



Philosophy and Climate Change

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Climate Change, Liberalism, and the Public/Private Distinction

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Abstract and Keywords

Climate change puts pressure on a distinction that is at the heart of liberal theory: that between the public and the private. Many of the GHG-emitting behaviors that contribute to the disruption of the climate system—such as using computers, taking hot showers, eating this or that, driving cars, investing here or there, and having children—are traditionally regarded as private. Yet today, through climate change, these apparently private behaviors can have very public consequences, however indirect, across spatial, temporal, and genetic boundaries. The chapter introduces the public/private distinction and discusses the various ways in which it has figured in liberal theory. It goes on to show how climate change threatens the viability of the distinction, both by intensifying old tensions and by bringing new pressures to bear. It then considers some options for relieving the pressure, none of which seems particularly promising by liberal lights.

Keywords: climate change, liberalism, public/private distinction, political philosophy, Anthropocene

In an earlier paper (Jamieson and Di Paola 2016) we explored the ways in which anthropogenic climate change and more generally the Anthropocene—this new epoch in which no earthly place, form, entity, process, or system escapes the reach of human activity—puts pressure on some central categories and concepts of liberal democratic theory. In this chapter we focus on one particular distinction that is at the heart of liberal theory: that between the public and the private (henceforth ‘the Distinction’). Our claim is

that climate change puts pressure on the Distinction in ways that are difficult for liberals to relieve. Our purpose is not to write an obituary for liberalism, but to articulate some emerging problems and to scout some possible solutions. Liberalism has shown itself to be remarkably resilient and it may well succeed in rising to these new challenges, even if it is difficult from here to see exactly how.

The chapter unfolds as follows. In Section 1 we present some basic facts about climate change and explain the notion of the Anthropocene. In Section 2 we introduce the Distinction and discuss ways in which it has figured in liberal theory. In Section 3 we show how the distinction comes under pressure in the Anthropocene. In Section 4 we consider some options for relieving the pressure. Finally, in Section 5, we draw some conclusions.

1. Climate Change and the Anthropocene

In the cosmically instantaneous time of two centuries, fossil-fueled human activities have warmed the Earth's surface by an average of almost one degree Celsius. This is causing polar sea ice to melt, sea levels to rise, more frequent extreme meteorological events such as floods, hurricanes and droughts, and widespread eco-systemic disruptions. Further warming poses threats to economic prosperity, water and food security, public health, local and global political stability, and other fundamental dimensions of organized human life. Despite occasional promising developments global carbon emissions have risen almost every year (p.371) since 1992, when the nations of the Earth first committed themselves to the "stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system."¹ The fact is that the global community still largely lacks the institutions, the technologies, and the will to decisively bend this curve.

Despite its magnitude and gravity, climate change is but one part of a larger picture. Just as a fever can be seen as a sign of systemic crisis in a human body, so the rise in global temperature can be seen as a sign of transformations that are so vast and deep that they may merit the label, "epochal."² Because these transformations are primarily driven by human action, the term, 'Anthropocene', coined by limnologist Eugene Stoermer and popularized by chemist Paul Crutzen, is typically used to refer to this proposed epoch.³ In a jointly published paper, Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) claimed that humanity had become the main driver of Earth's biological and ecological evolution. Hibbard et al. (2006) noted that the biological and geological changes initiated by human action have been subject to a "Great Acceleration" that began around 1950 and is ongoing. In 2011 Steffen et al. summarized the situation in the following way:

In addition to the carbon cycle, humans are (i) significantly altering several other biogeochemical or element cycles, such as nitrogen, phosphorus and sulphur, that are fundamental to life on the Earth; (ii) strongly modifying the terrestrial water cycle by intercepting river flow from uplands to the sea and, through land-cover change, altering the water vapour flow from the land to the atmosphere; and (iii) likely driving the sixth major extinction event in Earth history. Taken together, these trends are strong evidence that humankind, our own species, has become so large and active that it now rivals some (p.372) of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system.

(Steffen et al. 2011: 843)

The development, growth, and diffusion of powerful technologies have been important in enabling the high levels of production, consumption, and population that have transformed the planet and produced the Anthropocene. Human population, which for most of human history never exceeded more than a few million, has increased by an order of magnitude in the last three centuries. Today 7.8 billion people are organized in highly complex systems bound together by oil and gas pipelines, electrical wires, air travel, fiber optic cables, satellite connections, and cyber links.

These systems empower humans in both positive and negative ways. We can save a child in a faraway land by pledging an online contribution with a few clicks; but as we do this with our computers, we tap into globally sourced energy and materials, thus activating, reinforcing, and promoting the emission of greenhouse gases that will remain in the atmosphere for centuries, etching the human face ever more deeply on the planet.

The accumulation of such apparently trivial, localized, individually innocuous acts as using computers, taking hot showers, driving cars, heating homes, investing here or there, eating this or that, and having children can alter fundamental planetary systems in ways that have global consequences which are locally actualized. So together, but with no unitary plan, we change the climate, drive species to extinction, and acidify the oceans—thus harming humans and non-human nature in faraway times and places.

2. Liberalism and the Public/Private Distinction

Many of the behaviors that contribute to climate change and other systemic global problems of the Anthropocene are not only trivial, localized, and individually innocuous, but also generally regarded as private. Yet today, these apparently private behaviors have public consequences, however indirect, across spatial, temporal, and genetic boundaries. It is this that brings the Distinction under suspicion in the Anthropocene.

Through the centuries, the Distinction has been used in various ways to help mark boundaries as diverse as those between general vs. particular interests (e.g. Rousseau 1762/1985); the administrative state vs. the market economy (e.g. Smith 1776/2007); the realm of the ethical, the external, the objective vs. the realm of the natural, the internal, the subjective (e.g. Hegel 1820/1991); the participatory self-determination of citizens vs. their withdrawal from civic affairs (e.g. Tocqueville 1835/2008; Dewey 1927/1954; Arendt 1958; Habermas 1962/1989); the world of sociability vs. that of domesticity (e.g. Sennett 1977; **(p.373)** Ariès and Duby 1992); the administrative state and the market economy vs. the family (e.g. Pateman 1985, 1989); and privacy vs. exposure (e.g. Nagel 1998).⁴

The roots of the Distinction can be traced at least to Aristotle's distinction between the domain of politics (*polis*) and the domain of the household (*oikos*).⁵ The Romans contributed to the development of the Distinction by articulating a system of private law that provided the foundations for much of modern European contract and property law. The Distinction began to take modern form with the emergence of nation-states in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which led to the configuration of a distinctly public realm and, at the same time, a reaction against the claims of monarchs or parliaments to

unconstrained power. During this period popular claims to private spheres insulated from state jurisdiction became increasingly powerful. Religious conscience and rights to property (which natural law theorists such as John Locke took as their main concerns) were seen as central to the private domain (Horwitz 1982: 1423).

The Distinction took on special depth and meaning with the rise of liberalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁶ Thomas Nagel characterizes liberalism in the following way:

Liberalism is the conjunction of two ideals. The first is that of individual liberty: liberty of thought, speech, religion, and political action; freedom from government interference with privacy, personal life, and the exercise of individual inclination. The second ideal is that of a democratic society controlled by its citizens and serving their needs, in which inequalities of political and economic power and social position are not excessive.

(Nagel 1975: 136)

Most contemporary liberals embrace both ideals, justifying them on broadly consequentialist or Kantian grounds. Libertarians endorse only the first ideal, sometimes providing a natural rights foundation rather than justifying it on consequentialist or Kantian grounds.⁷ The first ideal specifically invokes privacy, and a distinction between the public and private is clearly implicated in most of the domains that Nagel mentions: speech, religion, personal life, the exercise of individual inclination, and so on. Realizing the second ideal may also require observing the Distinction, but making out this claim would require further (p.374) argument. In any case it is clear that all forms of liberalism endorse the first ideal and with it the Distinction.

The boundaries between the public and the private became entrenched in liberal societies by reciprocal empowerment. On the one hand liberals called for making people's lives, consciences, and property more securely private. On the other hand, any government entrusted with the task of overseeing and regulating a complex liberal society had to be especially powerful. Fairly enforcing the rule of law often required more rather than less involvement with citizens' private lives in managing files, issuing certificates and permits, keeping records and accounts, and generally tending to the bureaucracy of a modern state. The tension between a robust private sphere and the pervasive role of public authorities in keeping track of people's lives remains an object of ongoing negotiation and a source of political division in liberal societies.⁸

While the Distinction can be drawn in different ways and has taken different forms at various historical moments, it is hard to imagine any recognizable form of liberalism without the Distinction playing an important role. As Stanley Benn writes:

The conception of privacy is closely bound to the liberal ideal. The totalitarian claims that everything a person does has significance for society at large...The public or political universe is all inclusive.

(Benn 1988: 268)⁹

Similarly, Judith Shklar remarks:

[Liberalism] must reject only those political doctrines that do not recognize any difference between the spheres of the personal and the public...Because of the primacy of toleration as the irreducible limit on public agents, liberals must always draw such a line...[T]his must under no circumstances be ignored or forgotten.

(Shklar 1989: 24)

The Distinction runs through such familiar liberal themes as the value of individual liberty, which must be protected from unjustified interference from others; the rule of law, which separates public law (constitutional, criminal and (p.375) regulatory) from private law (the law of contracts, torts, transactions and commerce); human rights, which hinge on the recognition that individuals have independent moral status that governments are required to respect; secularism, which (among other things) distinguishes public political debate from private religious belief; and capitalism, the economic system whose development is associated with the rise of liberalism and which depends on the recognition and enforcement of private property rights.

Despite its ubiquity and obvious importance to liberals, it is surprisingly difficult to find a “*locus classicus*” of the Distinction, or even a clear statement and explicit defense. Indeed, often it has been liberalism’s critics who have been most forthcoming about the importance of the Distinction to liberalism. Karl Marx regarded the Distinction to be at the center of liberal consciousness and an important source of alienation, since it requires us simultaneously to view ourselves and others both as citizens and antagonistic private actors:

man leads a double life...[I]n the *political community* he regards himself as a *communal being*; but in *civil society* he is active as a *private individual*, treats other men as means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers.

(Marx 1843/1978: 28; emphasis in text)¹⁰

Some feminist critics have seen the Distinction as both at the center of liberalism and also deeply entwined with feminism itself. Carole Pateman writes:

The dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle...Although some feminists treat the dichotomy as a universal trans-historical, and trans-cultural feature of human existence, feminist criticism is primarily directed at the separation and opposition between the public and private spheres in liberal theory and practice.

(Pateman 1983: 281)¹¹

Although liberal theorists seldom explicate or explicitly defend the Distinction, they often seem to presuppose some version of it. It is in the background of Robert Nozick’s (1974) and Ronald Dworkin’s (1977) discussions of the strength (or priority) of individual rights versus other goods such as equality or

general welfare. It is present in Gerald Cohen's (1995, 2000) discussions of the extent to which people's personal decisions should be governed by principles of justice. It is central to the debate between H. L. A. Hart and Patrick Devlin about the **(p.376)** extent to which the state can legitimately enforce community norms and values (Hart 1963).

In *Political Liberalism* John Rawls actively distances himself from the Distinction. He embraces the "public/non-public" distinction but insists that this "is not the distinction between the public and the private" (1993/2005: 220). Yet as Charney (1998) has noted, *Political Liberalism* is innervated by contrasts that seem ultimately to hinge on some version of the Distinction: a public conception of justice vs. "comprehensive doctrines"; political values vs. those that apply to "all of life"; and modes of reasoning that apply to public deliberation (i.e. "public reason") vs. those that animate "the background culture" and pertain to individuals, families and what Rawls elsewhere (1971: 520–529) described as "social unions" (such as churches, universities, and clubs).

Perhaps Rawls's rejection of the Distinction can be explained in the following way.¹² Rawls is interested in reasons, and he recognizes different kinds of reasons each governed by its own rules, guided by its own distinctive values, and appropriate to its own domain. For Rawls, there is a domain of constitutional essentials, matters of basic justice, institutions and institutionalized roles and procedures; and another domain of individual preferences and voluntary associations. Public reason is appropriate to the first domain, and what Rawls calls "non-public" reasons are appropriate to the second. Public reason requires that citizens deliberate in the public political forum in terms of reasons that can be shared by all free and equal citizens, engaged in a fair system of cooperation.¹³ However, in the domain of individual beliefs, preferences, and associational and market choices, justificatory reasoning can be more sectarian and narrow. Praying, for example, can be justified by non-public reasons that are afforded by a comprehensive doctrine (in this case a religion), which provides a reservoir of reasons sourced from a background tradition that is common to its members. For Rawls it is important to recognize that all reasons, even non-public reasons, are "social." He writes (1993/2005: 220) that "there is no such thing as 'private reason'" and that "these [non-public] reasons are social, and certainly not private."¹⁴ The source of Rawls's resistance to the Distinction may lie in his fear of conflating non-public reasons with non-social reasons.

(p.377) However, Rawls's insistence on the social nature of reasons does not justify the rejection of the Distinction, at least as some have drawn it. John Dewey (1927/1954: 13), for example, regarded the Distinction as fundamental, yet emphatically stated that "the distinction between the public and private is thus in no sense equivalent to the distinction between the individual and social." It is hard to see why Rawls could not have endorsed this view and thus the Distinction.¹⁵

Rawls's focus on reasons is exemplary of the way in which many liberals tend to read the Distinction.¹⁶ They distinguish the public and private domains by identifying reasons appropriate to each. However, there is an obvious alternative to this focus on reasons as the hallmark of the Distinction.

Many of the (few) philosophers who explicitly embrace (or discuss) the Distinction focus on actions rather than reasons, and look to Mill as the godfather of the Distinction.¹⁷ In *On Liberty* Mill writes that:

The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.

(Mill 1859/1978: 9)

He formulates this idea in what has come to be known as the Harm Principle (HP):

The object of this essay is to assert one very simple principle...the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.

(Mill 1859/1978: 9)

Dewey echoes the HP in his characterization of the Distinction:

... the consequences [of an action] are of two kinds, those which affect the persons directly who are engaged in the transaction, and those which affect others beyond those immediately concerned. In this distinction we find the germ of the distinction between the private and the public.

(Dewey 1927/1954: 12)¹⁸

(p.378) Rorty, who writes that “Mill’s *On Liberty* provides all the ethical instruction you need” (1998: 24) and that Mill was the “last word” in Western political theory (1989: 36), regarded the Distinction as the beating heart of liberalism.

Mill was concerned with actions rather than domain-appropriate reasons. As a rough and ready guide, we can take the HP as suggesting that actions count as private as long as they do not harm others. By contrast, actions that harm others are public and thus may (at least *prima facie*) be liable to sanctioning and regulation. Following Mill, we can thus think of the private domain as constituted by actions that cause no harm to others, and the public domain as constituted by those actions that do cause harm to others.

There are many complications, of course. Despite his sometimes categorical language, it is clear that Mill did not think that the HP provided a sufficient condition for the rightful exercise of power over an individual (cf. Mill 1859/1978: 73). Nor did Mill think that the HP specified even a necessary condition.¹⁹ Moreover, as we have noted, Mill’s project was importantly different from that of liberal theorists such as Rawls: Mill was concerned with actions rather than domain-appropriate reasons. Still, whatever we think about these (and other) questions, Mill’s basic insight remains central to liberalism: It is surely a mark of a liberal state that it largely keeps its nose out of its citizens’ harmless behavior, whether it involves counting blades of grass or collecting comic books. For this reason and because of its influence, despite the complications and dangling details, we will take Mill’s insight as a valuable guide to a liberal understanding of the Distinction.

To summarize: Liberals aspire to a world in which governments respect the personal beliefs and choices of

individuals, the life of the family, and voluntary exchanges between consenting adults. While some degree of public intervention into the private sphere is permitted when it is required for collective security (e.g. national defense) or solves an urgent coordination problem (e.g. traffic regulation), the threshold for such intrusion is high. On one particularly influential view, articulated by Mill, public intervention into the lives, choices, opinions, actions, behaviors, and practices of individuals is only justified when it prevents harm to others. When it comes to believing in a god, eating meat, having children, or investing in property, most liberals would take the old 1920s blues song as normative: “Ain’t nobody’s business if I do.”²⁰

(p.379) 3. The Distinction Under Pressure

In this section we suggest that climate change (the harbinger of the Anthropocene) threatens the viability of the Distinction, both by intensifying old tensions and by bringing new pressures to bear. Technological development and the spatial collapse that it engenders has been a constant pressure on the Distinction, which the Anthropocene intensifies. The world in which we now live, where even our most mundane everyday behaviors such as using a computer and flipping a light switch have global ripples, puts pressures on the Distinction that seem qualitatively different in scale and ubiquity. These intensifying tensions and novel pressures provoke questions about whether liberalism can survive the Anthropocene; if so, in what form; and what may be the role of the Distinction in this new epoch.

The central challenge stems from the fact that when it comes to climate change and other problems of the Anthropocene, actions that are traditionally regarded as private—such as using computers, flipping light switches, taking hot showers, eating this or that, driving cars, investing here or there, and having children—contribute to disrupting planetary systems. These disruptions will harm not only those who contribute to them (generally not in proportion to their contributions), but also inhabitants of distant nations, future generations, and other species. For this reason it might be thought that actions such as taking a hot shower should be regarded as public, at least by Millian lights, and thus subject to regulation.

One way of making this argument appeals to the theory of externalities as it has been developed in economic thought. The basic insight on which this appeal rests goes back to Mill, who noticed the phenomenon of positive externalities, to Sidgwick who discussed negative externalities in detail, and to Pigou who developed the general concept in a more systematic (if ambiguous) way.²¹

The observation on which the theory rests is that the benefits and costs of the production and consumption of a good or service are not always confined to the producers and consumers of the good or service. Sometimes they are “externalized” to third parties who are not parties to the transaction. For example, suppose that a widget factory produces pollution that soils Mr. Smith’s clothes when he hangs them out to dry. The cost to Mr. Smith of his soiled clothes is not reflected **(p.380)** in either the widget manufacturer’s costs or in the price that consumers pay when they buy a widget. Mr. Smith is effectively contributing to the production and consumption of widgets without capturing the benefits. This distorts investment and consumption decisions and leads to suboptimal societal outcomes, in this case the oversupply and overconsumption of widgets. The solution is to “internalize” the cost of Mr. Smith’s soiled clothes so that it is borne by the producers and consumers of widgets. There are various ways of doing this, such as regulating pollution levels from the widget factory, taxing widgets to reflect the cost of the

pollution, or granting Mr. Smith property rights which would entitle him to compensation for his soiled clothes. If we implement some such solution, the theory goes, we will create incentives to reduce pollution to the “optimal” level at which further reductions are more costly than the benefits realized from the reductions.

This theory may be used to suggest that actions that are typically regarded as private but contribute to climate change and other problems of the Anthropocene should be regarded as public, since they produce negative externalities. This is the rationale for carbon taxes, cap and trade, regulations reflecting the social cost of carbon and so on. On this view the problem is not with the Distinction, but that we have failed to adopt policies that adequately police the boundary between the public and the private.

This is an elegant theory that even works in practice in some cases. However, it has some problems of its own, and when it comes to actions that contribute to climate change and other problems of the Anthropocene, its theoretical infirmities and practical frailty are very much on display.

The first problem is that rather than providing a foundation for the Distinction, the theory of externalities actually requires something like the Distinction in order to identify externalities in the first place. This is because almost everything we do affects others, often adversely, but we do not regard all of these effects as externalities. When I walk down the street my fashion choices sometimes appall other people. Whether I bike or drive affects traffic flows which affect everyone on the road. My opinions expressed in the morning newspaper make some people nauseous. But none of these effects are ordinarily regarded as externalities. While this is not the place to offer a full account of which effects count as externalities and which do not, we can say as a first approximation that for an effect to count as an externality, it must be considered significant and must result from actions that the actor does not have a presumptive right to undertake.

Consider the following example.²² Kelly has a taste for death metal music which is not shared by Kelly’s neighbors. Their response to the music spilling out of Kelly’s house ranges from the irritated to the offended. Some neighbors are merely annoyed, while others would claim to be harmed. The jurisdiction in **(p.381)** which Kelly lives, like most jurisdictions in the United States, allows Kelly to produce sounds of whatever kind up to a particular decibel level, sustained over a particular period of time, as measured at particular locations. As long as these thresholds have not been exceeded, the sounds produced by Kelly that reach the ears of the neighbors are not an externality, no matter how aggrieved the neighbors may be and how much they may hate Kelly’s taste in music.²³ What matters in this case is the objective characteristics of the sounds rather than how they are experienced by hearers. Our prevailing norms protect Kelly’s right to produce sounds that make other people miserable, so long as Kelly observes some objective boundaries. It is natural to explain this by saying that what counts as an externality presupposes something like a private sphere within which an individual is entitled to act. In this case (and others), something like the Distinction is conceptually and epistemologically prior to the identification and characterization of a negative externality.

Many other examples can be given. While all presuppose something like the Distinction, what is striking

is how different their shapes can be, which reveals how deeply contextual the idea of an externality is. For example, if we regard the noise that Kelly is producing as resulting from a socially beneficial (or even “normal”) activity, we may permit greater noise exposures than if we do not, especially if it occurs at a socially sanctioned time (i.e., the times that “decent” people are normally awake). If Kelly were renovating the house, mowing the lawn, or using a weed whacker or leaf blower, we might well permit much greater sound exposure than in the case of Kelly playing death metal music. Indeed, the neighbors might feel much less affronted by damaging noise levels coming from these beneficial (or “normal”) activities than they do from music that they hate, even if it is at a lower decibel level. Renovation and lawn work maintain or improve property values. The neighbors’ toleration of the negative effects of these activities is reminiscent of the old saw that the smell of pollution is “the smell of money.”²⁴

Like the boundaries of the Distinction itself, what we regard as a negative externality is malleable. In many communities today the smell of pollution is no longer experienced as the smell of money.²⁵ Second-hand smoke was once seen as (p.382) an unremarkable consequence of smoking; it is now seen as a negative externality. In most jurisdictions, Kelly’s dancing naked in Kelly’s apartment with the window open “ain’t nobody’s business,” even if Kelly’s prudish neighbor is outraged.²⁶ But this was not always so in the United States or Europe, and may not always be true in the future.

To summarize, externalities are not simply third-party effects nor even third-party effects of a particular kind. Which third-party effects are externalities is complex and dynamic, and depends on prevailing social norms. Rather than providing a foundation for the Distinction, the theory of externalities relies on many of the same resources as the Distinction.

This point seems to be tacitly understood by many people, though it eludes some academics and policy makers. In some countries there is deep resistance to climate policies that are rationalized by the theory of externalities. Even where these policies have been implemented (e.g. the European Union), they do not reflect the full costs of emitting carbon.²⁷ Even when such policies are accepted, they are typically viewed as just another tax rather than as part of the price of the commodity or service.

There is a further (and even deeper) conceptual difficulty with applying the theory of externalities to actions that contribute to climate change. Actions such as taking hot showers, eating this or that, driving cars, investing here or there, and having children do not in themselves cause damages. Vast, complex, multi-scalar physical and social systems mediate between my hot shower and the deaths and degradation that result from climate change. The emissions produced by my hot shower accumulate with those of the other billion hot showers in the world, travel through space–time, disperse into the workings and feedbacks of various physical and chemical systems operating at different scales, and at no point will the emissions provoked by my shower cause any particular flood, drought, or hurricane, much less the loss of life and property. My hot shower contributes to these harms but it does not cause them. This is because of the mass of variables that intervene between my hot shower and the harms; the complex relations between the various elements in the behavioral/physical systems that are involved; the massively different scales at which my hot shower, climate change, and the ensuing harms occur; and how all of this interacts with the concept of causation.²⁸

(p.383) Our prevailing conception of causation limits the relations that can obtain between different levels of organization—for example, between micro-level processes such as carbon fluxes and macro-level events such as human migrations. Causation, as we currently conceive it, does not nimbly leap over so many levels of organization. In this respect the situation is analogous to the case in which someone might claim that a causal relation exists between some quantum flux and my desire to read *Finnegan's Wake*. Some relation may exist, but not a causal relation: our concept of causation just does not work that way. “A quantum flux made me do it” does not figure in the explanation of human action. However, concepts change and speakers often engage in “persuasive definition” (Stevenson 1938) in order to get us to establish new relations between things and to see existing relations in different ways. Rather than being thought of as making sober claims to truth, those who claim level-leaping causal relations between my taking a shower and some individual person being forced to migrate by climate change are better thought of as engaging in a normative enterprise. They are trying to get us to see things in a new way: to see a causal relation where before we could not see one. Perhaps they will succeed, and we will revise our concept of causation in the way they prefer. Or perhaps we will jettison the concept of causation altogether. At this point nobody knows. What we can say here and now is that what is true of my emissions is true of everyone else's emissions as well. The non-linear, multi-level causal rollercoaster that goes from emissions to climate change and from climate change back to harms and damages does not allow specific instances of the latter to be causally imputed (even in part) to any particular agent. Since my hot shower contributes to climate change but does not cause it, perhaps it should count as private after all and not subject to regulation.²⁹

One way of thinking about cases in which apparently private actions contribute to harmful public consequences is to think of these actions as having two lives.³⁰ They have an episodic life, occurring when these actions are performed, which is harmless and thus private (e.g. me taking a hot shower). But such actions also have a systemic life: the moment I turn on the hot water, an entire “infrastructure of provision”³¹ that presides over the global procurement and distribution of energy is activated, whose workings require the exploitation of limited resources, cause habitat disruptions of various magnitudes, and pump greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The infrastructure of the Anthropocene—the global energy system, the global food system, the global transport system, etc.—is arranged in ways that engender spatiotemporally and genetically unbound harms and damages. When I turn on the hot water, start a car or flip a light switch I become implicated in these infrastructures and attendant global networks of (p.384) eco-altering financial interests, political agreements and avenues of cultural reinforcement, and contribute to their harmful outcomes. This systemic life of our actions is as real as their episodic life: climate change would not occur without all these cars being driven, hot showers taken, switches being flipped and other relevantly similar actions being performed. By performing these episodic actions that also have a systemic life, we partake in, and further propel, a globalized, fossil fueled system that changes climate and thus engenders harms and damages to people and ecosystems across space and time. From this perspective we seem to be left with an irreducible pluralism: some actions can be seen as both episodic and systemic, and so as both private and public. It is not easy to see how this coheres with the Distinction and its centrality to liberalism.

Climate change and the Anthropocene also put pressure on the Distinction by marginalizing or even undermining its traditional justifications. According to Mill, the justification of the Distinction rests on utilitarian grounds:

Utility [is] the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being.

(Mill 1859/1978: 10)

Mill thought that free ranging harmless individuality satisfies this criterion since it leads to a rich variety of opinions and ways of life, which in turn open a wide spectrum of possibilities for societal development, encourage the search for knowledge, refine institutions, and sustain lifestyle experimentation. In addition to benefitting individuals, society at large benefits from individuals doing their own (harmless) thing (Mill 1859/1978: 67–69).

However, in the Anthropocene, for most citizens of liberal democracies, doing one's own thing has come largely to mean heavy consuming. Today, affluent citizens are free to choose, from an ever increasing range of possibilities, products that maximally satisfy whatever their consumer preferences may be. But food, clothing, vehicles, energy, and many other consumer goods and services, as currently provided by globalized supply chains, are typically obtained through processes that deplete natural resources, pollute environments, and produce greenhouse gas emissions. Such unfettered consumer behavior may contribute to the immediate well-being of individual consumers, but that was not what Mill's conception of privateness was primarily meant to protect. Mill's private sphere was one of opinions and practices relating to "experiments in living" that would promote the general good of mankind. It was not a space of unrestrained consumption for its own sake. In fact, pursuing diversity- and innovation-enhancing "experiments in living" in the Anthropocene, particularly in market-enthusiastic liberal democracies, may mean not consuming what is most insistently offered by markets: it may instead mean growing one's own food, recycling clothes and materials, sharing transportation, and so on.

(p.385) Since most private acts of consumption that contribute to climate change and other problems of the Anthropocene are unlikely to be diversity- and innovation-enhancing in the ways valued by Mill, it is doubtful that these everyday consumer behaviors are worthy of protection on Millian grounds.³² Surely they are less worthy of protection than diversity- and innovation-enhancing private "experiments in living."³³ Indeed, a private sphere that protects actions that have the kinds of systemic consequences that we have described may not only fail to provide what Mill regarded as the most important benefits of a protected private sphere, but may undermine the conditions that have made possible human life as we know it.

Respect theorists in the Kantian tradition ground the protection of a private sphere on the value of autonomy and the dignity of our individual capacities for practical reason. For them the Distinction can be seen as both reflecting the value of autonomy and contributing to the maintenance and development of our capacities for practical reason. However, in the Anthropocene, by protecting the heavy consuming that threatens to disrupt the planetary systems on which our familiar ways of life depend, the Distinction may

contribute to undermining the conditions required for practical reason's concrete expression in liberal political communities.³⁴

Rawls (1993/2005) thought that “the fact of reasonable pluralism” was a “permanent feature of the public culture of a democracy” (p. 36) and, while it functioned as a bastion against authoritarianism and institutionalized oppression (p. 37), it also represented the greatest threat to the stability of liberal communities, since comprehensive doctrines can be “conflicting and irreconcilable – and what’s more, reasonable” (p. 36). Rawls’s greatest concern was that diversity and discordance in beliefs could lead to stability-threatening diverse and discordant behaviors. However, the behaviors that drive the problems of the Anthropocene are not diverse and discordant, but mostly quite uniform; and rather than grounded in significant beliefs about how to live, they largely express consumer preferences that are baked into the practices of everyday life. Whatever our religious, cultural, and philosophical persuasions, we all cook and eat; and even (p.386) back-to-nature environmental activists have children. In the Anthropocene even these basic human activities are enabled by and require the workings of global infrastructures of provision that deplete, pollute, and emit. It is agreement in these widely shared, relatively belief-independent behaviors—not diversity and discordance in beliefs leading to diverse and discordant behaviors—that is at the root of the problems of the Anthropocene. It is the shape of everyday life, with its material workings as presently arranged, that is remaking the planet. In an emissions-free world the disagreements in belief and discordant behaviors that Rawls was concerned about would never have undermined planetary systems in the way we are now experiencing.

In sum, climate change and other problems of the Anthropocene put pressure on the Distinction in two important ways. First, they exacerbate the double life of apparently innocent private episodic actions as their systemic dimensions become increasingly prominent and threatening. Second, actions that contribute to climate change and the Anthropocene are often not the kinds of actions whose privateness is particularly worth defending by liberal lights. They do not enhance diversity in desirable ways, and because they are typically relatively belief-independent acts of consumption they are not exactly paradigms of what we might hope for from the deliverances of practical reason. Respecting the private sphere may protect the dignity of practical reason, but in protecting unbridled consumption it may also lead to the disruption of fundamental planetary systems on which human life depends. Liberalism is worth defending, but it may seem that at least in its present forms it is made for a different world than that of the Anthropocene.

4. Pressure Drop?

We have claimed that in the Anthropocene, actions such as taking a hot shower have an episodic life that is innocuous and apparently private, yet they also have a systemic life that contributes to harms across spatial, temporal, and genetic boundaries and thus apparently public. This systemic life is enabled by the workings of globalized infrastructures of provision powered by fossil fueled technologies. Most of us living in liberal societies forget or ignore that many of our actions have this systemic life, and we strenuously defend our jurisdiction over what we buy, what we eat, what we invest in, and how many children we have.

This seems to present us with the following dilemma. If we focus on the systemic life of actions, then each of these actions contributes to spatiotemporally unbound harms and therefore counts, at least by Millian lights, as public. If we focus instead on the episodic life of actions, then each of these actions is discretely harmless, so therefore count, at least by Millian lights, as private. Seeing these actions as public conjures up the specter of a liberal state regulating hot showers, (p.387) driving cars, heating homes, eating meat, having babies and other behaviors generally regarded as beyond its reach. Seeing these actions as private, on the other hand, suggests that we should permit everyday behaviors that are known to contribute to harms and damages of planetary proportions.

Let us see first whether the horns of this dilemma can be dulled. One way of releasing the pressure that climate change and the Anthropocene put on the Distinction is to regard every action with a systemic life as public and open to regulation. Matters of personal hygiene, diet, housing, investment, mobility, and reproduction would thus be seen as matters of public decision-making. This would dissolve the dilemma, but amount to the abandonment of liberalism as we know it: rather than “nobody’s business if I do,” it would be “everybody’s business if I do.” Moreover, there is no guarantee that such an approach would succeed in preventing behaviors that contribute to climate change and the Anthropocene. Illiberal states sometimes succeed in suppressing behavior that a liberal state would consider private (e.g. China’s censorship of the internet), but in other cases illiberal states can’t even control behavior that clearly causes harm to others (e.g. China’s failure to prohibit fireworks during Spring Festival).³⁵

It might be objected that we have exaggerated what it would mean to regard every action with a systemic life as public and open to regulation. Public intervention occurs on a spectrum, ranging from relatively unobtrusive gasoline taxes, for example, to coercive restrictions on reproduction. True enough, but it should be recognized that in some countries even modest interventions are regarded as unacceptable governmental overreach.³⁶ Moreover, the kinds and scale of the interventions that would be required to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions are much more severe than paying a few cents more per gallon for gasoline. They would include, for example, having fewer children, living car-free, avoiding airplane travel, and moving towards a plant-based diet (Wynes and Nicholas 2017). Even on further reflection, the dilemma remains intact and the first horn very sharp.

Dulling the second horn may seem more promising. We could discourage actions that contribute to harms of planetary proportion by moralizing them even while continuing to regard them as private.³⁷ This is arguably the strategy that we pursue with some other actions. We moralize such apparently private matters as watching pornography, holding grudges, dropping out of college, having this or that sexual preference, or devoting time to lysergic acid (p.388) experimentation. We pass moral judgment on smoking, even though it is rare for an individual first-hand smoker (who does not live with a second-hand smoker) to cause the suffering or death of an individual second-hand smoker (and almost never on the spot). The moralization of actions goes beyond the extent to which they cause or contribute to harms, and can involve such attributes as fairness and reciprocity, group membership and loyalty, authority and respect, and purity and sanctity (Haidt 2012).

We could, in the Anthropocene, begin to moralize showering, driving, flipping light switches, eating high

on the food chain, having babies and all those other actions that have a pernicious systemic life, while continuing to accept that because of their harmless episodic dimension such actions should remain beyond the coercive power of the state.³⁸ Much as many people have come to see smoking as unfair, disgusting, disrespectful, or callous, we might come to see hot showering as unfair to future generations, driving as impure, wasting food as disrespectful of those who suffer climate-induced desertification, and having more than one baby as callous towards humanity and the planet. Such actions would remain private and thus beyond the reach of the state, but we would take it upon ourselves to regulate them *in foro interno*: we would be our own censors (with a little help from our friends).

While this is one approach liberals might take, it may strike some as being contrary to liberalism's characteristic spirit of tolerance. For liberalism to persist there must be a broad range of actions, practices, and ways of life about which morality is silent.³⁹

Moreover, the transition to the moralization of such everyday behaviors would be painfully disruptive of the value and cultural systems that liberalism has contributed to or tolerated over the past two and a half centuries. Exactly how disruptive it would be is difficult to say. Would it be more like the transition to the abolition of smoking, or would it be more like China's cultural revolution? Because climate-changing and Anthropocene-creating actions have an episodic as well as a systemic dimension, moralizing these actions might feel like the policing of our inner lives as well as our outward behaviors. To be successful, such change might require something resembling a new religion rather than the rational revision of our everyday moral practices. Perhaps the stakes are so high with climate change and the Anthropocene that such disruption would be justified. Yet the reference to China's cultural revolution also serves as a reminder that such disruptions do not always succeed in achieving their goals. In sum, (p.389) while it is possible to try to dull the second horn of the dilemma, it is hard to see it as remaining anything other than sharp.⁴⁰

There is another response to the dilemma that is in the spirit of liberalism, but at this point more of a recipe than a remedy. Throughout the modern era the Distinction has been something of a trickster, changing its shape in ways that keep it relevant, useful, and productive. Many liberals who have explicitly embraced the Distinction have recognized this, and they have shied away from seeing it as exhaustive, binary, timeless, or context-free. For example, Shklar (1989: 24) writes of the Distinction that "[t]his is not historically a permanent or unalterable boundary [...]." Similarly, Benn writes that:

The liberal cannot give absolute specifications...for what is private and what is not, because privacy is context-relative. I do not mean that standards differ between cultures. That is also true, but it is a different kind of relativity. *Within the one culture* [italics in text] the same matter may count as private or not, relative to the social nexus in which it is embedded.

(Benn 1998: 268)

The power of what is on each side of the Distinction leads to the unavoidability of dilemmas, yet the plasticity of the Distinction allows us to go on. As Rorty writes:

On the *public* side of our lives, *nothing* is less dubious than the worth of these freedoms. On the private side of our lives, there may be much which is *equally* hard to doubt...The existence of these two sides...generates dilemmas. Such dilemmas we shall always have with us, but they are never going to be resolved by appeal to some further, higher set of obligations which a philosophical tribunal might discover and apply.

(Rorty 1989: 197).

Yet it is the very features of the Distinction that allow it to shape-shift that have led some to say that we should do away with it or at least diminish it in our thought. For example, Geuss writes:

There is no single clear distinction between public and private but rather a series of overlapping contrasts, and thus [...] the distinction between the public and the private should not be taken to have the significance often attributed to it.

(Geuss 2001: 6)

(p.390) Geuss seems to think that the Distinction rests on a shifty set of underlying properties and circumstances that do the real work, and this is obscured when we invoke the Distinction as if it had independent power. A similar argument could be made about the HP: the line between harm and offense is not to be found in Plato's heaven, but in the messy facts of human psychology and social norms. Furthermore, as we have noted, the difference between an unpleasant byproduct of production and consumption, and the externalization of a cost, is in part a function of malleable norms that can be difficult to codify. Yet these observations do not drain these concepts of their utility. Geuss's observations are correct but it does not follow that the abstract languages of "externality," "harm," "public," or "private" are misleading or less significant in virtue of them.⁴¹

Despite such objections, the Distinction has persisted and played important roles in politics, jurisprudence, and morality. It has taken different forms at different times in various societies and contexts, generally remaining in the shadows and refusing to subject itself to constraining definitions. This may continue in the Anthropocene, with the Distinction taking on whatever form is required to do its work as part of the infrastructure of liberal society.⁴² The pressures of climate change and the Anthropocene may force a reshaping of the Distinction rather than its abandonment, bringing peace between the episodic and systemic dimensions of our actions even in this new epoch. Perhaps we could expel from the perimeter of privateness certain kinds of consumption, but keep what Mill and Rawls thought was most worth defending: those actions and behaviors related to "experiments in living" and our capacity to autonomously form and pursue conceptions of the good life. More broadly, we may come to think that some actions and behaviors that are now regarded as private are not worth defending at all, and other actions and behaviors that are worth defending episodically may still have to be expelled because of their systemic consequences for the planet. Using some such approach we could attempt to reverse the wheel of the presently unsustainable infrastructures of provision—avoiding attendant greenhouse gas emissions, land and water depletion, biodiversity loss, and so on—while keeping what is most important and exciting about privateness—the self-expression, diversity, and innovation that it protects and promotes. Perhaps in

this way we could edit the Distinction to fit both the circumstances of the new epoch and the original justifications that powered the last two and a half centuries of liberal political theory and practice.

This would be an epochal experiment indeed, requiring a significant revamping of the ways in which liberal societies currently understand the (p.391) Distinction and how they deliver goods and services to their citizens.⁴³ It is hard to see from here exactly how the boundaries would be drawn between the public and private, on what occasions and in what circumstances, and what alternative social and economic arrangements would emerge. Even how to conduct such an experiment is not clear, nor can we be sure that the experiment would succeed. But no epochal social change was ever neatly planned in advance, and the price of not deviating from our present course may be so great as to make the experiment worth trying even without the guarantee of success.⁴⁴ This may not be an intellectually elegant approach to the dilemma that we have posed, but it may be the only one that is pragmatically possible.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter we have focused on the ways in which climate change and more generally the Anthropocene—this new epoch in which no earthly place, form, entities, processes, and systems escape the influence of human activity—put pressure on one particular distinction that is at the heart of liberal theory: that between the public and the private. The Distinction has always been pivotal for liberalism, but also shifty, unstable, and rarely discussed explicitly and analytically. In the Anthropocene, liberals are now challenged, by the very material conditions and ecological implications of the form of life that they have helped to create, to revivify the Distinction or let it fade into the background or disappear. The Distinction took root in our sensibilities because it offered the promise of a protected sphere in which individuals could invent and pursue their own ways of living and conceptions of the good life. The Anthropocene forces a reexamination of these roots to see whether the Distinction can find new life in radically changing circumstances, or whether it is destined to decay in soil that has been exploited, polluted, and impoverished by the unintended effects of systemic, interlocking forces and structures that dominate our economies, politics, and even private lives. It is too early to say whether the Distinction will survive the Anthropocene, but we hope to have illuminated the challenge.⁴⁵

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Notes:

⁽¹⁾ Framework Convention on Climate Change, Article 2, available at <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf>. For global CO₂ emissions, visit http://cdiac.ess-dive.lbl.gov/ftp/ndp030/global.1751_2014.ems; and <https://www-iaea-org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/geco/emissions/>.

⁽²⁾ In 2016 the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS), the authoritative body that sets global standards for categorizing the history of the Earth, recommended that the ICS recognize a new geological epoch that began around 1950 when plastics and elemental aluminum became ubiquitous, plutonium from atmospheric nuclear testing first became visible in sediments, and a spike in fly ash residue from the high-temperature combustion of coal and oil became apparent (see <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/29/declare-anthropocene-epoch-experts-urge-geological-congress-human-impact-earth>). On the stratigraphic evidence for the Anthropocene, see Zalasiewicz et al. (2019); for skepticism about the Anthropocene as a geological epoch, see Finney and Edwards (2016) (Finney was Chair of the ICS at the time of writing this paper).

⁽³⁾ This term has also given rise to passionate controversies, often reflecting the fault lines between the “two cultures” (Snow 1959) of the sciences and humanities. Some of these controversies are discussed in Hamilton et al. (2015). For our own interventions in these debates see Jamieson and Di Paola (2016), Di Paola and Jamieson (2018), Di Paola (2017), Jamieson and Nadzam (2015), and Jamieson (2017).

(⁴) This list of (related but categorically different) pair-wise oppositions is far from exhaustive. Two books that map much of the terrain are Benn and Gaus (1983), and Weintraub and Kumar (1997).

(⁵) Arendt (1958). Generally, on the history of the Distinction see Horwitz (1982), Bobbio (1989), Geuss (2001), and Mahajan (2009).

(⁶) Geuss (2001: 1–5) credits Humboldt and Constant as particularly important in developing the Distinction within the context of liberal theory.

(⁷) The classic natural rights defense of libertarianism is in Nozick (1974). Consequentialist defenses of libertarianism have been most influential in the work of economists such as Hayek (1960). There are Kantian libertarians though they are not easy to find (but visit <https://www.libertarianism.org/publications/essays/kantian-case-libertarianism>).

(⁸) The rise of social media and other privately owned digital platforms that gather data about their users and reconstruct their propensities with a precision that may be politically pernicious complicates this negotiation significantly. The issue of what is private and what is public in the cyber-cloud that we all now inhabit opens another set of challenges to the Distinction, which we do not address here.

(⁹) As DeCew (2015) points out, “Privacy can refer to a sphere separate from government, a domain inappropriate for governmental interference, forbidden views and knowledge, solitude, or restricted access, to list just a few”—in other words it can refer to the private domain, and it is clear from context that this is how Benn is using the term here. The American tradition of legal philosophy that descends from Warren and Brandeis (1890) tends to have a narrower view of privacy, viewing it as a single interest or bundle of related interests.

(¹⁰) For discussions of the Distinction from a broadly Marxist perspective see the essays collected in Mouffe (1996).

(¹¹) See also Lloyd (1984).

(¹²) This paragraph has been informed by correspondence with Samuel Freeman, Gerald Gaus, and Leif Wenar. Of course, they are not responsible for what we say.

(¹³) This is part of what Rawls calls “the duty of civility” (1993/2005: 217). The duty of civility is a non-legal moral duty citizens have to “be able to explain to one another on [...] fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason. This duty also involves a willingness to listen to others and a fair-mindedness in deciding when accommodations to their view should reasonably be made” (Rawls 1993/2005: 217).

(¹⁴) Although he does not mention Wittgenstein in this regard, we speculate that Rawls’s rejection of private reason is related to Wittgenstein’s rejection of private language. Recent scholarship has emphasized Wittgenstein’s influence on Rawls’s thought (see, e.g. the symposium on Rawls’s archival papers in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* 78(2) (April, 2017)).

(¹⁵) It is perhaps especially ironic in that *Political Liberalism* began life as the 1980 Dewey Lectures at Columbia. For Rawls's engagement with Dewey, see Botti (2017).

(¹⁶) The focus on reasons in contemporary moral and political philosophy (rather than e.g. linguistic or other metaphysical constructions) is a large and complicated topic that we cannot discuss here.

(¹⁷) For example, Geuss (2001: 81); Gaus (1996: 171); and Rorty (1989). See also DeCew's (2015) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on "Privacy" (<https://plato-stanford-edu.proxy.library.nyu.edu/entries/privacy/>).

(¹⁸) Notice that Dewey's language of affecting is broader than Mill's language of harming. However, Mill also recognized that actions can have positive "spillover" effects that can justify state action (e.g. the provision of free public education); see note 21 below.

(¹⁹) See Brink (2013: 183–187), and note 21 below.

(²⁰) For Bessie Smith's 1923 recording, visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cngx_KKiWE. For a particularly awesome version, see Freddie King's at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FILEQ8guI1c>.

(²¹) Mill's argument for the public provision of education was based in part on his recognition of the positive externalities that education provides to society as a whole (see his 1848 *Principles of Political Economy with some of their Applications to Social Philosophy*, Book V, Chapter XI ("Of the Grounds and Limits of the Laisser-faire or Non-Interference Principle")). Sidgwick discussed the negative externalities related to the depletion of natural resources, the diversion of waterways, and the neglect of the interests of future generations in his 1883 *The Principles of Political Economy*, Book 3, Chapter 2 ("The System of Natural Liberty Considered in Relation to Production") and Chapter 4 ("Important Cases of Government Interference to Promote Production"). Pigou's classic treatment is in his 1920 *The Economics of Welfare*, Part 2, Chapter 9 ("Divergences Between Marginal Social Net Product and Marginal Private Net Product"). Interestingly, none of these figures actually used the term 'externality'. The earliest use of the term that we have been able to find is in Bator (1958: 351).

(²²) This and the following paragraph reprise arguments found in Jamieson (2002: ch. 17, section 3).

(²³) It might be objected that the effects of Kelly's music are externalities but not actionable externalities. This response provides no way out since something like the Distinction would then be needed for distinguishing externalities from actionable externalities.

(²⁴) What this case shows, it might be said, is that the positive externalities of weed whacking are at least equal to the negative externalities, so weed whacking is accepted and we do not treat it as imposing externalities. Fully addressing this claim would take us too far afield, but suffice it to say that in this case the normative content supplied by something like the Distinction is being imported into the evaluation of the economic consequences of the act in question, and this carries more than a whiff of adhocery. Moreover, we don't ordinarily treat these as cases in which positive and negative externalities are

balanced; we treat them instead as cases in which the theory of externalities does not apply because we are within our rights to operate a weed whacker, at least within certain hours.

(²⁵) See, e.g. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/opinion/readers/2016/11/11/smell-money-isnt-funny-anymore/93451068/>.

(²⁶) Virtually all liberal jurisdictions recognize the right of individuals to be naked in their own houses but limit it in various ways, sometimes taking intent to be important and other times reconfiguring the Distinction in such a way that under certain conditions acts performed on one's own property are regarded as public. There are interesting issues here that we cannot explore in detail.

(²⁷) It should also be recognized that economists disagree on the social cost of carbon by an order of magnitude or more. For recent discussions see, e.g., Hansel et al. (2020), Kent et al. (2019), and Scovronick, et al. (2017).

(²⁸) This is a controversial claim put forward in Jamieson (2014a: ch. 5) and earlier in Sinnott-Armstrong (2005). A full explication and defense would have to provide precise understandings of such notions as contribution and causation, taking us well beyond the bounds of this chapter.

(²⁹) This should not be taken to imply that we cannot hold agents morally or legally responsible for their contributions on other grounds. For discussion in the context of climate change, see Lazerus et al. (2020). For a more general discussion, see Jamieson (2016). Thanks to Michael Morck for prompting this note.

(³⁰) Di Paola (2017: 24-25).

(³¹) See Southerton et al. (2004); Van Vliet et al. (2005).

(³²) Worries have been voiced many times over, and from many different quarters, that the consumerist culture that dominates the globalized world of the Anthropocene has powerful homogenizing (rather than diversifying) effects on people's choices and lifestyles—thus depleting the private sphere of much that is most important and exciting about it. See, e.g., Marcuse (1964); Ewen (1976); Ewen and Ewen (1982); and Dawson (2004). For a pugnacious version of this argument, according to which anti-democratic forces have used consumerism to hollow out public life by colonizing the private sphere through market channels, see N. Chomsky's 2017 online interview at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYoKRS_eWZY.

(³³) The point made in this paragraph applies to industrialized liberal democracies especially. In the case of developing countries, consumption may more closely track human development and Mill's cherished "experiments in living."

(³⁴) In particular, destabilizing these planetary systems may threaten liberal democracy. For further discussion, see Di Paola and Jamieson (2018).

(³⁵) <https://www-ft-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/content/371a8ff8->

e440-11e6-8405-9e5580d6e5fb?mhq5j=e1.

(³⁶) We are thinking of course of the United States. Survey data suggests that for most of the last two decades Americans have thought that there was too much government regulation of business (visit <https://news-gallup-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/poll/220400/americans-views-government-regulation-remain-steady.aspx>), and this has generally been reflected in decisions by the US Supreme Court.

(³⁷) This is suggested by John Broome (2012) who believes that, as a matter of private morality, we should offset all of our carbon emissions. For a critical response see Jamieson (2014b).

(³⁸) Arguably, this is already occurring. For a general study of one such informal sanction (shame), see Jacquet (2015).

(³⁹) Of course there is such a thing as perfectionist liberalism. For discussion (but not endorsement) see Quong (2010); Nussbaum (2011).

(⁴⁰) In Chapter 6 of his far-sighted work, *Harm to Others* (1984), Joel Feinberg sketches an account of “accumulative harms” in which he seems to have a view that is different from but related to the pluralism that we discuss. According to Feinberg, individual acts of polluting are only harmful if they are “unlawful as judged by a regulative agency applying rules for allocating permits in accordance with specific rules of fairness and efficiency” (p. 230). On his view it seems that some apparently private acts of polluting can only be harmful once they have been taken up in the public domain. Yet such acts would continue to live a double life, and harm (at least in this domain) would now be a consequence of how the Distinction is drawn rather than providing a foundation for it.

(⁴¹) Similar observations could be made about goodness. Philosophers may fruitlessly search for a “single clear distinction between” the good and the bad; this may lead to madness or bad philosophy, but not to the conclusion that goodness “should not be taken to have the significance often attributed to it.”

(⁴²) Cf. Kysar (2011) who makes a similar point with regard to tort law.

(⁴³) In an important early paper on climate change, Revelle and Suess (1957: 19–20) described our returning to the atmosphere and oceans the concentrated organic carbon stored in sedimentary rocks over hundreds of millions of years as an experiment. Perhaps this physical experiment with the planet requires a social and political experiment in response.

(⁴⁴) As Professor Irwin Corey was fond of reminding us, “If we don’t change direction soon, we’ll end up where we’re going” (as quoted in Jamieson and Nadzam 2015).

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