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MUSING

Moral Injury, Despair, and Climate Justice Obligations

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Abstract

A despairing agent might object to climate obligations by framing them as too demanding to be morally required because they give rise to burdensome consequences of despair, like depression. This objection can be refuted on the grounds that it is morally wrong. However, when it is understood as symptomatic of moral injury, an alternative response prioritizing moral repair is illuminated. I consider how the virtue of epistemic humility can promote tasks for repair, like attentiveness to symptoms of moral injury. I see this virtue as a basis for an active form of care for others and the self that resists temptations to refer to this objection.

Oh god,
what if all I've done is guard myself against despair?

—Ada Limón

As a member of Generation Z, I learned about climate change around age 8. I first received treatment for depression and anxiety, partially driven by despair over a stable environmental future, at the age of 11. As I grew older, I shared quips about climate apocalypse with friends and online: "Worried about debt, having children, or finding love? Fear not! We're all going to die, and soon, what a relief!" My story is not unique. This generation has been identified as characterizing their experiences, especially on social media, through cynical, suicidal, and ironic humour to cope with despair (Gilbert 2021).

Comedy seems tasteless when so many have and are experiencing direct harms of climate change. Yet dark humour is also an attempt to cope with something as normalized, and unnatural, as environmental breakdown—signaling the temptation to justify inaction from despair. Consider Bo Burnham's pandemic anthem "That Funny Feeling," with lyrics like "The whole world at your fingertips, the ocean at your door [. . .] 20 thousand years of this, seven more to go," followed by the upbeat hook: "Hey, what can you say? We were overdue. But it'll be over soon, just wait" (2021). Burnham

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names this "funny feeling" as "total disassociation," paired with a "quiet comprehending of the ending of it all" (2021). This is a form of despair consisting in dissociation from desired objectives no longer viewed as possible to pursue. I see this as symptomatic of moral injury, which undermines our capacities to care for ourselves and others (Gilligan 1982/2003; 2014, 93–6).

Climate change can be understood as an instance of structural injustice: a normalized moral wrong that leads to systematic domination threatening the exercise and development of agential capacities (McKeown 2021, 2–3). Many agree that we have some individual climate obligations, like reducing carbon footprints or promoting collective action (Fragnière 2016, 798–9). Yet, given the "inertia of political processes," some obligations may be viewed as too *demanding* when normalized injustice appears futile to mitigate (809). It often comes at little cost to recycle, refrain from "joyrides in gas-guzzling SUVs," or promote collective action by signing petitions and sharing social media infographics (799). There are two success conditions for acts aimed at environmental repair. While I can straightforwardly succeed in placing an item in the recycling, it is more obscure if this makes a quantifiable difference for environmental repair. If one disbelieves this action makes causal difference, it is difficult to see how they would view themselves as obligated to act.

Climate change consists of countless contributions. Yet emphasis on individual actions can distract from structural environmental harm caused by large emitters. The term "carbon footprint" was popularized by British Petroleum for this reason (Kaufman 2021). Just 36 companies produced "over half of fossil fuel and cement CO2 emissions in 2023," and these emissions keep rising (Carbon Majors 2025). We should resist narratives that individual actions can, or should, take up the slack for these companies. These actions also do not exempt us from collective action, like protesting. While achieving collective action is more likely to succeed in environmental repair, and is a more pressing issue than motivating individual climate action, they are connected. Someone who takes *no* individual action is unlikely to engage collectively.

There is something disturbing about a person who desires climate justice and could act for it at little material costs, yet they do not. Cody C. Dout and Arthur R. Obst (2023) consider such a case, where an agent objects to performing the most minimal individual—let alone collective—climate actions because they despair over climate justice. Thinking about the topic results in painful symptoms of despair like depression, and she holds that any action that brings about these burdens is too demanding to take on. Lurking in the background, of course, is the belief that acting would make no difference. I see this objection as a faulty attempt to self-care when one lacks resources to hope well. In this paper, I focus on how revealing this objection's emergence as symptomatic of moral injury gives us grounding to consider tasks for moral repair—like how epistemic humility can motivate reparative self-care.

1. Climate change, despair, and moral injury

Given collective inefficacy for mitigating climate change, there have been growing challenges against hopeful narratives for solutions (Huber 2023). One worry is that we obscure environmental threats and demotivate collective action when we (falsely) hinge hope on stories that individual actions will be sufficiently effective or that large emitters will take responsibility without collective pressure. As Dout and Obst note, "climate despair—a resignation to the belief that any climate justice is impossible—is an

understandable reaction" in a context where billions have been affected by climate emergencies since 2000—the year I was born (2023, 316, 322).

In analytic philosophy, hope was standardly defined as a desire-belief combination for the probability of an objective obtaining (Downie 1963; Day 1969). Many now agree this misses an additional component that explains hope's motivational quality (Martin 2013; Calhoun 2018). So we hope for an objective when we (i) desire that it obtains, (ii) believe this outcome has some uncertain probability of obtaining, and (iii) are, in some sense, motivated to act for it. Broadly construed, hope is an energizing attitude empowering us to view the future as open to relevant efforts, and that there "remains room to make a difference" (Urban Walker 2006, 27, 54–55). However, it is compatible with fear, disappointment, and anger at current or future conditions.[1] It can be optimistic or pessimistic, depending on how probable or improbable we believe desired outcomes are. Just like pessimism risks beliefs that probable outcomes cannot come about, optimism can dint hope for the improbable: Cheerfully assuming others will fix the climate crisis can undermine motivations to act.[2]

Despair distinctively lacks hope's motivational quality. It is mutually exclusive to hope, consisting in its loss or absence—we cannot simultaneously hope and despair over an objective. Despairing agents relate to the possibility of achieving desired objectives in a way that interferes with their capacity to *act in hope* (Dout and Obst 2023, 321). Viewing circumstances as closed, or closed enough, can prevent us from *acting as if* they were open to our relevant efforts. One might question if this dichotomy overlooks ways to motivate acting-in-hope without hope: acting as if circumstances were open, with no sense that they are. I assume this would amount to cases where one views themselves as having "nothing to lose," motivated by faith, bitterness, or revenge.[3] Bracketing this point, I assume that we can hope and despair for closely related objectives and move between them quickly, especially when sustaining hope amounts to frustration and distress.

Dout and Obst consider an agent who deeply desires outcomes of climate justice but despairs over this (316). She has lost belief that circumstances are open to her relevant efforts and cannot sustain motivation to act for what she would otherwise hope for. She holds that thinking about climate change is psychologically burdensome when climate injustice appears inevitable, that this burden is too demanding to take on (316). She issues what Dout and Obst call a "demandingness-from-despair" (DfD) objection: Any action that brings about these burdens is too demanding to be morally required (316). Demandingness objections tend to be raised in relation to objectives one could otherwise pursue. To illustrate the objection, they reference a colleague who states, "I don't worry about my personal emissions because thinking about them is just too depressing" (316). This implies that thinking about climate change is too demanding, because it interferes with pursuing other objectives.

There *are* psychological burdens associated with this topic. Both acute impacts (anxiety, depression, and trauma) and chronic impacts (hopelessness and fatalism) are potential effects of climate change (318). As I see it, these burdens are united by the concept of moral injury: A kind of suffering that interferes with basic moral ideals or values—diminishing one's sense of reality and ability to act with care

[1]On "fearful" and "pessimistic," see respectively e.g., Stockdale 2021, 25–26; van der Lugt 2025. On "disappointed" hope see, e.g., Bloch and Adorno 1964; Baldwin and Raddatz 1978.

[2]On false hope, see McGeer 2004.

[3]See Dout and Obst 2023, 332, n. 69, on acting with no hope.

(Weintrobe 2021, 241). "Moral injury" initially described PTSD in soldiers (Shay 1994). It is now a near-ubiquitous category for feelings like shame, guilt, and powerlessness that come about when one perpetuates, fails to prevent, bears witness to, or learns about *normalized* acts of injustice that violate deeply held moral values—giving rise to symptoms like rage, withdrawal, or despair (Alford 2016, 7–13; Griffin 2019, 350). This is experienced as a betrayal of what one knows "deep down" to be right, leading to a loss of psychological stability because someone is subject to something normalized that makes no *sense* (Gilligan 2014, 91–93). "Normalization" refers to an authoritative "disavowal" of what otherwise disturbs us by making it appear ordinary, acceptable, or inevitable (Weintrobe 2021, 138, 196). Moral injury interferes with our capacity for self-care—causing us to dissociate from our inner voice alerting us to this betrayal and internalize a false authority that tells us we have it all wrong: "It must be my deep desires and values, instead, that are senseless" (90–91). When we are experts at dissociating from ourselves, we also become adept at turning care away from others.

When we follow Carol Gilligan's (2014) view that the structurally unjust dynamics of society subject all members to moral injury, it is clear that thinking about climate change forefronts the experience of moral injury (Wiinikka-Lydon 2019, 168–69). As Hilary Whitehouse argues, "Few things could be more irrational than to destroy the entire fabric of planetary life for shareholder profit and private enrichment" (2022, 223). As a privileged individual, I find it infeasible to opt out from contributing to this normalized and senseless destruction for capital. It *is* painful to consider how this betrays my desire for environmental flourishing.

2. Responding to failures of moral agency and self-care

With these resources on hand, let's turn back to the DfD objection. The agent who presents this is already in climate despair. However, like dark climate humor, it is also an attempted protective mechanism against the affective consequences of despair, like pain or depression. If thinking about climate change risks serious damage, resistant mechanisms *are* required. The DfD objection seems to accomplish this. Yet it not only prevents actions for desired objectives but also undermines moral agency. If one concludes that her desires are impossible, then she may view them as lacking moral relevance. As Dout and Obst note: "If one believes injustice to be fixed and immutable, then accepting injustice is not only morally permissible but the only rational thing to do" (2023, 321). It can *appear* that way when injustice is normalized, and moral agency is undermined.

Moral agency is concerned with whether the intentions, beliefs, and goals constituting one's sense of agency give rise to morally relevant actions. It includes the ability to act in accordance with knowledge of what is morally right to do and what social norms exist in one's context (Sondermann et al. 2018, 3). Responsibility presupposes that one has competency to do this; when she does not, she is not viewed as responsible for her actions (Davis 1998, 52).

What if an agent does not view *herself* as possessing these competencies because unjust norms betray her knowledge of what is morally right to do? She might relinquish moral obligations she otherwise holds, because relevant assertions of agency feel excessively demanding, but also painfully *meaningless*. I see the DfD objector as framing climate action this way: undermining her moral agency in anticipation that its assertion will lead to the pains of despair. This expounds on her moral injury by undermining her capacity to aim at what she knows to be morally right (Gilligan 2014, 103). This

objection anticipates symptoms of moral injury but cannot address it because it turns caring attention away.

Dout and Obst argue that the DfD objector "cares deeply about the climate," conflating it with deep desire (2023, 331). Yet care requires more than desiring, no matter how strongly. It includes engagement with the world in pursuit of one's desires. Broadly construed, theories and ethics of care highlight the importance of paying attention, being present, and responding responsibly.[4] Care is a practice that aims toward, among other things, repairing aspects of our world that undermine our capacities to live well (Fisher and Tronto 1990, 40). This includes moral repair: the activity of recovering "a shared sense of value and responsibility" (Urban Walker 2006, 28). So, care cannot be sustained well in isolation from political and social contexts it is applied within. Reparative self-care, too, is not apolitical or self-indulgent (Lorde 1988, 131). It is a preservation of self: a social and political act of life-affirmation against manifestations of despair (Lorde 1988, 124–31). In a context of structural injustice, repair will often consist in *resistance* to moral injuries that threaten the loss of our humanity (Gilligan 2011, 12). This is a threat to attending to our shared need for a more just and liberatory world.

As Gilligan argues, morally injurious structures cause dissociation (2014, 95). The DfD objector recognizes the *costs* of paying attention to injustice. Yet this comes with the serious consequences of not paying attention at all. It requires *dissociation* from moral injury by discarding relevant objectives from one's awareness, and risks damaging the self through moral injury, and others. For, by preventing thoughts about climate change, an agent cannot consider how it affects others. Dissociation from moral values not only compounds on moral injury to oneself but impacts others, especially those most affected by climate change. Regarding moral injury, as C. Fred Alford argues, "[i]t would be careless, in the literal sense of being uncaring, not to recognize its presence among us all" (2016, 17).

Perhaps you are thinking that few people would give up a moral project they desire to guard against despair's pains. I see this as one of the most pressing challenges for privileged individuals benefitting from injustice. When complacency is a live option, privileged despair becomes particularly tempting (Stockdale 2021, 188). The temptation to refer to the DfD objection is prevalent when complacency is furthermore encouraged by moral injury. It uses despairing forecasts as a *reason* for inaction—a luxury few can afford (Solnit 2023).

With similar focus on privilege, Dout and Obst present two ways to respond without dismissing demandingness altogether (2023, 320). The first is to show that meeting climate justice demands are not *too* demanding because doing so does not threaten other important projects (320). Second, they argue that "to live a life insensitive to the ongoing climate crisis is itself morally wrong" (320). They suggest privileged despair tends to manifest moral corruption: a tendency to "obscure the morally salient features of one's situation to avoid or downplay what one morally must do" (328). Their second point implies that reactive attitudes like blame are warranted, especially given their argument that there are differential obligations for oppressed people to act in hope that would "reduce blame's appropriateness" (327).

I agree that the behaviour defended by the DfD objection is morally wrong. But our responses will be different if we address it as a manifestation of moral corruption as opposed to moral injury. Moral corruption is a facilitation of strategies like selective attention or complacency that are "self-deceptive" (Gardiner 2006, 407–8). Privileged

[4]See, e.g., Gilligan 1982/2003; Noddings 1982; Tronto 1994; Kittay 1999; Held 2006; Engster 2007.

despair likewise facilitates these strategies. However, I think responding to this objection is less a case for blame than it is for recognizing injury and seeking moral repair. While privileged climate despair may be a manifestation of moral corruption, it is also a response to moral injury that affects all who despair when action seems pointless. It is something we do, but it also happens *to* us. Like apocalyptic humour, it is an attempt to cope with the *absurdity* of feeling that life-affirming desires are meaningless in the context of injustice. The DfD objection is a misguided attempt to defend against despair's pains with despair, a failed attempt to self-care with tools that disempower caring capacities.

I cannot recall when I first felt the injuries of climate change, but its pains can be recognizable. For example, struggling to breathe due to panic and asthma-inducing air quality that accompanies what is now-called "wildfire season." The pains can also be covert. It never felt *right* to toss something that could be recycled. It never felt *good* to deny life-affirming desires with jokes about climate apocalypse. Yet the wrongness felt necessarily accompanied by a benefit of respite that deceptively told me a pain was being "treated." It was zero-sum thinking in a game with no wins. It took time to recognize that this thinking hurt me too. It is difficult work to *keep* recognizing this, and I could not do it without my loved ones. The burden lightens when I attend to the fact that giving into moral injury has done a poor job of helping me resist it. It has interfered with my capacity to practice life-affirming care beyond mere defense against despair's pains. Referring to the wrongness of dissociating from one's values only gets us so far without a vision of moral repair to resist it.

3. Resisting moral injury

I assume that moral obligations include a shared responsibility to promote moral agency for ourselves and others in the face of structural injustice. I see these as *differential* responsibilities based on one's context, privilege, and ability. I take this to include moral repair, which often involves resisting moral injury, with a greater responsibility falling on those with more privilege and capacity to do so. One task for moral repair entails seeking resources to properly attend to shared symptoms of moral injury. I see epistemic humility as a virtue that makes good strides toward this.

I agree with Dout and Obst that humility invites us to act for justice and recognize the benefits of continued struggle in this (2023, 325–26). Cultivating epistemic humility is not only the *right* thing to do, but also a task of reparative self-care that empowers resistance to dissociation from shared moral projects. While we might warrant blame for leaning into despair, control over this is limited. We also deserve care for being harmed by it. Both blame and attempts at moral repair can recognize the agent's role in dissociating, but moral repair emphasizes the relational scaffolding that *helps* an agent take responsibility for a wrong they are not alone in experiencing, and that is difficult to attend to.

Attention has an important relational component, in the literal sense of *attending*, when understood as an active practice of engaging with reality. Attending to symptoms of moral injury includes care: aiming towards repair, listening to ourselves and others, and critically evaluating shared norms. Of course, directing attention to injustice is difficult. I wonder how many hours I spend scrolling through horrific reels of the genocide and ecocide in Gaza, of climate disaster, and of world leaders competing to deny human rights. This generates feelings of powerlessness, and the temptation to despair.[5] Sometimes we will need to temporarily turn attention away to avoid endlessly

[5]See Setiya 2022, 119–20, for a discussion of doom scrolling that inspired this section.

painful doom scrolling. Awareness of injustice necessitates *recognition* of moral injury's pains—making it tempting to normalize injustice, turn attention away, and never look back (Murdoch 1970/2014, 69–88). Resisting this self-deception requires continuous effort and relational scaffolding to restore visions for moral repair.

Awareness lacking epistemic humility cannot sustain attentiveness to injustice. It becomes unfettered, myopic, and interferes with acknowledging that we are not alone in the experience of moral injury or the struggle to repair it. There is a false certainty in the belief that the world is unjust beyond repair. I never felt more aware that it might be too late for climate justice than when I despaired. I never felt like more of an expert on my relationship with the world than when I justified inaction with the prediction that we were both ending, anyways. Upon reflection, I realize that I was dissociating from difference-making possibilities. I was no expert on the world. I was an expert on discarding reasons to hope from my awareness.

Epistemic humility requires reflecting on our limitations, considering other perspectives, and accepting vulnerability to uncertainty—it illuminates that moral desires cannot be accomplished or interfered with alone. We rely on others to help and not harm us, and they rely on us too. We can only begin to attend to possibility if we resist putting on our despairing-expert hats to view circumstances as fixed. It might seem like epistemic humility undermines faith in one's own epistemic competences but it grounds attentiveness to competency levels for aligning desires with action (Dormandy 2020, 295–96). Proper attentiveness involves recognizing when we require epistemic assistance—which we will almost always need. The struggle to hope in despair-inducing conditions illuminates the care we should give to others and ourselves when it seems futile to press on and the extent to which we need to depend on others, and they need us. It is easy to wallow in skepticism about making any difference. It is an act of life-affirming self-care to direct some of that skepticism toward our purported competencies to make "expert" despairing predictions.

When we are complicit in injustices that make no *sense*, moral repair triggers sense-making duties to care for ourselves and others. This requires attentiveness to how we are complicit and awareness of injustice, but also humility and acknowledgment that we cannot resist *alone*. Gilligan notes that when we dissociate from deeply held values, what is "held out of awareness, is not lost" (2014, 96). Epistemic humility helps us to reassociate with our values, and also in the literal sense of associating with others. Gilligan tells us that association brings "what is out of awareness back into consciousness," and empowers discovery of what "we know, and yet didn't know that we knew" (96). This does not eliminate burdens, but it lightens them by showing how much is missed when we turn attention away from what we didn't yet know that we knew, deep down, to be right.

The tasks of moral repair show us that living life insensitive to climate change is more demanding on our spirits than one where we maintain moral commitments by seeking to achieve them with others and avoiding a false certainty that there is no point to acting. Moral repair *is* highly, but not excessively demanding, relative to despair. Attentiveness and epistemic humility cannot defeat temptations to despair. Yet they open the door to reparative self-care, recognizing vulnerability to moral injury, sharing these burdens to recultivate moral agency, and regaining hope against despair. I *have* been wrong when I turned attention away from climate obligations because thinking about them was too depressing. But this does not tell the full story: I also wanted to care about climate change and found myself struggling with what this meant. Sometimes, I still do. I know, deep down, that others similarly struggle *and* have ways of caring that I am not yet aware of.

This gives me reason to hope that moral and environmental repair can be jointly undertaken.

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