

‘IT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE WHAT WE DO’: CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ETHICS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

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Opposition to collective action on climate change takes at least two forms. Some people deny that climate change is occurring or that it is due to human activity. Others maintain that, even if climate change is occurring, we have no duty to do anything about it because our efforts would be futile. This article rebuts the latter line of argument. I argue that: (1) everyone has a duty to do their share for the global common good, which includes doing one’s part to combat climate change; (2) the idea that taking action against climate change is futile should be treated with caution, because sometimes actions may seem to make no difference to climate change, when really they do; (3) in any event, the duty to do one’s share to combat climate change still applies, even if it is ultimately futile; and (4) this is because not doing one’s share for the common good harms oneself, regardless of whether it makes any difference to the wider outcome.

I INTRODUCTION

‘Yes, but what is one to do?’ people often ask in genuine perplexity. ‘If everyone would stand out it would be something, but by myself, I shall only suffer without doing any good to anyone.’¹

Opposition to action on climate change takes at least two forms. Some people deny that climate change is occurring or that it is due to human activity. This kind of climate change denialism has been widely rebutted by reference to scientific data on climate conditions over time and the proliferation of human-made pollutants such as greenhouse gases.² However, there is a second kind of scepticism about action on climate change that is potentially more difficult to counter. This is the argument that, even if climate change is occurring, we have no duty to do

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¹ Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, tr C Garnett (Watchmaker Publishing, 1951) 157.

² For an overview, see Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report* (AR5 Synthesis Report, 2015) (‘IPCC Synthesis Report’).

anything about it (or, at least, to increase our current level of action) because for us to do anything would be futile.

The latter argument frequently arises in political discourse around climate change. In November 2019, for example, Australia was ravaged by bushfires that many claimed were worsened by climate change. The Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, rejected calls for increased governmental action to combat climate change, arguing that greater action by Australia would be futile given the global nature of the phenomenon. Morrison seemed to accept that climate change was increasing the severity of bushfires, stating that ‘the contribution of these issues to global weather conditions and to conditions here in Australia are known and acknowledged’.³ However, he went on to state:

[T]he suggestion that any way shape or form that Australia, accountable for 1.3% of the world’s emissions, that the individual actions of Australia are impacting directly on specific fire events, whether it’s here or anywhere else in the world, that doesn’t bear up to credible scientific evidence ... Climate change is a global phenomenon and we’re doing our bit as part of the response to climate change — we’re taking action on climate change ... But I think to suggest that at just 1.3% of emissions, that Australia doing something more or less would change the fire outcome this season — I don’t think that stands up to any credible scientific evidence at all.⁴

Morrison’s suggestion seems to be that because Australia’s contribution to climate change globally is relatively small, it would be useless for Australia to increase its contribution to climate change abatement. Any change in Australia’s carbon dioxide emissions, for example, would make little if any difference in a global context and, in any case, would not materially affect the risk of bushfires. On the other hand, reducing carbon emissions would entail some inconvenience and potential economic costs to Australia. Therefore, since it would cost something and gain nothing, it should not be done.

My aim in the present article is to analyse and rebut this line of argument. I do so from the standpoint of normative ethics, drawing on my previous work on ethical theory in the natural law tradition.⁵ My argument proceeds through four propositions. I argue that (1) everyone has a duty to do their share for the global common good, which includes doing one’s part to combat climate change; (2) the idea that taking action against climate change is futile should be treated with caution, because sometimes actions may seem to make no difference to climate change, when really they do; (3) in any event, the duty to do one’s share to combat

³ Paul Karp, ‘Scott Morrison Says No Evidence Links Australia’s Carbon Emissions to Bushfires’, *The Guardian* (online, 21 November 2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/nov/21/scott-morrison-says-no-evidence-links-australias-carbon-emissions-to-bushfires>>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See especially Jonathan Crowe, *Natural Law and the Nature of Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) chs 1–4 (‘*Natural Law and the Nature of Law*’); Jonathan Crowe, ‘Does Control Make a Difference? The Moral Foundations of Shareholder Liability for Corporate Wrongs’ (2012) 75(2) *Modern Law Review* 159 (‘Does Control Make a Difference?’).

climate change still applies, even if it is ultimately futile; (4) this is because not doing one's share for the common good harms oneself, regardless of whether it makes any difference to the wider outcome.

II COMMON GOOD DUTIES

I have argued in detail elsewhere that everyone has a duty to do their share to promote the common good, conceived on a global as opposed to purely local level.⁶ I offer a précis of that argument in this Part, before applying it to the issue of climate change. The notion of the common good is central to political philosophy in the natural law tradition. Natural law theories characteristically hold there are certain basic values towards which humans should orient their intentional actions.⁷ These values play a central role in explaining the function and nature of human social institutions and practices. They are therefore fundamental to theories of politics and law. The pivotal idea of the common good describes the interest everyone has in being a part of a community where all members can lead flourishing lives by pursuing the basic values in a range of reasonable ways.⁸

Everyone has an interest in securing the common good in their communities for two fundamental reasons.⁹ First, it is good for each person to live in a community where they themselves can pursue the basic goods, because pursuing the basic goods is what makes a human life go well. Second, it is good for each person to live in a community where others can pursue the basic goods, because helping others to pursue the basic goods is also part of living a good life. A community where one extra person can pursue the basic goods is, by that fact, a better community than one where the person cannot do so. We have reason to bring that community into being, because we have reason to help each person live a flourishing life. It follows that the best possible community is one where every member can pursue the basic goods. Each person has weighty reason to bring that community about.

The precise form the common good takes in each community is substantially determined by local social and legal norms.¹⁰ There are, according to natural law theories, certain fundamental forms of flourishing that are common to all humans. However, these values may take different forms in diverse communities. Different societies, for example, recognise different forms of recreation and

⁶ Crowe, *Natural Law and the Nature of Law* (n 5) ch 4.

⁷ *Ibid* ch 2.

⁸ *Ibid* 88–90.

⁹ *Ibid* 91–3.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 93–5. For further discussion, see Jonathan Crowe, 'Intelligibility, Practical Reason and the Common Good' in Jonathan Crowe and Constance Youngwon Lee (eds), *Research Handbook on Natural Law Theory* (Edward Elgar, 2019) 296 ('Intelligibility, Practical Reason and the Common Good').

aesthetic experience, as well as different kinds of meaningful social bonds. Local social and legal norms also play a crucial role in defining what counts as each person's fair contribution towards the common good. For example, legal institutions may define a certain level of income tax as each person's appropriate contribution to shared resources used for social improvement. If the income tax scheme is generally fair and reasonable, then it plausibly becomes part of what it means for each member to do her share in a moral sense to promote the common good.

The common good, then, depends importantly on local arrangements. Nonetheless, in a broader normative sense, the common good is global and not local.¹¹ We have strong reason to bring about the common good in our community because it would allow all members to flourish. However, members of other communities in the world are also humans capable of flourishing, so we have reason to promote the common good for them as well. It follows that local legal and social norms should be consistent with the pursuit of the global common good if they are to retain their moral force. Local norms should be structured so as to require members of that community to do their share for human flourishing not only on a local level, but globally. Each community must do its share for the worldwide common good.

Some readers may be inclined to respond to the preceding paragraphs by wondering where exactly the content of natural law duties come from.¹² Some contemporary natural law authors, such as John Finnis, present natural law as a set of timeless precepts existing in the mind of God.¹³ I have argued, by contrast, for a hermeneutic and historicised view of natural law, which sees it as shaped by and discovered through human social practices.¹⁴ Natural law, thus conceived, reflects ongoing human efforts to work out how best to cooperate and flourish in our shifting natural and social settings. This perspective, which I call *diachronic natural law*, recognises that the content of our moral duties as humans is responsive to the challenges we face at specific junctures in human history. Human nature, on this view, is not a static concept, but rather a product of our interactions with each other, as well as the broader natural environment.¹⁵ It is, in

¹¹ Crowe, *Natural Law and the Nature of Law* (n 5) 95–8.

¹² I thank the anonymous reviewer for prompting me to address this question.

¹³ John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford University Press, 2nd ed, 2011) 24, 389–90. For critical discussion, see Jonathan Crowe, 'Is Natural Law Timeless?' (2021) 33(1) *Bond Law Review* 1 ('Is Natural Law Timeless?').

¹⁴ Crowe, *Natural Law and the Nature of Law* (n 5). See also Jonathan Crowe, 'Natural Law and the Nature of Law: A Response to Commentators' (2019) 44 *Australasian Journal of Legal Philosophy* 133 ('Natural Law and the Nature of Law: A Response to Commentators'); Jonathan Crowe, 'Philosophical Challenges and Prospects for Natural Law Foundations' in Mark Retter, Tom Angier and Iain Benson (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook on Natural Law and Human Rights* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming) ('Philosophical Challenges and Prospects for Natural Law Foundations').

¹⁵ Crowe, 'Natural Law and the Nature of Law: A Response to Commentators' (n 14) 133–6.

other words, deeply relational. This conception of natural law is compatible with both theistic and non-theistic worldviews.¹⁶

Climate change is one of the foremost challenges facing the global common good today. If climate change continues at current levels, many people in the world will be deprived of secure and reliable food, shelter and livelihoods.¹⁷ This will lead to large-scale global migrations that will be challenging to manage. Tensions between local communities are likely to be exacerbated by these trends, potentially causing outbreaks of violence. Many people will be unable to lead flourishing lives by accessing a rich array of basic goods in a safe and stable environment because of these developments. It seems clear, then, given what I have said above, that the duty to do our share for the global common good entails a duty to address global climate change. However, this conclusion potentially invites the objection raised at the start of this article: why should we take steps to combat climate change if doing so would be futile? I respond to this argument in the following Parts, showing how it does not remove our collective duty to do our share to promote the global common good.

III MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Morrison claims that ‘the suggestion that any way shape or form that Australia, accountable for 1.3% of the world’s emissions, ... [is] impacting directly on specific fire events ... doesn’t bear up to credible scientific evidence’.¹⁸ This argument queries the link between Australia’s carbon emissions and specific weather events that might be attributed to global climate change. The comment seems to assume that, in order for Australians to be responsible for specific climate change effects, the following chain of causation must be scientifically proven. First, it would have to be shown that Australia’s carbon emissions make a significant difference to global climate change. Second, a link would have to be drawn between that contribution and specific weather events.

I will query later in this article whether this kind of causal connection is necessary in order for Australians to be responsible for responding to climate change. However, even granting that assumption, the argument outlined above is questionable. A central point to be made in this context is that sometimes actions may appear to make no difference to an outcome, when really they do. It is tempting to dismiss what we might term *micro-contributions* as having no significant impact on macro outcomes. However, this arguably misunderstands the way in which a phenomenon such as global climate change occurs. Climate

¹⁶ For discussion, see Crowe, ‘Is Natural Law Timeless?’ (n 13); Crowe, ‘Philosophical Challenges and Prospects for Natural Law Foundations’ (n 14).

¹⁷ IPCC Synthesis Report (n 2) 67–71.

¹⁸ Karp (n 3).

change is caused not by the decisive contributions of a small number of main actors, but by the accretion of many contributions over time.¹⁹ Some contributors are no doubt more instrumental than others in causing the outcome, but all plausibly bear some responsibility for it.

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong offers a philosophical argument against the moral significance of micro-contributions to climate change based on a narrow understanding of causation for normative purposes. He argues that if 'I pour a quart of water into [a] river upstream' and the river then floods, '[m]y act of pouring the quart into the river is not a cause of the flood'.²⁰ Likewise, if I drive my car for fun when it is not necessary to do so, I don't thereby cause any additional climate change, because '[n]o storms or floods or droughts or heat waves can be traced to my individual act of driving'.²¹ However, these claims about causation are open to question. Shelly Kagan has argued in relation to pollution that even a contribution that makes an *imperceptible* difference to outcomes should be considered morally significant:

In the pollution case, for example, there is more toxin released as a result of my act — and while this may not leave any given individual perceptibly worse off (since one molecule more or less makes no perceptible difference), we can say that those who inhale a molecule of my toxin have been made imperceptibly worse off.²²

Kagan further points out that our evaluation of people's actions should take account not only of the imperceptibility of individual contributions, but the gravity of any overall harm that results:

Such an imperceptible harm will, obviously, be very small, but since I will have similarly harmed thousands, or millions, the cumulative amount of harm that I will have done will be very great — indeed, $1/n$ th of all the harm done by the n polluters. Thus my act does make a difference, and the results would have been better had I not polluted.²³

Kagan's analysis seems better suited than Sinnott-Armstrong's to capture our intuitions about the moral significance of micro-contributions to collective outcomes. Imagine a swimming pool that members of a local community fill cooperatively by emptying small buckets of water into it.²⁴ Some people contribute more buckets than others. Nonetheless, once the swimming pool is

¹⁹ IPCC Synthesis Report (n 2) 44–7.

²⁰ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, 'It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations' in Stephen Gardiner et al (eds) *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings* (Oxford University Press, 2010) 332, 335.

²¹ *Ibid* 336.

²² Shelly Kagan, 'Do I Make a Difference?' (2011) 39(2) *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 105, 114 ('Do I Make a Difference?'). See also Avram Hiller, 'Climate Change and Individual Responsibility' (2011) 94(3) *Monist* 349.

²³ Kagan, 'Do I Make a Difference?' (n 22) 114–15.

²⁴ For a rich and illuminating discussion of a broadly similar example, see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1986) 76–8.

full, everyone has contributed something to that outcome. Even a child who contributed only a small cup of water plausibly bears some responsibility for the outcome, even if not to the same extent as others. Furthermore, it seems correct to say that each contributor has made some difference to the result, since it was attained more quickly than it would have been without them. The swimming pool would have eventually been filled even if fewer people had contributed to the process. However, every bucket or cup of water hastens the outcome and so makes a difference overall. It may not change the ultimate nature of the outcome, but it changes its timing and how it occurs.

The actions of Australians, individually and collectively, plausibly make this kind of difference to climate change. It is no doubt true that global climate change would still be a very serious problem without Australia's contribution. Nonetheless, it also seems plausible that Australians' contributions are making the harms of climate change worse than they would otherwise have been. They do this by making the harms occur more quickly and in a more serious way that would otherwise have been the case. Every micro-contribution to climate change plausibly makes a micro-difference to the composition of the climate. It therefore potentially hastens and worsens the negative impacts in an imperceptible but nonetheless real way. Imperceptible contributions, as Kagan suggests, should not be discounted in attributing moral responsibility. Furthermore, small differences in the timing of outcomes can be critical for the most vulnerable, so we cannot discount that Australia's role in climate change makes a real difference for those most affected by it.

The connection between micro-contributions and responsibility for outcomes is further illustrated by the following example. Imagine that Marilyn is one of dozens of pilots involved in a wartime bombing raid.²⁵ Her bombs contribute to a firestorm that causes widespread death and destruction. However, the firestorm would have occurred in much the same way without her individual contribution. Suppose Marilyn thinks the bombing raid is morally unjustified. She is tempted not to release her bombs. However, she reasons that, since her contribution makes no difference overall, it does not matter either way, so she releases them. Later, can Marilyn disclaim responsibility for her role in the firestorm? If she did not release the bombs, she could say she did not contribute. However, since she did release them, she contributed and is partly responsible. She made a micro-contribution that plausibly made the firestorm worse (quicker and more serious) than it would otherwise have been.

The swimming pool and bombing raid examples are cases of micro-contributions that plausibly make a difference, albeit a small one. I have argued in this Part that such micro-contributions attract moral responsibility for the ensuing outcomes. I am not arguing, to be clear, that the scale of the contribution

²⁵ This is a variation on an example discussed in Crowe, 'Does Control Make a Difference?' (n 5) 163–4.

does not matter.²⁶ A large contribution to an outcome will generally attract greater moral responsibility than a small one. It is wrong to suggest, however, that micro-contributions attract no moral responsibility at all. The cumulative consequences of micro-contributions for overall outcomes also should not be overlooked. Individual Australians may make only a small contribution to climate change, but if they make that contribution in the knowledge that other Australians are doing likewise, they might plausibly be regarded as actors in a joint enterprise attracting a form of collective responsibility.²⁷ This collective responsibility, in turn, calls for a collective response, whether through government or other modes of social coordination.

The role of Australia's contributions to global climate change strikes me as analogous to the cases considered in this Part. The actions of individual Australians, I suspect, make a real, albeit relatively small, contribution to climate change on a worldwide level. However, there is no scope in this article to review the scientific evidence on how climate change specifically occurs.²⁸ I therefore cannot decisively refute the possibility that may be asserted by some opponents of climate change action: namely, that Australia's contributions make no difference at all to the overall outcome, even an imperceptible one. If that were the case, would it mean Australia has no responsibilities in this area? I do not think so. I argue in the following Part that, even if micro-contributions make no difference at all to the outcome, their contributors still bear some responsibility for what occurs.

IV DOING WHAT WE CAN

There are some situations where a person's individual contribution to an outcome makes no difference at all to what happens. They do not hasten the outcome nor make it worse than it would have been. Consider, for example, the following scenario.²⁹ David is a vindictive man who would like the satisfaction of shooting his enemy, but he does not want to be morally responsible for doing so. He learns that, by coincidence, someone else has the same intention (his enemy is an unpopular person). David therefore waits until the other person aims at the enemy, then fires at the same time. Both bullets enter the enemy's body simultaneously and immediately cause his death. David's strategy is to avoid responsibility for his enemy's death by claiming that his actions make no

²⁶ Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for prompting me to address this issue.

²⁷ For detailed discussion of collective responsibility for the harmful outcomes of joint enterprises, see Crowe, 'Does Control Make a Difference?' (n 5).

²⁸ For an overview, see IPCC Synthesis Report (n 2) 44–9.

²⁹ This is a variation on an example discussed in Crowe, 'Does Control Make a Difference?' (n 5) 164. For discussion of some similar cases, see Parfit (n 24) 70–3.

difference to the outcome. The outcome, he may claim, would have occurred in precisely the same way without his contribution.

Let us assume that David's causal claim is true: the enemy would have died immediately even without his bullet, so in this sense he made no difference to the outcome, not even a small one. Nonetheless, it seems that David's strategy fails: he cannot claim on this basis that he bears no moral responsibility for the death. This is partly because his intention was culpable: he wished the death to occur and acted accordingly. However, it is also because we would naturally say his actions *caused* the death, even though the death would still have occurred without them. The notion of causation operating in relation to moral responsibility is in this respect different to a simple 'but for' or counterfactual version, as has been observed in the philosophical literature on this issue.³⁰ David plausibly contributed to the outcome in a moral sense even though he technically made no difference to it.

The example of David's enemy shows that it is still wrong to contribute actively to a harm even if precisely the same harm would have occurred without your contribution. This seems analogous to the situation with Australia's contributions to global climate change. Australian carbon emitters plausibly contribute to global climate change; the preceding argument suggests they are therefore partly responsible for the harm even if it would still have occurred in exactly the same way without them. However, opponents of climate change action might be inclined to think about climate change in a different way: they might conceive it as something that is caused by external factors entirely independent of them. This strikes me as implausible, given that Australian carbon emissions are not zero, but suppose it was true. If a harm arises entirely independently of your actions and any response you would make would be futile, does this absolve you from any responsibility to address it?

The answer, I think, is no. Consider the following example. Imagine Bella sees her friend Edward get trapped under a fallen tree.³¹ She knows he will be seriously injured or die if the tree is not removed. She also knows she doesn't have the strength to lift the tree and rescue him — but she still grabs hold of it and pulls with all her might until she is exhausted. It seems Bella has done the right thing in trying her best to pull away the fallen tree, even though she might reasonably and correctly judge her actions to be futile. Consider, by contrast, what we would say if she had just stood by and watched her friend die without doing anything. We might, of course, feel great sympathy that she found herself in such a tragic

³⁰ See, eg, Carolina Sartorio, 'How to Be Responsible for Something Without Causing It' (2004) 18(1) *Philosophical Perspectives* 315.

³¹ For additional (and more interesting) stories about Bella and Edward, see Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (Little, Brown and Company, 2005); Stephenie Meyer, *New Moon* (Little, Brown and Company, 2006); Stephenie Meyer, *Eclipse* (Little, Brown and Company, 2007); Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* (Little, Brown and Company, 2008).

and distressing situation. We would be disinclined to judge her harshly in the circumstances. Nonetheless, it seems there is something less than ideal about her actions. We would like to think that, in the same situation, we would do everything possible before giving up.

Bella is the only one in this scenario who can help Edward. Her actions are futile because there is nobody else around to help her. Even so, there is some intuitive basis for saying she should do everything she can. However, the situation in relation to climate change is different. Climate change could still be mitigated (if not entirely reversed) if everyone did their part;³² it is because many people (or communities) are not likely to do their part that action by some is potentially futile. Australians may therefore think, ‘why should I do my part if others are not doing theirs?’ It is the kind of situation described by Leo Tolstoy in the quotation at the start of this article: ‘[i]f everyone would stand out it would be something, but by myself, I shall only suffer without doing any good to anyone.’³³

However, the fact that climate change features a collective action problem does not weaken the conclusion that we should do what we can to contribute our share to a solution. Let us imagine the Bella example, but with a variation. Suppose Bella is not alone when the tree falls on Edward; rather, there is a steady stream of passers-by who could also help. It would take a very large number of them working together to shift the tree; Bella may think it is highly unlikely that so many people would stop to help. Nonetheless, I think this circumstance strengthens, rather than weakens, our intuition that she should do what she can. Bella should not ideally think to herself, ‘why should I do my part to lift the tree if others are not doing theirs?’ Rather, she should do what she can, not only because there is inherent value in doing so (as in the previous example), but also because she might thereby encourage others to help.

Suppose Bella thinks that trying to encourage others to help is futile, because it is very unlikely and perhaps impossible that enough of them will stop and assist. Does this mean the existence of passers-by who could potentially help is irrelevant to her decision? I don’t think so. If Bella does what she can, she acts in a hopeful and proactive way, assuming the best of the passers-by. On the other hand, if she decides to do nothing because it would be futile, she behaves in a pessimistic and passive way, assuming the worst of the passers-by (or at least a significant number of them). It is better, other things being equal, to adopt the hopeful and proactive attitude than the pessimistic and passive one.³⁴ This observation, I think, holds a clue in resolving a potentially puzzling question underpinning the discussion so far. How can we explain the conclusion we have

³² IPCC Synthesis Report (n 2) 77–91.

³³ Tolstoy (n 1) 157.

³⁴ This is, for the moment, merely an assertion, but in Part VI provide further explanatory context to support it.

reached based on the preceding argument: that it is wrong not to act on climate change even if it would be futile?

V MORAL SELF-HARM

I argued in Part IV that we have a duty to do our share for the common good, even if this is entirely futile. This means we should do our share to combat global climate change, even if it would make no difference at all to the outcome. It bears emphasising here that I believe it is not, in fact, the case that Australia's actions on climate change make no difference overall; it is more plausible that they do make a difference, albeit a relatively small one compared to the members of other global communities. Nonetheless, even if we were to grant the version of the facts most favourable to opponents of climate change action — namely, that Australia's actions make no difference whatsoever to the overall situation — then it would still not be the case that we have no responsibility to act. This conclusion may strike some readers as counterintuitive. It will be helpful, then, to try to explain it. *Why* do we have a duty to do our share, even when it is futile?

This conclusion might seem particularly puzzling from a consequentialist perspective. Consequentialism holds, roughly, that the rightness or wrongness of an action depends solely on its consequences.³⁵ An action that makes no difference to the harms that result therefore cannot be wrongful from a consequentialist perspective. It may appear, then, that any explanation for why it is wrong not to take futile measures would have to appeal to deontic standards that apply independently of consequences. We would have to say, for example, that it is inherently wrong not to do our share for the common good, irrespective of outcomes. However, I believe this contrast between consequentialist and deontological approaches is a red herring in this context. It is possible to explain our conclusion in a way that is compatible with (certain forms of) consequentialism. We need only expand our understanding of the consequences that follow from adopting a stance of inaction in response to harm.

We have been positing, for the sake of argument, that Australians' actions do not make any impact on climate change, in the sense that they do not change the overall harms of climate change for other members of the global community (or indeed for Australians themselves). In this sense, we have supposed, the actions do not make a difference. However, they might make a difference in another way. My proposal is that not doing our share for the global common good by combating climate change *harms ourselves*, even if it does not harm others because it does not affect global outcomes.³⁶ Not doing our share harms us in two distinctive but

³⁵ For a helpful overview, see Shelly Kagan, *Normative Ethics* (Westview Press, 1998) 59–69.

³⁶ For a related discussion of how acting for certain motives can harm ourselves, see Crowe, *Natural Law and the Nature of Law* (n 5) 78–9.

interrelated ways. First, it makes us complicit in human suffering because it involves standing by and doing nothing while grave global harms occur to people more vulnerable than us. Second, it sets back our project of being engaged and active moral agents because it involves imagining ourselves as mere patients of what is occurring, as opposed to engaged actors who can assume responsibility for improving outcomes.

Why is it a form of self-harm to be complicit in human suffering? I have argued elsewhere that one of the basic forms of value for humans is the good of life, understood as involving an attitude of openness to human flourishing in all its manifestations.³⁷ This good is represented most obviously in the high value humans and their communities place on parenting, but it is not limited to that context. Inaction in the face of human suffering sets back participation in this value and to that extent is a form of harm. Likewise, it is a form of self-harm to situate ourselves as passive moral patients rather than active and engaged actors. This is partly because this behaviour sets back another basic human value, the good of meaning.³⁸ This good consists in pursuing basic value commitments that enable us to create meaning in our lives by forging a meaningful self-identity. Active engagement with moral challenges such as climate change enables us to define ourselves as kind, generous, compassionate and caring moral agents. Ignoring these challenges, by contrast, set back this good by missing an opportunity for positive self-definition.

The forms of self-harm outlined in the previous paragraph have both individual and collective dimensions. Individually, they set back the goods of life and meaning in the ways described above. Collectively, they potentially create a social environment where the goods in question are not prioritised but rather devalued. We risk creating the kind of community that overlooks rather than confronts human suffering and fails to promote opportunities for positive moral self-definition. This is not the best kind of community to live in, because it fails to fully support its members to participate in these goods. Basic human values are not only facilitated by the social environment but also partly constituted by them.³⁹ A community that fails to nourish participation in a wide range of forms of value risks impoverishing the forms of flourishing available to its members. We should prefer, other things being equal, to contribute to and live in a community that promotes and encourages active engagement with moral challenges rather than treating this as futile.

³⁷ Ibid 39–41.

³⁸ Ibid 53–5.

³⁹ For further discussion, see Crowe, 'Intelligibility, Practical Reason and the Common Good' (n 10).

VI CONCLUSION

It has become progressively more difficult to deny the existence of anthropogenic climate change as the scientific evidence has mounted. However, many Australians — including prominent politicians — remain opposed to taking action to combat this issue. Those who are opposed to such action sometimes justify their stance by suggesting that even though climate change is real and dangerous, there is no obligation to do anything further about it, because this would be futile. I have sought in this article to refute this line of argument. I argued that (1) everyone has a duty to do their share for the global common good, which entails combating climate change; (2) even micro-contributions to climate change plausibly create a moral responsibility to counteract their effects; (3) in any case, we would still have a duty to combat climate change even if, contrary to the evidence, this made no difference whatsoever to the outcome; (4) this result can be explained by appealing to the fact that not doing one's share constitutes a kind of individual and collective self-harm.

I conclude that Australians, like everyone else, should do their share to combat climate change. Even if our actions wouldn't make as much difference as those of other world communities, we should still take steps to reduce our contribution to this grave global problem. And even if fighting climate change is ultimately pointless — even if our actions make no difference at all to the outcome — we should still do what we can. If we do not, we alienate ourselves from our values, making ourselves less caring and engaged both individually and as a community. We reduce our opportunities to affirm our support for human flourishing in all its varieties. And we erode our capacity to build our character as kind, generous, compassionate and engaged moral agents. This constitutes a form of self-harm that we have reason to avoid — in addition to the already strong reasons we have to ameliorate, as far as possible, the harms climate change causes to those more vulnerable to its effects than ourselves.