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NERO'S FIDDLE

ON HOPE, DESPAIR, AND THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

ANDREW FIALA

It may appear rational to pursue short term self interest if the ecological crisis is unsolvable: it may be rational to fiddle while Rome burns. This is especially true when others are not making environmentally friendly choices and when we want to allow people extensive liberty to make their own choices. This paper examines this problem by utilizing the prisoner's dilemma and Hardin's tragedy of the commons. It argues that voluntary solutions to the ecological crisis are not promising, while also recognizing that governmental interventions are equally unhelpful. The problem identified is that it may in fact be rational to fiddle while Rome burns.

*And like thee, Nero,
Play on the lute, beholding the towns burn.*

—Shakespeare, *Henry IV*, Act 1, Scene IV

We are in the midst of a global ecological crisis. And yet, like Nero, we fiddle while Rome burns. Global warming is happening. Human population is growing. Land and water supplies are used and depleted at an ever-expanding rate. Species and habitats are destroyed and biodiversity is lost. Pollution and toxic waste pile up. Despite several decades of acute

awareness of these ecological problems, we have made little progress toward sustainable solutions.

This points us to a somewhat paradoxical feature of political action that I will call the problem of Nero's Fiddle.¹ We are in the midst of a crisis of millennial proportions and yet we waste time and pursue our own self-interests, fiddling while Rome burns.² What is most discouraging is the fact that some of those who are deeply concerned with the environment claim that perhaps it is now too late to do much about the ecological catastrophe. James Lovelock—renowned for the “Gaia hypothesis”—has warned that the end of human civilization as we know it may be imminent. In his recent book, *The Revenge of Gaia*, he writes, “even now, when the bell has started tolling to mark our ending, we still talk of sustainable development and renewable energy as if these feeble offerings would be accepted by Gaia as an appropriate and affordable sacrifice” (147–48). For Lovelock, our paltry efforts to heal the earth are all too little and much too late. In an interview published in *The Guardian* on March 1, 2008, Lovelock warns that most of the voluntary efforts made to combat global warming (from recycling and tree planting to cutting back on the use of fossil fuels) will be to no avail. And what is most troubling, Lovelock concludes, “Enjoy life while you can. Because if you're lucky it's going to be 20 years before it hits the fan” (Lovelock 2008).

Here then is the problem: if we believe that it is too late to solve the ecological crisis, then it *seems* rational simply to enjoy oneself before “it hits the fan.” I do not believe that it actually is rational to fiddle in the face of this crisis. But at issue here is the very definition of what is rational. One rational response to a crisis is to pursue self-interest—especially if others are doing so as well. And this is part of the problem, since those who continue to pursue self-interest in the face of the crisis exacerbate the crisis in a way indicated by Hardin and others who discuss the “tragedy of the commons.” It is obvious that the solution to current ecological crises must involve regulations that will make it difficult for consumers to pursue short-term self-interest by creating incentives for green alternatives and disincentives for environmentally damaging activities. But to generate political support for such regulations we must understand why short-term self-interest looks more and more appealing even as the crisis is growing.

RATIONALITY AND THE DIALECTIC OF HOPE AND DESPAIR

I do not want to claim that today's citizens or leaders are as megalomaniacal as Nero was. But most of us are egoistic and short-sighted. We tend to focus on narrow short-term self-interest. Even though the ideal of the Good Samaritan lies deep within Western culture, very few of us actually behave as Good Samaritans.³ And at the level of the nation-state, self-interest and the imperatives of growth remain supreme. It will be quite difficult for politicians and business leaders to change their thinking about ecology and economics so that we might develop toward a steady-state economy of some sort.⁴

The difficulty is that a focus on narrow and short-term interest can appear to be rational in the midst of a crisis—especially when the crisis appears to be hopelessly unsolvable. The problem is that in order to stimulate prompt and effective action with regard to the ecological crisis, it is necessary to paint a grim picture of the future.⁵ But if this picture is too grim, then it appears rational to do nothing. This is especially true in situations in which collective action is the only genuine solution but in which it appears that collective action will not be taken.

The solution is to foster an alternative form of rationality that looks beyond short-term utility. This has been proposed by a variety of theorists who propose an alternative to the imperative of growth and short-term self-interest that we find in contemporary capitalism.⁶ But if the ecological crisis is perceived as being intractable, then it may seem rational simply to enjoy oneself as much as possible before the catastrophe hits.

This problem is familiar from the prisoner's dilemma, which describes the collective action problem that leads to "the tragedy of the commons." Related to this is a problem that might be called the "dialectic of despair and hope." In order to take a problem seriously, one must perceive both that the problem is significant *and* that there is hope that it can be solved. This is connected to the important ethical principle that "ought implies can": if we ought to do something, it must be possible for us to do it. Thus, if we ought to take action to solve the ecological crisis, it must be possible for such action to be effective; or at least we must *hope* that such action can be effective.⁷

In thinking about the global ecological crisis, then we must walk the razor's edge between hope and despair. If the problem is not viewed as significant, then there will be no good reason for individuals to give up egoistic behavior. But to make people see the significance of a problem,

it is useful to emphasize worst-case scenarios. Voluntary participation in collective action that requires individuals to sacrifice short-term self-interest is only rational when there is a perceived balance between the sense of crisis and the hope for a solution.

Any solution to the ecological crisis must be enacted via democratic decision procedures. At the international level, nations must voluntarily adopt limits on consumption, since there is no global sovereign who can impose and enforce a solution. Within democratic nations, citizens must choose to impose limitations upon growth, either by electing green politicians or by voting in favor of green referenda.⁸ The democratic basis creates a problem that was recognized decades ago by Ophuls (1973) and Hardin (1968; see also Hardin 1998). Hardin suggested that the only way to avert catastrophe was to give up the freedom to breed. Ophuls put this more forcefully: either Oblivion or Leviathan. Walker (1988) and Taylor (1991) suggest that this analysis is grounded in a sort of false dichotomy. But nonetheless, in a democratic system, environmental regulations depend on the will of the people. And for the people to choose green regulations, the people must move beyond short-term self-interest.⁹ But for this transformation in consciousness to take place, individuals and nations must see the severity of the crisis and its implications for self-interest.

Such a transformation seems far off. It is difficult to imagine citizens in the United States—where democracy and autonomy are key ideas—voluntarily giving up power and sovereignty to an international Leviathan. Indeed, this has been the problem with recent policy decisions rejecting the Kyoto protocols, the establishment of the International Criminal Court, and the failure of the Copenhagen Climate Conference to produce any meaningful resolution to the climate change problem. A chief factor preventing such drastic measures is an understandable emphasis on negative liberty and short-term self-interest. Individuals want to be free to consume; and democratic governments must have very good reasons for restricting this liberty. Indeed, democratically elected politicians must pander to short-term self-interest in order to maintain popular support—a problem with democracy that has been noted since the time of Plato.¹⁰ Moreover, for a hegemonic power such as the United States, which has the resources needed to survive a global crisis in the short term, there is no immediate incentive to stop fiddling and join in with the global effort to avert the crisis.

One obvious solution is for democratic governments to make their constituents more aware of the need for coercive restrictions by increasing the sense of crisis. But the danger is that as the perception of crisis escalates there will be no good reason for individuals to adopt the sorts of remedies that are required to avoid further escalation. When the crisis is perceived as being severe enough to prompt radical action, individuals may also believe that it is too late to do much about it. Thus democratically elected leaders who propose radical action will lose popular support—as the population will prefer to fiddle and enjoy today, rather than to worry about tomorrow. A pertinent example of this is how American politicians promise to reduce the price of gasoline, despite the fact that more expensive gasoline is actually a useful tool for reducing carbon emissions. The fact that this sort of pandering to self-interest is common in democratic politics can lead to a pessimistic conclusion that acknowledges that democratic institutions will be unable to respond to the ecological crisis.

Any solution must foster the development of a form of rationality that is less concerned with short-term self-interest, more interested in sustainability, and that takes up the global perspective. This might require a sort of Good Samaritanism in which the rich willingly sacrifice luxury in the name of altruism. Good Samaritanism can be stimulated in various ways: by understanding the intrinsic rewards provided by sustainable lifestyle choices; by broadening self-interest in a way that involves the interests of others including one's own descendants; and by re-conceiving self-interest in a way that looks to long-term interests.¹¹

To open the door toward more sustainable choices, we must find ways to show the magnitude of the ecological crisis without stimulating the problem of Nero's fiddle. One solution is to reawaken our sense of altruistic concern by learning to see the suffering of others. But we cannot allow the ubiquity of suffering others and the severity of the catastrophe to lead us back toward egoism, self-preservation, and the temptation to fiddle in the face of desperate circumstances.

One of the most troubling aspects of the problem is the fact that acknowledging the problem can actually make it worse in a sort of "ratchet effect": if we acknowledge the true difficulty of finding a solution to the ecological crisis including the human tendency to fiddle in the face of calamity, we will be less likely to believe that any solution will work, and we will be more likely to retreat to that form of short-term self-interest that

exacerbates the problem. It is, of course, possible that the answer is as simple as better education about the *intrinsic* rewards of those behaviors that are ecologically friendly. For example, biking to work, carpooling, and eating low on the food chain can promote good health and they have their own intrinsic value. But the problem is that the behaviors that hurt the environment are also richly rewarding, which is why people do them in the first place. While biking to work can be both healthy and fun, it is also enjoyable to sit in an air-conditioned car listening to the radio. The intrinsic rewards of environment-friendly behaviors are not so great as to make such behaviors obviously more choice-worthy. This is especially true in a culture in which the media and advertising actively promote non-eco-friendly choices and in which corporate interests are able to influence political decisions. Indeed, if “green” behaviors were *obviously* more choice-worthy for consumers, then we would not be facing the present crisis. The ecological crisis thus requires more drastic solutions than simply relying upon the good will of conscientious individuals. But state coercion comes with a price in terms of liberty. The difficulty is to find a way to make progress and preserve hope, while also preserving liberty. The key here would be to transform our understanding of how individuals should use their liberty, i.e., in ways that are not merely self-interested and focused on short-term gain.

EGOISM IN A PERCEIVED CRISIS

Collective action is required to address the ecological crisis. But most individuals attend only to themselves. The same problem can be re-iterated at the international level: global action is required but nation-states act primarily out of self-interest. Even if we want to admit that collective action does happen—as it has in the development of the European Union, for example—rich hegemonies have little incentive to join in the collective action. The wealthy hegemon can survive a catastrophe, at least in the short term, and so can afford to fiddle. Moreover, and this is my point of emphasis here, when the crisis is so severe as to seem unsolvable, individuals are arguably *rational* to focus only on themselves and their short term interests—since there is little hope for anything beyond short-term pleasure.

In other words, cooperation diminishes as the threat increases and hope decreases. If we work together and share our resources, we may be

able to row our metaphorical “lifeboat” to safety. But there comes a time when it is rational to assume that the lifeboat will not be rescued. Those who continue to cooperate might be praised as Good Samaritans. But if the crisis is truly severe, the egoist may in fact triumph over the altruist in the struggle for survival in the short term; and for the sort of egoist I am describing here, the short term is what matters most. The more certain we are that the crisis is unsolvable and that the lifeboat is about to sink, the more rational egoism becomes for those who are already primarily committed to egoism.

Some may argue that it is never rational to give up hope, just as it is never rational to revert to egoism. The idea here is a noble one: we should all go down together, or at least we should each always continue to work for the good of the whole. But the problem is twofold. First, if cooperative action cannot solve the problem and striking out on one’s own at least gives one a chance of short-term success, then perhaps it is better to strike out on one’s own—especially if you choose the egoistic option before your capacities and resources are drained by the futile action of the group. Second, if you perceive yourself as making substantial sacrifices for the sake of the group but other members of the group (the free riders) are not similarly chipping in, then at some point it becomes rational for you to give up on the group effort and retreat to self-interested activity.

Determining when it is rational to turn to egoism in this way is the epistemic problem. Unfortunately, the mere hint that we have reached such a tipping point may be enough to prompt a rash of egoistic defectors to give up on the group project. The difficulty is that those inclined toward egoism are always looking for some excuse to justify their egoistic choices. And in fact, as the egoists defect from the group project, there may be a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy as the group project cannot succeed without buy-in by the majority.

For a complex process like global warming, substantial expertise is required to make a definitive judgment about whether the tipping point has been reached. And, indeed, the process is not an all or nothing sort of thing. Rather, global warming is an evolving process that will have various outcomes. Predictions of warming are not precise and some populations may benefit from changes in climate, even though the majority may be harmed.¹²

To motivate serious action it may be necessary to paint a calamitous

picture of the future in terms of the extent and significance of the harm. But the more dire the situation is perceived to be, the more risk there is that people will judge the crisis to be unsolvable. Some will assume that the tipping point has already been reached and will take up the fiddle of self-interest.

THE ECOLOGICAL CONSUMER AND HIS CARBON-HEAVY NEIGHBOR

One obvious way that this occurs in the context of environmentalism is at the level of consumer choice. Let's imagine two consumers: an ecologically minded person, E, who makes ecologically conscientious choices and a typical American consumer, C, whose choices are based on comfort and convenience and who has a carbon heavy lifestyle. E eats low on the food chain, bikes to work, keeps his heat and air-conditioning at a reasonable level, delays and constrains childbearing, uses a small number of consumer products, etc. Let's assume that some of these lifestyle choices involve a sacrifice on E's part, i.e., that E makes at least some of these choices not because of their intrinsic rewards but because they are good for the environment.¹³ For example, biking to work is more difficult than driving; and keeping the heat low is less enjoyable than getting the house warm. Now E's neighbor, C, consumes a meat-based diet, drives a gas guzzler, blasts the heat and air-conditioning, has many children, and is an avid collector of non-recyclable consumer products. E's voluntary efforts to make a dent in the ecological crisis are obviously offset by C's voracious appetite for all the things that cause the very problems E is trying to solve. And C appears quite happy with his choices, i.e., they do not appear to C (or to E for that matter) as "sacrifices."

The difficulty of this scenario for voluntary environmentalism is obvious. When C and E compare themselves to each other in terms of short-term happiness, it seems that C comes out ahead. We might also compare them in terms of their long-term prospects for happiness in light of the ecological crisis. If the crisis is averted, then C still comes out ahead: it is E's hard work that has averted the crisis and C remains happy throughout—as free riders usually do when compliance is voluntary.

One way to get C to voluntarily adopt some more environment-friendly behaviors would be to educate C about the severity of the ecological crisis and to appeal to his own self-interest. A severe enough crisis will have a negative effect on his happiness. The further difficulty is, however, that *if*

it is perceived that a significant ecological crisis is unavoidable, even if C were to adopt E's lifestyle choices, then there is no reason for C to adopt an ecologically friendly lifestyle, since it will be useless. Moreover, if the crisis cannot be averted, then there is no reason for E to continue to make his choices. If E and C *believe that ecological sacrifices are for naught*, then E will be tempted to give up on his environmentally friendly choices and C will have no reason to adopt them. The focal point is in italics here: the crucial question is whether they each believe that the sorts of sacrifices that E is making are going to have any positive outcome. In other words, if the crisis *appears* unsolvable, then there is no good reason that E should not enjoy himself in the way that C does and clearly no reason for C to change his ways. Moreover, the general perception of the futility of living an ecologically-friendly life will be exacerbated by the perception that C's lifestyle is widely accepted and unlikely to change and that because of this, E's lifestyle is a sacrifice without significance.

If the crisis appears to be unsolvable, then E might as well enjoy himself here and now. More concretely, if temperatures do rise, as a result of global warming, without hope of them returning to normal in E's lifetime, then there is no good reason for E not to use his air-conditioning, even if air-conditioning use contributes to the problem. Why should E be uncomfortable when his discomfort does nothing to contribute to a solution, and while his neighbor enjoys himself, at least for the short-term?

This problem is reiterated and much more difficult to solve if we look at C and E's lifestyle choices. At least E recognizes the moral demand that he should be a Good Samaritan and make personal choices that help to solve the problem. If E thought that these choices would in fact help, he would continue to make them. But with C, we've got a further problem. C may be ignorant or self-interested or irrational (or some combination of these). The really tough problem is converting C to a more ecologically friendly way of life. Again, one way to do that would be to educate C about the severity of the crisis. But if the crisis is perceived as being unsolvable, then C will have no good reason to convert. This is especially true if C finds his way of life enjoyable and affordable. If there are no obvious local and short-term disincentives to his choices, and *if the crisis is viewed as inevitable*, then why should C choose differently—especially if he sees no moral reason to be a self-sacrificial Good Samaritan (or if he thinks that Good Samaritan-ism is simply futile in this context)?

One solution to this problem is to build up a moral argument in

favor of self-sacrificial Good Samaritan-ism. But that may well require the imposition of a religious superstructure or some other metaphysical effort. The more obvious solution is to manipulate the structure of short-term rewards and disincentives. One way, for example, that E will find the will to continue to make his environmentally-friendly choices is if he sees his choices as rewarding here and now, that is, if he does not see them as “sacrifices.” Thus the government might provide tax-breaks and other incentives for environmentally-friendly behaviors. Such incentives may work for E but unless there are also disincentives for C, there may not be sufficient reason for C to act like E. Incentives and disincentives require governmental coercion and perhaps the growth of the Leviathan as envisioned by Ophuls. The difficulty is that it is unlikely that coercive measures will be supported by democratic-citizens who behave like C.¹⁴ If the majority are like C, they will elect politicians who promise not to create disincentives for C’s behavior.

There are, of course, good reasons to make ecologically friendly choices that are not based on long-term ecological impacts and that are not structured by governmental incentives or disincentives. For example, E’s vegetarian diet and exercise patterns (biking to work) are healthier for him in the long run.¹⁵ And he may be content with the temperature of his house and his lack of consumer products. But in a consumerist culture that actively promotes consumption, extravagant fossil fuel use, etc., it is very likely that environmentally friendly choices will still be viewed as sacrifices. For example, C is content with his big vehicle and lavish lifestyle. Indeed, C may find ways to achieve good health that are not very friendly to the environment. For example, C may eat “health foods” that must be manufactured and shipped at high cost to the environment; and he may consume pharmaceuticals that have environmental costs associated with shipping and production. Consumers like C drive to health clubs in SUVs, consume water that is shipped in plastic bottles, and fly to far-flung destinations for sporting vacations. If E sees others enjoying goods like these that he has foregone, and if they are for the most part as healthy as he is, and if he sees no solution to the ecological crisis and no one else really taking that crisis seriously, then eventually he will be tempted to enjoy these goods as well, “before it hits the fan.”

A solution involving state coercion thus appears to be needed. C’s lifestyle must be made unaffordable or illegal. Thus taxes (or bans) on gaso-

line and driving, on meat consumption, and on consumer goods might be effective at converting C's lifestyle choices while reinforcing E's. But there are serious political difficulties in instituting consumption taxes, including the fact that C and voters like him will be unwilling to support politicians who propose to disrupt their lifestyle. Moreover, if the economy depends upon C's consumption habits, then all of those businesses (and their voter-employees) who produce the goods that C consumes will be opposed to regulations that will decrease consumption. E might vote for such politicians. But it is unlikely that a majority of voters will vote for politicians who propose to create disincentives for consumption. This is especially true if the ecological crisis that these disincentives are supposed to avert is seen as hopeless and unsolvable.

When this encounter between E and C is raised by analogy to the level of states, the problem reappears. At the level of states, if C is a heavy carbon-producing consumerist state and E is an emerging economy, E will feel that it deserves some of what C has and C will not be willing to take the steps necessary to decrease consumption and carbon emissions. In such a scenario, E will want to continue to expand its economy so that it might be able to develop the technological capacity to respond to the negative outcomes of the crisis. And C will not want to give up its advantage, in part because it sees that in the global crisis, only the technologically and economically most advanced states will survive. Again, this sort of competitive race to the bottom will be exacerbated if both states believe that the crisis is inevitable and that no one is really taking any serious action to remedy the problem.

THE PRISONER'S DILEMMA

These conclusions follow a pattern familiar from the prisoner's dilemma. In the classical form of the prisoner's dilemma, two suspects, A and B, are arrested and held in separate cells and not allowed to consult one another. Each prisoner is offered the following deal. If one rats out the other and the other remains silent, the rat goes free while the other crook will receive a 10-year sentence. If both stay silent, both will be given six months. If each betrays the other, each receives a two-year sentence.

The best choice is for them both to remain silent (this produces result #1). But it is usually predicted that this sort of cooperative action will not result, since each will act upon his own self-interest and each will suspect

	B Remains Silent	B rats
A Remains Silent	1. Each serves six months	2. A serves ten years; B goes free
A Rats	3. A goes free; B serves ten years	4. Each serves two years

the other of doing the same. Thus the predicted outcome is that each crook will rat out the other. So they will both end up with sub-optimal result of two years in jail (this produces result #4).

The prisoner's dilemma applies to the ecological crisis in the following way. In order to solve the ecological crisis we need the optimal outcome of cooperative action (result #1). However, un-trusting, uncooperative, self-interested agents will not achieve this outcome. Moreover, if it seems that no one will cooperate and that less than optimal cooperation will do no good, then there is no reason to cooperate. Instead, it is rational to pursue short-term self interest and enjoy oneself before "it hits the fan."

Stephen Gardiner has considered how the prisoner's dilemma structure applies to environmental issues (Gardiner 2001, 2004a, 2004b). His interpretation of the dilemma is that it is *collectively* rational to cooperate, while it is *individually* rational not to cooperate. The problem for Gardiner is understood as a trade off between short-term consumption and long-term interest. And this trade off actually spans generations, since the impacts of the ecological crisis will not be fully felt by the present generation. Gardiner concludes, "whereas the present generation both causes the environmental damage and reaps the rewards, most of the costs fall on future generations. This suggests that the current generation has a powerful self-interested reason to carry on polluting, and the future generations a powerful self-interested reason for wanting that pollution to stop" (2001, 403).¹⁶ This is so because, as Gardiner interprets the intergenerational prisoner's dilemma, it is collectively rational for most generations to cooperate; but it is individually rational for each generation not to cooperate. Of course, there is a significant problem in talking about "cooperation" across and between generations. In this case, then, it might make more sense to talk about Good Samaritan-ism: any sacrifice in the present generation will be a gift to future generations that cannot be recouped in terms of reciprocity. While there is difficulty in applying the Prisoner's Dilemma across generations in the way Gardiner does, this reminds us why it is so difficult to persuade the present generation to make substantial sacrifices in order to solve the ecological crisis.

The Prisoner’s Dilemma also applies in cases in which contemporary states are the actors. Let’s re-imagine the case as follows. State A can choose to reduce CO₂ emissions by constraining economic growth or to continue to increase such emissions (assuming that as the economy grows emissions increase). The same scenario applies in reverse to B. The choices look as follows.

	B reduces CO ₂ emissions	B increases CO ₂ emissions
A reduces CO ₂ emissions	1. Each reduces emissions and Global Warming is slowed	2. A is at a competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis B (and Global Warming is not significantly slowed)
A increases CO ₂ emissions	3. B is at a competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis A (and Global Warming is not significantly slowed)	4. Each increases productivity and Global Warming increases

Clearly the best outcome is #1. But unless there is some reason to trust the other state and there is some way to compensate for the probable short-term loss of productivity that would happen with reductions of CO₂ emissions, neither state will choose choice #1. Instead, we will end up with choice #4, since neither state will want to sacrifice productivity and competitive advantage (assuming, of course, that the only way to reduce CO₂ emissions is to decrease productivity).

The ecological crisis appears to become unsolvable if we add in two other elements. First, the ecological crisis is not a two-player game. Rather, it involves the entire globe. So the prisoner’s dilemma will be amplified on this larger scale. Second, the costs of solving this crisis rise as the severity of the crisis increases. As these costs rise, there may be less incentive to act and short-term and narrow self-interest will take over.

Moreover, if cultural leaders—politicians, businessmen, and even intellectuals—do as Lovelock and acknowledge this problem, the problem can become even worse. When environmentalists begin to admit that it is “reasonable” to fiddle while Rome burns, the game is truly over. Why should anyone sacrifice present goods for the supposed “benefit” of future generations if there is little hope that any future generation will remain to cash in on the sacrifice? If Rome is going to burn anyway, then it may be entirely “rational” to go on fiddling. It may have made sense to join in with the firefighters when the fire was small. But once there is a raging

inferno and no hope of extinguishing it, it might be entirely rational to do whatever it takes to make yourself happy until “it hits the fan.”

This shows us the very real danger we will confront as the ecological crisis grows: at some point a strategy of despair and selfishness will become the reasonable option. In this way, believing that the crisis is unsolvable may in fact contribute to its becoming so. If our leaders give up hope, the rest of us will too. And when we see that collective action fails to deal with ecological crises, we may resort to a strategy of privatization that is equivalent to the Nero strategy: the well-off will fiddle in private enclaves, while the rest of the world is allowed to decay. Naomi Klein argues that this is already occurring in a movement that she calls “disaster capitalism”: the rich are building security lifeboats in which they plan to ride out the coming storm (Klein 2005 and 2007). And indeed, on the analysis I’ve presented here, such a strategy can make perfect sense.

CONCLUSIONS

Very few of us would want to be remembered as a Nero who did nothing while the crisis was unfolding. Perhaps the desire to create a legacy we can be proud of is enough to solve the intergenerational prisoner’s dilemma. But the lure of short-term self-interest is strong. And it is easy to succumb to selfishness when our culture actively promotes consumption and free riders appear to be enjoying themselves.

This paper presents a dark scenario that explains how even conscientious environmentalists may be tempted to take up Nero’s fiddle. Here’s a summary of the problem. First, short-term self-interest is reasonable and it is even more reasonable in the midst of a severe crisis. Second, voluntary action is insufficient to solve the global environmental crisis when voters and consumers base their behavior on short-term self-interest. Given our quite reasonable commitment to democratic government and our reasonable fear of the power of Leviathan, it is unlikely that voters will choose leaders who advocate radical coercive action. Third, perception is the key to voluntary action. In order to stimulate people to act voluntarily to solve the crisis, they need to perceive the severity of the crisis. Fourth, perception of a crisis can lead to despair and retreat to self-interest. If we believe the crisis is unsolvable, then short-term self-interest is rational.

One obvious solution is thus to find some way to stimulate hope that the crisis can be averted through individual action and collective reform.

Another solution is to inspire people to look beyond self-interest and develop altruistic concern for people in the developing world who will bear the brunt of the ecological crisis and for future generations who will suffer from the long term negative effects of global warming and the like. Suggestions about how to stimulate hope or inspire Good Samaritanism require a different paper. But any solution must take seriously the problems I have outlined here.

NOTES

1. “Nero’s Fiddle” is of course a metaphor. Most likely Nero did not fiddle while Rome burned—he probably recited poetry and may have accompanied himself on a cithara or lyre. For an extensive refutation of the myth of Nero fiddling, see Gyles (1947). Nonetheless, the general sense of this expression aims to bring to mind an ineffectual leader doing nothing but pursuing his own self-aggrandizement and self-interest while catastrophe strikes. The sense of “fiddling” I want to emphasize here is to engage in ineffective action. One definition of “to fiddle” is “to trifle or waste time.” It is this sense that predominates in what follows.
2. Let me be clear that in using the term “we” here I mean to implicate the majority of citizens of “Western” or “Developed” nations. Clearly some in the developed world are doing quite a lot to work towards a sustainable future. But the majority fiddles while the crisis continues.
3. Good Samaritanism (altruism) represents the opposite pole of the problem of Nero’s Fiddle. I have discussed Good Samaritanism in Fiala 2007 and 2008. A radical transformation akin to a religious conversion appears to be needed. Daly claims, for example, that the shift to steady-state economics would involve a “change of heart” that is like a religious conversion. Cf. Daly 1996, Part VII.
4. See Daly 1996 for details. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting that I connect this paper to the question of sustainable development.
5. An obviously related issue is whether environmental activists ought to use hyperbole and exaggeration in order to stimulate action. Great care must be taken in promoting environmental activism: if the crisis looks unsolvable then hyperbolic claims can be counterproductive.
6. Paul Baer and Tom Athanasiou write, for example: “Within the common frames of economic and political ‘rationality,’ it’s almost impossible to take a genuinely precautionary approach to climate change. This is true for two reasons. First, within the myopia of conventional economic frames, it’s simply not ‘economically rational’ for the current generation to pay to prevent harms that will occur far in the future, not, at least, if that future is being discounted at the typical rate of three to five percent a year. Second, it’s simply not ‘ra-

- tional' for sovereign nation-states to pay to prevent climate damages in other countries. Individual politicians—'statesmen,' they would be called—may even want to do so, but they face almost insuperable obstacles, not the least of which is that politicians who expect to be reelected must work to maximize their own country's economic receipts" (2007). In terms of alternatives, Herman Daly's ideas about sustainable economics are central (1996).
7. The connection between hope and ethics can be tied both to a pragmatic approach to ethics and even to Kant, who famously wonders "what may I hope for?" (1965, B 833). I discuss this in Fiala 2002. Also see Shade 2001.
 8. Of course democracies do impose eco-regulations upon themselves. And European democracies appear to be better in this regard. But the point is that the more radical the solution, the more difficult it will be to generate democratic support.
 9. Brian Czech argues that the turn to a steady-state economy must be based upon a revolution in thinking among the citizenry. "A democracy is ultimately dependent on an intelligent, caring, and participating majority for its success. Problems are solved only when such a majority develops a perspective conducive to the solution" (Czech 2000, 110).
 10. There are some reasons to hope that democracies can take action. For example, Norway and other European nations do seem better in this regard. Perhaps there is some structural problem in the American example: the two-party system, gerrymandering, and winner-take-all elections; or the fact that small states get equal representation in the Senate. Further analysis of these structural issues would take us beyond the present topic.
 11. Thanks to an anonymous referee of this article for forcing me to clarify these approaches.
 12. See discussion of the complexity of the issue in "White Paper on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change" published by the Rock Ethics Institute at Penn State University. For more concrete analysis of the harms see Patz 2005.
 13. I am not denying that there are intrinsic rewards for eco-friendly behavior, e.g., health benefits from vegetarian diet and biking to work. But the point is that such choices do require some extra effort on E's part, especially in a culture that is based upon meat consumption and daily use of private automobiles. The point is that E's choices are not so obviously valuable. Indeed, most people do not make these choices, thus highlighting the problem.
 14. It is possible that individuals act and choose in different ways as consumers and as citizens, as suggested by Sagoff (1988). This is possible—but the question is whether consumers qua citizen are willing to impose restrictions on consumption. My assumption here is that usually this does not happen, especially when the citizen-consumer makes his decisions in the way that C does.

15. That they are also healthy for the environment has been shown by Cafaro et al. (2006).
16. Also see Gardiner 2004a and 2004b; and Desombre 2004.

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