



Heatwaves and Hedonism

How the Philosophy of Mind Addresses Climate Change

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Philosophy and
Global Challenges

Loving Wisdom in Unloving times

Historically, philosophers have concentrated on resolving existential questions about human life. To do this, they posed different arguments to creatively answer internal questions, but never really addressed broader external issues.

However, the skill of taking an in-depth look into a question becomes useful when dealing with global challenges which do not always have a clear cause, like climate change. Only when you find the root cause can you get to the root of a problem. Thus, philosophers have a role to play in addressing the global challenge of climate change.

Heatwaves and Climate Change

Between the 18th to 19th July 2022, the UK experienced astronomically high temperatures of up to 40.3 degrees Celsius (Met Office 2022), marking a record-breaking heat wave. This is just one example of climate change.

The rise in average global temperature due to increased greenhouse gas emissions explains why heatwaves are becoming more frequent and intense.

According to the IPCC, the average global temperature is predicted to rise by 2 to 6 degrees Celsius by 2100 unless efforts are made to curb emissions. This temperature change is equivalent to between one-third and the whole of an ice age! A dramatic change in climate (Houghton, 2005).

Cake or Broccoli?

Knowing these results, we are faced with the choice of either reducing our greenhouse gas emissions or leaving them as they are. We are well-versed in this kind of choice. It is similar to the question: would you like cake or broccoli?

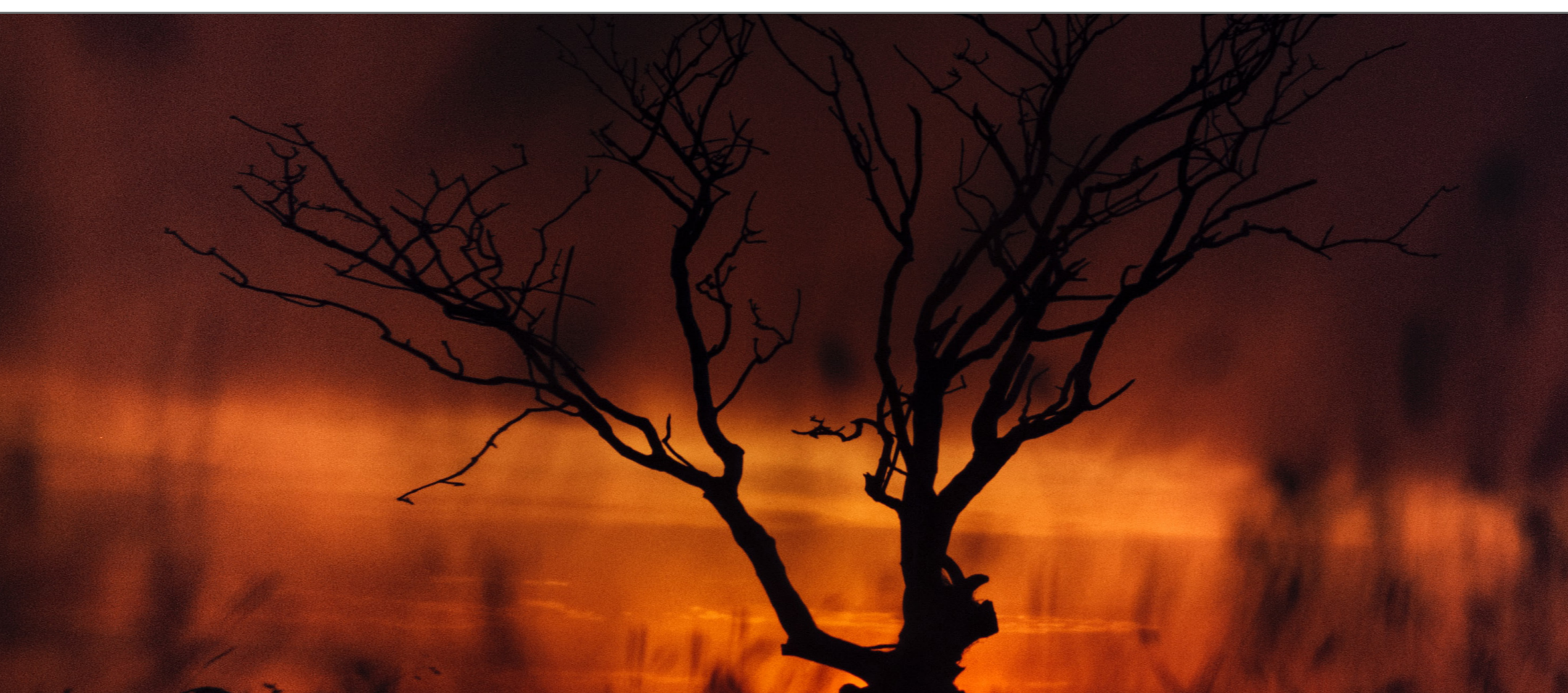
The choices we make in both situations ultimately depend on what makes us 'happy' as individuals. First, we need to understand what 'happiness' is. In Ancient Greek philosophy, there is a theory of happiness called 'hedonism' which suggests that happiness is what one deems beneficial for oneself (Haybron 2020). This approach corresponds to our way of speaking. What makes us 'happy' in its ideal form is the experience of pleasure free from pain.



MICHAELA BAUM VIA UNSPLASH



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Similarly, Freud suggests that the way we seek happiness ‘aims on the one hand at eliminating pain and discomfort, on the other at the experience of intense pleasures.’ This would explain why humans try to maximise pleasure and minimise pain. He goes on to explain that happiness ‘comes from the satisfaction - most often instantaneous - of pent-up needs which have reached great intensity, and by its nature can only be a transitory experience’ (Freud 1962).

This ‘instantaneous happiness’ arises when one’s ‘pent-up needs’ or cravings reach a climax and become fulfilled through action. For instance, when your craving for cake is so intense, you satisfy that craving by eating it, activating dopamine in your brain and giving you a short-term high. On the other hand, eating broccoli leads to better health and wellbeing, a longer-term feeling of contentment without the intensity qualifying the hedonistic view of happiness. Eating cake is strongly associated with the fulfilment of short-term pleasure or temporary avoidance of pain as in the cases of buying clothes instead of saving money or using a car rather than walking. When faced with

two choices, we choose the one with less activation of pain in the brain and more activation of pleasure in the brain at that moment (Haybron 2020). Even knowing the future outcome of our decisions, we often choose the easier option. Many people choose to keep their greenhouse gas emissions high as it allows for greater consumption. However, in trying to find happiness, they fail to consider impacts of global warming on themselves and their loved ones in the future. This leads to a further question:

Why is it the case that humans continuously contribute towards climate change?

Maximising ‘happiness’ in the moment is more commonly known as instant gratification, a brain circuitry likely inherited from our prehistoric ancestors. In a world where ordering transport and food are at your fingertips, it is becoming harder than ever to resist temptation and take the best decision for the future. There are many explanations as to why the human brain might be hardwired with these circuits.

One reason is that many may doubt that

the efforts taken to resist temptation will bear fruit. The future is inherently uncertain. For example, suppose someone has a tempting cake in front of them. By contrast, their future weight loss goal seems far more distant and uncertain (Cherry 2019). A temporal distance creates a mental blind spot for the person, fuelling an “if it’s not in front of me, it doesn’t exist” type of mentality.

Furthermore, if someone’s trust depletes, they may doubt the honesty of others. Eventually, one can become dubious that there even will be a reward or lack of punishment awaiting as promised. In this example, one might lose faith in scientists even though they have data showing that broccoli contributes to improved health. At the extreme, some might question why these experts want us to exercise greater self-control in the first place, leading to a conspiracy theory.

For climate change, the idea of experiencing less pain in the future is not quite the reward of a delicious treat. It is a hard pill to swallow. While

the pain may not be preventable in the foreseeable future, it can definitely be reduced. However, it is neither distant nor uncertain. Even if we do not trust the IPCC data, we can still see climate change happening before our eyes. Heatwaves are becoming more uncomfortable for most of us and are deadly for vulnerable people.

Philosophers’ ability to understand the inner workings of the mind allows them to identify one of the root causes of climate change: instant gratification, which arises from an innate ‘need’ to satisfy pleasure and temporarily relieve pain. Since the cause arises from an individual, the solution also lies within. As a result of the uncertainty of a delayed reward, we observe reactions to climate change in the form of ignorance of the effects of climate change or the creation of conspiracy theories. This global challenge can be addressed by having clearer information and more evidence surrounding it to dispel the uncertainty contributing to instant gratification.

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Nature's Fury

A poem about wildfires

BY RADHIKA BADIANI
(3RD YEAR PHILOSOPHY AND PHYSICS)



I am the raging flame,
Seething through the land,
Consuming as I cross.

Leaving behind a blackened ash,
To serve as a reminder for the pyre
Thanks to your provocation.

They say that I am all-devoting.
Well, here is my sacrifice.
And, be assured, my commitment is
ignited.

My dark clouds loom over,
To bury your misbelief,
A fool's paradise.

"Heaven is a place on earth," they exclaim.
They are deluded.
If you plant a seed, you will grow a tree.
And my tree is marching forth with all
guns ablazing!
They speak true about one thing, that is for
sure:
The climax of my wrath is purgatory – nay,
It is Inferno!

I am the raging flame,
Seething through the land,
Consuming as I cross.
I burn and burn and burn without end.
The lion attacks the deer by ripping her
violently into pieces,

And yet,
The deer not once thinks of her own safety
but only that of her loved ones.
She is not fearful; she is accustomed to the
suffering.
Withering away.

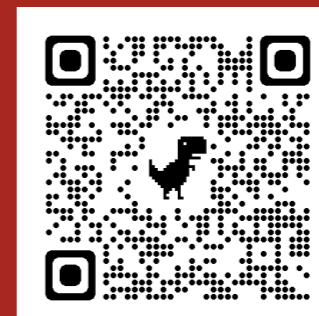
Do not mistake my burning as inconsider-
ate or thoughtless -
Yet those blessed with a thinking mind
Escape from themselves in fear
Of themselves.
They are deluded.
They look to the skies in hopes that their
importance,
Having the upper hand,
Outweighs their ghosts.
Convinced that they are mere puppets in a
play
Under compassionate surveillance.

They fail to grow up, fail to see;
Love is fierce.
But you cannot teach one who cannot see,
you can only show.
And now the only play is the battlefield.

And the day will soon come when I, like
the deer, will see
My beloved fawn
Go up in flames
All whilst I do nothing.
I will burn. And burn. And burn. Without
end.

We are creatures with the ability to think through our actions. Rare? Maybe. But I would not so far as mistake that for speciality. Even if higher forces of nature exist and would not wish for wildfires upon anyone, it is nature itself which has provided us with the ability. To see. To act. To take ownership of our choices. Despite our potential to learn, we are faced with our own lack of growth. Looking at one's own reflection in the mirror, one wrinkles one's nose and turns away in distaste. We will be faced with the consequences of our actions; this is just a wake-up call. When we do, it should not be surprising. It is a law of that very nature. And in the end, if provoked, it could show us. What we foresaw centuries ago and thought we could be excused from. If we continue to desperately run away from our demons like mice rather than face them, then it is near. Hades will finally find a place among us, where he belongs. And even in light of all of this, this ultimate tribulation will be an act of self-sacrifice.

After all, it is only at the funeral that we repent.
For she who passes away weeping.



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