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Second Order Desires and the Devaluation of Humanity

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That the discussion of what to do about climate has arrived at this sort of solution is indicative of the dire situation we are in, not only because of climate change but because of the ideological and political situation that surrounds climate change. I agree with Liao, Sandberg, and Roache (2012). We are in a dire position. While Liao et al. (2012) argue that we should take human engineering seriously because the alternative solutions are either insufficient to stem climate change by themselves (behavioral and market-based solutions) or too risky (geo-engineering), Liao et al.’s (2012) proposal is a sort of doubling down on the technocratic promise implicit in both of the other solutions. If we cannot get sufficient public support for the modest technological and behavioral changes required by behavioral and market-based solutions, then perhaps enough individuals will apply the technocratic solution directly to themselves and to their children. At the heart of the proposal are the same assumptions that mar both the moderate approach of economic and behavioral changes designed to decrease carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide emissions and the more radical geoengineering solutions designed to alter other aspects of the earth’s energy cycle to either increase the energy that escapes the atmosphere or decrease the total energy that reaches the earth’s surface. Namely, all three sorts of solutions – including Liao et al.’s – begin with the assumption that economic growth can (and should) continue indefinitely. Thus, the only solution to environmental crisis is more technology, which will allow continued growth, but (hopefully) with less effect on the climate.

Two related criticisms of this proposal are presented. First, I argue that if any modification is to be voluntary, it will fail for the very reasons that Liao et al. (2012) give for considering human engineering as a potential solution in mitigating climate change in the first place – too few people are motivated to change their behavior to a sufficient degree to do so. Part of the reason for this unwillingness to change behavior, I suspect, has its source in a belief in the possibility and desirability of infinite economic growth and the ability of increasingly sophisticated technology
to provide it. However, regardless of the source of this unwillingness, the authors too are skeptical that behavioral changes will be deep enough and widespread enough to mitigate climate change sufficiently. Yet, it is, at best, unlikely that those in the first world who contribute the largest part of greenhouse gases, who refuse to alter their behavior sufficiently to avert the more dangerous aspects of climate change, possess the second order desire to change their behavior but simply lack the will to do so. Second, I argue that the solution, rather than valuing nature, instead devalues human beings, essentially turning human beings into another natural object to be manipulated in pursuit of infinite growth. The irony of this proposal, and any proposal that seeks to maintain the status quo with regard to our most fundamental assumptions about the possibilities of growth, is that it ultimately frustrates the very goals which we assume will be achieved through economic growth – human freedom and flourishing.

The authors present in detail four sorts of human engineering that we ought to take seriously in discussions of climate change mitigation: pharmacological meat intolerance, making humans smaller, cognitive enhancement for the purpose of lowering birth rates, and the pharmacological enhancement of altruism and empathy. In order to illustrate the first criticism I will focus on the least controversial proposal, the pharmacological inducement of meat intolerance. As this proposal is the least controversial, if what I have to say holds for this proposal, it will hold for the three other proposals. That reductions in meat consumption would mitigate climate change is not at issue. Instead, I am skeptical that the very people who consume the most meat possess either the will or the second order desire to reduce or eliminate meat consumption. The authors merely assert that ‘people often lack the motivation or willpower to give up eating red meat even if they wish they could’ (Liao et al., 2012, p. 208). It is obvious that the authors view this on a parallel with smoking and other addictions, as they mention the potential use of a ‘meat’ patch (Liao et al., 2012). Therefore, the authors seem to assume the existence of a second order desire of the sort illustrated in Frankfurt’s reflections on the concept of person (Frankfurt, 1971). Now, it is an empirical question as to whether people possess these second order desires. Yet, given the assumptions of the piece, namely that too few people will reduce their meat consumption absent these measures, it seems highly unlikely, even with incentives, that people possess or would come to possess the second level desire to stop eating meat, while they merely lack the will to do so. The solution is only a solution insofar as a significant number of meat eaters possess the second order desire to stop eating meat, but merely lack the will. This does not seem to be the case. Take the United States, the second largest contributor to greenhouse emissions, for instance. First, there are the (at minimum) 35–40% of the Americas who either reject the claim that the earth’s climate is changing or who accept that the climate is changing, but reject the claim that human activity is the cause of this change (see Pew, 2011; Rasmussen, 2012). They would have no motivation to implement this solution. Even assuming some second order desire of the requisite kind, an additional connection must be made, not just between one’s own behavior, but a specific, and perhaps fundamental behavior – what one eats – and climate change, and even those who do believe in anthropocentric climate change are unlikely to take steps which will pharmacologically alter their own will, even if they end up linking their own desires and behaviors with climate change. The fact that the
other proposals are more radical and thus require even more striking links between
the second order desire to do something about climate change and the motivation to
engage in specific modifications and the very abstract discussion of airplanes and
tattoos in Liao et al.’s penultimate section can do little to overcome the specific
problems of motivation regarding these proposals (Liao et al., 2012).

My second criticism is more ethereal, but no less important. The position
advanced by Liao et al. (2012) demotes human beings to another element in nature
with which we may do what we wish. While the authors gesture at an answer to this
angle by presenting and discussing a version of Michael Sandel’s criticisms of genetic
engineering, the piece completely ignores Sandel’s ultimate concern: the hubris
of genetic engineering that celebrates ‘the one-sided triumph of willfulness over
giftedness’ (Sandel, 2004, p. 60), and instead focuses on a position that no one holds,
namely, that all intervention into nature is unacceptable. Liao et al. conclude that
since human engineering results in less overall human interference in large-scale
ecological processes, and ‘promotes the well-being of many people and animals that
are vulnerable to effects of climate change,’ someone sympathetic to Sandel’s
position should accept their proposal (Liao et al., 2012).

The problem is not that humans interfere with natural processes. That is
inevitable. Instead, the proposal not only continues upon the very path that led us to
human-caused climate change, one in which all of nature is an object for human use,
but leaps down that path by potentially reducing all human beings into these very
objects. The most abstract form of the concern is the one that all consequentialist
regimes prompt in those of Kantian sympathies: an instrumentalization of humanity
(Habermas, 2003). However, it is also more specific. The proposed modifications
seem specifically aimed at preserving not only the overconsumption of high-income
nations, but two key ideological bases for that overconsumption: a belief in infinite
growth and the ability for technology to provide it. The proposal would only seem
plausible to an agent with abiding faith in the very attitude toward nature that lay
at the root of the climate change problem and environmental crises more generally.
The relatively well-off citizens of the world can continue the same patterns of
consumption, and the exploitation of nature it requires, but we need only modify
ourselves and our children in such a way that we do so a little less. And in the
process, turn ourselves, explicitly, into the sort of thing we have implicitly held
non-human nature to be for quite some time. The proposal itself exhibits the
unwillingness to question our most fundamental beliefs, an unwillingness that may
also explain why individuals will likely resist the very modifications the authors
propose.

References
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