicitude, non-violence and ‘responsibleness.’”<sup>152</sup>

There is an obvious objection here which should be addressed immediately: namely, that such a list could be seen as rather lukewarm when it comes to offering real moral guidance as part of a virtue ethical account. What is important to acknowledge, however, is that these virtues are not necessarily intended in the sense that these same terms are used in everyday speech. While Aristotle may have counseled finding the mean between two extremes, these virtues are intended to be quite radical. Humility is not simply being self-effacing: it is, as we will see, grounded in a particular understanding of what constitutes the self. Compassion (subsumed under solicitude) is not just a matter of caring about the wellbeing or empathizing with the struggles of others: it is the radical wish that all beings be released from suffering. In much the same way that ‘suffering’ fails to fully capture the

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<sup>150</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 90.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

multifaceted meanings suggested by the term *dukkha*, the Buddhist virtues are richer in ethical implications than their names initially suggest.

#### 6.4. Buddhist Virtues for the Climate

Cooper and James go on to offer a detailed account of each of the six virtues and then proceed to briefly discuss how these virtues might take on the shape of an environmental ethic. There are three virtues in particular which I believe are especially relevant for how we think and act with respect to climate change, however, and it is on these virtues that I will focus here. These three virtues are the self-regarding virtues of humility and self-mastery, as well as the other-regarding virtue of solicitude (specifically, the virtue of compassion as subsumed under solicitude). In each case, I will offer Cooper and James' description of the virtue in question, and then proceed to suggest how such a virtue might be applied to the problem of climate change. In the case of the final virtue, solicitude, I will take issue with Cooper and James' account and argue for a more radical interpretation of the virtue's application.

First, the self-regarding virtue of humility. As noted above, humility for the Buddhist ethicist is not simply an intensified version of the commonplace sense of humility that we encounter in daily life. We might conceive of humility as we normally use it in terms of how we account for our own worth or value: the person who fails to be humble simply overvalues herself. For the Buddhist ethicist, however, such a characterization misses the point entirely. The aim of Buddhist humility is not to value ourselves 'correctly,' but rather to overcome "the self-centredness apparent, *inter alia*, in devotion to precisely such self-estimation."<sup>153</sup>

But how does one overcome this self-centeredness? Here, we begin to see the intimate relationship between practical wisdom and the exercise of the virtues in Buddhist ethics. The virtue of humility is inextricably linked with insight into the truth of no-self:

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 92.

The fundamental conceit is ‘the conceit “I am”’. That this is a conceit does not entail that it is mistaken at the ‘mundane’ or ‘conventional’ level to speak of selves...What it does mean, however, is that it is wrong to regard selves as irreducible constituents of reality and hence to lend to the concept of selfhood any fundamental role, explanatory or otherwise, in a philosophically perspicuous view of the world.<sup>154</sup>

There is therefore a “dynamic interplay” between the concept of no-self and exercise of the virtue of humility. One does not entirely precede the other: the Buddhist ethicist does not somehow master the knowledge of no-self and then begin exercising the virtue of humility, nor does she exercise humility as a means of somehow ‘attaining’ insight into no-self.<sup>155</sup>

The relationship between practical wisdom, or insight (*prajñā*) into the fundamental Buddhist truths of the nature and cause of suffering (the Four Noble Truths) and no-self on the one hand, and virtue on the other cannot be overemphasized. *Both* the virtues themselves *and* the practical wisdom of Buddhism must, following Cooper and James’ interpretation of the *Sutta-nipāta*, a core Theravada Buddhist text, “penetrate” one’s understanding. In order for these truths and the virtues themselves to “penetrate,” the Buddhist ethicist’s understanding cannot be merely propositional: “a grasp of it must show itself in the ways a person perceives, responds to, and otherwise comports with, the world...No such elimination [of the conceit ‘I am’] is achieved by someone who, while procaliming ‘There is only not-self’, fails in Buddhist humility.”<sup>156</sup>

Before offering an interpretation of the relevance of humility for how Buddhist ethics would conceive of the problem of climate change, it is helpful to consider the next other-regarding virtue on my list of three, namely self-mastery. Again, self-mastery should not be understood in conventional terms. In fact, if we typically think of self-mastery as a sort of forced self-discipline, one might argue that Buddhist self-mastery is *precisely the opposite*

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

of this conventional sense of the term. This will become clear presently. Self-mastery is, following Cooper and James,

a virtue of people who successfully seek to transform their lives: they do so, through meditation and other disciplines, by freeing their actions and attitudes from subjection to unwholesome states and subjecting them instead to intelligent control. 'Victory over oneself' is, in a way, a misleading phrase: for the real victory is that of a person over what, so to speak, renders him less than a person and obstructs his development into a rational, self-directing being, no longer at the beck and call of whim, caprice and 'craving.'<sup>157</sup>

Given this description, self-mastery is analogous to something like self-overcoming. It is not a kind of self-discipline, but rather an engaged and ongoing attempt to cultivate and exercise a deep understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the truth of no-self. One key distinction here is the constitutive component of self-mastery in Buddhist *eudaimonia* — that is, in nirvana. Self-mastery, alongside the virtue of humility, "must manifest itself in a resolve to transform one's life" on the path to Buddhist nirvanic felicity.<sup>158</sup>

How are the virtues of humility and self-mastery relevant for our thinking about climate change? First, I take humility to be intimately related to the exercise of self-mastery (and with solicitude, which I will discuss below). As I mentioned in section 6.2, the Four Noble Truths are perhaps the most foundational Buddhist teaching. They were the substance of the first *sutta* given by the Buddha to his followers, and they contain the core tenets of Buddhism: that suffering is present in all aspects of conditioned existence, that suffering is caused by craving, and that suffering can be overcome. Further, as I showed above, craving is rooted in a lack of practical wisdom: that is, a lack of insight into the truth of no-self. I would argue, then, that the Four Noble Truths and the truth of no-self are foundational to Buddhism on a textual or theoretical level: they manage to sum up and distill a great deal of complexity. But I would further argue that in a more practical sense for the Buddhist ethicist, it is essential that these truths penetrate and begin to reciprocally imbue

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

the Buddhist's actions via proper insight. Rooted as it is in deep insight into no-self, and given that improper understanding of no-self is at the root of craving (which is the cause of suffering and the subject of the Four Noble Truths), humility is thus an absolutely foundational virtue which must be cultivated alongside self-mastery.

But what of the role of self-mastery itself for the climate? It is hardly controversial to maintain that we live in a consumer culture. Recall from section 1 that, by some estimates, individual annual carbon emissions may need to be limited to 3 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per person, per year by 2050 in order to reduce the mounting pressure on technological innovation to 'save the day' with respect to the climate problem by developing and implementing entirely green energy solutions at an unprecedented rate.<sup>159</sup> Linnerud et al. reach a similar conclusion, placing the annual carbon budget threshold at 3.6 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per capita.<sup>160</sup> Meanwhile, according to the World Bank, the average U.S. citizen currently emits more than 16 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> each year.<sup>161</sup> There are a number of factors at play here, but a quick look through the World Bank data makes it clear that most first world countries are emitting anywhere from two to five or more times beyond the proposed 3 ton limit. Consumer culture plays a significant role in these emissions. It is behind the desire to buy a new car rather than attempting to take public transit to work. It is apparent in a consumer's decision to eat a heavily processed, meat-centered meal from a fast food restaurant rather than preparing something simpler and more carbon neutral at home. And it is there in the ongoing pursuit of luxury consumer goods, the vast majority of which are produced overseas and must undergo lengthy transport before arriving in our homes.

Self-mastery has an important role to play in addressing this situation. First, self-mastery could be construed as coming to understanding that there is a fundamental difference between consumption undertaken in light of practical wisdom, and consumption

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<sup>159</sup> "World Economic and Social Survey 2011," p. 27.

<sup>160</sup> Kristin Linnerud et al., "A Normative Model of Sustainable Development," 33.

<sup>161</sup> "CO<sub>2</sub> Emissions (Metric Tons Per Capita)."



undertaken at the whim of craving. Succumbing to the whim of craving “leaves insufficient time and energy for mindful cultivation of wisdom” and is “incompatible with rational control of one’s life.”<sup>162</sup> It is vicious in the virtue ethical sense of the term, as it moves us off the path toward nirvana. I believe it is obvious that we have certain needs which are consumptive in nature: the need to eat, to shop, to get to work, and even to take a vacation. Self-mastery does not suggest an ascetic retreat to the woods, a kind of Thoreauvian ‘no’ to society as we know it. Recall that the Buddha spent years as a wandering ascetic, but ultimately rejected such an existence as failing to address the root causes of craving and suffering. Excessive self-denial in no way eliminates craving or moves one down the path toward nirvana. Self-mastery is not a heavy handed attempt to deny ourselves all sensory pleasure in the form of food, property, or anything else. Rather, it is the imperative that we undertake such consumption in an engaged and mindful manner, in the light of practical wisdom. Our dietary choices, for example, would be spurred not by impulse and craving, but by a measured consideration of what is truly nourishing for us and for others. Rather than racing to purchase the latest iPhone, self-mastery implores us to make do with what we have. In the light of practical wisdom, is this or that purchase actually going to help me realize nirvanic felicity? Is such a purchase constitutive of that same felicity? This is the question that the Buddhist ethicist would pose. In the vast majority of cases as they occur throughout the world today — at a fast food restaurant, while online shopping, or in any other circumstance — the answer will often be a resounding ‘no.’

This interpretation of the virtue of self-mastery is rather specific, focusing as it does on individual scenarios and particular instances of decision making. But we can also regard self-mastery in a more holistic sense. Understood more broadly, self-mastery is, as mentioned above, an essential component of the Buddhist’s desire to transform her life. In the case of climate change, self-mastery is the desire to transform one’s life into a more

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<sup>162</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 95.

climate-neutral one. In recent months, millions of students worldwide have engaged in climate strikes, refusing to attend school and instead staging mass demonstrations. If I observe or take part in one of these demonstrations and am subsequently inspired to turn over a new leaf and transform my life into a more climate-friendly one, this is a tangible step on the path of self-mastery. By exercising practical wisdom, I am acknowledging that a climate-neutral life is in alignment with the sort of self-transformation which undergirds both humility and self-mastery.

Why is this so? Importantly, self-mastery is not a forced, against-one's-will, self-imposed attempt to straightjacket oneself into a climate-friendly lifestyle. If I perceive myself to be missing out on some potential good or pleasure each time I opt for a home-cooked low carbon footprint meal rather than eating a fast food hamburger, I am not in any sense engaging in self-mastery. Rather, self-mastery is motivated by the understanding that such a dietary decision — one which is informed by practical wisdom rather than the whim of craving — is *itself constitutive of the good life*, both because of the role of self-mastery in the realization of nirvana and deepening of one's insight into the truths of Buddhism, as well as because such a decision *enables the potential for this same life for others*. In this sense, I believe there may be significant ramifications for the virtue of self-mastery (in combination perhaps with solicitude) for the topic of climate justice. A discussion of climate justice is beyond the scope of this paper, but recent scholarship on the relationship between climate justice and Buddhism would indeed situate climate justice considerations in the exercise of the Buddhist virtues and the pursuit of nirvanic felicity.<sup>163</sup>

This brings me to a discussion of the third and final Buddhist virtue which I would like to consider here: solicitude. For Cooper and James, solicitude is actually an umbrella term which encompasses three other Buddhist virtues: loving-kindness, compassion, and

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<sup>163</sup> Simon P. James, "Climate Justice: Some Challenges for Buddhist Ethics," (paper presented at conference "Climate Change and Asian Philosophy: A Dialogue in Environmental Ethics," University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway, Oct 4-5, 2019).

empathetic joy.<sup>164</sup> My focus here will be on compassion, which I take to be both the most essential component of Cooper and James' solicitude as well as the most relevant for the question of climate change.

Compassion begins with loving-kindness, which is "the aspiration that beings, ideally, all sentient beings without exception, be happy." Compassion follows from this aspiration as "a heightened sensitivity to the suffering of these beings, and the heartfelt wish that that suffering be alleviated."<sup>165</sup> It is difficult to overestimate the importance of compassion in Buddhist ethics, or in the Buddhist texts taken as a whole. As Damien Keown points out, we observe in the canonical *Śikṣā Samuccaya* (a Sanskrit Buddhist compendium) that one "should not practise too many things. One virtue (*dharma*) alone, Lord, should be faithfully served and perfected by him, in which all the virtues of a Buddha are encompassed. And what is that? — it is Great Compassion."<sup>166</sup> As noted above, and as was the case with humility and self-mastery, compassion *qua* Buddhist virtue is not to be confused with our everyday usage of the term. This should be obvious given the above definition. The Buddhist exercising the virtue of compassion is not simply empathizing with others or lamenting their suffering. Rather, her awareness of the suffering is so heightened that she experiences the "heartfelt wish" that it be alleviated.

Before I can proceed to a discussion of how compassion might impact our thinking with regard to climate change, I need to briefly consider the second other-regarding virtue posited by Cooper and James: non-violence. On the one hand, it appears that non-violence is not actually distinct from solicitude, but ought to be subsumed under the same umbrella, "so that acting in a non-violent way is nothing more than a by-product of the virtues of loving-kindness, compassion and empathetic joy." But according to Cooper and James, this

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<sup>164</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 98.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> Quoted in Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 188-189.

only holds if we believe that non-violence ought to “[concern] only our relations with sentient beings.” On the contrary, however, they argue that

it would be a mistake to suppose that the virtue of non-violence expresses itself only in our relations with other sentient beings...One would not expect to find the non-violent man tramping through the monk’s gardens, kicking up the carefully raked sand...The fact that a non-violent individual...would be unlikely to behave in this schizophrenic manner suggests the reverse thesis: that the man who is non-violent in his relations with sentient beings would also be gentle in his dealings with non-sentient beings.<sup>167</sup>

But the inclusion of non-violence as a separate virtue is only necessary, then, insofar as we identify loving-kindness and compassion as properly directed at *sentient* beings, rather than at *all* beings. But is it so clear that Buddhism would only have us direct compassion toward those that we conventionally conceive as being sentient beings? What about the “monk’s gardens?” In “Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature,” William LaFleur examines a debate between Chinese and Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhists (one which spanned several hundred years) regarding the limitations on who or what could or could not achieve enlightenment (nirvana). Specifically, these Buddhist masters wondered “whether or not ‘plants and trees’ (*sōmoku*) could ‘attain Buddhahood’ (*jōbutsu*). Implicitly, the problem was not limited to a question concerning vegetations alone but included all of the natural world in distinction from that which is human.”<sup>168</sup> LaFleur argues that Kūkai, the founder of Japan’s Shingon school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, maintained that plants and trees were indeed capable of enlightenment, or a release from suffering: “Even though with the physical eye one might see the coarse form of plants-and-trees, it is with the Buddha-eye that the subtle color can be seen. Therefore, without any alteration in what is in itself, trees-and-plants may, unobjectionably, be referred to as [having] Buddha [-nature].”<sup>169</sup> The fact that these non-sentient beings have Buddha-nature means that they are capable of

<sup>167</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 102-103.

<sup>168</sup> William LaFleur, “Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature,” in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 183-209.

<sup>169</sup> Kūkai, *Kōbō Daishi Zenshū*, ed. and trans. Mikkyō Bunka Kenkyō, vol. 2 (Tokyo, 1964), 37, quoted in LaFleur, “Saigyō,” 186-187.

achieving enlightenment, which entails that they are suffering in the Buddhist sense of the term and can be released from this suffering — and this would presumably therefore render them ample targets for compassion. For the T'ien-tai Buddhists, contemporaries of Kūkai who were engaged in the aforementioned debate, such a sharp distinction between sentient and non-sentient beings, with compassion directed at the former but not at the latter, only “evinced a dualistic tendency at odds with Mahāyāna thought.”<sup>170</sup>

This position is further elaborated some centuries later by the Japanese Zen master Dōgen, who maintained that Buddha nature is not just something that plants and trees ‘have,’ but rather that it is *what they are*:

Therefore, the very impermanence of grass and tree, thicket and forest is the Buddha nature. The very impermanence of men and things, body and mind, is the Buddha nature. Nature and lands, mountains and rivers, are impermanent because they are the Buddha nature. Supreme and complete enlightenment, because it is impermanent, is the Buddha nature.<sup>171</sup>

This reading of the scope of the Buddha nature would also enlarge the scope of compassion, and may eliminate the need for the additional other-regarding virtue of non-violence. Such a reading is, I think, in alignment with later developments in Mahāyāna Buddhism. And such a reading has interesting ramifications for climate change.

Which brings us to the question: what of Buddhist compassion with respect to the climate problem? First, note that if we follow the above reading of the scope of Buddhist compassion and locate the Buddha-nature in (apparently) non-sentient beings, then there is suddenly something distinctly ethical about how we conduct ourselves towards the environment writ large, apart from any concerns about future human well-being. Additionally, however, it is interesting to distinguish the direction this reading takes us from the one advanced by Cooper and James. They characterize compassion as militating against the vice of cruelty, and my reading would at the outset at least militate against cruelty towards

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<sup>170</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 131.

<sup>171</sup> Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism*, 85.

non-human nature. But, in fact, my reading of compassion goes much further. Recall that Cooper and James characterize compassion as the “heartfelt wish that suffering be alleviated” for all sentient beings. If we accept that apparently non-sentient beings are capable of suffering in the Buddhist sense of the term and make them additional targets of this “heartfelt wish,” then it appears that we border on a kind of positive duty towards the world at large, rather than simply a virtue of compassion which militates against the vice of cruelty.<sup>172</sup>

By ‘duty’ here, I do not intend a duty in the Kantian sense of the term. Recall from the discussion in section 5.4 that a distinctly moral (and morally superior) act for Kant would be one in which duty is consciously adhered to in the face of a desire to do otherwise. For the Buddhist ethicist, insight into (that is, practical wisdom involving) the truths of Buddhism would imply that such a ‘positive duty’ is not a duty in this sense of the word. Rather, it is an imperative presented by the constitutive relationship between the virtues (including the virtue of compassion) and the eudaimonic goal of nirvanic felicity. Actualizing the virtue of compassion, or the wish that suffering be alleviated for all beings, is constitutive of the eudaimonic life. It would be inappropriate, then, to think of compassion as something that we have a ‘duty’ to engage in, just as it would be inappropriate to think of self-mastery as requiring a kind of struggle against an opposing inclination to give in to craving.

Aside from general considerations of how we might comport ourselves toward the natural world, however, compassion has a more specific climate-focused role to play. I mentioned above that self-mastery implies the adoption of a climate-friendly lifestyle, and that such an adoption is linked with questions of climate justice insofar as such a lifestyle allows *other* individuals to realize the same (and, in turn, to walk the path toward nirvana). Compassion has a role to play here, too. It is through compassion for the suffering of others that, in combination with self-mastery, the Buddhist ethicist recognizes the value of a

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<sup>172</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 127.

climate-friendly lifestyle. Looking over the World Bank table of global emissions by country cited early, the compassionate Buddhist ethicist acknowledges that, for example, as a first world citizen who continues to emit far beyond their annual CO2 limit, they are reducing the possibility that others might lead lives worth living and embark on the path toward a eudaimonic life. A central issue in the climate justice conversation is the rights of less developed countries to continue to industrialize, despite the fact that this will, of course, lead to increased emissions. The Buddhist ethicist engaged in compassionate self-mastery would presumably conclude that, with the proper exercise of practical wisdom, they can carve out a significant amount of ‘carbon space’ for others to improve their own standards of living, rather than themselves indulging in a lifestyle driven by craving.

#### 6.5. Buddhist Ethics and the Non-Identity Problem

Having considered what some of the Buddhist virtues might have to say with regard to climate change, I would like to briefly discuss how such a virtue ethic manages to avoid some of the central concerns presented by the Non-Identity Problem. What I have to say here has been anticipated in earlier sections, and has to some extent been spelled out during earlier discussion. But I assemble it here for the sake of clarity, and to drive home the point of why a virtue ethic has something to offer to discussions of intergenerational issues that consequentialist ethics is lacking.

Recall Damien Keown’s characterization of Buddhist ethics as distinctly non-consequentialist. According to Keown, a Buddhist approaches ethical problems by inquiring into an action’s intention. Keown clarifies that “an act is right if it is virtuous. It is the preceding motivation (*cetanā*) which determines the moral quality of the act and not its consequences. In Buddhism acts have bad consequences because they are bad acts — they are not bad acts because they have bad consequences, as a utilitarian would maintain.”

<sup>173</sup> This much ought to be clear from the above discussion of the relationship between virtue, practical wisdom, and nirvana for the Buddhist ethicist. Acting virtuously means exercising practical wisdom and vice-versa. Simultaneously, however, the exercise of practical wisdom and engagement in virtuous action are not in any way ethical *because of their consequences for future people*. Rather, they are ethical because *virtuous acts are partially constitutive of the Buddhist picture of a good life*. That is, a virtuous act is *in and of itself partially constitutive of nirvana*. One could not achieve the Buddhist ideal of the good life — nirvana — without acting virtuously. Again, however, acting virtuously is not a *means* to the end of nirvana. The two occur *simultaneously*, in a mutually constitutive relationship.

Given all of this, the quandary presented by the Non-Identity Problem is not a quandary at all for the Buddhist ethicist. For consequentialist ethics, the NIP poses a significant challenge when we attempt to engage in moral thinking related to a problem like climate change. What reason do we have to engage in climate-friendly behaviors on an individual level — or to adopt policies at the national or global level which can help to mitigate climate change — when it appears that any future individuals who come into existence as a result of said climate change actually *owe their existence* to it? How can climate change be said to harm these individuals, when without it they would cease to exist? If we are inclined to reason along consequentialist lines, the question of how our current actions impact distant future generations is of paramount importance. We have to calculate whether our actions will bring about good or bad results for these future generations, and the rightness or wrongness of our actions can then be determined accordingly.

But for the Buddhist virtue ethicist, the question of distant future generations ought to be considered in an entirely different way. We should not attempt to determine the rightness or wrongness of our actions by engaging in longterm moral calculus. Our actions are not right or wrong insofar as they impact future, currently non-existent individuals in a particular

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<sup>173</sup> Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 178.



manner. What renders our actions morally good or bad is the consideration — in light of practical wisdom, or insight into the nature of the fundamental Buddhist truths of suffering, craving, and no-self — of whether or not those actions properly express Buddhist virtues like humility, self-mastery, and compassion, and whether they therefore not only lead to the eudaimonic goal of nirvanic felicity, but whether they are *constitutive of* this picture of the good life.

I believe this much could be said for any sort of virtue ethic. The details would change, of course: a different ethic would posit a different sort of practical wisdom, different virtues, and an alternative picture of the good life. But any virtue ethic could (assuming it fulfills the criteria laid out above for what constitutes a virtue ethic) essentially sidestep the quandary presented by the Non-Identity Problem. In the case of intergenerational ethical issues, a virtue ethic can respond to the NIP by highlighting how important it is to resist the temptation to distill all questions of right and wrong down questions about good or bad consequences. Consequentialism has its place, and is certainly valuable for particular types of ethical thinking. But when we attempt to reason about something as complex and temporally extended as climate change, consequentialism comes up short. When thinking about climate change and future generations, consequentialist moral reasoning fails to account for the rightness or wrongness of our actions in a way that can satisfy the challenge presented by the NIP.

But Buddhist ethics may offer a distinct advantage over other virtue ethical approaches. Consider how a Buddhist conceives of the notion of an individual self. For the Buddhist, it may indeed make sense to speak of selves along conventional lines for practical reasons: the Buddhist teacher can, of course, use the pronoun 'I' when referring to herself, or call others by their proper names when referring to them in the third person or greeting them. But, as we have seen, this is not tantamount to subscribing to the conventional way of conceiving of the self as a kind of persisting essence which underlies individuals sentient

beings. Rather, selves are better understood in terms of 'time slices.' The particular collection of interdependent and causally connected processes which result in what we perceive as another person does not imply that such a person exists in a persisting, individuated way. This person 'comes into being' as the result of a long series of events, and eventually 'goes out of existence' as part of the same process of change. But the individual as we perceive her is nothing more than a convenient way of demarcating the particular slice in time during which these various interdependent and causally connected phenomena produce what we conventionally refer to as an individual. There is nothing more essential or absolute that can be said about a 'self' underlying said individual, however.

It is interesting that Parfit subscribes to what he calls a "Reductionist" picture of identity, one wherein personal identity is just comprised of the existence of certain physical components (a body and brain) along with a continuity of mental events, or "various kinds of psychological continuity, with the right kind of cause."<sup>174</sup> This picture of personal identity shares some common features with the Buddhist picture, something that Parfit himself acknowledges.<sup>175</sup> Despite this conception of human identity, however, Parfit believes the NIP to be problematic and to require the introduction of a Theory X, one which will avoid what he terms the "Repugnant Conclusion" and "Absurd Conclusion" while also addressing the "Mere Addition Paradox."<sup>176</sup>

But given the Buddhist's deep commitment to the truth of no-self combined with the virtue ethical nature of Buddhist moral reasoning, it is difficult to imagine a Buddhist lending much credence to the discussion Parfit wants to engage in regarding future individuals, the NIP, and the need for a Theory X. The Buddhist ethicist would, I believe, simply point out that a correct understanding of the self destabilizes such considerations of future

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<sup>174</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 210.

<sup>175</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 273, 502-503

<sup>176</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 451. The repugnant conclusion is discussed in section 2.2 above. There is no space to discuss the absurd conclusion or mere addition paradox here. For the absurd conclusion, see Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 391-417; for the mere addition paradox, see 419-441.

individuals. To say that there are multiple potential future generations (or, as Gardiner would have it, a single future generation) comprised of different potential individuals is to commit a fundamental error of understanding, one which is not in alignment with Buddhist practical wisdom. Once the Buddhist truths of suffering, craving, and no-self fully ‘penetrate’ in combination with the Buddhist virtues, such thinking will be beside the point not only for the reasons stated above — reasons about which any virtue ethicist could agree — but also because this sort of thinking places far too much weight on the notion of distinct, atomistic individuals, each with their own identity and persisting, essential self.

Parfit is unwilling to make this move. I believe the explanation for this unwillingness lies in how Parfit approaches moral reasoning. While Parfit offers a critique of consequentialism in *Reasons and Persons* and gestures towards a unified theory of moral reasoning,<sup>177</sup> the elaborate thought experiments he engages in with respect to the Non-Identity Problem make it clear that he is concerned with the question of distant future consequences. He briefly considers whether a rights-based account could adequately respond to the Non-Identity Problem, but quickly concludes that it could not.<sup>178</sup> Nowhere in *Reasons and Persons*, however, does Parfit ever consider the value of a virtue ethical approach to moral reasoning in general, or to questions regarding future individuals specifically. Writing decades later in *On What Matters*, where he attempts to develop the unified theory hinted at in *Reasons and Persons*, a thorough treatment of virtue ethics is also conspicuously missing. In fact, the only mention of virtue ethics made by Parfit in the entire three volume work actually occurs briefly and in passing, and in a section devoted to *consequentialist* theories. When discussing the beliefs of “Rule Consequentialists” and “Motive Consequentialists,” the latter of whom Parfit describes as believing that “the best or right acts are not the acts that would make things go best, but the acts that would be done by people with the best motives,” Parfit notes that such theories “overlap with those

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<sup>177</sup> See Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, chapters 1 and 5.

<sup>178</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 364-366.

systematic forms of *virtue ethics* which appeal to the character traits and other dispositions that promote human flourishing or well-being.<sup>179</sup> This is the extent of the consideration that Parfit gives to virtue ethics: a single sentence as a means of further describing two particular types of consequentialist theories.

If one thinks that moral reasoning must in some cases involve the consideration of consequences for distant future people (as Parfit clearly seems to), the NIP does indeed appear to be something that needs solving — perhaps even in the face of a reductionist picture of individual identity. But given that the Buddhist has already adopted a virtue ethical approach to moral reasoning from the start, there is no reason to grasp at the Non-Identity Problem as something that must be addressed. Because the problem itself is characterized by consequentialist thinking, attempting to address it is, for the Buddhist, simply wrongheaded: such an approach would be couched in consequentialist moral reasoning, which for the Buddhist is not a sensible way to determine whether an action is in fact right or wrong.

Further, consider the ramifications of the particular reading of Buddhist compassion which I offered above. If Kūkai and Dōgen have it right and we have good reason to think that compassion ought to be extended to *all* beings and not just the obviously sentient ones, then it appears that there is something distinctly ethical about how we conduct ourselves towards the environment as a whole, regardless of any concerns we might have about the well-being of future individuals. A radically compassionate Buddhist would then have additional reasons to both engage in climate-friendly actions while dismissing the problem posed by the NIP on the grounds that it is improperly focused on the potential suffering of future individual people (which, given the above point regarding personal identity, is already problematic), when in reality such considerations of future suffering would need to encompass a far wider scope of potential experiencers.

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<sup>179</sup> Derek Parfit, *On What Matters: Volume One*, ed. Samuel Scheffler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 375, emphasis in original.

These, then, are some of the distinct advantages over consequentialist ethics offered by virtue ethical reasoning in general and a Buddhist virtue ethic specifically when thinking about the problem of climate change in light of the NIP. But questions of the NIP aside, there is one other thing worth mentioning before I move on to examine two potential critiques of my position here. Namely: what about deontological ethics? Does a Buddhist ethic offer something particularly valuable to climate-related thinking which a deontological ethic lacks? I believe it does. Recall the discussion above of self-mastery, and how exercising the virtue of self-mastery stands in direct opposition to the idea of wilfully forcing oneself to, for example, engage in climate-friendly behavior. One could argue that one of the biggest challenges presented by climate change which differentiates it from other global environmental problems — some of which we have managed to address quite effectively, with ozone depletion being a prime example — is the sheer scope of the changes we have to make to our lives in order to do something about it. Making the decision to live a climate-friendly life is about more than simply resisting the temptation of excessive consumption, be it in the form of an international flight, a diet heavy in beef, or the latest (and wholly unnecessary) mobile phone. I would argue that in addition to these things, it involves a complete shift in what we perceive of as a good life. We will likely have to travel less, consume less, and take a conscientious approach to a wide range of daily activities if we are to step up to the challenge posed by climate change. With this in mind, there is something distinctly advantageous about coming to see this sort of simpler life — a life characterized in part by self-mastery — as inherently valuable. In doing so, we will find ourselves intrinsically motivated to say ‘no’ to craving and transform our lives. For the deontologist, on the other hand, saying ‘no’ to the trappings of a consumption-heavy life is something that we perhaps ought to do out of some climate-related duty or set of duties. But if we agree that the sheer scope and intensity of the changes involved in combating climate change is itself a challenge, and that motivation to enact these changes is a limited personal resource, it is

difficult to see how any attempt to ethically wrestle ourselves into adhering to something like a ‘duty for the climate’ could succeed. If we can come to understand that such changes are actually *constitutive of the good life*, however, it would appear that they could be more successfully implemented at the level of the individual.

### 6.6. Objections and Responses

In closing, I would like to consider two objections to what I have presented above. The first objection is to the concept of no-self. Such an objection would argue that the Buddhist no-self is not compatible with a viable ethical position, as it fails to recognize the worth of individual persons. How can there be ethics proper without selves? The second objection is to Buddhism’s ability to engage with real-world problems. This objection would characterize Buddhism as excessively other-worldly and passive, focused on the distant eudaimonic goal of nirvana. Isn’t Buddhism too quietistic for a problem as demanding as climate change?

On the surface, the first objection seems like a potentially troubling one. It is conceivable that Buddhism’s denial of the existence of individual selves could result in a lack of respect for persons — and is it really conceivable that we could build an ethical theory without respect for the individual? There are two points to be made in response. First, Buddhist ethics would not be the only ethical tradition to supposedly downplay the importance of something like natural rights or respect for persons: consequentialists would do the same. If this is a problem for Buddhist ethics, then, it is a problem for other ethical traditions as well, including various forms of utilitarianism.<sup>180</sup> But secondly — and more importantly — this is simply a misreading of the doctrine of no-self. Recall the point made above about using the word ‘I’ in a conventional sense. According to the Buddhist picture of the world, there is nothing fundamentally ‘wrong’ or incorrect in referring to individual selves

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<sup>180</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 52.

in the conventional, “mundane” sense: we can “speak of selves, of the world containing you and me, him and her.”<sup>181</sup> The Buddha repeatedly declares in the *suttas* that certain individuals are due “honour” or “respect,” reinforcing the idea that “even the wise may ‘use such words as “I” — and hence speak of individual persons — since it is often necessary to conform to ‘common worldly speech’” when engaging with the world around us.<sup>182</sup> What the Buddha would have us do, then, is respect individual persons when appropriate. There is no problem with ‘honoring’ or ‘respecting’ the individual. Rather, problems arise when we mistakenly fail to see into the fundamental truth of no-self: that is, when we begin to posit that these individuals worth respecting have some sort of underlying, persisting essence that makes ‘them’ who ‘they’ are. I believe the no-self doctrine is, therefore, perfectly compatible with an ethical position.

The second objection also appears quite forceful at first. There is a certain stereotyped image of the Buddhist: the lone monk, the mountain hermit, the Buddhist adept engaged in mindful meditation, all ignoring the events of the world. There may be value in a life characterized by mindful contemplation, one could argue — but this is hardly the sort of worldview that could generate the kind of ethic necessary to deal with a problem like climate change. Perhaps such a worldview would be incompatible with any ethic at all, given its apparently lack of any sort of ‘other-regarding’ features. Again, I would offer two replies. First and foremost, there is adequate evidence in the *suttas* to counter this characterization. Consider the *Sīṅgālovāda Sutta*, a section of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (or Long Discourses of the Buddha) which deals with the duties of householders (that is, lay Buddhists).<sup>183</sup> The Buddha entreats Buddhist lay practitioners to work to improve the lives of others. He even goes so

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 52. See also *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, section 1.3.

<sup>183</sup> Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 461-470.

far as to call upon kings and rulers to actively engage in charity for those in need.<sup>184</sup> In section 26, we find:

The friend who is a helper and  
 The friend in times both good and bad,  
 The friend who shows the way that's right,  
 The friend who's full of sympathy:  
 These four kinds of friends the wise  
 Should know at their true worth, and he  
 Should cherish them with care, just like  
 A mother with her dearest child.  
 The wise man trained and disciplined  
 Shines out like a beacon-fire.  
 He gathers wealth just as the bee  
 Gathers honey, and it grows  
 Like an ant-hill higher yet.  
 With wealth so gained the layman can  
 Devote it to his people's good.<sup>185</sup>

This early Buddhist text presents a picture of Buddhism which is clearly outwardly-focused, and which certainly doesn't fit with the stereotyped image described above. But such examples aside, there is a second point to be made in response to the characterization of Buddhism as quietistic: namely, that it incorrectly attempts to separate inner states of mind — reached via mindful contemplation — from outward practice. We have already seen the degree to which the Buddhist virtues are interdependently connected with Buddhist practical wisdom: one engages in practices of “meditation and other disciplines” in order to gain insight into the practical wisdom component of Buddhist ethics not as an end in itself, but as part of the cultivation of Buddhist virtue.<sup>186</sup> And, as we have seen, such virtue is at least partially other-regarding. “We would hardly judge a person to be compassionate,” Cooper and James point out, “merely in virtue of her entertaining images of people suffering accompanied by ‘inner’ pangs of sadness. She would, in addition, need to manifest a disposition to help these people when possible. Buddhist ethics, as the virtue

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<sup>184</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 54.

<sup>185</sup> Walshe, *The Long Discourses*, 466.

<sup>186</sup> Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 94.



ethics we take it to be, is indeed crucially focused on ‘character’, but not to the exclusion of practice.”<sup>187</sup> There is no reason to think, then, that a Buddhist virtue ethic would be incapable of dealing with an ‘external,’ ‘other-regarding’ ethical problem like climate change.<sup>188</sup>

Both the objection from no-self and the objection from quietism, then, turn out to be without grounds. A Buddhist virtue ethic stands as a potential ethical resource for dealing with the problem of climate change.

## **7. Conclusion**

Climate change is a highly complex, intergenerational problem. It is often tempting to conclude that solving such a problem lies within the purview of technicians (for example, climate scientists and engineers) and politicians. I have argued here that climate change is also a distinctly *ethical* problem, and that philosophy has a role to play in addressing it.

However, philosophical consideration of an intergenerational problem like climate change brings with it various theoretical difficulties. Here, I have focused on one such difficulty: namely, the Non-Identity Problem. I have argued that the NIP both clashes with our ethical intuitions regarding climate change while also creating problems for Stephen Gardiner’s theoretical representation of the intergenerational ethical challenge presented by climate change. Rather than attempting to ‘solve’ the NIP via consequentialist means, I have suggested that we take its existence as an indicator of the shortcomings of consequentialist reasoning for certain types of temporally extended, intergenerational ethical problems (of which climate change is a clear example) and of the need for alternative ethical resources — particularly virtue ethical ones.

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>188</sup> This sort of willingness to address ‘external’ or ‘other-regarding’ problems is present in the work of prominent contemporary Buddhist teachers as well. See for example Thich Nhat Hanh, "History of Engaged Buddhism: A Dharma Talk by Thich Nhat Hanh, Hanoi, Vietnam, May 6-7, 2008," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 6, no. 3 (2008): 29-36.

In this thesis, I have examined two such potential ethical resources which I characterize in terms of virtue ethics: deep ecology and Buddhist ethics. I concluded that deep ecology requires further exegesis in order to generate a viable ethic which can tackle the problem of climate change. Following a thread from Naess' later writing, however, I proceeded to consider what Buddhist ethics has to contribute to moral reasoning about climate change. I concluded that three Buddhist virtues, namely humility, self-mastery, and compassion can offer valuable resources for how we think about the problem of climate change. Further, I demonstrated how a Buddhist virtue ethic specifically (and virtue ethics generally) manages to avoid the quandary presented by the Non-Identity Problem.

Philosophers working in ethics are beginning to address some of the difficulties proposed by climate change, and some have alluded to a "turn to virtue ethics" in this discussion.<sup>189</sup> It is my hope that this thesis will offer such philosophers an additional reason to think that virtue ethics has something meaningful and useful to offer intergenerational ethical discussion: namely, its ability to engage in ethical discourse without suffering the force of the Non-Identity Problem. Further, however, I hope my work here gives philosophers a glimpse into two alternative, nontraditional virtue ethical systems which may have something to contribute to the climate change discourse. Particularly in the case of Buddhist ethics, there is a rich textual history available which could be further explored for resources relevant to climate ethics. This thesis only scratches the surface of these resources, and much work is left to be done.

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<sup>189</sup> Jenkins, "The Turn to Virtue," 77.

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