

SYMPOSIUM

MORAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY FOR A BROKEN WORLD?



CLIMATE CHANGE, MORAL INTUITIONS,  
AND MORAL DEMANDINGNESS

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# Climate Change, Moral Intuitions, and Moral Demandingness

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**Abstract.** In this paper I argue that reflection on the threat of climate change brings out a distinct challenge for appeals to what I call the *Anti-Demandingness Intuition* (ADI), according to which a view about our obligations can be rejected if it would, as a general matter, require very large sacrifices of us. The ADI is often appealed to in order to reject the view that well off people are obligated to make substantial sacrifices in order to aid the global poor, but the appeal to the same intuition is much less intuitively plausible against the view that we are obligated to make great sacrifices if that is the only way to avoid severe climate change. I claim that there are no plausible grounds on which to accept the ADI with respect to addressing global poverty while rejecting it with respect to avoiding severe climate change. I conclude that we should accept that morality is far more demanding than we typically accept, and suggest two lessons of my discussion regarding the practice of appealing to intuitions in moral argument.

## I

### Introduction

In the Preface to his *Ethics for a Broken World*, Tim Mulgan suggests that the inhabitants of a world “broken” by severe climate change will be angry with us, the people of what he calls the “affluent” age.<sup>1</sup> They will “see us as the self-obsessed breakers of their world,” and will, perhaps, “think of us as we think of those past generations who practiced slavery or burnt heretics.”<sup>2</sup>

Those who reject the view that we ought to take steps to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions on the ground that climate change is not really occurring, or is not caused by human behavior, of course, share much in common with past defenders of slavery and heretic burning. They tend, for example, to have self-interested reasons for preferring that the status-quo remain in place, and attempt to justify this preference in moral terms by appealing to an all-too-convenient ideology that is wholly lacking in rational or empirical support. And those who accept the overwhelming scientific consensus that human activities are the primary cause of global warming,<sup>3</sup> but refuse to make any effort to reduce their own GHG emissions, and/or to advocate for policy changes that would help mitigate warming, can plausibly be described as “self-obsessed [potential] breakers” of the world that

<sup>1</sup> Tim Mulgan, *Ethics for a Broken World: Imagining Philosophy After Catastrophe* (Montreal & Kingston-Itacha: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> It has recently been reported that the forthcoming Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report will assert that it is at least 95% certain that human activities, and in particular the burning of fossil fuels, are the principle cause of climate change. See, for example, Justin Gillis, “Climate Panel Cites Near Certainty on Warming,” *New York Times*, August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Accessed August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/20/science/earth/extremely-likely-that-human-activity-is-driving-climate-change-panel-finds.html>.

future generations will be forced to inhabit.<sup>4</sup> It seems, then, that members of future generations might justifiably look back upon typical affluent people of our time in the way that Mulgan imagines.

Mulgan's central concern in the book, however, is not what those living in the broken world that our activities may bring about would or ought to think about the behavior or characters of contemporary affluent people generally, but rather what they would or ought to think about what he calls "affluent philosophy,"<sup>5</sup> by which he means, roughly, the mainstream of contemporary Anglo-American moral and political philosophy. He suggests that there are a number of general features of affluent philosophy that inhabitants of the broken world would likely find troubling, or at least deeply puzzling, including the relative neglect of intergenerational issues,<sup>6</sup> the apparently pervasive assumption that future people would, at least on the whole, be better off than present people (which may help explain the neglect of intergenerational ethics/justice),<sup>7</sup> and the widespread reliance on individual intuitions in philosophical arguments.<sup>8</sup>

But while it is certainly true that moral and political philosophers have often treated intergenerational issues as less

<sup>4</sup> As an anonymous reviewer suggests, this description does not apply to those who accept that current affluent people have very demanding obligations, but believe that our resources ought to be exclusively, or at least nearly exclusively, devoted to addressing issues other than climate change, such as global poverty and disease. For a view of roughly this sort, see Bjorn Lomborg, *Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist's Guide to Global Warming* (New York: Random House, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> T. Mulgan, *Ethics for a Broken World*, xi.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

than central,<sup>9</sup> there is clearly a growing awareness that the threat of climate change makes any approach to basic questions of ethics/justice that implies that these issues are of only peripheral or secondary concern indefensible. And this is surely at least in part because it is now widely recognized that we can no longer safely operate on the assumption that future generations will, on the whole, be better off than present people. Indeed, in nearly all of the recent philosophical work addressed to the range of ethical challenges raised by the threat of severe climate change, it is at least implicitly assumed that if severe climate change occurs, and future generations are left to occupy a broken world, we, that is, present affluent people, will have committed serious wrongs. The thought that we have an obligation to do what is necessary to avoid severe climate change, then, seems to function as what Mulgan calls a “decisive intuition,” that is, as “a judgement any acceptable moral theory must accommodate,”<sup>10</sup> at least within a significant subset of current debates in moral and political philosophy.

Mulgan suggests that the inhabitants of the broken world would have different intuitions than many of us have in cases that are typically thought to ground objections to utilitarianism, including cases in which we can give money to charity rather than spending it on non-necessities for ourselves, and cases in which we can save many people from serious harm by seriously harming a smaller number of people ourselves.<sup>11</sup> If this is right, it suggests that it is a mistake to treat these intuitions as decisive, as many have wanted to. More generally, it suggests that it may be methodologically problematic to rely heavily on individual case-

<sup>9</sup> Mulgan makes this point explicitly with reference to the work of John Rawls; *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>10</sup> Tim Mulgan, *Future People: A Moderate Consequentialist Account of Our Obligations to Future Generations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>11</sup> T. Mulgan, *Ethics for a Broken World*, 82-8.

based intuitions in moral argument.<sup>12</sup> But if it is appropriate for inquiry into questions regarding our obligations to future generations to be guided, as a general matter, by the intuition that the occurrence of severe climate change would constitute sufficient reason to conclude that current affluent people have committed serious wrongs, then we must at least allow that certain kinds of intuitions (though perhaps not individual case-based ones) can carry substantial weight in moral argument.

Roughly speaking, we might distinguish individual case-based intuitions from intuitions to the effect that certain generally describable implications of a moral theory or account of our obligations render that theory or account unacceptable.<sup>13</sup> By

<sup>12</sup> This view is powerfully defended in Chapter 4 of Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); see also Tim Mulgan, “The Future of Philosophy,” *Metaphilosophy* 44 (2013): 241-53, at 248-9. For a defense of the method of appealing primarily to case-based intuitions, see F. M. Kamm, *Intricate Ethics: Rights, Responsibilities, and Permissible Harm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>13</sup> What I call “individual case-based intuitions” are referred to by Joakim Sandberg and Niklas Juth as “practical intuitions”; they contrast practical intuitions with what they call “theoretical intuitions,” which they define as “intuitions about abstract moral principles or ideas, or about what makes actions moral or immoral generally and what morality is about” (“Ethics and Intuitions: A Reply to Singer,” *Journal of Ethics* 15 (2011): 209-26, at 213). Their category of theoretical intuitions is similar, though not identical to my category of intuitions concerning generally describable implications. This is because their category includes intuitions about the plausibility of moral principles themselves, as well as intuitions about the moral (ir)relevance of distinctions such as that between doing harm and allowing harm, and of factors such as physical distance (Ibid., 214); mine, however, includes only intuitions to the effect that a theory or principle either must or must not have a certain kind of implication, and is therefore narrower. Nonetheless, many intuitions concerning generally describable implications will be at least closely related to intuitions about the (ir)relevance of distinctions or factors; for example, the intuition that a theory cannot imply that it is permissible to seriously harm some in order to prevent similar serious harms from being suffered by a

‘generally describable implications’, I mean implications that can be described without reference to particular cases, for example the implication that it is permissible to avoidably bring about a broken world, or the implication that it is permissible to seriously harm some in order to prevent similar serious harms for a greater number of others. Claims of the form “theory A is unacceptable because it has generally describable counterintuitive implication X” can, we might think, have much greater force against a view than any claim of the form “theory A is unacceptable because, in individual case Y, it has counterintuitive implication Z.”<sup>14</sup>

If we accept that intuitions to the effect that certain generally describable implications either must follow from any acceptable moral theory, or cannot be allowed to follow from any acceptable

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greater number of others is clearly very closely related to the intuition that the distinction between doing harm and allowing harm is morally relevant.

<sup>14</sup> If this is right, then whether and to what extent the fact that a theory has certain generally describable implications that might strike some as counterintuitive can be taken to count against the theory will depend on the extent to which the fact that those who find the generally describable implications counterintuitive is itself explained by the fact that they have intuitions about certain particular cases with relevant features. For example, I suspect that a large part of the explanation of many people’s having the intuition (to the extent that they have it) that a theory is unacceptable in virtue of having the generally describable implication that it is permissible to harm some in order to prevent similar harms for a larger number of others is that these people tend to have intuitions about cases of the sort that are typically thought to constitute counterexamples to (act)-consequentialism (e.g. Mulgan’s case of the Sheriff hanging one innocent person in order to prevent the deaths of several innocent people in a riot; *Ethics for a Broken World*, 83), and these intuitions are brought to mind and influence their intuitions about the acceptability of the generally describable implication. In many cases it will likely be difficult to separate out the independent counterintuitive force of a generally describable implication from that which is attributable to the influence of related intuitions about particular cases. But if we think that there are good reasons to be skeptical of appeals to case-based intuitions, there does not seem to be any clear alternative to attempting to do so.



theory, can have substantial force in moral arguments, then among the most difficult challenges for moral theorizing will be to determine how to adjudicate between such intuitions when they conflict. In the remainder of this paper, I want to explore one conflict, made salient in large part by the threat of severe climate change, that seems to take this form. I'll argue that there is reason to think that any acceptable resolution of the conflict will, given relevant features of the world, commit us to a much more demanding account of the obligations of the affluent than many philosophers have been willing to accept. More generally, I'll suggest that reflecting on the conflict can help to reveal an important type of challenge to the widely accepted practice of appealing to intuitions in moral argument. This challenge should lead us to think more carefully about the conditions in which we are justified in assigning substantial weight in moral argument to intuitions, and, relatedly, about the conditions in which we ought to be more suspicious of our intuitions (including those that we might initially be inclined to treat as decisive).

## II

### **Climate Change, Global Poverty, and the Anti-Demandingness Intuition**

The conflict that I will focus on arises in large part because of the recently recognized fact that much of our ordinary, everyday behavior, and, as we might say, our collective “way of life,” threatens to bring about a broken world in which our descendants will have to live. The longer we put off taking the steps that are necessary to ensure that global temperature increases are limited to an extent that is sufficiently likely to avoid at least many of the more serious potential effects of global

warming, the more difficult and costly it will become to do what is necessary to avoid “breaking” the world.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, our current circumstances may already be such that doing what is necessary to avoid leaving our descendants a broken world would require massive sacrifices of resources, and more generally of the lifestyles that we are accustomed to living. To the extent that this is the case, the intuition that we are obligated to avoid leaving our descendants a broken world, which I will call the *Mitigation-Obligation Intuition (MOI)*, will conflict with the intuition, shared by many, though not all, that morality cannot require that we make massive sacrifices of resources, time, and our most valued projects in order to improve the lives of others, or to make the world impersonally better.<sup>16</sup> Any such requirement, according to proponents of this latter intuition, can be rejected on the ground that it is objectionably demanding.

<sup>15</sup> It is generally agreed that avoiding “dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” (*United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*, 1992. Accessed August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013. <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf>) requires limiting warming to less than 2° C above pre-industrial levels, although some, including the Alliance of Small Island States, and over 100 countries in total (Alliance of Small Island States. “Opening Statement, Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action,” April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Accessed August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013. <http://aosis.org/for-immediate-release-aosis-opening-statement-adp-2/>) argue that warming that exceeds 1.5° is unacceptable, in particular because it is likely that allowing temperatures to rise by more than 1.5° will cause sea levels to rise to an extent that will threaten the existence of several small island nations.

<sup>16</sup> The latter of these intuitions is expressed and defended in a way that has been particularly influential in contemporary debates by Bernard Williams. See especially his “A Critique of Utilitarianism,” in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 110-18; and “Persons, Character, and Morality,” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 10-19.

The intuition that there are significant limits on how demanding morality can be, which I will call the *Anti-Demandingness Intuition (ADI)*, has often been appealed to in response to arguments that purport to show that we have, or at least could have,<sup>17</sup> extensive obligations to make sacrifices in order to save the lives of some, and improve those of others among the global poor. One of the most powerful and best-known arguments for this view is that of Peter Singer, who famously compares refusing to donate a modest amount of money to an effective aid agency to allowing a child to drown in a shallow pond.<sup>18</sup> When iterated, this argument yields a view on which we are obligated to make very large sacrifices. There are various ways in which philosophers have attempted to explain precisely what is supposed to be objectionable about views that require such large sacrifices.<sup>19</sup> I will, for the most part, set aside

<sup>17</sup> Some reject the view that we have very demanding obligations to make sacrifices in order to aid the global poor either because they think that, at least collectively, modest sacrifices would be sufficient to provide all of the aid required to meet our obligations, or because they think that, as an empirical matter, aid is not an effective means of improving the lives of the victims of global poverty, and therefore not morally obligatory. Even if true, however, neither of these claims provides reason to reject the view that *if* very large sacrifices were both necessary and sufficient to alleviate the plight of the global poor, such sacrifices would be required.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229-43.

<sup>19</sup> In addition to Williams's work, referred to in note 16, see Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism: A Philosophical Investigation of the Considerations Underlying Rival Moral Conceptions, Revised Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 9-10, 55-62; Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982): 419-39. Also relevant is Liam Murphy's claim that there is no reason to think that any such explanation, any "underlying rationale" for the belief that there must be a limit to morality's demands, is necessary, since the belief is itself widely held and plausible, and "none of [the rationales that have been offered]...seems to have any greater plausibility than the simple claim that

these differences, since the central question that I want to consider is whether the appeal to the ADI as a means of rejecting the view that we are (or could be) obligated to make extremely demanding sacrifices in order to save or improve the lives of those suffering from global poverty and poverty-related afflictions can be accepted, assuming that the intuition that, given the threat of severe climate change, we are obligated to do what is necessary to mitigate warming (that is, the MOI) is correct.<sup>20</sup> The answer to this question will not depend on how we understand the ground of the ADI, since if it is illegitimate to appeal to the ADI, however grounded, in order to reject the view that we are obligated to do what is necessary to avoid severe climate change, then any defense of appealing to the ADI in order to reject the view that we have extremely demanding obligations to aid the global poor cannot simply involve referring to or developing a particular way of grounding the ADI. Instead, it will have to be claimed that there is a (or multiple) morally relevant difference(s) between obligations to avoid severe climate change, on the one hand, and purported obligations to aid the global poor, on the other, that explains why appeals to the ADI can have the force against the latter that they lack against the former.

The ADI suggests that any moral theory or account of our obligations that implies that we are required to make very large

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there is such a limit" ("The Demands of Beneficence," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (1993): 267-92, at 274).

<sup>20</sup> I do not consider the possibility of resolving the conflict between the MOI and the ADI by rejecting the MOI here. I suspect that few will find this to be an attractive option, and it seems to me clearly unacceptable. Still, a complete defense of the view that the appeal to the ADI must be rejected with respect to obligations to the global poor would require an argument against giving up the MOI. My aim here is merely to suggest that there are substantial and generally unacknowledged costs to endorsing the appeal to the ADI in the case of global poverty relief, and that insofar as its proponents are unwilling to accept those costs, they must give up their commitment to the ADI.

sacrifices, or to radically change the way that we live our lives, can be rejected on intuitive grounds. This is, at least roughly, the basis on which many have sought to reject views like Singer's about the extent of our obligations to the global poor. But it would appear that if the ADI can justify rejection of the view that we are, or could be, obligated to radically change the way that we live our lives in order to improve, and in many cases save, the lives of the global poor, then it must also justify rejecting the view that we are, or could be, obligated to radically change the way that we live our lives in order to avoid leaving our descendants with a broken world.<sup>21</sup> After all, the changes to our lifestyles and standards of living that might be required in order to avoid severe climate change could be, and perhaps actually are, just as or even more radical than what would be required to ensure that all of the global poor are, for example, provided with sufficient resources and opportunities to live a decent life.

<sup>21</sup> I have not distinguished between several distinct ways of understanding the notion that “we” are obligated to radically change the way that we live our lives. The view might be understood to mean only that there is a collective obligation to alter our way of life that applies to, for example, all affluent people together, such that there is not necessarily also an obligation that applies to each affluent individual to radically alter his or her own lifestyle (for the view that a group can be obligated to do something without any of the individual members of the group being obligated to do their relevant part, see Frank Jackson, “Group Morality,” in *Metaphysics and Morality: Essays in Honour of J.J.C. Smart*, eds. Philip Pettit, Richard Sylvan, and Jean Norman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987)). It might also be understood to mean that there is both a collective and an individual obligation to radically alter the prevailing affluent way of life. Lastly, it might be understood to mean only that each affluent individual is obligated to radically alter his or her way of life insofar as doing so will contribute to alleviating the suffering of the global poor or the threat of severe climate change. Since the satisfaction of any of these obligations would entail large sacrifices for current affluent individuals, none of these views avoids conflict with the ADI, and so for my purposes I do not need to distinguish between them.

### III

#### The Conflict Between the MOI and the ADI

It is, however, deeply implausible to think that we might lack an obligation to do what is necessary to avoid severe climate change because such an obligation would be objectionably demanding. Indeed, as I noted above, the intuition that we *are* obligated to do what is necessary to avoid allowing global warming to exceed certain limits (2°C, or, more demanding, 1.5°C) effectively functions as a decisive intuition in all of the recent philosophical work on the ethical implications of the threat of climate change.<sup>22</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that many of the prominent contributors to the growing philosophical literature on climate change are also among the philosophers who endorse the view that we have more demanding obligations to the global poor than many others are willing to accept.<sup>23</sup> Dale Jamieson, for example, says that “While people can reasonably disagree about exactly how demanding morality is with respect to duties to the desperate, there is little question in my mind that it is much more demanding than common sense morality or our everyday behavior suggests.”<sup>24</sup> Henry Shue argues that all individuals have a basic right to subsistence, where this means more than that they have a right to what is necessary for survival. In particular, he

<sup>22</sup> Nearly all of the views defended in the broader literature on our obligations to future generations also imply that we are obligated to avoid allowing severe climate change to occur. An exception is Thomas Schwartz, “Obligations to Posterity,” in *Obligations to Future Generations*, eds. R.I. Sikora and Brian Barry (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978).

<sup>23</sup> Among this group is Peter Singer, whose work on climate change includes “One Atmosphere,” in *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) and Chapter 9 of *Practical Ethics, Third Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Dale Jamieson, “Duties to the Distant: Aid, Assistance, and Intervention in the Developing World,” *Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005): 151-170, at 153.

argues that this right entails that all are entitled to “what is needed for a decent chance at a reasonably healthy and active life of more or less normal length, barring tragic interventions.”<sup>25</sup> There are, on Shue’s view, obligations correlative to this right that apply to the affluent (both individually and institutionally) to provide the resources necessary to ensure that it is satisfied, including by making significant economic sacrifices. Finally, Simon Caney suggests that a plausible set of principles of global distributive justice will include not only a universal right to subsistence, but also global principles of equality of opportunity and equal pay for equal work, as well as a general prioritarian principle stating that benefits to a person matter more the worse off she is.<sup>26</sup> Although Caney denies that these principles are as demanding as, for example, the global utilitarianism endorsed by Singer, and even suggests that their being less demanding should be taken to count in their favor,<sup>27</sup> it is clear that compliance with these principles would require that typical affluent Americans, for example, accept significantly lower incomes and greater competition for desirable positions from those who are currently effectively excluded due to lack of educational opportunities, among other causes. And these are certainly among the sacrifices that, at least in an indirect sense, proponents of the ADI believe that we are not obligated to make.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Henry Shue, *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 23.

<sup>26</sup> Simon Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 122-4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-4.

<sup>28</sup> Those who reject accounts of our obligations on demandingness grounds often claim that we cannot be required to, for example, give up the pursuit of our most valued projects or refrain from heavily prioritizing the interests of our nearest and dearest, even when doing so could save lives or provide desperately needed benefits for the very badly off. Since many valuable projects require large resource investments, and since the affluent would

I suspect that it is more than a mere coincidence that climate change has disproportionately been taken up as a subject of philosophical interest by those who are already inclined to accept at least fairly demanding views about other morally pressing matters. But I also expect that even those who are generally attracted to less demanding views will tend to be strongly committed to the MOI, and will not be willing to abandon it simply because it conflicts with the ADI. If we are justified in treating the MOI as a decisive intuition, then we must accept that the ADI cannot be treated as a decisive intuition (since it conflicts with the MOI). Relatedly, we must accept that any defense of the view that we do not or cannot have extremely demanding obligations to aid the global poor must be capable of explaining why we lack these obligations given that we have, or at least could have, extremely demanding obligations to avoid severe climate change. If no such explanation can be given, then we will have good reason to think that our obligations to the global poor are significantly more extensive than many, including those who have appealed to the ADI in order to reject very demanding views, have been willing to accept. We will also be forced to accept that, in a world like ours, in which the affluent must make moral choices in the face of widespread and crushing poverty, *as well as* the serious threat of severe climate change, the demands on us are very likely to be extreme.

Before moving on to consider how the view that we have potentially very demanding obligations to avoid severe climate change, but lack very demanding obligations to aid the global poor, might be defended, it will be helpful to say a bit more about

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significantly compromise the interests of, for example, their children by promoting and accepting global equality of opportunity and equal pay for equal work, it is clear that adherence to Caney's principles would at least tend to impact the affluent in ways that proponents of the ADI deny that they are obligated to accept.



the conflict between the MOI and the ADI. It might be suggested, against the view that there really is a conflict between these two intuitions, that severe climate change can in fact be avoided without affluent people making very large sacrifices. What is required in order to meet our mitigation obligations, we might think, is primarily aggressive investment in research and development of alternative energy technologies to replace fossil fuels, along with further efforts to increase the efficiency with which we can use GHG-emitting fuels as we await the development and implementation of alternatives. These measures are, to be sure, far from costless, but adopting them would not require that we accept substantial reductions in our quality of life, in large part because they would not require that we make substantial short-term reductions in our energy consumption. Shue emphasizes the importance of aggressively pursuing the development of alternative forms of energy in part because he is convinced that in the absence of such alternatives, the affluent will in fact be unwilling to reduce their GHG emissions to levels that are low enough to sufficiently limit the threat of severe climate change.<sup>29</sup> Of course, this prediction about the behavior of the affluent is virtually certain to be correct, and so there is obvious value in focusing, as Shue does, on what we are obligated to do about the threat of severe climate change given that we can only realistically expect large reductions in GHG emissions once alternative sources of energy are widely available, reliable, and inexpensive. But we also have both philosophical and practical reasons to ask whether the refusal by affluent people to significantly reduce their GHG-emitting energy use in the short term is necessarily justified. First, as some experts seem to think,

<sup>29</sup> Henry Shue, “Responsibility to Future Generations and the Technological Transition,” in *Perspectives on Climate Change: Science, Economics, Politics, Ethics*, eds. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Richard Howarth (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005), 266.

it may in fact already be too late to do what is necessary to avoid severe climate change without making significant near-term reductions in GHG emissions, so that, as a practical matter, it is essential to seriously consider the possibility of accepting substantial collective near-term reductions in energy use.<sup>30</sup> But even if we are not yet in a situation in which avoiding severe climate change requires large sacrifices in quality of life for the affluent, thinking about what we *would be* obligated to do if we were in such a situation might help to shed light on other difficult moral issues, such as the extent of our obligations to the global poor.

Consider the following case, which (apart from the clarity of the evidence assumed) may be at least reasonably close to representing the actual situation of present affluent people:

*Dire Climate Change Threat.* While reliable non-GHG-emitting energy sources are not yet widely and cheaply available, it has become clear that in order to keep global temperature increases below the 2°C threshold, global emissions must be reduced by 40% almost immediately, and further reductions

<sup>30</sup> In a posting to his e-mail list from April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013, climate scientist James Hansen notes that back in 2005 he warned that we would need to get on a path with decreasing emissions by 2015 in order to avoid “build[ing] into the climate system future changes that will be out of our control.” Because we have failed to do so, he adds, “the climate dice are now loaded” (“Making Things Clearer: Exaggeration, Jumping the Gun, and the Venus Syndrome.” Accessed August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

[http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/2013/20130415\\_Exaggerations.pdf](http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/2013/20130415_Exaggerations.pdf).

If Hansen is right, then there is good reason to believe that we either are already, or will be within just a few years, in a situation in which avoiding severe climate change will be possible only if we make drastic short-term reductions in GHG emissions, and in which alternative energy sources are not yet widely available enough to fully make up for the necessary reductions in fossil fuel use.

must be achieved in fairly short order. If these reductions are not made, billions of people will, a few generations in the future, unavoidably endure severe weather events that will kill many and threaten the provision of basic needs for many more, suffer from lack of reliable access to clean water, and face significant difficulty obtaining basic health care. The affluent could reduce their emissions by the amount that is necessary to avoid these results, and still have lives that are well worth living, although the reductions would entail a notably lower quality of life for nearly all affluent people.

In these circumstances, the choice that we face is, in effect, between accepting significant quality of life sacrifices, or else ensuring that our descendants will be left with a broken world. Would we be justified in doing the latter, since the former would require us to, for example, visit friends and family who live far away less often, walk, bike, or take public transit whenever possible (even when it would be much more convenient to drive), live in smaller homes, keep those homes notably cooler in the winter and warmer in the summer, purchase fewer products the manufacture and/or transport of which is energy intensive, and give up valued projects the pursuit of which requires substantial energy use?

I expect that very few people would be inclined to reject the view that we are obligated to make these sacrifices on demandingness grounds, and that instead most will continue to share the MOI in this case. If this is right, then thinking about the moral implications of the threat of severe climate change reveals that, at the very least, the ADI cannot be taken to support the view that very demanding sacrifices can never be systematically required of all affluent people in virtue of general facts about the

state of the world in morally relevant respects.<sup>31</sup> And since this seems to be the view that many proponents of the ADI have in fact taken it to support, the conflict with the view that I have suggested we must accept about *Dire Climate Change Threat* shows that if the view that we lack very demanding obligations to aid the global poor can be defended at all, it cannot be defended by appeal to the ADI alone. More specifically, it will have to be defended by arguing that there is a morally relevant difference, or multiple morally relevant differences, between *Dire Climate Change Threat* and the following case, which there is reason to think is at least close to representing the actual situation of affluent people with respect to current global poverty:

*Dire Global Poverty:* Approximately 18 million people die each year (approximately 50,000 per day) from preventable, poverty-related causes.<sup>32</sup> Approximately 7 million of these people are children under the age of five.<sup>33</sup> Over 3 billion

<sup>31</sup> Those who appeal to the ADI in order to reject the view that affluent people generally have, for example, very demanding obligations to aid the global poor sometimes allow that particular affluent people can, at least in principle, find themselves with very demanding obligations to provide aid to particular people. If an affluent person finds himself in a situation in which the only way that he can, for example, rescue a nearby drowning child involves taking out and thereby ensuring the destruction of a boat that represents a large portion of his net worth, and that he needs in order to continue pursuit of his highly valued project of participating in sailing competitions, many who oppose demanding obligations to aid the global poor will nonetheless accept that he must make the large sacrifice in order to save the child. The ADI, then, is not typically taken, even by its proponents, to support the view that we can *never* be obligated to make very large sacrifices in order to aid others.

<sup>32</sup> Roger C. Riddell, "Aiding the World's Poor: New Challenges for Donor States," in *Giving Well: The Ethics of Philanthropy*, eds. Patricia Illingworth, Thomas Pogge, and Leif Wenar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 86-7.

<sup>33</sup> UNICEF. "Progress Toward Millennium Development Goal 4: Key Facts and Figures." Accessed August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

people live on less than \$2.50 per day,<sup>34</sup> and approximately 600 million children live on less than \$1 per day.<sup>35</sup> Approximately 400 million children lack access to safe drinking water, and around 270 million “have no access to health care services.”<sup>36</sup> The affluent could sacrifice the resources necessary to vastly reduce, if not eliminate these deaths and deprivations relatively quickly and still have lives that are well worth living, although the sacrifices would entail a notably lower quality of life for nearly all affluent people.

What morally relevant differences might there be between *Dire Climate Change Threat* and *Dire Global Poverty* that could support the view that we have very demanding obligations in the former but not in the latter?

## IV

### Morally Relevant Differences?

It might be suggested that *Dire Climate Change Threat* involves a certain kind of morally important change in our circumstances, and that this explains why we have extensive obligations in this case that we lack in *Dire Global Poverty*. It might be added that the ADI is an intuition that we tend to have primarily in response to

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<http://www.childinfo.org/mortality.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Patricia Illingworth, Thomas Pogge, and Leif Wenar, “Introduction: The Ethics of Philanthropy,” in *Giving Well*, eds. P. Illingworth, T. Pogge, and L. Wenar, 3. The figure is in 2005 Purchasing Power Parity adjusted dollars.

<sup>35</sup> UNICEF. “Millennium Development Goals: 1. Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger.” Accessed August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<http://www.unicef.org/mdg/poverty.html>.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

cases in which we could prevent *widespread and familiar* types of suffering and deprivation at substantial cost to ourselves, rather than an intuition that we can never, under any circumstances, have extremely demanding obligations to respond to morally disastrous features of the world.

This view is suggested by Samuel Scheffler's explanation of his claim that "moral norms [...] must be capable of being integrated in a coherent and attractive way into an individual human life."<sup>37</sup> Scheffler says that this claim should be understood to mean that "within generous limits, morality makes room for personal projects and relationships. *In ordinary circumstances*, it is permissible for agents to develop and pursue a wide range of personal projects and to cultivate personal relationships of many different kinds."<sup>38</sup> Surely "ordinary circumstances" must include circumstances in which many millions of people die each year from poverty-related causes, and hundreds of millions more live on less than \$1 per day and lack access to clean water and basic health care. After all, these are the circumstances in which the world's poor have lived for generations – there is nothing at all out of the ordinary about widespread poverty-related death and deprivation. We might think, however, that circumstances in which our behavior threatens to leave our descendants with a broken world are not ordinary at all, and that it is this fact that, in some sense, explains why we have extremely demanding obligations in *Dire Climate Change Threat*, but lack them in *Dire Global Poverty*.

Some might point to both our intuitions about cases and our actual behavior in order to suggest that we do at least implicitly take it that there is less moral reason to respond to "ordinary"

<sup>37</sup> Samuel Scheffler, "Potential Congruence," in *Morality and Self-Interest*, ed. Paul Bloomfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 118.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 119, emphasis added.

threats to human life and well-being by making significant sacrifices than there is to respond to unusual threats by making similar sacrifices. For example, we tend to believe that we have strong moral reasons to provide “emergency aid” in response to unusual, high-profile devastating events such as the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, Hurricane Katrina, and the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, but not to believe that there are equally strong reasons to provide aid to those suffering from chronic poverty. And our behavior, at least as individuals, reflects this.<sup>39</sup> American households are reported to have given \$1.93 billion to tsunami relief efforts, with 30% of households giving,<sup>40</sup> \$2.8 billion to 9/11 relief efforts,<sup>41</sup> with 66% of households giving,<sup>42</sup> and \$5.3 billion to Hurricane Katrina relief efforts, again with 66% of households giving.<sup>43</sup> By contrast, we can estimate that American households gave a total of approximately \$4 billion to international aid in 2005,<sup>44</sup> with a portion of this total surely going

<sup>39</sup> Aid provided by governments is less disproportionately directed toward emergency relief, although given the scope of the suffering and death caused by chronic poverty in relation to the scope of the suffering and death caused by emergencies, government aid is still somewhat disproportionately directed toward emergency relief (Riddell, “Aiding the World’s Poor,” 86-7).

<sup>40</sup> Philanthropy News Digest. “9/11 Motivated Americans to Give When Disaster Strikes.” Accessed August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013. <http://foundationcenter.org/pnd/news/story.jhtml?id=352800015>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Aaron Smith, “How Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> Changed Charity in America,” *CNN Money*, September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Accessed August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013. [http://money.cnn.com/2011/09/06/news/economy/katrina\\_donations\\_911/](http://money.cnn.com/2011/09/06/news/economy/katrina_donations_911/).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Individual charitable contributions for 2005 are reported to have been \$199.07 billion (Rob Reich, “Toward a Political Theory of Philanthropy,” in *Giving Well*, eds. P. Illingworth, T. Pogge, and L. Wenar, 190, citing Melissa S. Brown, *Giving USA 2006: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2005* (Glenview: Giving USA Foundation, 2006)), and Americans typically give 2%

to emergency aid rather to aid the victims of chronic poverty, despite the fact that the deaths from chronic poverty-related causes outnumber the deaths from emergency-related causes by approximately 20-1.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the total amount provided for international aid is likely only as high as it is because of a relatively small number of larger donors; most Americans surely give nothing at all.<sup>46</sup>

It is difficult, however, to see what moral basis there might be for thinking that our obligations to aid are stronger in emergencies, and more generally in response to “non-ordinary” threats to well-being, than they are in the case of chronic poverty. After all, the lives of the victims of chronic poverty involve a constant struggle for survival, continual deprivation, and typically much suffering, while the lives of emergency victims may or may not have been particularly bad prior to the threat posed by the relevant emergency. Chronic poverty is, then, as Peter Unger puts it, “*far worse* than almost any emergency [...]we may say that [...]it is] a *chronic horror*.”<sup>47</sup> Because the victims of chronic poverty have, on the whole, worse lives than the victims of emergencies (who are only sometimes among the world’s poorest people), it would seem that there is, if anything, *greater reason* to provide aid to the global poor than to the victims of emergencies, all else being

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of their donations to international aid (P. Illingworth, T. Pogge, and L. Wenar, “Introduction,” 3).

<sup>45</sup> R. Riddell, “Aiding the World’s Poor,” 86.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Unger reports that in 1993, over 4 million Americans, targeted because of past charitable behavior, were sent appeals for donations from UNICEF, and that less than 1% of these people donated anything at all (*Living High and Letting Die*, 7).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 42, emphasis in original. For similar points, see R. Riddell, “Aiding the World’s Poor,” 86-7; and Elizabeth Ashford, “Obligations of Justice and Beneficence to Aid the Severely Poor,” in *Giving Well*, eds. P. Illingworth, T. Pogge, and L. Wenar, 42-3.



equal.<sup>48</sup> The fact that their suffering and deprivation are ordinary, far from making it the case that it is less morally urgent to aid them, seems to *add to* the case for prioritizing their claims over the claims of others in need. It seems clear, then, that we cannot appeal to the fact that global poverty, unlike climate change, is an ordinary type of threat to human well-being in order to defend the view that our obligations to the global poor are less demanding than our obligations to avoid severe climate change.

We might, however, accept that we have at least as much reason to aid the victims of global poverty as to aid the victims of familiar types of emergencies, but claim that it does not follow from this that we can have extremely demanding obligations to aid the global poor. After all, we seem not to be committed, either in our intuitive responses to cases or in our typical behavior, to the view that we can be obligated to make very large sacrifices in response to emergencies. Typical donations to emergency relief from well off people are quite modest, given the resources available to such people, and it is far from widely accepted that they are obligated to give more. And we might think that we can explain why we should accept that we are obligated to make much greater sacrifices in *Dire Climate Change Threat* by pointing out that severe climate change would not merely bring about a large emergency, or even a series of large emergencies, but instead would create *a much more extensive chronic horror* than current global poverty. On this view, *Dire Climate*

<sup>48</sup> One way to explain this thought is by appeal to a prioritarian principle stating that, all else equal, benefits to a person matter more the worse off she is; for discussion of such a principle, see Derek Parfit, “Equality or Priority,” in *The Ideal of Equality*, eds. Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). As I noted above, a principle of this sort is endorsed by Caney (*Justice Beyond Borders*, 123); it is also endorsed by Thomas Pogge (“How International Nongovernmental Organizations Should Act,” in *Giving Well*, eds. P. Illingworth, T. Pogge, and L. Wenar, 50).

*Change Threat* generates much more demanding obligations than *Dire Global Poverty* simply because severe climate change threatens to bring about even greater and more widespread death, deprivation, and suffering than is caused by current global poverty. We might say that *Dire Climate Change Threat* involves circumstances that are non-ordinary, in the relevant sense, because of the threat that the world will come to contain extraordinary levels (that is, much greater levels than we currently observe) of premature death and suffering that could have been avoided.

There are two reasons that this view is unacceptable. First, although the claim that, all else equal, we are obligated to sacrifice more in order to prevent more deaths, deprivation, and suffering is surely correct, there does not seem to be any principled reason to think that we can be obligated to make very large sacrifices in order to prevent, say, *many billions* of people from facing these ills (as, we can imagine, would occur if we did not act in *Dire Climate Change Threat*), but not in order to prevent *merely several billion* from facing similar ills (as will occur in the next few years if we do not act in response to *Dire Global Poverty*). In both cases, making the relevant sacrifices would make the world vastly better, in impersonal terms, than it would otherwise be. The fact that there may be even more potential suffering and death at stake in *Dire Climate Change Threat* does not seem sufficient to justify the view that there is a vast difference in how much we can be obligated to sacrifice in the two cases, since in both cases whatever sacrifices we do make would bring about massive improvements in the state of the world in morally relevant respects.

The second reason that an appeal to differences in the scale of death, deprivation, and suffering at stake cannot justify the view that we have much more demanding obligations in *Dire Climate Change Threat* than in *Dire Global Poverty* is that the MOI does not

lose its apparently decisive force if we assume that the effects of climate change will, on the whole, be no worse than the effects of current global poverty. Imagine an extended version of *Dire Climate Change Threat* in which it is stipulated that, whether because of technological advances, political arrangements that ensure that as many people as possible have their basic needs met,<sup>49</sup> or for other reasons, the number of people who die or suffer seriously from climate change-related causes attributable to our emitting behavior will be *somewhat lower* than the number of people who will die or suffer in the next several years as a result of poverty-related causes, but still well into the *billions*. Surely we do not think that in this version of *Dire Climate Change Threat*, it would be permissible to refuse to make the sacrifices necessary in order to avoid severe climate change.

Perhaps the problem with not acting in *Dire Climate Change Threat*, however, is not that more people will die and suffer than if we do not act in *Dire Global Poverty*, but rather that failing to make large sacrifices will necessarily make the world *worse than it currently is*, whereas failing to make similar sacrifices in *Dire Global Poverty* is compatible with continued improvement in the moral state of the world. This view is suggested by the “Progressive Consequentialism” that Dale Jamieson and Robert Elliot claim is worth taking seriously as a candidate moral theory.<sup>50</sup> This theory, roughly, says that “a [permissible] action is one whose

<sup>49</sup> Mulgan portrays the inhabitants of the broken world as living within political systems that are, at least generally, committed to maximizing the number of people whose basic needs are met through survival lotteries (*Ethics for a Broken World*, 10-11). It seems at least conceivable that policies of this sort could keep the typical number of people who die each year from lack of basic resources below the levels that we see today due to global poverty, even in a broken world with far fewer resources than we currently possess.

<sup>50</sup> Dale Jamieson and Robert Elliot, “Progressive Consequentialism,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009): 241-51.

consequences improve the world[...]what [it] requires of agents is that they act in such a way as to increase value in the world.”<sup>51</sup> They add that according to Progressive Consequentialism, “Our mission as moral agents is to leave the world better than we found it. This struggle for improvement should be constant. The more we accomplish, the more that is demanded. Ourselves and others are held to even higher standards as the world improves.”<sup>52</sup> Since *Dire Global Poverty* involves bad conditions that are already a part of the world, making only small sacrifices to improve these conditions will, all else equal, improve the world relative to the baseline of current conditions, and so making only small sacrifices appears to be permissible according to Progressive Consequentialism.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, continuing to improve the world in the face of the threat of severe climate change may require very large sacrifices, so that Progressive Consequentialism demands such sacrifices in *Dire Climate Change Threat*.<sup>54</sup>

There are, however, two important problems with Progressive Consequentialism that render the attempt to resolve our conflict by appealing to it problematic. First, it is not clear that the

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>53</sup> Jamieson and Elliot add to the requirement to improve the world what they refer to as an “efficiency condition,” which says, effectively, that agents must maximize the amount of improvement that they achieve given the amount of effort that they expend (Ibid., 244-5, 248). Since it will, at least typically, require more effort of agents to make, for example, a \$1,000 donation to OXFAM, than to make a \$50 donation, it appears that Progressive Consequentialism will not require larger donations when smaller donations will bring about at least some improvement in the world.

<sup>54</sup> Jamieson and Elliot are motivated to develop Progressive Consequentialism as a consequentialist response to the demandingness objection (roughly, appeals to the ADI typically made against Act-Consequentialism). But they allow that if it were to become difficult to improve the world, morality would, as a result, become quite demanding (Ibid., 242).

implications of Progressive Consequentialism regarding our obligations to the global poor can be moderate, as Jamieson and Elliot seem to suggest they are. Consider, for example, what the view might imply about how much a typical affluent person is obligated to donate to organizations such as OXFAM. On the one hand, we might think that it implies that there is no obligation to donate at all, and that it is permissible for an affluent person to spend all of her wealth on herself. After all, each purchase will improve the world, even if only by a very small amount, since, we can assume, both buyer and seller will benefit from such transactions.<sup>55</sup> Because of this, so long as it would require more effort of an affluent person to give any of her money to aid the poor than to spend it on herself,<sup>56</sup> it looks as though Progressive Consequentialism will imply that it is permissible for her to spend all of her money on herself. But this result is surely *objectionably undemanding*; even proponents of the ADI acknowledge that any acceptable view will include some (less than very demanding) obligation to contribute to aiding the global poor.

If, on the other hand, we understand Progressive Consequentialism so that it requires affluent agents to make at least one donation of any amount to aid the global poor, then it appears that whatever explains why this first act is required will also ensure that a second such act will be required, and a third, and so on. For example, if our account of what constitutes “improving the world” for the purposes of our theory implies

<sup>55</sup> If some such transactions would harm third parties to a greater extent than the parties to them would benefit, then they would be ruled out by Progressive Consequentialism. But some plausible theories of harm make this unlikely, if not impossible, and in any event, this will only limit the range of self-interested purchases that are permissible, rather than yielding any obligation to provide aid to the global poor.

<sup>56</sup> See note 53.

that in order to meet that requirement, an affluent person must make a certain sacrifice in order to aid the global poor, then it is clear that the account will also imply that further sacrifices of the same sort are required. Although such a view may be able to justify a limit to these required sacrifices that makes the view less demanding than, say, Singer's view, it seems quite unlikely that it will be able to justify a limit that proponents of the ADI will find acceptable.

The second problem for Progressive Consequentialism is even more serious. This is that it seems to commit us to a form of what I will call *reverse discounting*.<sup>57</sup> Because Progressive Consequentialism assigns to us the aim of continually improving the world, one thing that we will have to ensure when deciding what to do is that we do not now act in ways that will make it impossible, or even much more difficult, to continue to improve the world in the future. We will have to prefer courses of action that are likely to allow for steady, incremental improvements in the state of the world to be made over courses of action that would provide large benefits now but are also likely to lead to future actions that will bring about even small reductions in the

<sup>57</sup> There is debate, in the literature on climate change and more generally, about whether it is permissible for us to discount the interests of future people relative to those of present people, that is, to count the interests of future people for proportionately less than the interests of present people, simply because the former will live in the future (this is sometimes referred to as "pure time discounting," to contrast it with forms of discounting that might be justified by, for example, greater uncertainty about effects in the future as compared with effects in the present). Reverse discounting, then, involves counting the interests of future people for proportionately *more* than the interests of present people. Most philosophers reject the view that pure time discounting of future interests is permissible. See, for example, Tyler Cowen and Derek Parfit, "Against the Social Discount Rate," in *Justice Between Age Groups and Generations*, eds. Peter Laslett and James S. Fishkin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

moral state of the world, since these latter actions would be wrong, and it is surely better to choose a course of action that will involve no wrongdoing than one that will involve wrongdoing.

For example, imagine that we have the following two options: 1) We can increase the well-being of 100 current people from 50 to 51, and ensure that we will also, 50 years from now, act so as to provide an improvement for 100 people who are not yet born from 80 to 85; 2) We can increase the well-being of 100 current people from 50 to 70, but in doing so will ensure that 50 years from now we will act so as to reduce the well being of 100 people who are not yet born from 80 to 79. It appears that Progressive Consequentialism rules out choosing option 2, since it entails wrongdoing on our part, while option 1 does not. But this entails that *we must consider a small loss to better off people who will live in the future to be of greater moral importance than a much larger benefit to worse off present people*. And this means that, at least in certain kinds of cases, Progressive Consequentialism requires us to discount present interests relative to future interests. And this is clearly unacceptable. We cannot, then, accept the view that our fundamental moral obligation is to ensure that the world continuously improves, and so we cannot appeal to this claim in order to defend the view that we have more demanding obligations in *Dire Climate Change Threat* than we have in *Dire Global Poverty*.

Perhaps the most promising approach to defending the view that we have very demanding obligations in *Dire Climate Change Threat*, but not in *Dire Global Poverty*, would involve appealing to the distinction between doing harm and allowing harm. It might be argued that if we continue to emit greenhouse gases at dangerous levels, we will be doing harm to future generations, whereas if we fail to act in response to global poverty we will merely be allowing harm to come to those among the global poor

whom we might have helped. It might be further argued that although we can have very demanding obligations to avoid doing harm to people, we cannot have similarly demanding obligations to avoid allowing harm to befall people.<sup>58</sup>

I cannot provide a complete response to this line of argument here, but I will try to point out some reasons to be skeptical that it can succeed in defense of the view that we have very demanding obligations in *Dire Climate Change Threat*, but not in *Dire Global Poverty*. First, the much discussed Non-Identity Problem makes it questionable whether, by failing to act so as to avoid severe climate change, we would in fact *harm* future people.<sup>59</sup> Our deciding to reduce emissions drastically would, at least over a long enough period of time, yield a future with an

<sup>58</sup> An anonymous reviewer suggests that a slightly different defense of the view that we have demanding obligations in *Dire Climate Change Threat*, but not in *Dire Global Poverty*, would claim that even if bringing about a broken world would not harm anyone, it would involve actively bringing about a bad state of affairs, while refraining from aiding the current global poor would merely allow a bad state of affairs to occur. It could then be claimed that we can have demanding obligations to avoid actively bringing about bad states of affairs, but not to avoid allowing bad states of affairs to occur. It seems to me, however, that if our actively bringing about a state of affairs can be morally problematic despite not harming anyone (or, perhaps, violating their rights), this can only be because there was an alternative available to us that would have brought about a better state of affairs. In other words, the objection to what we in fact did could only be that we acted in a way that brought about a state of affairs that is worse than the state of affairs that would have come about as a result of our acting in some other way. But this is just as true of whatever we might do in preference to aiding the global poor as it is of our acting in a way that brings about a broken world. Because of this, the proposed line of defense cannot succeed.

<sup>59</sup> The seminal discussion of the Non-Identity Problem is in Chapter 16 of Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); see also Parfit's "Energy Policy and the Further Future: The Identity Problem," in *Energy and the Future*, eds. Douglas MacLean and Peter Brown (Totowa: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983).



entirely different set of people than would have existed had we decided to continue emitting at dangerous levels. If we make the latter decision, then as long as our emitting behavior did not cause anyone to exist and have a life that is, on the whole, not worth living, no one will have been made worse off as a result of that behavior than they otherwise would have been. So, if harming a person requires making her worse off than she otherwise would have been, our behavior may not harm any future people.

Even if our continuing to emit at high levels would harm future people,<sup>60</sup> however, it is far from clear, given the Non-Identity Problem, that the moral reasons against harming them (assuming that they will have lives that are on the whole worth living) are as weighty as the reasons against harming present people. I may have much greater reason not to harm a present person than I have not to allow a similar harm to befall a present person, without also having much greater reason not to harm a future person, who would not exist at all if I did not harm him, than I have not to allow a similar harm to befall a present person. It may, for example, be much worse to take the food that a person needs in order to avoid going hungry for several days than to refrain from providing someone who would otherwise go hungry with similar food. But even if this is the case, it is not clear that it must also be the case that causing someone to exist who will experience food deprivation for several days (but will have a

<sup>60</sup> A number of philosophers have defended accounts of harm according to which it is possible for us to harm future people even if we do not make them worse off than they otherwise would have been. See, for example, Seana Shiffrin, “Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm,” *Legal Theory* 5 (1999): 117-48; Lukas H. Meyer, “Past and Future: The Case for a Threshold Notion of Harm,” in *Rights, Culture, and the Law: Themes from the Legal and Political Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, eds. Lukas H. Meyer, Stanley L. Paulson, and Thomas W. Pogge (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

life that is on the whole worth living) is much worse than failing to provide needed food to a present hungry person. Indeed, it seems at least plausible that the latter is in fact worse. If this is right, then it provides a significant reason to think that our obligations in *Dire Global Poverty* must, all else equal, be at least as demanding as our obligations in *Dire Climate Change Threat*. Since we cannot plausibly reject the view that we have very demanding obligations in *Dire Climate Change Threat*, my discussion suggests that we must accept that we have similarly demanding obligations in *Dire Global Poverty*. And since we live in a world that contains the morally significant features of *Dire Global Poverty*, and at least many of the morally significant features of *Dire Climate Change Threat*, we have good reason to believe that the obligations of the affluent are *extremely demanding* indeed.

## V

### Appeals to Intuition?

This result is, of course, deeply counterintuitive. But my discussion has suggested that thinking about the moral significance of the threat of severe climate change helps to reveal that appeals to widely accepted intuitions, such as the ADI, are deeply problematic. Furthermore, the problem is not that these intuitions provide acceptable guidance in familiar circumstances, but become misleading when we begin to consider their implications in unfamiliar types of cases, such as that involving the threat of severe climate change. Rather, it is that they can be generally misleading, but that we are sometimes only able to recognize that this is so as a result of thinking about what they suggest about our obligations in particular kinds of cases. If this is right, it suggests that we must be much more cautious about

appealing to intuitions in moral argument than many philosophers have been. With regard to an intuition like the ADI, we should be careful to consider whether we are willing to accept it as decisive across the full range of relevant cases. If thinking about novel cases, such as that involving the threat of severe climate change, reveals that we are not, then we must take on the difficult task of determining how best to resolve the conflict of intuitions that we face. This will often require, as I have attempted to do here, considering whether there are morally relevant differences between the novel cases and the cases in response to which we were inclined to apply the initial intuition. It will also tend to require taking seriously the possibility that our initial intuitions are seriously mistaken, and that we may have to accept surprising, and perhaps unsettling, moral conclusions.<sup>61</sup>

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