

Self Regulation

Version 2

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When we consider whether human beings can respond to some of the major global issues that affect us such as climate change, environmental damage and poverty, the discussion ultimately centres on one question – whether we are capable of self-regulation.

Self regulation is the ability to regulate our behaviour as a collective group. On some issues (e.g. climate change), this group may consist of all human beings whilst on other issues (e.g. poverty) it may refer to smaller clusters of people.

On some issues, a failure to self regulate may ‘only’ have consequences for a proportion of the global population (e.g. poverty) but on others it may affect everyone. In this paper I will examine the topic of self regulation in relation to the issue of climate change, as it is an example of an issue where failure to self regulate could feasibly affect everyone. The aim of the paper is to articulate some of the overarching questions that global issues such as climate change are currently forcing us to consider, and to suggest that our ability to self-regulate as a species is dependent not just on our selfishness or otherwise as creatures (as is often claimed) but also on our willingness to reconsider the principles and values we have built our societies around, such as the importance of individual freedom.

Our ability to change our level of CO₂ output will dependent on our ability to make a substantial change to our lifestyles – not only in the west but as a developing global community. In other words, we will need to place constraints on our own behaviour despite tempting options being available to exceed these constraints. For example, we may need to travel less by car and plane despite these options being open to us. This placing of constraints on our own behaviour may have to occur on an individual level if the state will not intervene, or it may be achieved through our voting as an electorate for a political party that is prepared to constrain our freedom on this issue when in government.

In either case, we find a conflict that gets to the heart of the complexity of self-regulation – ‘our desire to self-regulate in order to achieve a particular goal’ versus ‘our freedom to do as we please’. Freedom is possibly the most important of our modern values and should never be surrendered (even to a partial degree) lightly.¹ Throughout many states in the world, this freedom is enshrined within a democratic political system, which gives us the freedom to choose who we vote for and to reject those that do not promise to fulfil our wishes. Assuming (not entirely accurately, I know) that the world is moving towards democratic government in most major states, and assuming that not enough people will make a sufficient number of changes to their own lives voluntarily, how can

we be sure that people will actually vote for a government that is prepared to constrain their freedom to achieve a particular aim (however important)?

The answer is that we can't. Choosing democratic political systems over authoritarian ones (or choosing freedom as an inalienable right for citizens) is rather like choosing 'the journey' over 'the destination'. It preserves our ability to live the lives we want (i.e. to each choose our own 'destinations', within the bounds of social acceptability), free from interference from any interest group, however seemingly honourable their intentions. Quite simply, the thinking goes, if you let one group constrain our freedom for even the best reasons, this opens the door for others to constrain our freedom.

This seems to be the right way to preserve one of the most important things in our world – our freedom. But, returning to the 'journey versus destination' analogy, choosing the journey rather than the destination hampers us on the occasions when we actually do need to seek a particular destination. In other words, somewhat shockingly, it appears to prevent us from reacting to long-term situations quickly – even those that could threaten our existence as a species. Perhaps the need to do something about climate change is the first time such a situation/destination has presented itself to the world as a whole community.

Our prioritisation of democracy and freedom doesn't necessarily prevent us from reacting to short-term situations - there are circumstances in which democratic governments are willing to claim emergency powers to constrain peoples' freedom – and in which (sometimes) the electorate accepts this. For example, if the government feels it necessary to go to war to protect the country. I suggest however that most of these situations of 'enforced constraint' only occur in the face of an immediate threat or situation – and not in the face of a long-term problem. The threat of climate change is different - although we are being constantly reminded of changes in the weather that are already happening as a result of climate change, we may not actually be adversely affected by it in a substantial way for some years, and by this point it will be too late to prevent even more serious consequences. This raises another difficult question - how will the government get the cooperation of the people in such a situation and convince them (and indeed themselves) that it is serious enough to demand constraints on their freedom?

Now back to the main thread of the article. Should we consider sacrificing our freedom in some way in order to meet the challenges of climate change? Perhaps we have to accept that our prioritisation of freedom may be our downfall unless we are prepared to compromise it to a certain level on the issue of climate change.

A decision to sacrifice this freedom on one particular issue – arguably the biggest threat we have ever faced as a species – is likely to have massive political and social ramifications, and is not one to be taken lightly. But perhaps the presence of such an important threat to human civilisation should force us to re-examine some of our most basic principles and systems on this occasion.

A couple of central questions or decisions emerge from this paper. The first is that for the last few hundred years we have placed freedom as the key priority of our societies, but perhaps we now have to replace it with a higher priority – survival in our environment. Part of this decision requires policy makers to arrive at a view on just how

many people climate change needs to affect before we make it a priority over our freedom. This is a very difficult choice as it is based on drawing an arbitrary line on what level of suffering or non-survival is 'acceptable', but that is the way of such decisions.ⁱⁱ

If they can make the above decisions together (and it's a big if), political decision makers then face another challenge, related to the non-immediate nature of the threat that I mentioned earlier – at what point do they decide to trust scientific evidence and predictions about the threat and which evidence and predictions should they trust? Again, this is a complex question and one I simply wish to raise in this paper. It will be critical in convincing the public of the severity of the threat and the need for the imposition of constraints on their freedom. A series of further questions follow this one, such as what types of constraints governments should place upon people, but I will not pursue these here.

Issues such as climate change present us with a new challenge that forces us to review some of humanity's most cherished principles and systems. Let us realise the scale of this challenge and tackle it as a matter of urgency.

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ⁱ It is however a hideously misunderstood concept – misunderstood by both the public and those who should be better equipped to deal with it such as politicians and writers. I will not explore this point here however.

ⁱⁱ And if this adjustment of priorities were to be made it would need to be undertaken with great care, in order to ensure that the prioritisation of anything above freedom was so tightly defined that no other interests could slip above it on the basis of their similarity in definition to survival relating to climate change.