

# IS ANTHROPOGENIC CLIMATE CHANGE EVIL?

## THE APPLICATION OF THE ATROCITY PARADIGM TO CLIMATE CHANGE

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### **Abstract**

Why differentiate between evils and mere wrongs? Evils require more immediate and profound action than other wrongs. Evils must be counteracted and addressed head-on; they cannot be merely recognized without deliberate efforts to stop them. In this paper, I argue that human-caused climate change is indeed one of those evils. To argue this, I employ Claudia Card's theory of evil, termed the Atrocity Paradigm, which defines evil as "reasonably foreseeable intolerable harm, produced by inexcusable wrongdoing." This paper thus examines each of the three elements of the Atrocity Paradigm as it relates to climate change and shows that it meets each of the three measures. As a result, I conclude that human-caused climate change is indeed an evil rather than a mere wrong, which suggests a dire need to promptly prevent its continuation. For the purposes of this paper, the discussion of the adverse effects of human-caused climate change is narrowed to the evaluation of rising sea levels and more frequent, unpredictable, and severe storms in coastal and island areas. Anthropogenic climate change, thus, is treated and subsequently judged as a moral evil. Since it is human-caused, the effects of climate change

studied in this paper are not deemed natural evils and must be prevented through human (re)action.

### **Keywords**

Atrocity Paradigm, evil, climate change, environmental philosophy, environmental evil

### **Resumen**

¿Por qué distinguir entre males y meros daños? Los males requieren una acción más inmediata y profunda que otros daños. Los males deben ser contrarrestados y abordados de frente; no pueden ser simplemente reconocidos sin esfuerzos deliberados para detenerlos. En este artículo sostengo que el cambio climático provocado por el hombre es uno de esos males. Para argumentar esto, empleo la teoría del mal de Claudia Card, denominada Paradigma de la Atrocididad, que define el mal como “un daño intolerable y razonablemente previsible, producido por una mala acción inexcusable”. Este artículo examina cada uno de los tres elementos del Paradigma de la Atrocididad en relación con el cambio climático y demuestra que cumple cada una de las tres medidas. Como resultado, concluyo que el cambio climático provocado por el ser humano es realmente un mal y no un mero daño, lo que sugiere la necesidad imperiosa de impedir con prontitud que continúe. A los efectos de este artículo, el debate sobre los efectos adversos del cambio climático de origen humano se limita a la evaluación de la subida del nivel del mar y la mayor frecuencia, imprevisibilidad y gravedad de las tormentas en las zonas costeras e insulares. El cambio climático antropogénico, por tanto, se trata y posteriormente se juzga como un mal moral. Al ser provocado por el hombre, los efectos del cambio climático

estudiados en este documento no se consideran males naturales y deben evitarse mediante la (re)acción humana.

### **Palabras clave**

Paradigma de la Atrocididad, mal, cambio climático, filosofía medioambiental, mal medioambiental

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### **Introduction**

This essay will assess whether climate change is evil according to Card's theory of evil termed the Atrocity Paradigm. The Atrocity Paradigm posits that evil is "reasonably foreseeable intolerable harm, produced by inexcusable wrongdoing" (Card, 2010 p. 16). As such, I will examine each of the three elements of the Atrocity Paradigm as it relates to climate change. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on a single ramification of climate change, namely, the life-threatening impact of rising sea levels and more frequent, unpredictable, and severe storms on people who live in coastal and island areas.<sup>1</sup> I begin with an argument that these effects of climate change are foreseeable. Next, I discuss how rising sea levels and severe storms consequently result in the death or forced displacement of coastal inhabitants, which I argue fits Card's definition of intolerable harm. I consider an objection to this point but ultimately maintain that forced displacement constitutes intolerable harm. This will then give way to a discussion about inexcusable wrongdoing and culpability. Here I

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<sup>1</sup> I treat this single manifestation as indicative of climate change as a whole. I do not mean to imply that this is the only evil effect of climate change. I merely use it as a case study to narrow the scope, and allow for a more specific analysis in my evaluation that climate change is evil.

consider several objections on the grounds that the adverse effects of climate change are not wholly inexcusable and that it is difficult to assign blame. However, I contend that the intolerable harm suffered by victims of anthropogenic climate change is not mitigated by any other moral reason, and thus that those intolerable harms are produced by inexcusable wrongdoing. Accordingly, having confirmed that each component of the Atrocity Paradigm applies to this case of climate change, I conclude that climate change is indeed evil according to Card's theory of evil.

My purpose is twofold. First, I seek to condemn anthropogenic climate change as evil in order to make clear just how dire the situation is for the victims of human-caused climate change. Evils, as opposed to mere wrongs, require our greater attention and more immediate remedy. Anthropogenic climate change does not have a simple solution, and reducing its catastrophic ramifications takes significant resources and shared commitments globally. By prescribing the label of evil (rather than mere wrongness), I also aim to highlight the degree of importance in collectively securing preventative measures to halt the continuation and exacerbation of anthropogenic climate change. I also would like to make clear that in discussing climate change, I refer explicitly and solely to changes in climate that are a result of human activity. The climate changes naturally, and severe storms may result from atmospheric changes irrespective of human activity. Those storms and other naturally occurring climate events may cause suffering and harm, indeed, sometimes even deadly harm. But those events that result naturally are not the kind of evil I wish to examine (what may be termed "natural evils"). In my discussion of "evils," I mean only *moral* evils. Therefore, when I say I focus on rising sea levels and more frequent severe storms, I mean those that

result unnaturally from a climate that *humans* have changed through anthropogenic pollution.

The first component of the Atrocity Paradigm requires that an evil be reasonably foreseeable (Card, 2010). According to Russell and Bolton (2019), awareness of climate change is widespread. It is common knowledge that rapidly increasing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions contribute to climate change, which manifests in catastrophic effects such as “melting icecaps, rising sea levels...extreme weather events, [un]inhabitable dead zones” and so on (*ibid* p. 3), and particularly for coastal and island nations who are disproportionately impacted (IPCC, 2023). Knowledge about the harmful, even deadly, impacts of dangerous levels of GHG emissions in the atmosphere is ubiquitous, as is knowledge that those emissions are the result of human (rather than natural) activity.<sup>2</sup> It is undeniable, then, that the life-threatening consequences of anthropogenic climate change on inhabitants of coastal and island areas are foreseeable. Therefore, climate change adheres to the first requirement of the Atrocity Paradigm.

The second component of Card’s theory of evil mandates that the evil must be or cause intolerable harm. According to Card (2010), a harm is intolerable if it makes life not worth living from the viewpoint of the person whose life it is. In other words, “intolerable” signifies the deprivation of basic necessities (such as reliable access to food, drinking water, clean air, and social contact) needed to sustain a tolerable life. “Tolerable,” in turn, is a life minimally worth living for the person whose life it is (which, again, means that the person has access to basic necessities and is free from

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the IPCC begin their 2023 report on climate change with the blunt statement: “human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gases, have unequivocally caused global warming” (p. 4). See the report for more details.

severe physical or mental suffering).<sup>3</sup> As mentioned, excessive GHG emissions cause ocean levels to rise, leading to the submergence and increased vulnerability of inhabitable coastal land to life-threatening weather. In the simplest terms, climate change endangers human life. People who live in coastal areas or on islands face the very real possibility of death because of climate change. Patently, if people are unable to survive, then they cannot access basic necessities (since, rather obviously, they will be dead). For Sen (1999 p. 18), a tolerable life includes “the ‘capabilities’ of persons to lead the kind of lives they value—and have reason to value.” When people are deprived of basic freedoms (like physical security) that eliminate their “capability to escape premature mortality or preventable morbidity,” such as is the case with the climate events considered in this paper, they suffer what Card would call intolerable harm (*ibid* p. 17). Therefore, the deadly effects of climate change cause people to lose rudimentary access to basic necessities and physical safety critical for their survival, and so, on Card’s account, are intolerable harms.

However, one may object to the claim that this constitutes intolerable harm on two grounds. First, one may say that facing existential threat does not necessarily entail inevitable death, as people can flee to inland areas where rising sea levels do not pose the same dangers. Second, one may object that a mere *threat* of harm is not tantamount to the intolerable harm Card requires of evils. I reply to both objections by drawing on de Shalit (2011).

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<sup>3</sup> See Card (2010). For the purpose of this paper and its space limitations, I apply Card’s theory of evil to the case of climate change without arguing for her theory myself. Though I admit that one may object to Card’s vague definitions of tolerable and intolerable life, my purpose in this paper is not to evaluate Card’s Atrocity Paradigm. My aim is only to assess whether climate change is evil on her account.

First, de Shalit (2011) explains that rising sea levels cause people living in coastal and island communities to become climate refugees, resulting in their forced displacement. Card (2010 p. 29) states that an inability to make choices independent of constraints or compulsions counts as intolerable harm. Forced displacement means that coastal inhabitants are compelled to flee from deadly climate events. They are unable to make any other choices (since *not* fleeing is not an option)<sup>4</sup>; therefore, their forced displacement is an intolerable harm. Sen (1999 p. 76) agrees, saying that having the freedom to choose is a valuable right, and so being compelled into something beyond one's control violates this right.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, as de Shalit (2011) expounds, rising sea levels submerge coastal and island areas, meaning that displaced inhabitants' homes altogether cease to exist. In essence, the displaced climate refugees lose their sense of place. De Shalit argues further that the *permanence* of losing one's sense of place through forceful displacement is commensurate to losing an integral piece of one's self-identity and connection to others. Indeed, Sagoff (1992 p. 358) notes that a place "functions as a center of felt value because human needs, cultural and social as well as

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, technically speaking the option of not fleeing is available. Despite the inevitability of a certain death in these cases, people can choose to not flee, but this choice would mean succumbing to certain death. Accordingly, I do not treat this as a choice in the way Card uses it, since it is not a choice free from compulsion.

<sup>5</sup> The UN's department of human rights recognizes that being compelled to relocate often results in migrants' inability to "make choices about when and how they move," which means "they are therefore more likely to migrate in conditions that do not respect the dignity of the human being" (OHCHR, 2018). Not only does this indicate that forced displacement makes people migrate beyond their will, but they are also often denied the ability to make choices in the process of migration itself.

biological, are satisfied in it.” This means, as Anderson (2004 p. 47) states, that our self-identities are inextricably linked with our place identities. Further, Sagoff (1992 p. 389-390) writes that “a sense of place depends as well upon a sense of temporal community—a consistency with the past and continuity with the future.” So when displaced climate refugees permanently lose their homes and places, they also lose that temporal community, too. Additionally, the process of forced displacement itself is a significant “source of fear and anxiety” (de Shalit, 2011 p. 315). Card’s (2010 p. 29) definition of intolerable harm includes severe suffering (including “debilitating fear”) and loss of social contact, which are entailed in forced displacement and the subsequent loss of one’s sense of identity.

Identity, in the sense that de Shalit communicates it, refers to the multifaceted social vitality integrated with one’s connection to their physical community and to others. It is reasonable to assume, then, that in losing one’s home, one does indeed lose a compelling piece of their identity. That is to say, a person’s identity is composed in part of various aspects of their social life, such as their relationships and connections to their community, home, and other people. These social aspects together play a crucial role in shaping a person’s sense of who they are (succinctly summarized by Anderson’s (2004 p. 47) aphorism, “*who* you are is dependent on *where* you are”). Since forced displacement causes one to lose those social aspects, forcefully displaced climate refugees essentially lose a piece of themselves in the process. According to Card, social contact is a basic necessity, the absence of which can make life intolerable. If we extend the basic necessity of social contact to include the sense of belonging to a physical place (which on de Shalit’s account is a paramount facet of self-identity), then we can conclude that losing one’s sense of place, and thus a part of

one's identity, is an intolerable harm. Indeed, Sen (1999 p. 75) helps make this connection. Sen defines functionings as "the things a person may value doing or being," such as being free from avoidable death and "being able to take part in the life of the community," i.e., social vitality. Capability, meanwhile, refers to what one is able to do and what one has the opportunity to do. Forceful displacement (and losing one's social ties and aspects of their identity) deprives one of those basic functionings, and thus deprives them of certain capabilities to realize those functionings.

I therefore reply to the first objection above (which objected to the point that rapidly rising sea levels and more frequent storms entail certain death) by agreeing that death is not invariably the only consequence for victims of climate change. As de Shalit (2011) explains, the emergence of climate refugees is extant, which indicates that (at least some) people flee submerging coastal land. Thus, victims of climate change considered in this paper face forced displacement, not only death. Nevertheless, I argued that forced displacement resulting from rising sea levels and severe storms in coastal areas, like death, is an intolerable harm and hence maintain that climate change is an intolerable harm.

The second objection above questions whether the mere threat of harm is enough to be considered "intolerable" according to the Atrocity Paradigm. In response, I draw on de Shalit (2011) once more, who asserts that even the mere threat of death or forced displacement causes people to suffer from extreme anxiety and a sense of peril. Even more compellingly, he argues that the threat itself forces one to lose the positive "psychological ties to one's place and therefore to one's identity;" and thus does not enable one to sustain the "positive sense of identity that the place engendered" for them (*ibid* p. 322). In other words, de Shalit

argues that such a considerable existential threat can cause one's perception of their home, and subsequently their identity, to reverse from a positive one to a gloomy, dejected one. Again, de Shalit argues that the forceful displacement from one's physical home (due to permanent climate change events) is a type of identity loss. But more than that, he implies that the threat of such displacement is enough to cause one to have negative associations like fear toward their home—something that ought to be an otherwise positive facet of one's identity. Essentially, it seems de Shalit argues that harboring negative psychological associations toward a part of one's identity alters one's identity in harmful ways.

Again, according to de Shalit (2011), facing legitimate existential threat or legitimate threat of forced displacement causes psychological torment including extreme fear, anxiety, and stress which can then presumably foster profound trauma. If one is living in an area where rising sea levels and severe storms threaten the permanent destruction or loss of the land, then one is subjected to an existence marred by extreme unease and concern. Further, since rising sea levels and severe storms threaten not only death but forced displacement, and since forced displacement (as earlier argued) constitutes a form of identity loss, climate change threatens the loss of identity, in addition to mental and physical harm. This, as mentioned, can alter one's association to their place, and thus alter parts of their identity in detrimental ways. Taken together, those living in coastal and island areas must live in a state of constant uncertainty; in a state of fear of losing their lives, their homes and homeland, and subsequently, pieces of their identity and social connection to others in their community.

Moreover, as aforementioned, Card (2010) asserts that “debilitating fear” and severe mental suffering are intolerable harms. Although existential threat is not an action (or even a

deliberate nonaction), the trauma and extensive suffering it causes is real and legitimate. Put simply, those living in coastal and island areas suffer actual harm from the threat of climate change events. That threat includes the threat of physical harm (including death) as well as the threat of forced displacement and the loss of one's place and thus identity. That harm includes severe mental suffering in the form of fear, anxiety, and trauma, which, on Card's account, is intolerable harm. Therefore, I argue that the threat of impending catastrophic consequences of anthropogenic climate change produces actual, real suffering and not only the threat of suffering. That suffering is severe mental anguish, fear, and trauma which Card identifies as intolerable. And since the threat of forced displacement results in the actual felt harms of mental suffering and the actual (adverse) changes to one's identity perceptions, the threat itself is in fact intolerable harm.

Furthermore, Bell's (2011) analysis explains how victims of anthropogenic climate change suffer basic human rights violations (such as forced displacement). In discussing whether a mere risk to human rights (such as the risk of forced displacement) constitutes a violation of one's basic human rights, he argues that having rights does not merely mean being free from violations that are presently hindering those rights. Rather, for Bell, human rights must be extended to ensure adequate protection from threats of violations of one's rights— that is, to possess our rights, we must have an assurance that we can enjoy our rights. Effectively, inadequate protection from human rights violations can itself be a violation. However, Bell (2011 p. 111) makes clear he is not talking about just any possible threat to human rights, only what he calls a "social guarantee" against "standard threats," meaning that we ought to be protected from reasonably predictable threats. Anthropogenic climate

change is one of those “standard,” or reasonably predictable, threats according to Bell. In other words, Bell offers a further argument for why the threat of forced displacement is intolerable harm. The argument can be stated as follows: Forced displacement is a human rights violation. A failure to protect against reasonably predictable threats to human rights is also a human rights violation. Anthropogenic climate change is one of those reasonably predictable threats.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, those who face the threat of forced displacement due to anthropogenic climate change have their basic human rights jeopardized (and thus violated according to Bell), since adequate measures are not in place to prevent forced displacement for people living in coastal or island areas. And since intolerable is defined as a deprivation of basic rights, this threat is an intolerable harm.

When considering the deadly consequences of climate change considered in this essay, it is important to note that this is not a question of *potential* threat. It is commonly known that sea levels are continually rising and that there are areas that were once coastal but are now fully submerged. In other words, climate change is not merely a threat; it has already resulted in the deaths and forced displacement of many coastal and island inhabitants, and will result in many more if ocean levels continue to rise. Therefore, the threat here considered is not one that may or may not happen. Unless profound changes are made to slow the emissions of GHGs into the atmosphere, ocean levels will continue to rise and storms will be more frequent and more severe. The question, then, is not whether there is a threat, or even whether the threat will be realized. Rather, it is a question of when it *will* happen. The threat facing people who live in coastal and island areas is palpable and legitimate. The

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<sup>6</sup> See also the earlier argument about reasonable foreseeability.

intolerable harm resulting from that threat is likewise palpable and legitimate.

I therefore maintain that forced displacement can indeed make one lose an important psychological aspect of themselves and their identity. And, as noted earlier, since Card admits that a loss of social contact can be an intolerable harm, I readily assume that she would allow that losing a compelling aspect of one's identity also constitutes an intolerable harm. Indeed, in her discussions on genocide, Card puts forward a concept of what she terms "social death" (Card, 2003; 2010). Though my discussion here differs from her analysis of cultural genocide, the concept is useful in my own analysis. According to Card (2003 p. 63), social death is a loss of social vitality that can have profound consequences for individuals and communities, including "a loss of identity and consequently a serious loss of meaning for one's existence." As earlier argued, permanently losing one's place also means losing the social vitality that the place fostered. Therefore, the permanence of a loss of place may be a type of social death.

Card (2003 p. 76) further asserts that a mere memory of one's place is "insufficient to create social vitality" since all that is left for the person is the *memory* of the social relations they once had rather than their *actual* full participation. This is reminiscent, too, of Sagoff's notion of temporal community described earlier in the paper. For Card, our relationships are what give meaning to our lives (Snow, 2016). Since people have strong relationships with their place, homes, and homelands, losing those relationships deprives people of a compelling and meaningful aspect of their lives (and surely having meaning in life is requisite for life to be tolerable). A mere memory of that is not the same as having those relationships. I do not mean to suggest that forced displacement due to anthropogenic climate change is

synonymous with cultural genocide, but the concept of social death seems to shed additional light on just how intolerable the harm is for these victims of anthropogenic climate change who are forcefully displaced.

While what is meant by a life not worth living remains vague (see earlier footnote), I argue from a position that accepts Card's theory of evil. Thus, using her definitions, I contend that a loss of identity and sense of place, coupled with severe suffering through the manifestations of fear, anxiety, and an inability to make decisions free from compulsion (all of which are present in the case of forced displacement), satisfies the intolerable harm condition in Card's theory of evil. In other words, I argue that the effects of climate change considered here adhere to Card's definition of intolerable harm, which is the second component of the Atrocity Paradigm.

Thus far, I have argued that the first two conditions of the Atrocity Paradigm (that evil is reasonably foreseeable and an intolerable harm) apply to the case of climate change I consider in this essay. I argued that since the anthropogenic causes of climate change and its dangerous consequences are widely understood, it is clearly reasonably foreseeable. I then argued, by use of de Shalit and others, that the ramifications of climate change considered in this paper result in the forced displacement and death of inhabitants of coastal land, which are intolerable harms according to Card's definitions. Next, I will evaluate how those intolerable harms are produced by inexcusable wrongs, which is the final component of the Atrocity Paradigm.

Norlock (2004) examines the Atrocity Paradigm's application to environmental evils against ecosystems. Although her aims differ from those considered in this paper,

she offers a useful point that calls for greater attention.<sup>7</sup> She suggests that climate change is evil on an intuitive level because it is human-caused, and because it has resulted, and will continue to result in, irreversible consequences (*ibid* p. 90; 91). Not only does this build on the previous point that the effects of climate change constitute intolerable harm, but it offers some reasoning as to why it is inexcusable. More specifically, it seems to suggest the following argument. Human activity emits dangerous levels of GHGs into the atmosphere, causing the Earth's climate to change. The changing climate, in turn, has caused sea levels to rise and more severe storms to occur, which has submerged what was once inhabitable land. That outcome is irreversible—those submerged lands cannot be returned. And since, as argued earlier, that loss of land conveys intolerable harm for the people who once inhabited that land, the intolerable harm is likewise irreversible. Furthermore, anthropogenic emissions are causing sea levels to continue to rise, which means that these intolerable and irreversible harms will surely continue to occur. At the very least, then, that the effects of climate change are human-caused and irreversible seems to offer an intuitive explanation for why it is inexcusable wrongdoing.

However, more needs to be said about what exactly is meant by inexcusable wrongdoing before it can be adequately assessed whether or not the effects of anthropogenic climate change adhere to the final component of the Atrocity Paradigm. Card (2010 p. 37) clarifies that calling evil “inexcusable” means that there

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<sup>7</sup> See Norlock (2004). Her line of inquiry focuses on whether Card's definition of intolerable harm applies to nonhuman and insentient beings. Though she does not offer an in-depth discussion of inexcusable wrongs or culpability, I derive the following interesting point from her arguments.

cannot be a “morally appropriate and defensible reason in favor of the deed or practice.” In other words, if a harm can be morally justified in some way (i.e., in that it is for the so-called greater good), then that harm is not evil (though on Card’s account, it can still be morally wrong). In the case of anthropogenic climate change, one can argue that although human action results in harm, those actions contribute to an overall higher quality of life. That is, although human activity releases emissions that cause the aforementioned intolerable harms, they are not wholly inexcusable because there is some good that results from it (i.e., we can fly all over the world, get same-day delivery, and so on).

I acknowledge that there are myriad human actions that indeed cause climate change, but simultaneously provide goods and services that improve quality of life. However, I argue that those are not morally justifiable reasons. The fact that people have access to increasingly convenient and efficient goods and services that improve the overall quality of their lives does not warrant the kind of suffering that people living in coastal or island areas face as a result of those same goods and services. Indeed, Card (2010 p. 34) says that although there are reasons why evil occurs, those reasons “do not count morally in favor of the deed. They carry no moral weight.”

There are doubtless many who do not face intolerable harm due to anthropogenic climate catastrophe, and who benefit from an improved quality of life. But that benefit by no means constitutes what Card (2010 p. 39) calls a “good moral reason” for allowing those beneficial actions (that concomitantly put others in peril) to continue. Quality of life may indeed be greater, but the actions that improve some people’s lives release emissions which in turn cause others intolerable harm. Essentially, the fact that people are benefited from a more comfortable and convenient lifestyle

does not carry moral weight in the case of climate change, and thus cannot justify in any way the intolerable harm that it produces. Indeed, Bell (2011 p. 115-116) says that we have a duty not to accept benefits that arise out of human rights violations. Since anthropogenic climate change violates its victims' human rights (as argued earlier regarding intolerable harm), we ought not to accept benefits (i.e., goods and services) that contribute to anthropogenic climate change, and which thus violate people's human rights. Therefore, the argument that anthropogenic climate change is not inexcusable because it has benefits is not apt, since accepting those benefits, on Bell's account, is wrong.

To underscore this point I invoke Ross's theory of moral pluralism, which offers another appealing explanation as to why those goods and services are morally unjustifiable on Card's account. In basic terms, Rossian pluralism argues that we have multiple moral principles that guide our actions and tell us how we ought to act and what we ought to do, generally speaking (Ross, 1930). In situations in which there is moral conflict—when two or more of our behavior-guiding moral principles are conflicting, Ross says we must examine the specific situation to determine which principle holds the most moral weight and thus which principle ought to guide our action (McNaughton, 1988 p. 199-200; Ross, 1930 p. 18,46). In Rossian terms, we have a set of action-guiding prima facie principles that determine our prima facie duty, whereas what we actually do in specific instances is our duty proper (McNaughton, 1988 p. 197-198; Ross, 1930). In the inevitable cases of moral conflict, then, we determine which properties of the situation are morally relevant, and thus determine which of the prima facie principles carries the most moral weight (in the particular instance) and act accordingly (this is then our duty proper).

It is useful to evaluate the case of anthropogenic climate change in this paper through the Rossian lens. I readily accept that we have a utilitarian-like moral principle to promote overall happiness and goodness for the greatest number of people. As such, we would like to have convenient, comfortable lives and moderate luxuries. Generally speaking, the goods and services discussed earlier fall into this category, and thus, according to this (*prima facie*) principle, we ought to promote those actions that produce happiness and convenience for people. However, we similarly have a (*prima facie*) principle by which we ought to avoid actions that produce harmful consequences for people. Since the goods and services that exacerbate anthropogenic climate change both generally enable more convenient lifestyles *and* cause intolerable harm, we are at a moral impasse; we are facing moral conflict.

To alleviate the conflict, Ross would say we ought to examine the situation to determine which of these two *prima facie* principles carries moral weight in this situation. Assuming the goods and services I discuss refer to convenience factors such as offering same-day delivery for non-essential items and increasing the number of flight options to give greater flexibility for travel, it is undeniable that the principle of avoiding actions that cause people intolerable harm carries far more moral weight in this case. This is reinforced by the fact that the most vulnerable communities (such as the coastal and island communities considered in this paper) suffer the most from, but have contributed the least to, anthropogenic climate change (IPCC, 2023; UNHCR, 2022). In other words, generally speaking, it is beneficial to have procedures in place that promote our well-being by increasing our overall quality of life, and we ought to pursue those procedures. But when those procedures conflict with an opposing *prima facie*

principle to not produce intolerable harm, the quality of life principle is not morally relevant in determining the duty proper. In the instance of anthropogenic climate change, our duty proper is to avoid actions that produce intolerable harms. Therefore, as Card says, there is no “morally appropriate and defensible reason in favor of” continuing the actions that contribute to the anthropogenic climate change effects of rising sea levels and severe storms. For that reason, the intolerable harm produced by human-caused climate change is inexcusable and thus is evil on Card’s account.

However, my discussion of an improved lifestyle remains vague and is thus in need of greater explication. Same-day delivery, for example, is a non-essential service we can do without and still live comfortably. The difference between receiving the shoes I ordered online later today and later this week is not significant, and certainly not on moral grounds. Yet a question arises of where to draw the line. Where do technologically advanced goods and services stop being non-essential luxuries and begin to be nuisances or even impede healthy (medico-social) development? I would like to make it very clear, then, that I am not advocating an extreme position contrary to technological advancement. I do not even advocate a position that rejects any non-essential goods and services, since I assume that we have a *prima facie* principle to promote well-being which includes reasonable non-essential luxuries. The line I draw is that, as a collective, we ought to divest and avoid actions (both individual and societal) that release significant GHG emissions and consequently exacerbate climate change.

A complex and multifaceted package of policy efforts aimed at decreasing overall emissions would be most effective at mitigating the intolerable harms of anthropogenic climate change without threatening contemporary technological advances. More specifically, I

advocate for policy efforts and governance that divest from fossil fuels and invest instead in renewable energy; that disincentivize individual consumption of single-use plastics; that incentivize and invest in green infrastructure and green public transport; that promote the reduction of individual and national carbon footprints; and so on. A detailed discussion of these efforts and their ramifications is beyond the scope of this paper. I merely seek to make clear that in condemning anthropogenic climate change as inexcusable, I do not claim that all goods and services that release GHG emissions are inexcusable, only that there ought to be more cognizance and intentionality in effective mitigation efforts.

Indeed, Ross (1930 p. 30) himself concedes that in every one of our actions, we are taking a “moral risk,” since there will always be good and bad consequences resulting from our actions. What I call inexcusable (on Card’s account) is the continual reliance on easily avoidable goods and services that exacerbate anthropogenic climate change. Russell and Bolton (2019) underscore how despite increasing awareness that climate change is human-caused, nothing is being done to change course. They succinctly state that “humankind’s collective response has been little more than to continue contributing to the problem” (*ibid* p. 3). Therefore, in order for anthropogenic climate change to not be utterly inexcusable (and thus evil on Card’s view), mitigation efforts must be implemented, anthropogenic GHG emissions must be hindered, and intolerable harms must be reduced.

Still, the Atrocity Paradigm mandates that the intolerable harm not only be morally inexcusable, but that it is *produced* by inexcusable *wrongdoing*. “Wrongdoing” implies that there is some responsibility involved. Yet, Russell and Bolton (2019 p. 7) point out that climate change contains “responsibility ambiguity,” or the diffusion of responsibility which makes it difficult to assign blame and

point to who is most culpable for the harm inflicted by anthropogenic climate change. Effectively, there are too many agents implicated in the release of GHG emissions that it is impossible to determine who is “most” blameworthy for exacerbating climate change and hence causing the mentioned intolerable harms. However, Card (2010 p. 37) explains that though something like climate change is not an individual or institution, and thus does not have easily identified culpable parties, it does in fact involve responsibility. For Card, responsibility is more about a general failure to control against or mitigate intolerable harm. This means that people “can suffer intolerable harm as a result of a practice that is indefensible (even unjust), even though no one is culpable” (*ibid* p. 41).

While it certainly can be argued that in the case of climate change, there are some who are more culpable than others,<sup>8</sup> that argument is not needed here. It is sufficient that climate change is a result of indefensible (inexcusable) human action and that people suffer intolerable harm because of it. In other words, despite there being responsibility ambiguity, we know the effects of climate change discussed in this paper are anthropogenic, not natural, and so we know there is responsibility involved. Again, I refer to responsibility in the way that Card does; in that there is a collective human responsibility to mitigate (human-caused) intolerable harm. Anthropogenic climate change fails in that regard and thus it is produced by inexcusable wrongdoing.

Before I conclude that climate change is evil, however, I want to refute a last potential objection. The ramification of climate change I have considered in this paper, which is indicative of climate change’s catastrophic consequences

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Russell and Bolton (2019), who argue that profit-driven energy companies are the most blameworthy.

more broadly, is the threat of rising sea levels and more severe storms for coastal and island areas. The submergence of land from rising sea levels and severe storms are natural events. Thus, it might be contended that these natural catastrophes are not evil, since “they are not produced, aggravated, and so on by” inexcusable wrongdoing (Card, 2010 p. 6). This is a weak objection, however, as it is indisputable that these “natural” events are caused by overtly human actions. Therefore, these “natural” events *are* precisely produced and aggravated by inexcusable, human-caused wrongdoing. The evil I am assessing, as noted at the onset of the paper, is moral, not natural, evil, since the changing climate is the result of anthropogenic (not natural) activity. For that reason, then, the Atrocity Paradigm applies to climate change. The earlier suggestion that climate change is intuitively evil because it is caused by human activity and results in irreversible (intolerable) harm thus seems to hold.

This essay sought to evaluate whether Card’s Atrocity Paradigm applies to climate change to see whether anthropogenic climate catastrophe is indeed evil. The Atrocity Paradigm determines that for something to be considered evil, it must first, be reasonably foreseeable; second, cause intolerable harm; and third, be produced by inexcusable wrongdoing. I argued that all three components apply to climate change; thus, I conclude that climate change is evil, and not merely wrong. This distinction is an important one, and not only for semantic reproach. One reason why it is important to differentiate evils from lesser wrongs is that it helps “set priorities when resources are limited for preventing wrongs and repairing harms” (Card, 2010 p. 7). Calling climate change evil is important not only for the forceful condemnation evoked by the label of “evil,” but in order to make addressing it a priority. Evils require

immediate attention since their victims suffer intolerable harm. Therefore, condemning anthropogenic climate change as evil means that as a collective we ought to prioritize the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions. Also, in line with Card, the aspiration is that in identifying an evil, the upshot will be that people stop supporting evil practices (*ibid* p. 8). Thus, another reason for calling climate change evil rather than wrong is that it will hopefully induce a greater cognizance of the consequences of human actions, and hence push people to make the choice to limit their contribution to anthropogenic climate change.

I began this essay by showing that the effects of climate change are reasonably foreseeable. I then argued that the victims of the effects of climate change suffer intolerable harm. I used de Shalit's discussion on the impact of forced displacement for climate refugees to put forth an argument that forced displacement is an intolerable harm. Finally, I argued that since those intolerable harms result from anthropogenic climate change, they are utterly inexcusable. I considered the argument that increased quality of life might mitigate the intolerable harms suffered by victims of climate change, but ultimately refuted this objection. Therefore, I concluded that climate change causes reasonably foreseeable intolerable harm and that it is produced by inexcusable (human) wrongdoing, thus condemning climate change as evil according to Card's Atrocity Paradigm. I then ended the discussion by underscoring the import of labeling climate change evil, rather than merely wrong.

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