

# *Climate change: against despair*

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**Catriona McKinnon** is Professor of Political Theory at the University of Reading, and Visiting Professor at the Institute of Climate Change and Public Policy at Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology. She is the author of *Liberalism and the Defence of Political Constructivism* (2002), *Toleration: A Critical Introduction* (2006), and *Climate Change and Future Justice: Precaution, Compensation and Triage* (2011), and the editor of *Issues in Political Theory* (2008, 2011, 2014). E-mail: [c.mckinnon@reading.ac.uk](mailto:c.mckinnon@reading.ac.uk)

## **Climate Change: Against Despair**

**Catroina McKinnon**

In the face of accelerating climate change and the parlous state of its politics, despair is tempting. This paper analyses two manifestations of despair about climate change related to (1) the inefficacy of personal emissions reductions, and (2) the inability to make a difference to climate change through personal emissions reductions. On the back of an analysis of despair as a loss of hope, the paper argues that the judgements grounding each form of despair are unsound. The paper concludes with consideration of the instrumental value of hope in effective agency to tackle climate change. Overall, the paper's assessment of personal despair about climate change as philosophically unjustified provides a fresh perspective on aspects of the debate about how to frame climate change in public debate.

### **1. Introduction**

Facing the facts about climate change and our failure to tackle it is an uncomfortable experience. For many people, these facts and our failures to date to justify despair about our failure to move to a zero carbon global economy to properly address

the problems of climate change. It is not obvious that people in despair about tackling climate change are making a mistake. Consider the following reflections.

A recent paper in *Nature* reports that the Arctic sea ice is shrinking at a rate far faster than predicted by any climate models (Whiteman, Hope, and Wadham 2013). Its authors estimate that summer sea ice in the Arctic could be gone as early as 2015. As the ice retreats, seawater will warm so as to melt offshore methane hydrates and release a single giant pulse of 50 Gt of methane from the permafrost on the East Siberian Arctic Shelf. The authors of the report estimate the economic costs of this to be at least \$60 trillion—a figure comparable to the size of the world economy in 2012 (about \$70 trillion). If this pulse of methane is released throughout the decades 2015 to 2025 (and if it is not released then, it will be released at some later date), the point at which we pass a 2C temperature increase (above pre-industrial levels) will be brought forwards by 15 to 35 years: to 2035 on a business-as-usual scenario, and to 2040 on a low emissions scenario.

The 2C threshold has been treated as significant because passing it increases the chances of passing various climate change tipping points (loss of albedo, mass methane hydrate release from the oceans, the death of the Amazon forest, the acidification of the oceans) that could create runaway climate change—an escalating warming beyond human control that has the potential to make most life on Earth extinct. No serious person knowledgeable about climate change now thinks it is likely that we will avoid 2C,<sup>1</sup> and most put their hope in slowing down the rate of warming through technological changes, and perhaps political action, so as to buy further time to find mitigation measures. If the *Nature* report is correct, we have lost much of that time by being locked into a course of action that will irreversibly initiate the Arctic methane pulse in 18 months time (PLEASE ADJUST TO REFLECT JUNE 2014 PUBLICATION DATE), and bring forward a

global breach of the 2C threshold to 21 years from now (ADJUST FOR PUBLICATION DATE).

The state of climate change politics matches the rapidly deteriorating state of the atmosphere. The heady days of the 1992 Earth Summit crystallized in the fine words and intentions of the Rio Convention are long gone. The Kyoto Protocol did not realize these dreams, and arguably retarded political progress to tackle climate change by setting GHG reductions targets for the worst emitters that were on the cards anyway, thus enabling them to evade the higher reductions that would, in the mid-1990s, have greatly mitigated climate change (and would have made our prospects now for tackling it much more rosy), while giving themselves a moral pat on the back for being part of Kyoto (Gardiner 2011, 103–43). Since then, global political measures to tackle climate change have gone into free fall, with no legally binding—let alone effective—replacement on the horizon for 2020, when the Convention expires. And there are few states—at best, a handful—enacting meaningful policies at the domestic level.

Does the frightening future that climate change promises, and our bleak prospects of avoiding it, justify despair?<sup>2</sup> Given the parlous state of climate change and its lamentable politics, ought we to despair and give up? The debate among environmental philosophers and activists about how to frame the climate change challenge—about whether a ‘doom and gloom’ narrative is justified and wise—so as to get people to take effective action has addressed how despair can demotivate people in ways that could exacerbate climate change. This debate has focused on two questions. First, whether the ‘doom and gloom’ narrative is accurate; in particular, whether the ‘greening’ of lifestyles, social and political institutions, cultures, the global economy, and the architecture of global governance necessary to address climate change would in fact greatly improve peoples’ lives (as its advocates claim), rather than imposing severe sacrifices on them.

And, second, whether for pragmatic, tactical reasons the green movement ought to de-emphasise the ‘doom and gloom’ aspects of the climate change challenge, and solutions to it, so as to avoid the demotivation effect already mentioned. Although there is often an unhelpful polarization of approaches to these questions, some environmental philosophers attempt a more nuanced approach which seeks to, on the one hand, avoid the unrealistic and unjustified optimism embedded in the presentation of a green future as bright in all respects,<sup>3</sup> and on the other hand, avoid a focus on the severity, urgency and size of the climate change problems that is likely to propel most people into a state of ostrich-like denial, or paralytic fear.

This paper adds a new dimension to this more nuanced approach by showing that some common forms of personal despair about tackling climate change are not justified from a philosophical point of view. While acknowledging the scale of the challenges of climate change, and the extent of the sacrifices that meeting these challenges is likely to require, this paper argues that some of the most common reasons given for personal despair with respect to tackling climate change do not withstand philosophical scrutiny. The arguments made here should be taken as giving philosophical support to the most nuanced voices in the framing debate: even given proper acknowledgement of the desperateness of the situation in which we find ourselves, the limited contribution (most of us) can make to improving this situation, and the sacrifices that even this limited contribution would require, personal despair about tackling climate change is not philosophically justified. Thus, the advocates of framing the climate debate in terms that accurately reflect the scale of the challenge, the reality of the sacrifices required to meet it, *and* the (still) real possibility that it *could* be met, should not worry that this framing justifies—from a philosophical perspective—demotivating despair.

I shall start by considering, in the next section, what it is to despair. Subsequent sections consider the architecture of despair and giving up in relation to tackling climate change, and what it would take for despair, and giving up, to be justified.

## 2. What Despair Is

I shall treat despair as hope's opposite. Hope aims at an objective which exists in the future, is valued by the hoper, and is desired by the hoper in virtue of this evaluation. Hope involves the belief that the future in which its objective exists is logically, conceptually, and nomologically possible.<sup>4</sup> Commitment to the logical possibility of hope's objective provides a minimal constraint on the content of the belief about the future in which hope's objective exists, and is rarely violated by non-delusional adult hopers. Commitment to the conceptual and nomological possibility of hope's objective is a more demanding constraint. What this means is that, given what the hoper knows about the world and the agents inhabiting it, she believes that the objective of her hope could come to pass. Without this constraint, instances of wishful thinking or fantasy would incorrectly be brought within the scope of hope: a person could be said to hope for an objective she believes to be logically possible, but which she believes could not be realised in the actual world. A person who believes that it would be a good thing to live forever, desires this for herself in virtue of this belief, and is disposed to do things she believes will increase the odds of her living forever even though she knows that, *qua* human, she cannot live forever, is a fantasist, not a hoper.

A common way in which hope can be lost is when the hoper comes to believe that her objective is contra-certain (because it is logically impossible, or—far more common—because the way the world is makes it impossible), or extremely unlikely (again, because of the way the world is). When uncertainty about hope's objective gives

way to contra-certainty, the hoper moves into a state of despair; when it gives way to a judgement of extreme improbability, the hoper becomes pessimistic about the objective.

If it turns out that an objective contains a formal contradiction, such that it is contracertain because it is logically impossible, then despair is to be welcomed as the end of a delusion. Such cases are rare and uninteresting. Instead, despair is typically generated by a judgement that hope's objective is impossible because of the way the world is; and it often turns out upon inspection that a judgement of impossibility of this type is actually a judgement of extreme improbability. That is, despair often turns out to be a variety of (extreme) pessimism. From here on I shall use the term 'despair' to capture both judgements of contracertainty and judgements of extreme improbability (i.e. pessimism).

Despair is typically a debilitation of the will.<sup>5</sup> On coming to believe that an objective is contracertain or extremely improbable, a person is likely to give up trying to achieve it. And this can often be a good thing. When a hoper has indeed been fixed on an objective that, it turns out, is impossible or extremely unlikely, then she is better off abandoning her hopes, and may even do so without a gnashing of teeth, and perhaps with equanimity. Furthermore, people can hope for things that are bad for them and for others. Again, losing these hopes can be good for the hoper (although we normally think that people who hope for bad things for others should abandon that hope through a morally required re-evaluation of its objective, even when uncertainty about the objective remains). Despair is tragic only when hope's objective is (properly) valued by the hoper, desired as such, and yet is incorrectly judged to be impossible or very unlikely, and abandoned for that reason.<sup>6</sup>

With respect to tackling climate change, is despair justified? And if it is, should we give up? My focus here will be on despair about the difference each of us as individuals



can make to climate change. In the face of the scientific evidence and political track record detailed earlier, I think this is the most common locus for despair. Most people have limited knowledge of the ways in which international environmental regimes, organisations, laws and treaties, and negotiations proceed, and so are less likely to make judgements of contrariness and extreme improbability with respect to the mitigation and adaptation objectives aimed at through these forms of global cooperation. But many people are confident that they know themselves, and human nature. It is this putative knowledge that generates the most common form of despair about tackling climate change, which is personal: I can make no difference to climate change through reducing my emissions (often followed by the judgement: so I may as well not try).

If the reasoning behind personal despair about climate change withstands philosophical scrutiny, then questions related to how to frame the climate change problem, and green solutions to it, refocus. If people are justified in despairing at the personal level (in the ways I shall address) about tackling climate change, then attention ought to focus on whether realistic appraisals of the scale of the climate challenge, and the costs to individuals of tackling it, inherent in framings of the climate problem in public debate contribute to the generation of this despair. I shall argue personal despair about tackling climate change through personal emissions reductions is not justified. In which case—at least, from a philosophical point of view—the framing of the public debate about climate change should not be sensitive to the possibility that it could stimulate these forms of personal despair.

There are at least two sceptical ‘grounding judgements’ that can generate personal despair about climate change. Although they are often held together they are, as I shall show, quite different, and I will assess them separately. The two judgements are:

- a) Efficacy: whatever I might do will make no difference to climate change.

b) Ability: I am unable to make any difference to climate change.

### **3. Emissions Reductions: Whatever I might do, it will make no difference**

For many people unmotivated to cut their emissions, or otherwise take personal action to tackle climate change, the problem is an information deficit. There is nothing intrinsically or obviously morally corrupt about enjoying eating bananas in the UK, getting a thrill from driving a Lamborghini, or relishing a twenty minute hot shower at the end of a winter day; doing these things is not like torturing an infant. Many people remain unaware of how these seemingly innocuous and innocent activities enlarge their personal carbon footprint. This is a problem that can be addressed, pretty straightforwardly, by providing information. For others, where awareness is not the problem, laziness, indifference, entrenched self-interest, hypocrisy, or weakness of the will explain an unwillingness to make lifestyle changes, or otherwise take personal action on climate change (Gardiner 2011). The much harder challenge here involves moral education, either to bring people to see climate change as a moral problem, or to persuade them that if they already see it that way, they ought to commit to action.

Another group, however, requires neither factual nor moral education: they understand the contribution their lifestyles make to climate change, they value tackling climate change (in the broad sense of thinking that it is a bad thing, and that something should be done to stop it), and yet they take no action to reduce their carbon footprints (or take other forms of personal action on climate change) because they think that what they do makes no difference. In other words, they judge themselves to be personally inefficacious with respect to tackling climate change. In the face of the enormous, complex, and (often) invisible threat of climate change, feelings of insignificance and inefficacy are recognizable, perhaps excusable, and are familiar to those who work on the

communication of climate change risk (Sandman 2013). However, feeling insignificant and inefficacious is not the same thing as being inefficacious and insignificant: a person may feel this way and yet soldier on with hard choices, hopeful that somehow they might make a difference. What we should focus on in order to assess this type of despair are not feelings, but rather the grounding judgement that generates the belief that what one does as an individual—in particular, the changes one could make to one's way of life so as to reduce one's carbon footprint—is certain not to (or is very unlikely to) make a difference to climate change: we need to assess whether this is true.<sup>7</sup>

There are at least two reasons to reject the grounding judgement that reducing individual emissions makes no difference to climate change. The first reason is that unless climate change is claimed to be non-anthropogenic, this grounding judgement *prima facie* carries commitment to a sorites paradox of climate change. The second reason emerges as a result of (correctly) blocking the generation of a sorites paradox of climate change.

First, the Philosophy 101 version of the sorites paradox is this: removing one grain of sand from the heap will not destroy the heap; therefore, removing the next, more or less identical, grain of sand from the heap will not destroy the heap; etc. etc. until we are left with the last grain of sand, which we must identify as the heap, because if we remove it there is nothing left. In which case it was false that removing the first grain of sand did not destroy the heap, given that the first grain of sand was more or less identical to the last grain of sand.

The grounding judgement that my individual emissions make no difference to climate change *prima facie* creates a sorites paradox as follows.

- 1) This act of turning up my thermostat does not contribute to climate change;
- 2) Therefore, neither did the same act I performed yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that; etc. etc.

- 3) If this is true of my act of turning up the thermostat, then it is true of anyone's act of turning up the thermostat.
- 4) If no token act of the type 'turning up the thermostat' contributes to climate change, then no token act of any individual type of act contributes to climate change;
- 5) In which case, no individual act—at any point in history—has contributed to climate change.
- 6) But given that current climate change is anthropogenic, some individual acts must have contributed to it.
- 7) Thus, individual acts creating emissions both contribute to and do not contribute to climate change.

Despair responds to judgements that an objective is contracertain (or extremely improbable). The putative sorites paradox (which could equally well be generated by attributing extreme improbability to the acts creating emissions it describes) shows that the judgement that it is contracertain that reducing individual emissions will make a difference to climate change ought to be abandoned, as should any judgement that commits one to a contradiction (as in 7). Abandoning the judgement that individual emissions make no difference *prima facie* involves acquiring the belief that it is uncertain what contribution individual emissions make to climate change. And uncertainty provides the context for hope rather than despair. If there is a sorites paradox of climate change then those who despair of tackling climate change on the basis of the grounding judgement that whatever they might do will make no difference ought to rekindle hope because they are required to abandon this belief in favour of uncertainty about the difference they could make.

The obvious objection here is that the sorites paradox does not correctly identify the grounding judgement underlying despair about personal efficacy. No person in despair and knowledgeable about climate change really believes that their emissions make *no*

difference to climate change (at least, they ought not to believe this). Rather, they think that their emissions do not make climate change *worse* (which is consistent with them making a difference to the total atmospheric accumulation of GHGs, and so making some difference), and this takes us to the second—and better—reason for rejecting despair related to judgements of personal inefficacy. The grounding judgement now relates to the *imperceptible contribution* that individual emissions make to climate change: in the context of all the other individual acts creating GHGs, the contribution of any one act does not make a perceptible difference to climate change. Thus, personal changes are not means to tackling climate change, and should be given up on.

The best way to challenge this grounding judgement is, simply, to show that it is false. Shelly Kagan asks us to imagine the following (parallel) case,

[S]omeone is wired to a torture machine with a thousand identical switches. When none of the switches are flipped, no current runs through the machine, and so the victim is in no pain at all. If all thousand switches are flipped, then a sizable current runs through the machine and the victim is in tremendous pain... But the flipping of any given switch increases the current only by a very small amount (well below the perceptually discriminable threshold for pain) so that the victim simply cannot tell how many other switches have been flipped. (Kagan 2011, 116).

Given the imperceptible difference any one torturer's switch flip makes to the victim's pain, no individual act of switch flipping can be identified as the one that causes the victim's pain, despite the fact that the outcome of many such acts being performed is pain for the innocent victim. If it is true that individual torturers in Kagan's case do not cause the victim's pain, then this is also true of individuals performing acts creating emissions, all else being equal. Or so someone in despair about climate change on the grounds of personal inefficacy might reason.

Kagan provides a simple response to the torturer case which, I think, succeeds: he denies that it is possible. He says, ‘it is never the case that a large enough number of acts make a morally relevant difference, but each individual act makes no difference at all’ (Kagan 2010, 130). Here is his argument:

It simply cannot be that every state [of the innocent victim] feels like the one before it, for by hypothesis state 0 feels like no pain, while state 1000 feels like pain. Hence at least one state must feel different from the one that came before. At some point the answer given to the question “are you in pain?” must differ from the answer given immediately before—otherwise the victim would still be answering “no” at state 1000 (just as they answered “no” at state 0), something we know to be false. Thus not every state feels like the one before it. At least one state is perceptibly different from the one before it...[and] one perceptible difference is enough to show the impossibility of the case. (Kagan 2010, 132–33).

I think this works as a response to the torturer case. Does it transfer to individual emissions? Each individual emission is a switch flip, and the cumulative outcome is climate change and the harms it causes. For the first ever individual emission, no difference was made to the climate; similarly, for the second ever individual emission, and the third etc. until we reach a point at which the climate has clearly changed. Either we deny that the change is anthropogenic or we must admit that, at some point, at least one individual emission made a perceptible difference and made climate change worse. In which case it is false that no individual emissions make climate change worse.

Cutting personal emissions *could* make a difference. Furthermore—and given that climate change is an evolving phenomenon—it could be that my emissions are the very ones fit to make that perceptible difference. Of course, I have no way of knowing whether this is the case, but that is irrelevant with respect to banishing despair through hope: as I have emphasised, the context for hope is radical uncertainty. My claim here is not that the grounding judgement that I can make no difference ought to be abandoned

because it is probable that I can make a difference, and thus that I ought to supplant despair with optimism. Rather, it is the far more modest claim that it is (logically, conceptually, and nomologically) possible that I can make a difference, and thus that I ought to supplant despair with hope.

#### **4. Emissions Reductions: I am unable to make any difference.**

Let me turn now to the second category of grounding judgement which I identified earlier: I am unable to make any difference to climate change through reducing my emissions (often followed by the judgement: so I may as well not try). This should be kept distinct from a judgement of personal inefficacy: it is consistent of me to judge that there are things I might do that could make a difference (efficacy), but that I am unable to do those things (ability). I know that giving up smoking will increase my life expectancy, but I am addicted and unable to do it. A judgement of personal ability can be understood either as a judgement a person makes of her own abilities as the particular person she is, or as a judgment she makes of her abilities *qua* human being, i.e. it can be understood as a claim about human nature. When a person makes this judgement of her own abilities, then her will to reduce her personal emissions will be debilitated with despair. However, once we realise that this type of judgement actually relates to motivational capacities rather than abilities, we can see that it is not justified,<sup>8</sup> and that amplifying it by reference to human nature lends it no further support.

Recent reflections by David Estlund on the role of facts about human nature - insofar as they bear on what people can't, won't, and cannot will themselves to do— in assessment of moral theories issuing requirements to do, or forbear, from various things, are helpful here. According to Estlund, being able to do something is as follows: 'A person is able to (can) do something if, were she to try and not give up, she would tend to

succeed' (Estlund 2011, 212). This shows that it is possible that 'the inability to bring oneself to do something (to will to do it) might coexist with an ability to do that thing' (Estlund 2011, 213). If this is true then the fact that a person cannot muster the will to take personal action on climate change does not in itself establish that she cannot—that she is unable to—take that action. Instead, what must be assessed is whether if she were to try and not give up, she would tend to succeed with respect to the purpose of the action. So, the question is: if a person were to try to reduce her carbon footprint, and not give up, would she tend to succeed with respect to making a difference to climate change?

Note: the relevant question is not whether a person, *qua* individual, would tend to succeed with respect to tackling—in the sense of mitigating—climate change. Clearly this is beyond the reach of any one individual, and indeed anyone cultivating hope for that as a personal objective ought to supplant it with despair on these grounds. With respect to the right question—i.e. 'can I make a difference?'—I have argued that it is false that no personal emissions make any difference to climate change. In that case, if a person were to try to reduce her carbon footprint, and not give up, she *could* succeed with respect to making a difference on climate change. This falls short of a tendency to succeed, and so it is not the case that a person reducing her emissions should judge that she *has* the ability to make a difference on climate change. But neither should she judge that she *lacks* the ability because she *could* make a difference. It will be impossible for any person to tell whether her activity will tend to make a difference, but she is unjustified in judging that it will not. In that case, she should judge that she could have the ability to make a difference to climate change through reducing her emissions. And this is sufficient for her to forswear despair on the grounds that she lacks the ability to make a difference.



It is true that the difference any person is able to make to climate change may not amount to much (although note that many of the superrich are able to make a relatively massive difference in comparison to those less rich than them). A person in despair about making *much* of a difference to climate change through reductions in her carbon footprint may be making sound grounding judgements about the likely effects of her emissions reductions. And this person may also be unable to make *much* of a difference: no matter how hard she tries, without giving up, she is right to judge that she will not tend to succeed in making *much* of a difference. But this does not establish that a person is right to despair of making *any* difference, nor that she is unable to make *any* difference. And note, also, that a person's ability to make any difference to climate change through reductions in her personal emissions has nothing to do with whether her will is debilitated by despair, or whether she lives in hope of making some difference. Her ability to make a difference depends on whether trying and not to giving up would tend to succeed, which in this case depends on facts entirely beyond her control, which are probably unknowable. In the case of climate change and personal emissions reductions, the ability to make a difference is entirely independent of a person's judgements about whether she will, in fact, make a difference.

Things are no different if a person judges herself unable to make any difference in virtue of her human nature, i.e. that making reductions to personal emissions is the kind of thing that human beings can't will. This is often cashed out with the claim that what people will be required to give up in order to tackle climate change through personal emissions reductions is more than can be expected of human beings.

First, note that this grounding judgement operates with the assumption that tackling climate change will involve sacrifices, understood as pure deprivations. This is true only if we continue with a global carbon intensive energy regime within which the remaining

budget of emissions is ever shrinking as we approach the trillionth ton.<sup>9</sup> But this is not a necessity, and there are alternative non-carbon-based sources of energy that could enable us to continue to live well while avoiding the trillionth ton.<sup>10</sup> As Hall and others have noted, it is a mistake to present a green, carbon-free future as one which does not require sacrifices. Irreplaceable things will have to be sacrificed in a carbon neutral economy. But, as she and others also correctly note, sacrifice is not synonymous with deprivation, and can have a positive impact on the life of the one who makes the sacrifice, particularly when it is freely undertaken, genuinely necessary, and achieves a worthwhile purpose.<sup>11</sup>

Second, and most significantly, the fact that a set of people are all similarly motivationally incapable does nothing to show that they are unable to do that which they cannot will themselves to do. As Estlund nicely puts it:

Suppose people line up to get your moral opinion on their behavior. Bill is told that his selfishness is indeed a motivational incapacity, but that it does not exempt him from the requirement to be less selfish. Behind Bill comes Nina with the same query. Again, we dispatch her, on the same grounds as Bill. Behind Nina is Kim, and so on. Since each poses the same case, our judgement is the same. The line might contain all humans, but that fact adds nothing to any individual's case (Estlund 2011, 220–21).

I have shown that being in despair about making any difference to climate change on the grounds of an inability to make any difference is not justified by reference to the motivational capacities of people qua individuals, or qua human beings: what despair amounts to in either case is the judgement that I can make no difference because I am unwilling to make a difference. In these cases, despair is *sui generis*. And if my arguments in section 3 are sound, then there are good grounds for judging that reductions in personal emissions can make a difference (albeit small) to climate change, and thus that each of us is able to make a difference.

If a person is able to make a difference through personal emissions reductions, but cannot will herself to do so, ought she to give up nevertheless? Committing to an objective that is within one's abilities, but that one cannot will oneself to do, looks pretty quixotic. Answering the 'giving up' question involves establishing whether people are morally required to reduce personal emissions so as to make a difference to climate change. Although there is much disagreement in the literature on climate ethics and justice about the sources and scope of our moral obligations vis-a-vis mitigation and adaptation, there has emerged what Cass Sunstein calls an 'incompletely theorised agreement' (2005, 2) on the core of their content. Incompletely theorised agreements are those to which parties divided by often deep theoretical differences can nevertheless give their assent. Such agreement exists in the realm of climate justice and ethics with respect to, for example, the following requirements: precautionary action on climate change despite scientific uncertainty; mitigation measures in order to deliver justice to members of future generations; distribution of the burdens of tackling climate change in ways responsive to 'common but differentiated responsibility' for the climate change problem; ensuring that mitigation and adaptation do not exacerbate the disadvantage of the global poor. There is much disagreement about the ways in which these morally required ends are to be pursued, and only 'bean eating homeopaths' advocate means entirely consisting of personal action (Goodin 1992, 18). But almost everyone thinks that there is some obligation on individuals to reduce their emissions—after all, the ultimate source of the demand for carbon fuelled energy is individual demand. There is an 'incompletely theorised agreement' that individuals ought not to give up on activities that make a difference to climate change.

## **5. Who cares about despair?**

I have argued that individuals are able to make a difference to climate change through reducing their personal emissions. If—as I have claimed, but not shown here—there is an incompletely theorized agreement that they are morally required to do so, then they ought not to give up on attempts to reduce their personal emissions; that is, giving up would be unjustified. Given how what people are able to do and what they ought to do detach from what they have a will to do, why should we care if people are in despair about their personal emissions reductions? Why is it important to engage with people's mistaken grounding judgements related to efficacy and ability, if what really prevents them from taking personal action to reduce emissions is that their will to do so is impaired?

The reason why combatting despair for effective personal action on climate change matters relates to the instrumental value of hope in securing effective agency, remembering that hope is despair's opposite. Hope can increase the probability that a person's agency achieves its purpose, and so can galvanise the person's will as it aims at this purpose. When a person believes an objective to be impossible, her capacity to act so as to realise that objective is impaired. If this denial is deep-rooted and repeatedly affirmed in an attitude of despair—that is, if it is more than a fleeting doubt or negative thought—it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy: that which is repeatedly asserted to be impossible can thereby become impossible (Snyder 2002; Pettit 2004; Moellendorf 2006). Consider a person standing at the edge of a crevasse, committed to continuing forward, but unsure whether she can make the jump. If she believes that she can make the jump, the odds of her actually making it are increased. Even though she doesn't know how likely she actually is to make it, jumping *as if* she can make it gives her the best possible chance of actually making it.<sup>12</sup> Given that one of the key ways in which climate change will be tackled is by individual people reducing their emissions, the significance

of encouraging hope through philosophically combatting despair is that this makes it more likely that people will succeed in reducing their personal carbon footprints. A person who (correctly, I have argued) believes that the reductions in personal emissions she makes could make some difference, and that she could have the ability to make these reductions, is more likely to succeed in making the necessary changes to her lifestyle. Hope keeps open a space for agency between the impossible and the fantastical; without it, the small window in time remaining for us to tackle climate change is already closed.

Of course, the ways in which people strengthen their will to do something are multifarious, and are certainly not responsive only to the philosophical assessments of whether the reasons they take themselves to have for giving up are, in fact, good reasons for doing so. Indeed, it may be that the philosophical robustness of such reasons plays only a minor role in bolstering the will of people who value reducing their personal emissions as a way of tackling climate change, and who want to commit to this objective. Or perhaps it plays no role at all. But even if this is true, it still matters that we know whether, in fact, a given reason does justify giving up. I have argued here that personal judgements of inefficacy and inability with respect to personal emissions reductions do not justify giving up attempts to make these reductions, because the judgements (which make personal efficacy and ability with respect to emissions reductions contrainformative) are false. This removes one prop supporting giving up; other props will have a different character, and will require different strategies to combat them. With respect to how climate change, and green solutions to it, are presented in public debate, this paper delivers philosophical responses to those who claim—in the face of an accurate presentation of the climate emergency we are in, and the costs to us of tackling it—that their reductions will make no difference, and/or that they are unable to make a difference. The framing of the climate debate should not be sensitive to these forms of personal

despair: it is possible that individuals have the ability to make a difference through personal emissions reductions, and— at least given the present state of climate change— a framing of the problem that includes a realistic appraisal of the costs to individuals of addressing it does not change this fact.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, many serious people recognize that the IPCC predictions about the impacts of climate change, at various thresholds, are conservative. See, for example, Brysse et al. 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Despite despair being an instantly recognizable, and not obviously mad, response to the climate crisis, very little has been written on this. Notable exceptions are: Nolt 2010; Williston 2012; Fiala 2010.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Hall 2013. On the framing debate in general see Ereaut and Segnit 2006; Feinberg and Willer 2011; Moser and Dilling 2007.

<sup>4</sup> An alternative approach is in Bovens (1999); he characterizes hope in terms of judgments of probability about objectives.

<sup>5</sup> Typically, but not always—for example, a person can be in despair about achieving an objective and yet have the will to continue because she promised a deceased loved one that she would never give up on that objective.

<sup>6</sup> Here I differ from John Nolt who conceives of despair as ‘a form of suffering’ of which we stand under a moral duty to avoid, because it ‘unfits us for service to others’ (Nolt 2010, 167).

<sup>7</sup> Doubts about the efficacy of reducing personal emissions are given their most respectable philosophical defense in Sinnott-Armstrong 2010. For direct critique of his arguments see Hiller 2011.

<sup>8</sup> This is not true of cases of addiction or psychological incapacity, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder. I take it that we can set aside as obviously false the judgement that engagement with GHG-generating activities is addictive, or compulsive, despite being habitual.

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://trillionthtonne.org/>. Accessed 30/07/13. **ADD TO REF LIST**

<sup>10</sup> Fourth generation nuclear power is, to my mind, the most promising option, but it is severely under-analyzed from an ethical point of view. However, see Taebi and Kloosterman, forthcoming; Shrader-Frechette 2013.

<sup>11</sup> And this can be the case even when losses are so extreme as to occasion mourning. See Willox 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Moellendorf 2006 contains a particularly good discussion of hope and practical agency.

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