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Hope in an Illiberal Age?

Comments on Darrel Moellendorf, *Mobilizing Hope: Climate Change & Global Poverty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)

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ABSTRACT

In this commentary on Darrel Moellendorf's *Mobilizing Hope: Climate Change & Global Poverty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), I discuss his use of the precautionary principle, whether his hope for climate-friendly 'green growth' is realistic given the tendency for inequality to accelerate as it gets higher, and what I call his assumption of a liberal baseline. That is, I worry that the audience to whom the book is addressed are those who already accept the environmental and economic values to which Moellendorf appeals, while those who are blocking effective action on climate change in fact reject those values and are therefore unlikely to be moved by the arguments the book presents.

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I. Introduction

The central claim in Darrel Moellendorf's *Mobilizing Hope* is that there is a direct connection between climate change and poverty. First, Moellendorf argues that the more global warming we have, the more poverty will increase. And second, he argues that the poorest people in the world will bear the biggest share of the damage caused by climate change. These are important claims, for sure, and while often made, they are rarely highlighted and pursued so thoroughly as they are here. If we the global rich do not want to continue to inflict injury disproportionately on the global poor, we need to stop dithering and take serious steps to slow climate change or, if we can finally master the various political forces at work here, stop and perhaps even reverse it.

But Moellendorf does not stop with this appeal to the better angels of our nature. He also reminds us that we have powerful selfish reasons to urgently address climate change regardless of our concern for the global poor. For climate change harms *everybody*, not just the poor. Even more importantly, the cost of doing something now is far less than the cost of doing something later. If we care about our children and our grandchildren, we have a strong reason to take effective action now regardless of our attitude toward global poverty.

Like many others who argue for environmental action, Moellendorf sources this latter argument in the claim that we have duties to future generations. But it might also be

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possible here to make an argument from right. That is, we could argue that pollution has already injured people who are alive today, and these people have a property-based right to enjoin further pollution of their air, water, and/or land (see Reiff, 2013, pp. 260–272). In other words, if we view pollution as a violation of the property rights of living individuals, then enforcement of these rights will stop such pollution and benefit future generations as a side effect. We do not need to worry about whether we have duties to people who do not yet exist.

II. Green Growth, Popular Mobilization, the Precautionary Principle, and Sustainable Development

As a natural follow-up to the point about the connection between climate change and global poverty, Moellendorf examines what our attitude should be toward economic growth. One could argue, for example, that if greater economic activity is likely to increase rather than decrease existing levels of pollution, environmentalists should be against trying to achieve ever greater amounts of economic growth. But Moellendorf thinks the ‘no growth’ approach is not a good idea. A better idea would be to pursue ‘green growth’. That is, real economic growth, but the kind of growth that does not put further strain on the environment. Indeed, we need the added resources that further growth will generate to pay for measures designed to adapt to the irreversible changes that global warming has already wrought – no growth is really not an option. And I agree. But I do worry that what is called ‘the Palma ratio’ also needs to be addressed. For if it is not, even growth that is very green will not necessarily lead to improvements in global poverty. But more on this later.

In any case, because efforts to protect the environment are often viewed as anti-growth whether they are or not, Moellendorf expects political resistance to even modest environmental measures to be substantial. To overcome this, Moellendorf argues for popular mobilization, modeled after the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s, to push for real and effective action. Indeed, this is the prime action point to take from Moellendorf’s book. I will also say more about this later, but first I want to examine the decision-making principle that Moellendorf suggests we use to animate our thinking on the need for action here.

Moellendorf claims the principle to apply here is the precautionary principle. But I wonder whether he really needs to invoke the precautionary principle to justify his call to action. The picture he paints of the upcoming environmental cataclysm is dire enough *and certain enough* that we don’t need a principle that tells us to ‘err’ on the side of caution – the threat presented here is significant, immediate, and direct. Ignoring it at this point would be irrational. The only question is whether it is merely very late or too late to avoid some dire consequences, even if we may still avoid or reduce the impact of certain others. But in either case, we don’t need to be motivated by caution but by self-preservation. All we need is a principle that says avoid serious harm. There is no real work for the precautionary principle to do.

Besides, I am skeptical that the precautionary principle can do the work Moellendorf wants it to. The book does not address the point made by Cass Sunstein in *Laws of Fear: Beyond the Precautionary Principle* (Sunstein, 2005). This is that the precautionary principle is paralytic – the risk of doing nothing may be catastrophic, but the risk of doing the

wrong thing may to be catastrophic too. This makes the precautionary principle useless as a decision-making guide even if we want to take precautions against possible catastrophic outcomes. Indeed, Moellendorf seems to want to use the precautionary both ways himself – for example, to argue against seeding the atmosphere with reflective particles because the risk of unintended consequences here is too great (Moellendorf says not but I am not sure that this is clear), and yet to also argue for taking other actions because doing nothing is too risky – without offering a basis for determining which risks are the ones to fear.

I think Moellendorf will argue that the correct point of view is determined by the uncertainty of the effects attached to a particular course of action and the seriousness of the damage if it goes wrong. But almost everything has some possibility of leading to a catastrophic outcome – this is Sunstein’s point. I know Moellendorf claims he has set forth narrow conditions for using the precautionary principle, but these don’t seem narrow to me. He says that the catastrophic outcome must be more than merely ‘possible’, although how much more is vague. In any event, Sunstein argues that even if you ignore merely possible outcomes, the precautionary principle is still paralytic, so I think Sunstein’s concern remains live.

An even more important concern, however, is with regard to Moellendorf’s commitment to sustainable development. Moellendorf recognizes there is an unavoidable tension for environmentalists in this concept – a tension between addressing climate change and permitting sustainable development in nations that have not yet used up their fair share of environmental resources. Moellendorf argues that sustainable development must have priority here. I think Moellendorf’s argument is strong, but my worry is that it is strong only among those who already embrace liberal values. This is also a problem for the book’s argument for addressing climate change more generally.

III. The Assumption of a Liberal Baseline

Here is what I mean by this – the book assumes that liberal values are in play, and it appeals to these values in making its various arguments. And note that I am not using the word ‘liberal’ to refer to a group of moderately leftish concerns. Rather, I am using it as a catch-all to refer to Enlightenment values, values embraced by those on the moderate right as well as the moderate left. Moellendorf would say that my assignment of a very broad meaning to the word ‘liberal’ is unconventional, and to some extent it is, but it is not unheard of – many political philosophers define liberalism in this way, including both liberals and anti-liberals like the Nazi legal theorist Carl Schmitt (see Schmitt, 1996). In any event, illiberals hold a different conception of the good, and therefore many of the arguments made in the book will have no purchase on them because these arguments assume that a liberal conception of the good, which illiberals reject, is in effect.

Don’t get me wrong – I embrace liberal values too, and I do think these values are the ones everybody ‘should’ embrace. But all over the world, illiberal values are on the rise, so arguments based on liberal values are going to be falling on a lot of deaf ears. Addressing arguments only to those who already embrace liberal values is like preaching to the converted. Or, more precisely, it is begging the question, the question being which set of values – liberal or illiberal – is correct (Reiff, 2007, 2017b, 2022).

Moellendorf claims that even illiberals are committed to human development, anti-poverty, caution, and nature preservation, which are the values he invokes, so there is no need to worry that he is assuming a liberal baseline. But I don't think this is correct – he is thinking of traditional conservative values, and traditional conservatism is a form of liberalism. When I talk of illiberal values, I am talking about the values of the extreme right, which might still call itself conservative but is not conservative in any conventional understanding of the term. For example, those on the far right are not concerned by poverty – on the contrary, keeping the masses poor is seen as an important way of controlling them. Illiberal governments are also often more interested in the reversal not the promotion of what I think Moellendorf means by human development – they certainly often want to take us back in time. Caution, while indeed a traditional conservative principle, is not a principle endorsed by the radical right, many of whom would prefer that society be destroyed rather than see liberals get their way. And nature preservation is not really a goal of the radical right either – if God didn't want us to burn fossil fuels, why did he give them to us?

Of course, I fully recognize that there are also disagreements among liberals on how we should proceed. One of the strengths of the book is that it provides persuasive reasons for resolving these disagreements in certain ways. But my concern is that the real targets of the book – the people one needs to convince through popular mobilization if the world is to finally take effective action on climate change, do not embrace liberal values. They embrace a range of illiberal, perfectionist, and even fascist values. For example, these people do not believe that all humans have equal moral worth. They believe that members of their own community, however that community may be defined, have greater moral worth. 'Others' may have some moral worth, like working animals or pets – but they do not have the same moral worth as members of one's own community. It is accordingly wrong to sacrifice the interests of members of one's own community to protect the interests of outsiders.

This undermines Moellendorf's argument for the principle of sustainable development, as well as his argument that we should care (even just a little) for the global poor. It even undercuts the argument that we should care about what happens to our *own* poor. After all, being poor in a social system that rejects equality and instead embraces a system of social hierarchy, where some people have more worth than others, poverty is a sign that one is a loser, and the interests of losers do not rise to the same level as the interest of winners in an illiberal value system. Indeed, the illiberal rich may even be unwilling to take action when this merely benefits others *more* than it does them, not just when it does not benefit them at all. The self-centeredness that flows from a sense of self-importance is all consuming, often leading people to willingly sacrifice their own interests if this prevents people whom they deem unworthy of receiving benefits they do not supposedly deserve (see the discussion of the ultimatum game in Reiff, 2013, pp. 175–77).

Now I know you are thinking that people who believe this are just hopeless – we shouldn't worry about convincing them of anything because they are simply unreasonable. But it is the unreasonable who have been blocking action on climate change for decades, so it would be a mistake to underestimate their importance. And we are not going to convince them of anything by appealing to values they already reject. We have to engage with them on a more fundamental level – we have to argue that the

fundamental values they now accept are actually wrong. This is not an easy argument to make; winning it may even be impossible. But if we are to stop talking to ourselves and make some progress here, I am convinced that this is what we must try to do. As I said, the book does not really do this – it makes its argument from within liberalism, and leaves arguments for liberalism itself largely off the table.

But what about popular mobilization, on which the book places great reliance? My worry is that even if we were successful in bringing people to the streets in impressive numbers, this will not convince those who reject liberalism to reconsider their position. The relatively recent ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests, for example, illustrate how popular protests (especially when they are large) can be mischaracterized and turned into lawless riots by the right-wing media. When protests are amenable to this kind of mischaracterization, popular mobilization can backfire and simply harden the viewpoints of those already inclined to reject the claims of those who are taking to the streets. What changed unenlightened people’s minds during the civil rights era was not the size or frequency of popular protests, but the vulgar and repulsive brutality of those intent on suppressing people merely for asserting their civil rights.

In some ways, I suppose, we should be grateful that environmental protests are unlikely to trigger the same kind of violent repression, at least not to the same frequency and extent. I could be wrong about this, but I think we are unlikely to regularly see pictures of women and children being violently beaten at environmental protests like we did at demonstrations for civil rights. Nevertheless, the right-wing press will then be free to spotlight any violence by the protestors themselves, no matter how infrequent or slight, and the real economic disruption these protests create, and use this to paint the environmentalists as the true villains. The book’s reliance on the civil rights movement as a model may accordingly be misplaced.

Of course, illiberal people reject other liberal values besides the view that all people have equal moral worth. I don’t want to go too far down this rabbit hole because it is very deep and potentially bottomless, but I will mention a few other key differences in the fundamental value system in operation here to illustrate the depth of this problem. For one thing, those with an illiberal value set tend to view all human interactions as contests for domination – meaning that the resolution of any conflict primarily depends on the participants’ respective places on the social hierarchy. Taking the interests of the weakest members of global or even domestic society into account is an act of submissiveness, and therefore contrary (the argument goes) to the fundamental nature of human relations, which provides that the strong should dominate the weak. Indeed, respecting the environment would be a sign of submissiveness in general, something to be avoided at all costs – it is the feminine to the masculine. Women tend to the garden; men build big machines and kill things. In an illiberal society, in fact, being feminine is the greatest insult one can hurl at someone, so it is going to be hard to convince illiberal people to care about the environment when this is seen as part of the ‘feminization’ of society (see e.g. Mansfield, 2006). Once again, the sacrifices that Moellendorf argues we should make are going to seem unnatural and unappealing to such people.

They are also going to see further environmental regulation as imposing limitations on our liberty, and as therefore objectionable for that reason too. While this argument misunderstands what liberty is and how it is supposed to work (see Reiff, 2017a, 2020), I won’t go into the details of this here. But it does provide yet one

more reason to worry that given the embrace of illiberal fundamental moral presuppositions, the arguments of the book will simply have no purchase on those currently unwilling to take real action to limit climate change because the argument to do so assumes they accept values that they in fact reject. As I said, these people are not the majority yet, but their numbers are substantial and rising, and have already become large enough to exercise an effective veto over sensible environmental planning.

In any event, what all this means is that just as there is relationship between climate change and poverty, as Moellendorf contends, there is an even more important relation between environmentalism and liberalism and therefore between anti-environmentalism and illiberalism. And we are not going to be able to successfully address climate change if we don't do a better job convincing people to embrace liberal values rather than illiberal ones. I'll say a little more about this in a moment, but first I want to talk about another way this problem expresses itself.

IV. The Thanatos Drive and the Illiberal Conception of Truth

I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to recognize that illiberals do not prefer compromise to their own destruction. If they can't have things their way, it is better to destroy everything and begin again under what they view as the cyclical nature of history. This is the idea that history begins at its apex and then slowly decays until it ultimately ends in some sort of cataclysm, at which point the decks are cleared and a new cycle can begin. If you believe this, you prefer having everything destroyed rather than not getting your way, because this is how we get to experience living at the apex of a new cycle. And this view is not as fringe as it might seem – it is the express view of millions of Christian Dispensationalists and even chunks of those who belong to more mainstream sects, and it is also very commonly advanced by fascist leaders and their political philosophers (see e.g. Armstrong, 2000, pp. 137–140; Evola, 1995).

Illiberals also have a different conception of truth. Truth is not the best inference from the available empirical evidence, but rather a self-affirming narrative of a certain idealized conception of history and society. So the science behind all this is going to be viewed with a great deal of skepticism if not outright hostility no matter how convincing it is. If it is a conceptual truth that we are the highest form of life and that the resources of the earth were placed here for us to exploit, then how can such exploitation be bad for us? Any evidence suggesting that it might must simply be concocted by a vast conspiracy of those who would benefit financially from preventing us from doing so.

What all this means is that even if we were to convince those with an illiberal mind-set that ignoring climate change could lead to catastrophic destruction, this would not be viewed as bad, but as good, as a prophesized fulfillment of God's plan and as a way to restart history free of the shackles of liberalism. This is especially true given that the bulk of those destroyed (at least at first) will be outsiders or poor people – i.e. losers – and their destruction will therefore help purify society. Even if some of our own lose, more losers will be outsiders, so the worthy will be the collective winners. And even if everyone is destroyed, that will bring on the rapture, and how could that be a bad thing?

V. Different Approaches to Measuring Equality Over Time

The book uses the priority of diachronic equality over synchronic equality to argue for intergenerational justice – the fact that some people have had more already is used as a justification for them getting less now in relation to those who had less before. In other words, it is used to justify imposing different standards on historically big polluters than on developing countries now. On the other hand, it also puts the payoff to later generations over sacrifices by the current generation, so it asks current people to sacrifice so future people can prosper. And by ‘sacrifices’, I mean to include both the real and imagined economic ramifications of being more environmentally respectful.

But I fear that even liberals are not prepared to sacrifice synchronic equality for diachronic equality in this way, given the degree of sacrifices they think are required of them. They will make sacrifices now to protect the possibility of a big payoff later (see my ‘The Politics of Masochism’) but they will not, I fear, make sacrifices now as payback for payoffs they have already received (Reiff, 2003). This is simply contrary to human nature. In short, even though I find the book’s argument on this morally unassailable, it is not practically possible for it to be fulfilled – it will not meet what Rawls call ‘the strains of commitment’ (Rawls, 2001, sec. 29.3 and sec. 37; Rawls, 1999, sec. 25 and sec. 29). These are the strains placed on any people who find themselves disadvantaged by a current agreement or practice, which if great enough, lead them to seek renegotiation and revision. Agreements and practices subject to strains that are too great cannot last – they will eventually, and probably sooner rather than later, collapse.

VI. The Need to Account for Palma Ratio and the Tendency for Inequality to Accelerate

Back now to the Palma ratio. ‘The Palma Ratio’, is named after José Gabriel Palma, the Cambridge economist who recently developed it. The ratio is described (very uninformatively, I’m afraid) as measuring ‘distance from distributional challenges’ (Palma, 2019). But meaningfully characterizing what it represents is not as important as understanding that it measures economic inequality in a different and more illuminating way than existing econometric measures, such as the Gini coefficient, an equally difficult to explain but nevertheless widely used mathematical measure of inequality (see Reiff, 2021).

In any event, one of the insights the Palma ratio reveals is that over time, inequality tends to exponentially increase at the tail end. That is, the higher it gets, the faster it gets higher. One reason it becomes exponentially higher at the end is because as they get richer and therefore more powerful, the top 10% are able to capture increasingly larger portions of the economic pie. First, by capturing an ever-increasing share of economic growth. Then, by engineering transfers of wealth from the bottom 40% to the top 10% (Palma, 2019). This, in fact, explains how economic inequality has become so high today and has been accelerating (Reiff, 2021). And while we do not have enough information to determine as a matter of economic history where things are likely to go from here, the information we do have seems to suggest that the next step will be increasingly large transfers from the middle 50% to the top 10%. In any event, if we do not stop this and make some progress toward reversing it, we will get nowhere with global poverty – even green growth will benefit only the rich. The most important link is not between climate

change and poverty, as the book suggests, but between climate change and *inequality*—looking just at poverty is far too limited.

The problem is that Moellendorf's approach can fairly be described as sufficientarian. That is, it is not really driven by a concern for inequality, but by a concern for the worst off. The idea is that we first worry about the poor, and once they are okay, we can then worry about overall inequality or perhaps just stop worrying altogether, satisfied that our sufficientarian goals have been met. I am not sure if Moellendorf really means to adopt this position, because I suspect he really does care about overall inequality, but I fear that this concern is not really made clear enough in the book and therefore its sufficientarian implications are what stand out.

VII. What Does This Mean When It Comes to Designing Our Environmental Action Plan?

One thing it means is that popular mobilization, even if this were possible, is not a sufficient strategy to reverse the failure of too many and those that represent them to take environmental concerns seriously. Instead, we need to pressure our own legislatures to support de-globalization, for it is the shift of manufacturing to the developing world that has allowed producers to avoid the environmental regulations of their own countries. Fighting for de-globalization, moreover, has the added benefit of drawing support from local workers who would benefit from production being moved home. It also has the benefit of satisfying national and economic security concerns made apparent by the pandemic when critical goods were in short supply because they were exclusively produced abroad. It is a tactic that has a natural constituency of allies rather than one that requires us to swim against the current.

We can also internationalize our environmental regulations – that is, require all goods sold in the United States or our respective countries to have been produced in accordance with domestic environmental regulations even if they were produced in a foreign facility. This removes some of the incentive to move production abroad because such a move will no longer necessarily offer reduced production costs.

We also need to expressly enlist the help of religious organizations. Some religious organizations are already adopting more environmental views, but we need to actively encourage this rather than simply passively applaud it. Indeed, religious organizations may hold the key here as to whether we are able to get anything done.

In any case, simply focusing our attention on environmental issues, or even tying liberalism too closely to the environmental movement as a single issue, is a formula for defeat. We must attack the fundamental values that illiberalism embraces on all fronts. Only then can we get enough people to care about the environment for the book's arguments to take hold.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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