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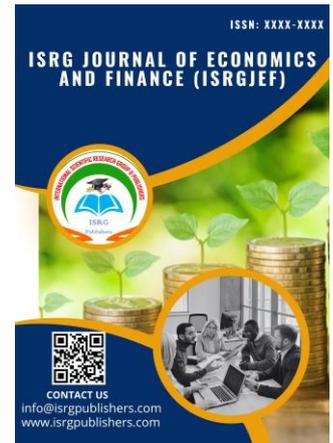
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Frank Ramsey, Doughnut Economics and De-growth Theories: Towards a Pragmatic Solution to Social Inequality and the Climate Catastrophe

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Abstract

There are striking parallels between the ground-breaking economic theories of Frank Ramsey and the current proposals of Kate Raworth in her theory of doughnut economics. Moreover, there are elements of both positions which align well with contemporary efforts to deal with the looming climate catastrophe through forms of de-growth strategies. Ramsey's theories, introduced in the early 20th century, laid down foundational ideas for understanding how future consumption needs to be balanced against present needs. His notion of optimal growth over time aligns well with Raworth's insistence that economic factors need to be interpreted within a framework of social justice and the well-being of the planet. Both these theories – reinforced by current work on de-growth strategies – can provide a blueprint for social and economic theory and practice which aims at creating a safe and just space where humanity can thrive without undermining the planet's health.

Key Words: Frank Ramsey, Doughnut Economics, Existential Risks, Inter-generational Ethics, DeGrowth Strategies

1. Introduction

Frank Ramsey (1903-1930) was – according to all the evidence adduced by his biographer, Cherly Misak (2020) – ‘one of the most powerful and influential thinkers Cambridge ever produced’ (p.xxiii). Although he died just before his twenty-seventh birthday, he made highly significant and lasting contributions to a wide range of fields and disciplines including philosophy, economics, pure mathematics, mathematical logic, probability theory, the

foundations of mathematics, and decision theory. Many academic topics and fields still bear his mark, and the philosopher, David Davidson coined the term ‘the Ramsey Effect’ in 1999 to identify the ‘phenomenon of finding out that your exciting and apparently original philosophical discovery has already been presented, and presented more elegantly, by Frank Ramsey’ (Misak, p.xxv). There are also Ramsey Sentences, the Ramsey Test for

Conditionals, Ramsification, Ramseyan Humility, and many more (ibid.)

In relation to the primary concerns of this article, Ramsey's work on economic theory – particularly his account of overarching tax and savings policies (Ramsey, 1928) – was so far-sighted it is still required reading on all university economics degree courses. After examining aspects of Ramsey's ideas in this sphere, the article goes on to locate these against the background of contemporary economic issues, particularly those discussed by Kate Raworth in her theory labelled 'doughnut economics' (2017). The analysis concludes with a comparison of this synthesis of 20th and 21st century theories with the recent de-growth strategies which seek to solve the problems of balancing current social-economic needs with future societies in the light of issues surrounding the current climate catastrophe and problems of wealth inequality and social injustices.

2. Frank Ramsey: Pragmatism, Socialism and Economics

Ramsey was initially influenced by the work of J M Keynes and Arthur Pigou – both influential Cambridge economists in the 1920s – but soon diverged from orthodoxy by presenting his ideas which reflected his astute mathematical understanding and the influence of both philosophical pragmatism and the socialist perspectives of his Cambridge peers such as Maurice Dobb and Piero Sraffa (Misak, 2020, pp.299ff.). In two ground-breaking papers published in *The Economic Journal* (Ramsey, 1927,1928) edited by Keynes, Ramsey put forward his models for growth, savings and taxation which focussed on optimal consumption over time, stressing inter-generational equity and the allocation of resources for maximum utility. The key elements of Ramsey's economic theory include:

2.1. Inter-temporal choice

The Ramsey model examines how people make decisions about saving and consumption over time, with an aim to optimize utility in a way which underscores sustainable consumption patterns that consider future generations. In this way he departs from strict utilitarian principles and – informed by his socialist ideas and the pragmatism of philosophers such as William James and C.S. Peirce – he eschewed ideal models in acknowledging that a society's resources will always be finite and growth cannot be sustained indefinitely without depleting current reserves (Ramsey, 1928).

2.2. Utilization of resources

In his growth model, Ramsey viewed resources as finite, and assumed that economic growth cannot be sustained indefinitely if it depletes environmental resources beyond regeneration capacity. Thus, a balance must be struck between current consumption and investment for future growth which can incorporate environmental conditions (Ramsey,1927). This conception aligns fully with current de-growth strategies, whether these are linked to issues of social justice and equality (Saito, 2022) or to policies which foreground the urgent need to tackle the impending climate catastrophe (Ord, 2020; Hyland, 2022). Applied to the current policies informing the policies and practice of most industrialized nations, this must count as a salutary reminder of the radical step change required to preserve our commitment to future generations

2.3. Discount Rate

Ramsey's theory of taxation – described as 'brilliant..a landmark in the economics of public finance' by the Nobel prize-winning economist, Joseph Stiglitz (2014) – introduced the then revolutionary notion of differential rather than general taxes on

goods and services with the aim of optimizing present and future utility. As Stiglitz explains:

given that commodity taxes are distortionary, what is the best way of raising revenues, i.e. what is the set of taxes to raise a given revenue which maximizes utility? The answer is now commonly referred to as Ramsey taxes. The basic insight was that taxes should be set so as to reduce the consumption of each good (along its compensated demand curve) equi-proportionately. He establishes this result in two contexts: (i) if the government needs to raise only a small amount of tax revenue and (ii) if utility functions are quadratic (2014, p.1-2).

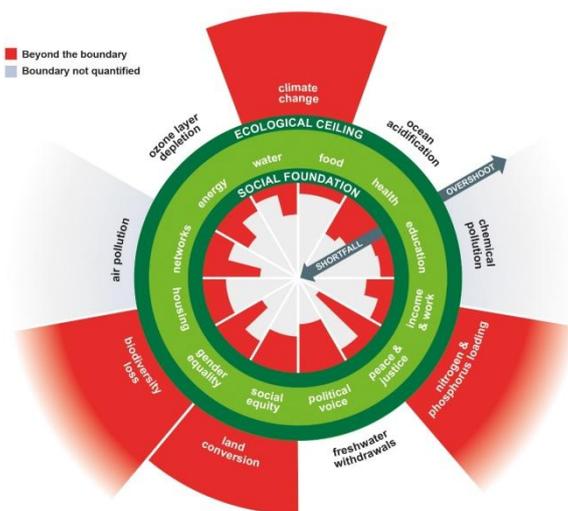
As Misak (2020) remarks, this theory 'set the agenda that is still being pursued almost a century later, laying the foundation for the field of macro-public finance'. She goes on to note that Ramsey's approach:

would pave the way for progressive income taxes, indirect taxation, bequest taxes and capital taxes. For once we can articulate our concern with distributive justice and the need to fund public goods, we can figure out what can be achieved by the tax system while limiting the level of distortion (pp.310-311).

Ramsey's taxation notions were aligned with his theory of savings which was informed by a robust social welfare function which sought to balance individual and societal needs with a close eye on the potential needs of future generations. Frank Dasgupta, the Frank Ramsey Professor of Economics at Cambridge University, explains that Ramsey's idea of how to balance private, public and communitarian investments taking into account future needs and interests was 'remarkable...In academic economics it is probably one of the dozen most influential papers of the twentieth century' (Dasgupta, in Misak, 2020, pp,322-3).

3. Doughnut Economics

Like Ramsey's theories, Doughnut Economics popularized by Raworth (2017) presents a framework for economic activity that aims to meet the needs of all whilst taking account of the planet's finite means and resources, both in the present and, as far as possible, for future generations. Acknowledging the development of technological, social and environmental factors that were unknown to Ramsey's generation, Raworth's model integrates social and environmental dimensions much more explicitly than orthodox economic models.



(Source: World Economic Forum, 2017)

The essence of the Doughnut: a social foundation of well-being that no one should fall below, and an ecological ceiling of planetary pressure that we should not go beyond. Between the two lies a safe and just space for all

The first of the seven changes Raworth proposes to make economic theory and practice relevant to 21st century conditions is to change its main goal. As she puts it:

For over 70 years economics has been fixated on GDP, or national output, as its primary measure of progress. That fixation has been used to justify extreme inequalities of income and wealth coupled with unprecedented destruction of the living world. For the twenty-first century a far bigger goal is needed: meeting the human rights of every person within the means of our life-giving planet. And that goal is encapsulated in the concept of the Doughnut. The challenge now is to create economies – local to global – that help to bring all of humanity into the Doughnut’s safe and just space. Instead of pursuing ever-increasing GDP, it is time to discover how to thrive in balance (Raworth, 2017, p.27).

The other six changes proposed by Raworth – seeing the big picture, nurturing human nature, employing systems thinking, designing to distribute, creating to regenerate, and being agnostic about growth (ibid.,pp.27-31) – can be usefully discussed under the following headings:

3.1. Social Foundation and Ecological Change

Building on the central idea that narratives and images play a crucial role in human development, the Raworth model is visualized as a doughnut-shaped structure where the inner circle represents the social foundation of basic human needs, and the outer circle represents the ecological ceiling of planetary boundaries. This framework seeks to ensure that economic activity does not exceed ecological limits whilst also preserving access to basic needs for everyone. The model ‘it points towards a future that can provide for every person’s needs while safeguarding the living world on which we all depend’ (ibid.,p.43).

3.2. Regenerative and Distributive Economy

The model advocates for an economy designed to be regenerative and distributive, emphasizing the need for sustainable strategies that constantly preserve and restore ecological health in terms of renewable energy, a circular economy, and a fair and equitable distribution of resources. As Raworth explains:

The Doughnut’s inner ring – its social foundation – sets out the basics of life on which no one should be left falling short. These twelve basics include: sufficient food; clean water and decent sanitation; access to energy and clean cooking facilities; access to education and to healthcare; decent housing; a minimum income and decent work; and access to networks of information and to networks of social support. Furthermore, it calls for achieving these with gender equality, social equity, political voice, and peace and justice (ibid.,p.44).

3.3. Holistic Approach to Growth and Progress

Raworth is highly critical of the current economic model dominated by the conception of humankind as purely rational, calculating and self-interested, concerned only with material needs and interests. The origins of this conception can be traced to the growth of industrialisation and mercantilism and, in political theory, the basic ideas go back at least as far as Hobbes and Locke and encapsulated in the concept of ‘possessive individualism’ which, according to Macpherson (1962), asserts that each ‘individual is essentially the proprietor of his (sic) own person and

capacities, for which he owes nothing to society’ (p.263). Following critics such as Stiglitz (2013) and Picketty (2014), Raworth outlines her own holistic approach to growth. As she explains:

At the heart of twentieth-century economics stands the portrait of rational economic man: he has told us that we are self-interested, isolated, calculating, fixed in taste, and dominant over nature – and his portrait has shaped who we have become. But human nature is far richer than this, as early sketches of our new self-portrait reveal: we are social, interdependent, approximating, fluid in values, and dependent upon the living world (op.cit., p.29).

Like critics of the current neoliberal model of economics such as George Monbiot (2024), Raworth extends the notion of growth from crude measures of national wealth or GDP to include health, justice, and the well-being of the whole planet.

3.4. Engage with systems thinking

Raworth asserts that much economic thinking is still rooted in 19th century models of activity based of outdated models of input/output and supply and demand. Contemporary conditions, however, call for more dynamic and flexible systems thinking which can be ‘summed up by a simple pair of feedback loops’. She argues that it is ‘time to stop searching for the economy’s elusive control levers and start stewarding it as an ever-evolving complex system (ibid.,p.29).

3.5. Design for distribution

Like Stiglitz and Picketty, Raworth holds that inequality is not an inevitable outcome of economic activity but a ‘design fault’ of the present model. She argues that her doughnut model entails ‘going beyond redistributing income to exploring ways of redistributing wealth, particularly the wealth that lies in controlling land, enterprise, technology, knowledge, and the power to create money (ibid.,p.30)

3.6. Create to regenerate

Raworth is highly critical of the view ‘reinforced by the Environmental Kuznets Curve, which once again whispered that pollution has to get worse before it can get better, and growth will (eventually) clean it up. However, ‘there is no such law: ecological degradation is simply the result of degenerative industrial design’. The 21st century requires ‘economic thinking that unleashes regenerative design in order to create a circular – not linear – economy, and to restore humans as full participants in Earth’s cyclical processes of life’ (ibid.,p.31).

3.7. Be agnostic about growth

This element directly challenges the current model of growth tied to GDP and argues for a much more inclusive and holistic conception which encompasses the overall well-being of society. As Raworth argues:

Today we have economies that need to grow, whether or not they make us thrive: what we need are economies that make us thrive, whether or not they grow. That radical flip in perspective invites us to become agnostic about growth, and to explore how economies that are currently financially, politically and socially addicted to growth could learn to live with or without it (ibid.,p.30).

The dominant GDP conception of growth in narrowly economic terms is described by Raworth as the ‘cuckoo in the nest’ of growth strategies and goes on to explain how:

Knocked sideways by the 2008 financial crash, alarmed by the 2011 Occupy movement’s global resonance, and under growing

pressure to act on climate change, it's no wonder that politicians today have started searching for words to express more inspiring visions of social and economic progress (ibid.p.40).

Within the framework of these new conception of societal health, Raworth – inspired by thinkers and policymakers in a wide range of fields and disciplines – goes on to elaborate her concept of Doughnut economics as a model which has the potential to achieve the more holistic and inclusive aims and goals of flourishing human communities. Many of these aims are aligned with contemporary de-growth strategies, and the main connecting elements are examined in the next section.

4. The Philosophy of Degrowth: Theory and Practice

What unites the economic conceptions of Ramsey and Raworth is their shared recognition of the limitations imposed by environmental constraints, although they arrive at the conclusion via different pathways. Ramsey's model, seeking to extend neo-classical ideas, operates under the premise that optimal resource allocation can guide sustainable growth. However, it can also lead to the fallacy that technology and more efficient planning may provide an indefinite substitute for the planet's finite resources, and this idea is increasingly at odds with the reality of climate catastrophe and the increasing inequalities between rich and poor both within and between individuals and nation states. Thus, though Ramsey's ideas are rooted in more egalitarian distribution of wealth and resources, he could not have anticipated the current ecological threats to the planet.

Doughnut economics directly confronts the idea of the threats caused by unregulated and headlong economic activity by arguing for new conceptions of how growth is defined and applied. Proponents of de-growth philosophy ask legitimate questions such as why do developed states interpret growth in purely economic terms of GDP when it can be applied to, for instance, the progress made in public health and social welfare, the inclusivity of schools and colleges to foster greater equality of opportunity, or the reduction of numbers of people in prisons or those suffering from mental ill health? Some of these issues will be seen to be relevant later when attempts are made to justify these policies in moral, prudential and pragmatic terms.

The extension of the concept of growth to encompass a wider remit than GDP or the economy serves to provide a positive connotation for the concept of de-growth which may, in some contexts, seem negative. As the official *Degrowth* organisation explains, the origin of the term:

is to be found in Latin languages, where “la décroissance” in French or “la decrescita” in Italian refer to a river going back to its normal flow after a disastrous flood. The English word “de-growth” became prominent after the first international de-growth conference in Paris in 2008. It has since then been established in academic writing as well as in the media and is used by social movements and practitioners. An advantage of using a term which does not roll off the tongue easily in English is that it creates disruption. Disruption in a world where the critique of economic growth is a radical position. We distance ourselves from forms of growth critique which do not aim for the good life for all. We object to all right-wing, racist and sexist forms of growth critique (2021, p.1).

The essential elements of de-growth strategies are outlined as:

- Striving for a self-determined life in dignity for all. This includes deceleration, time welfare and conviviality.
- An economy and a society that sustains the natural basis of life.
- A reduction of production and consumption in the global North and liberation from the one-sided Western paradigm of development. This could allow for a self-determined path of social organization in the global South.
- An extension of democratic decision-making to allow for real political participation.
- Social changes and an orientation towards sufficiency instead of purely technological changes and improvements in efficiency in order to solve ecological problems. We believe that it has historically been proven that decoupling economic growth from resource use is not possible.
- The creation of open, connected and localized economies (ibid..p.2)

Moreover, advocates of such policies such as Katharina Richter (2023) are keen to stress that de-growth should not be equated with a shrinking GDP or a recession. As she explains, ‘de-growth proposes an equitable, voluntary reduction of over-consumption in affluent societies’ (p.2). However, critics of the currently dominant neoliberal stage of economic activity such as Paul Mason (2015) and George Monbiot (2024) - though broadly agreeing with de-growth objectives – tend to locate them within a more radical socialist framework in order to advocate ways of repairing the damage to humanity and the planet caused by late capitalism. There is an echo here of the later writings of Karl Marx.

In an interesting analysis of Karl Marx's later writings, Kohei Saito (2022) argues that Marx – after studying non-Western societies which helped him to propose ideas for post-capitalist communities – ultimately ‘became a de-growth communist’ (p.173). Writings in the later notebooks reveal that he ‘underwent a significant theoretical shift after he brought his attention to bear on the problem of the productive forces of capital’. In this later revision of Marx's ideas there is a realization that ‘productive forces do not automatically prepare the material foundation for new post-capitalist society but rather *exacerbate the robbery of nature*’ (ibid.,p.177, italics added).

In particular, Marx's notebook of 1868 reveals ‘how he came to deal with the ecological complex around modern food production consisting of water pollution, soil exhaustion and pandemic disease’ (ibid.,p.181). Saito goes on to note that: ‘the research objective that is discernible from Marx's late notebooks is very different from his earlier optimistic view’. Saito goes on to elaborate this position by noting that Marx:

Abandoning his celebration of the of the increasing productive forces under capitalism, came to recognize that the sustainable development of the productive forces is not possible under capitalism because it only reinforces intensive and extensive squandering and robbery of human and nature for the sake of short-term profit and endless capital accumulation, creating more complicated and extensive ecological issues. The reparation of the metabolic rift necessitates a different economic system, and this is the fundamental insight of Marx's ‘ecosocialism in the 1860s (ibid.,pp.181-2).

Such ‘ecosocialism’ has direct parallels with both Ramsey's pragmatic economic theory and Raworth's ideas described earlier,

and there are also clear links with the contemporary perspectives of climate activists and eco-ethicists such as Lent (2021), Ord (2020), and Saeverot (2022). These conceptions are explored in the next section concerned with the moral justification of the policies proposed.

5. Ethics, Economics and Future Generations

In reference to ethical justificatory arguments for the sort of radical changes recommended above in terms of social, economic and political systems, a number of relevant levels seem to be necessary.

1. General arguments for the value of social/co-operative arrangements for planning and designing communities on the basis of de-growth economics and politics. These will encompass both evolutionary themes pointing to the historical value of collaboration in the evolution of humankind, and more pragmatic ones which are concerned with the beneficial outcomes for all in arrangements informed by inclusivity, equality and social justice.
2. An expansion of the moral arguments above to encompass future generations since, as argued by Ramsey and Raworth above, any rational approach to social/economic planning needs to include this inter-temporal future-oriented element.

5.1. *General Moral Justifications*

Any case for the universality of altruistic moral values concerned with co-operative social relationships aimed at general well-being needs to face the challenge of the alleged egotism and competitive selfishness of humans which is often supported by reference to evolutionary perspectives. This key question brings us face to face with the evolutionary basis of human behaviour concerned with competition versus co-operation in relation to ourselves, our families, tribes, nations as against all others – an issue which has been discussed at length by philosophers and social scientists.

Having shown in his earlier study *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011) that – in spite of our current pessimistic perspectives and preoccupations – ‘violence has declined over long stretches of time, and today we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species’ existence’ (p.xix), in *Enlightenment Now* (2018) Steven Pinker goes on to outline positive progress in all spheres of human development. In a concluding section on the future of progress, he provides an impressive list of mighty human achievements over the centuries since the late 18th century Enlightenment. As Pinker comments:

When the Enlightenment began, a third of children born in the richest parts of the world died before their fifth birthday; today, that rate befalls 6% of the children in the poorest parts...The world is about a hundred times wealthier than it was two centuries ago, and the prosperity is becoming more evenly distributed across the world’s countries and peoples...War between countries is obsolescent, and war within countries is absent from five-sixth of the world’s surface...Life has been getting safer in every way...Two centuries ago a handful of countries, embracing one per cent of the world’s people, were democratic; today two-thirds of the world’s countries, embracing two-thirds of its people, are...People are putting their longer, healthier, safer, freer, richer and wiser lives to good use (pp.322-323).

None of this good news would, of course, carry any weight with the poor people of Sub-Saharan Africa or in war-torn countries such as present day Yemen, Syria or especially war-devastated Ukraine but, as Pinker shows over and over again, our news is dominated by negative images of violence, crisis and disaster whereas positive good news hardly ever gets reported. There may also be objections which point to any putative advances or examples of human progress as merely temporary blips in the long history of human folly and wickedness. Critical work by Taleb (2018) takes such a pessimistic line, and points to the picture of the natural world as, in Tennyson’s words, ‘red in tooth and claw’ with human evolution as a blind and purposeless struggle for existence.

However, Richard Dawkins’ (2017) interpretation of evolutionary history and development seems to lend more support to the Pinker thesis. Although it is now undisputed that we are ‘Darwinian creatures, our forms and our brains sculpted by natural selection, that indifferent, cruelly blind watchmaker’ (p.34), this does not mean that our future development must be strictly determined by the blind watchmaker. Darwin had allowed for the development of moral instincts in humans which rise above the ‘selfishness’ of our evolutionary endowment to build communities defined by trust and benevolence. Our big brains were ideally suited to the precarious and desperate struggle for existence by our ancestors as hunter-gatherers living on the Savannah plains 200,000 years ago but, as Pinker points out, once we had such brains they could then be used for purposes beyond mere survival such as making art, language, music and building settled communities characterised by laws and moral codes. Daniel Dennett (2018) puts the case powerfully in noting:

Dawkins’s title *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) nicely evokes the apparently paradoxical nature of these [evolutionary] processes: on the one hand they are blind, mindless, without goals, and on the other hand they produce designed entities galore, many of which become competent artificers (nest-builders, web-spinners, and so forth) and a few become intelligent designers and builders: us (p.37).

A notable product of such design is the construction of communities governed by laws and ethical codes characterised by altruism and co-operation which rise above the brute competitiveness of the evolutionary instincts and impulses.

Jeremy Griffith (2017) shows how the cruder forms of Social Darwinism which misinterpreted ideas about the struggle for existence were gradually replaced by ideas which demonstrated how moral virtues such as altruism were more beneficial to human society than selfish competition. Dawkins (2017) explains, in what evolutionary psychologists call the environment of evolutionary adaptedness (EEA) it is plausible that – even in a world of fundamentally selfish entities – ‘those individuals that co-operate turn out to be surprisingly likely to prosper’ (p.58). He goes on to note that:

Brains as big as ours...can actively rebel against the dictates of the naturally selected genes that built them. Using language, that other unique gift of the ballooning human brain, we can conspire together to devise political institutions, systems of law and justice, taxation, policing, public welfare, charity, care for the disadvantaged. We can invent our own values. Natural selection gives rise to these only at second remove, by making brains that grow big. From the point of view of the selfish genes our brains raced away with their emergent properties, and my personal value system regards this with a distinctly positive sign (p.61).

All such arguments would lend further support to cooperative/altruistic thesis, and this case can be reinforced by anthropological and historical/cultural research evidence contained in the work of Christopher Boehm (2012) and Jeremy Lent (2017) on the origins of morality in early societies. Lent described in fine detail how human cultural evolution – and crucially our mores, morals and legal conventions – was irrevocably shaped by the move from hunter-gatherer to agrarian forms of life. Beginning with the Natufian civilisation in the Eastern Mediterranean, settled communities arose in Jordan, Syria and the Lebanon in which tribes started to plant and store grain seeds, build permanent houses, and construct legal conventions concerned with property rights. As Lent summarises such developments:

the agrarian worldview transformed the hunter-gatherer's sense of nature as a giving environment into one of a cosmos demanding far more from its human participants, giving birth to a world filled with the existential anxiety that has remained with us ever since (p.104).

Boehm's (2012) monumental anthropological research work on moral origins traces the evolutionary development of hominids in seeking to explain how genetic and cultural factors combined to shape the emergence of co-operation, generosity and altruism. The central thesis is that:

prehistorically humans began to make use of social control so intensively that individuals who were better at inhibiting their own antisocial tendencies, either through fear of punishment or through absorbing and identifying with their group's rules, gained superior fitness. By learning to internalize rules, humankind acquired a conscience...(p.17).

In commenting upon the move from hunter-gatherer to agrarian settled communities described by Lent (2017), Boehm illustrates graphically how – through the suppression of alpha male behaviour through punishment and social ostracism – evolutionary adaptations to social and economic changes led to a move from a 'wolflike or apelike "might is right", fear-based social order to one also based on internalizing rules and worrying about personal reputations' (p.176).

Within mainstream philosophy, Phillip Pettit, covers the same area as these evolutionary/anthropological accounts in constructing a "story" about the birth of ethics (2015). Pettit prefers to call his account a "story" on the grounds that – since we can never know for sure how ethical concepts and behaviour actually originated – any attempt to describe such origins must necessarily be imaginative, speculative and, like fictional writing, fundamentally creative. Using the counterfactual device of imagining a society without ethics (he makes an analogy with the 'conjectural history of money' which is explained by its emergence from the inefficiencies of the barter or similar systems), the story aims to:

provide a naturalistic genealogy of how ethical talk could have arisen, in particular a genealogy under which ethical judgments play a role in registering bona fide aspects of the world in shaping our responses to that world. The aim is to vindicate ethics, taken literally or realistically, in naturalistic terms. And the plan is to achieve that aim by explaining how we, the products of a natural and cultural evolution could have come to develop notions of desirability to refer to aspects of the options we face, to shape our choices between those options, and to determine our fitness to be responsible for what we do (pp.214-15).

The overriding idea highlighted throughout Pettit's story is that there is a natural movement from the ethical language of avowals (such as pledges, promises, conventions, etc.) to active commitments and behaviour in accordance with such moral language. Such conventions emerge because only those ethical concepts supported by appropriately responsible behaviour would survive and remain conducive to the maintenance of social order and functioning. Moreover, as alluded to already, many of the ethical concepts developed in this evolutionary process are underpinned by commitments to cooperative values and relationships. Indeed, Peter Turchin's (2007) monumental study of the rise and fall of empires suggests, the key element in maintaining order and stability in civilisations as diverse as the Roman, Persian, Russian, and American empires is 'cooperation and a high capacity for collective action' (loc.191, Kindle edn). In a similar vein, Yuval Noah Harari (2011) has described what he calls the 'cognitive revolution' (pp.3-70) which happened when humans incrementally moved from small hunter-gatherer tribes to larger settled farming communities. Such a radical change required for the first time 'cooperation between large numbers of strangers' (p.41) in order to establish forms of communication, law and order, economic exchange and common values.

Similar work on evolutionary ethics has been undertaken by Hoffman using evolutionary game theory (Institute of Art & Ideas, 2021) which shows that, in most standard adaptive evolutionary environments, cooperative strategies outperform competitive ones in terms of ensuring gene survival and reproduction. Such findings align with the famous 'Prisoner's Dilemma' thought experiments (Lee, 2002) which provide cogent and logical demonstrations of the superiority of cooperation over selfish individualism in arriving at optimal solutions to practical everyday problems. However, the key question here is how this wealth of argument and evidence can be used to support the case for forms of universal ethical codes and, in this respect, the ongoing research at the evolution institute (www.evolution-institute.org).

A particularly interesting and relevant contribution was made by Oliver Scott Curry (2018) which aligns with the arguments and evidence referred to above by Pettit, Turchin, Hoffman and Harari. Curry asks the key questions in this sphere:

What is morality? And are there any universal moral values? Scholars have debated these questions for millennia. But now, thanks to science, we have the answers. Converging lines of evidence – from game theory, ethology, psychology, and anthropology – suggest that morality is a collection of tools for promoting cooperation (p.40).

Arguing that morality 'is always and everywhere a cooperative phenomenon', Curry outlines the research by his team which demonstrates that – although there are understandably ethnic, national and cultural variations in ethical codes – our common cultural and biological mechanisms 'provide the motivation for social, cooperative and altruistic behaviour'. The upshot is that seven moral rules are found in codes throughout the world. As Curry explains the finding:

as predicted by the theory, these seven moral rules – *love your family, help your group, return favours, be brave, defer to authority, be fair, and respect others' property* – appear to be universal across cultures. My colleagues and I analyzed ethnographic accounts of ethics from 60 societies (comprising over 600,000 words from over 600 sources)². We found that these seven

cooperative behaviours were always considered morally good (ibid., p.41, italics added)

Consequently, if we add such work to the accounts already outlined above, the case for a universal core of ethics which is amenable to scientific analysis and application may be both expanded and reinforced. Such approaches to morality can be utilised productively to provide a solid foundation for the strategies outlined in earlier sections whether the emphasis is on Ramseyan pragmatism, Doughnut economics or degrowth ecosocialism.

5.2. *Intertemporal and Future-Oriented Ethics*

A robustly recalcitrant critic of the co-operative thesis might still – notwithstanding evolutionary evidence and the logic of the prisoner’s dilemma noted above – want to oppose the altruistic thesis on the basis of rational deliberation. This might be expressed in colloquial terms by means of such questions as ‘I can see why morality applied to my family and, perhaps grudgingly, to my extended relatives and community members, but why should I care about people in other countries or to future generations who have no claim on my moral allegiance?’ In terms of reasoning about moral obligations such questions can always be asked but, as G.J. Warnock (1967) once remarked wryly:

That moral argument is not more effective than we find it to be is probably attributable to the cross that all arguments have to bear: an argument offers reasons to people, and people are not always reasonable (p.72).

However, we can proceed with the appeal to reason about moral values by noting that, in a real sense, most ethical deliberation is about what ought to be done and this, *ipso facto* is necessarily concerned with future events whether short term or long term. When considering whether to tell the truth or keep a promise – though the deliberation is in the present – the state of affairs under consideration is about some future course of action. John Rawls’ (1971) theory of justice is helpful here as a guide to moral decision-making. This approach to social morality involves a contract conception of justice in which we are asked to place ourselves in a position in which we can reconstruct society. However, the limiting condition here is that we are situated behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ so that we cannot know in advance which position in society we will come to occupy (pp.136ff). Rawls argues that, in such a position, it would be logical and rational to opt for a society in which goods and services are fairly evenly distributed, and in which social justice, equality of opportunity, and autonomy prevail.

Such an ethical thought experiment is by definition about future states of affairs since it is about reasons for reconstructing present social conditions. Moreover, research by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2010, 2018) reveals that the outcomes of such a society based on justice as fairness tend to be better for both individual and societal well-being. Their findings support the thesis that health and social problems – whether we look at factors such as life expectancy, infant mortality, imprisonment numbers, drug addiction, teenage births, homicides, mental health and social mobility – are much worse the more unequal a country is in terms of the gaps between rich and poor (2010). Revisiting the research more recently, the researchers argue that:

The evidence is now such that these correlations between income inequality and both health and social problems must be regarded as causal, reflect the ways greater inequality damages societies, harming human health and well-being (2018, p.xviii).

In order to extend such notions about the morality of justice as fairness in the rational reconstruction of society, it is useful to examine more forward-looking, inter-generational arguments such as those offered by Toby Ord (2020).

In his seminal work on existential risks to humanity, Ord meticulously examines a wide range of threats, both natural and anthropogenic, that could potentially eradicate humanity or drastically curtail its future potential. He argues that:

Safeguarding humanity’s future is the defining challenge of our time. For we stand at a crucial moment in the history of our species. Fuelled by technological progress, our power has grown so great that, for the first time in humanity’s long history, we have the capacity to destroy ourselves – severing our entire future and everything we could become (2020, pp.2-3).

After examining a range of natural risks - such as the impact on the Earth of comets, supervolcanic eruptions, and stellar explosions (ibid.,pp.67ff) – Ord goes on to examine anthropogenic risks caused by humankind such as the threat of nuclear weapons, climate change and environmental degradation caused by technological exploitation of the planet’s resources. There are, of course, practical remedies in relation to these threats but the prior question addressed by Ord is the philosophical and ethical one which consists in explaining how the present generation owes moral duties and obligations to future generations. Using an expansive version of the utilitarian and evolutionary frameworks outlined above, Ord argues that the value of human life and the capacity for flourishing needs to extend to the lives of humans not yet born. He argues that:

We need to take responsibility for our future. Those of us alive right now are the only people who can fight against the present dangers...When exploring these issues, I find it useful to consider our predicament from *humanity’s* point of view: casting humanity as a coherent agent, and considering the strategic choices it would make were it sufficiently rational and wise. Or in other words, what all humans would do is we were sufficiently coordinated and had humanity’s interests at heart (ibid.,pp.187-8, original italics).

Such a moral inter-temporal and intergenerational stance aligns well with Ramsey’s pragmatism, Raworth’s social welfare notion of growth, Pettit’s notion of the naturalistic origins of morality, and also falls squarely within the collaborative frameworks which arise from evolutionary perspectives.

6. Conclusion; Ethics and the Well-Being of Future Generations

Ord uses the term ‘existential security’ to emphasize the need to ‘preserve humanity’s potential, extracting ourselves from immediate dangers’ and also to ‘protect humanity’s potential’ by establishing ‘safeguards that will defend humanity from dangers over the long-term future’ (op.cit.,pp.188-9). However, as the range of perspectives outlined above has indicated, there are many strategies which may be adopted to try to achieve such broad objectives. What unites all these approaches – Ramsey, Raworth and the ecosocialists – is a general commitment to reconstructing the economy to reflect an inclusive and holistic conception of growth in terms of the general well-being of humanity rather than the endless accumulation of capital for a small minority of wealthy individuals, a system which is causing the widespread destruction of the planet (Siglitz, 2011; Monbiot & Hutchison,2024). There are both pragmatic and ethical/spiritual strands of this movement.

On the pragmatic side we can turn to the recommendations of both individuals and groups who are trying to address the climate catastrophe currently facing planet Earth. There is now more than enough scientific evidence and clear recommendations for practical remedies from Greenpeace, UNESCO, trades unions and political think tanks (Hyland, 2022) to indicate the way forward in this area. However, inertia still prevails in the midst of ever increasing pleas for urgent action. Given this failure – based on a mixture of political intransigence and fierce lobbying by the all-powerful fossil fuel corporations – there is now a ‘doom loop’ (Laybourn & Dyke, 2024) generated by climate change and geopolitical instability which can only get worse as more and more climate targets are missed. Global temperatures passed the critical 1.5 degrees C milestone in 2024 (Wright, Leach & Ermis, 2025) – with the hottest years on record occurring in the last decade – and the resultant extreme floods, wildfires, droughts and hurricanes continue to aggravate social, political and economic insecurity and instability..

The overwhelming evidence that this deepening crisis in integrally connected with global inequalities (Samuel, 2025) now makes it imperative for urgent initiatives to combine climate action with the struggle to combat all such inequalities and injustices. In this respect, the recommendations of Mason (2015) especially his suggestion that – in the face of the ‘limitations of human willpower’ – it would be useful to ‘test all proposals at small scale and model their macro-economic impact many times over before we attempt them at large scale’ (p.265). His proposal that all solutions must aim at ‘ecological sustainability’ (ibid.,pp.266ff.) echoes the ideas of Ramsey and Raworth already outlined, and also those of Monbiot & Hutchison (2024) who insist that the first task is to name this ‘invisible doctrine’ of neo-liberalism, a ‘zombie doctrine which staggers on, protected by a cluster of anonymities’ (p.61). It is invisible only until we investigate the right-wing think tanks and powerful lobbying organisations funded by vastly wealthy corporations and individual oligarchs who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Monbiot and Hutchison lay bare this shadowy foundations of neo-liberalism and highlight what they call the ‘Pollution Paradox’ which goes as follows:

The dirtiest, most ant-social and damaging companies have the greatest incentive to invest in politics, as they are the ones most likely to face the heaviest regulation if exposed to full democratic scrutiny...The result is that politics comes to be dominated by the dirtiest, most anti-social and damaging industries (ibid.,p.74).

The upshot of all this has been a ‘frenetic assault on the living planet. The charred wastes left in its wake are as intrinsic to capitalism as the commodification of labour’ (ibid.,p.119). Thus, the first stage of the campaign must be to name and shame the enemy, and to explode the myth that there is no alternative. As the social historian, Tony Judt (2010) put it:

The materialistic and selfish quality of contemporary life is not inherent in the human condition. Much of what appears ‘natural’ today dates from the 1980s: the obsession with wealth creation, the cult of privatization and the private sector, the growing disparities of rich and poor. And, above all, the rhetoric which accompanies these: uncritical admiration for unfettered markets, disdain for the public sector, the delusion of endless growth (p.2).

In relation to the necessary motivation to enact change, it is worth reminding ourselves of the radical and ground-breaking changes that have occurred recently within one generation: ban on smoking in pubs and restaurants, changes in legislation and attitudes to

LBQT+ citizens, gay marriage, values in relation to mental illness, and so on. Such changes came about because, as Monbiot & Hutchison (2024) explain, the narrative changed, so to bring about a world characterized by social justice, greater equality and care for the natural resources of the planet we need a ‘new story’ which can help us to reach ‘the environmental tipping points’. They go on to declare that:

If we are to reach these social tipping points, our first task is to tear down the cloak of invisibility that shields both neo-liberalism and the true nature of capitalism from public view. It is to expose their breaches, their obscurities and their deceptions. It is to reveal what has been hidden. It is to speak their names (ibid.,p.161).

Moreover, further support for the new narrative is available in abundance in the two millennia of rich philosophical and spiritual traditions in both Eastern (Buddhism and Daoism; Loy, 2018) and Western (Stoicism, Holiday & Hanselman,2016) philosophy. As Steve Taylor (2018) writes in his plea for a ‘spiritual science’ to replace the destructive materialism which now threatens almost every aspect of life on earth:

Spirituality wakes us up, opens us to the aliveness and sacredness of nature, and reconnects us to the world...Because every human being is interconnected, the more we evolve as individuals, the more we will help our whole species to evolve...We will no longer perceive the world as a soulless physical machine, but as a radiant and meaningful manifestation of spirit. We will see our oneness with the world, and treat it with the care and respect it deserves (pp.231-233).

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