

# Abolition over the ages, slavery and fossil fuels

Final essay, Environmental Philosophy

by

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Dale Jamieson writes about moral progress in his 2017 article: “Slavery, Carbon, and Moral Progress” (Jamieson, 2017). In this work, Jamieson compares an area where we have already made moral progress, that being the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, with an area where there still is a lot of work to be done, being anthropocentric climate change. The comparison is limited to the occurrence of moral progress, the severity of the issues at hand is not assumed to be anywhere near-equal.

There are many ways in which moral progress can be viewed, Jamieson starts his article by giving us the so-called “naïve conception”, which should appeal to consequentialists and deontologists alike. Jamieson formulates the naïve conception as holding that:

*“Moral progress occurs when a subsequent state of affairs is better than a preceding one, or when right acts become increasingly prevalent.” (Jamieson, 2017,2)*

As mentioned above, this conception clearly appeals to consequentialism and deontology, it is however not strictly limited to these systems alone. On the contrary, any moral system in which there is such a thing as “good” and in which it is possible for states of affairs to be better than preceding ones, the naïve conception fulfills its purpose. For instance, in virtue ethics, it is said that one ought to act as the virtuous person would act. Presumably, an increase in virtuous people would constitute a better state of affairs, therefore, moral progress occurs when there are more virtuous people. Even from within a framework where morality is strictly relative or dependent on circumstance, we can still say that: relative to the circumstance, there is more good in situation B as opposed to situation A. In essence, the naïve conception allows us to debate on moral progress while leaving the actual discussions about what is right or wrong to be discussed elsewhere.

Using the naïve conception, Jamieson starts to analyze the process through which moral progress occurs by looking at a “clear example” (Jamieson, 2017,9) the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Much like Jamieson’s work, this essay will not be concerned with proving **that** the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade is an example of moral progress. Instead, we look at **how** the process progressed through its various stages, drawing comparisons to the modern day problem of decarbonisation along the way.

According to Jamieson, moral progress in the case of the abolition of slavery in The United

States progressed similarly to the current progress of decarbonisation. First is the stage where the issue at hand (here slavery) is normalized. Those who argue for its abolition are often seen as “fanatics” or “lunatics” (Jamieson, 2017,10). While many of these early vocal critics stand at the edge of society, often rejecting more parts of the general consensus than just the issue at hand, critics were also to be found within the ruling classes of society. According to Jamieson, progress towards abolition was: “*tentative, incremental, localized and even one-dimensional*” (Jamieson, 2017,12), instead of being a momentary revolution.

Arguments against the abolitionists often took an economic form. Slave owners and politicians often claiming that not having slaves would be too expensive, while others held that the entirety of modern society relied on the existence of slave labour. These arguments also had the test of time on their side, being that many ancient societies tolerated or even encouraged slavery. The ancient wise philosophers are credited as stating that:

*“That some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.”* (Aristotle and Barnes, 1984)

And even religious scriptures such as Exodus encouraged the practice:

*“Anyone who beats their male or female slave with a rod must be punished if the slave dies as a direct result, but they are not to be punished if the slave recovers after a day or two, since the slave is their property.”* (Exod. 21:20-21)

According to Jamieson, some slave owners even claimed that they ensured the moral development of the slaves which would otherwise not take place (Jamieson, 2017,12).

The overlap between arguments for slavery and the use of fossil fuels is clear to see. As Jamieson points out, fossil fuel companies often portray themselves as a cornerstone of modern society, while others see them as a necessary evil (Jamieson, 2017,12). Furthermore, both with slavery right before its abolishment and with fossil fuel industries now, there is much to be lost economically. Indeed, a complete abolition of fossil fuels will likely decrease the income of many countries around the world, wealthy and otherwise. Claims that “green jobs” will actually cause an increase in welfare are, according to Jamieson, just as doubtful as pre-abolition claims that plantations would thrive without slavery on free labour, due to its allegedly higher productivity (Jamieson, 2017,13).

At this point in his article, Jamieson alters his approach. Instead of pointing out further similarities between the issues of decarbonisation and abolition, he dedicates a section to pointing out the differences between the two.

The first difference Jamieson points out is that while slavery is always bad, the use of fossil fuels is only bad in excess. Historically, the use of fossil fuels was a good idea, and even a

necessity for human development. According to Jamieson, this is not the case with slavery, which was “*always a bad idea*” (Jamieson, 2017,13).

On a secondary yet related note, Jamieson calls our attention to the dehumanizing factor inherent in slavery. In Jamieson’s view, this factor is absent from the issue of climate change. Though there is talk of discounting the interests of future and far off people, Jamieson claims that there is less of an assault on what it means to be a person (Jamieson, 2017,13).

Another difference Jamieson point out is the directness of the harm caused. While slave owners and slaves were always in close proximity, the former causing direct harm to the latter, in the issue of climate change, there is the mediation factor of the atmosphere which stands between the assailant and the victim.

In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on the rebuttal of Jamieson’s latter claims, thereby showing that the issues of climate change and slavery are even more closely related than he makes them out to be.

On Jamieson’s first claim, that slavery is always bad while the use of fossil fuels isn’t I wish to call attention to our definition of slavery. Though many people would say that the classical picture of American slavery is morally corrupt. The bloodshed, humiliation and dehumanisation causing instant revulsion for many. More subtle forms of slavery do not receive the same reaction. For instance, forced labour under threat of eviction, or child labour motivated by an extreme lack of food, are certainly seen as less severe. Other examples include sex trafficking, debt bondage or domestic servitude. Indeed, some abstain from calling people in these situations “slaves”, preferring the term “servants” or simply “workers”. This essay will not be concerned by proving these forms of labour to be enslaving people. Instead, I merely wish to call attention to the fact that the term “slave” may not be limited to the slaves we know from the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, there is the issue of dehumanisation. Jamieson does not see anthropocentric climate changes as challenging our definition of “what it means to be human” (Jamieson, 2017,13). I think one need only look at recent news articles to be convinced that the issues surrounding carbon diode, climate change and pollution are in fact quite dehumanizing. Examples include toxic rivers in Brazil bring cancer and severe skin problems to native tribal people (Lopez-Carmen, 2020), people in Alaska starving due to poisons released by melting polar icecaps (Smedley, 2019) and a young girl dying in London due to pollution induced asthma attacks (Harrabin, 2020). The health, wellbeing, livelihoods and sometimes lives of people, especially in developing nations, are discounted in the face of progress. Their moral worth is apparently trivial when compared to the fruits of industrialisation. This is in my opinion a challenge to what it means to be human. Sayings such as “money can’t buy happiness” tell us that material possessions are less valuable than human life, friendships and compassion. However, when it comes to the people mentioned above, their suffering is discounted in

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<sup>1</sup>For further reading, see (Davidson, 2015)

exchange for money, material possessions or even mere comfort and entertainment.

When Jamieson claims that the harm caused by slavery is more direct than in the case of climate change, he makes a fair point. Many of the effects of carbon dioxide emissions are felt in distant-places or -times. However, this is not always the case. I mentioned earlier the case of a girl in London who died from air pollution (Harrabin, 2020). Another example (though not nearly as severe) is a man in Ridderveld (South Holland, The Netherlands) who noticed an oil-like substance floating on his fishpond in his back garden which he claims came from the exhausts of nearby cars (Reitera et al, 2021). And then there are cities such as Mexico City and Shanghai which are clouded by smog. Leading, beyond lung ailments, to vitamin D deficiency (Stratford et al, 2018) and an increase in traffic accidents (Abdel-Aty et al, 2011). These examples open up to a more general point, while the effects of carbon dioxide emissions are often not felt locally, the effects of (air) pollution are.

Upon returning to Jamieson's work, we find him concluding with his ideas on how activists are to move forwards in their quest for the abolition of fossil fuel use. In this section, Jamieson draws on the methods used historically by the slavery abolitionists.

Jamieson calls for a campaign that connects the effects of global warming with the actions that cause them (Jamieson, 2017,13). Jamieson mentioned the 1791 blood sugar campaign where the consumption of a pound of sugar was directly adequated with the consumption of two ounces of human flesh (Jamieson, 2017,13).

A similar campaign might be started by the carbon abolitionists. However, scale is not on their side. Saying: "showering for 10 minutes instead of 5 causes an increase in global temperature of 0.00000000001 degree!"<sup>2</sup> is unlikely to convince anyone to lower their showering time. A similar problem comes forth from the fact that to the uneducated, do not understand the significance of a rise in temperature. The rise in temperature should be further compared, for instance, to the loss of life. If we can successfully adequate, for instance, an aeroplane trip with the killing of one person, we might achieve something with such a campaign<sup>2</sup>.

Though I understand Jamieson's recommendation of this tactic, seeing its success in the slave abolition campaign, there is one major pitfall for this approach. Bringing the effects close to home and thereby playing on peoples sympathies is, in a sense, played out. Advertisements with sad and hungry African infants litter television, newspapers, magazines and websites. Pictures of burnt woodlands, seabirds drenched in oil and people stuck under rubble appear after every major disaster. At a certain point instead of inducing sympathy, encouraging the people to take action, these strategies only desensitize the public to suffering and destruction. In fact, the overuse of this approach of invigorating the masses has been used so much, that jokes such as:

*"Every 60 seconds, a minute passes in Africa"* (@raphaelbek, 2009)

are commonplace.

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<sup>2</sup>Values not necessarily in accordance with reality.

In this essay, I have discussed Jamieson's 2017 article "Slavery Carbon and Moral Progress" (Jamieson, 2017). I started with outlining Jamieson's view on moral progress in general and give a slight alternative view that should appeal to all ethical systems. Afterwards, I listed the similarities Jamieson mentioned between the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and the call for the abolition of fossil fuels. After displaying and analysing these points, I provided further examples of yet more areas where the two issues overlap. Here I departed from Jamieson, showing the shortcomings of his theory. Afterwards, I discussed Jamieson's proposed solution which borrows from the slavery abolitionists. While this solution was compatible with the views I expressed up till then in this essay, I showed a potential pitfall of the approach. This pitfall exists not because the issues of carbon and slavery are too different, but instead because the strategy of the historic abolitionists, which Jamieson proposes we use again, has now been used too much and by too many groups to really be effective.

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