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Religion and the Ethical Defense of Emissions Trading

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Abstract

Several prominent philosophers have argued that CO2 emissions trading may be a morally justified means of fighting global climate change. The present article defends the claim that this position is not merely ethical but, notwithstanding its secular appearance, religion-dependent. The article's argument is twofold. First, the ethical case for emissions trading cannot rely on pure moral-philosophical argument, as it must, and (implicitly) does, include particular basic views about economic policy. Second, consequently, the ethical case for emissions trading is to be understood as a further secularized continuation of the 'Roman' tradition as opposed to the 'Protestant' one within Western intellectual thought (cf. Nelson 1991, 2010). The article concludes by suggesting that the 'Roman-ness' of the ethical defense of emissions trading indicates its ultimate weakness.

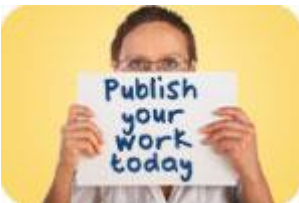
Article body

Introduction

Emissions trading, or 'cap and trade', has become a popular policy response to dangerous global climate change. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol created the 'commodity' of an allowance to emit a certain amount of greenhouse gases within a certain timeframe (Ott and Sachs 2000: 12) by introducing several 'flexible mechanisms' of which emissions trading was one. Subsequently important was the 1998 switch of the European Union (EU) from opponent to supporter and its later creation of a common emissions trading system - now the 'flagship' of EU climate policy (Egenhofer and Goergiev 2010) - which was followed by a launch of similar schemes in many other countries (Paterson and Stripple 2012: 564; cf. Page 2011a: 38-39, 2011b: 260; Randalls 2011: 128; Cass 2006; Schreurs and Tiberghien 2007). In permitting countries and firms to trade allocated emission rights for money with other countries and firms, emissions trading is often valued as an efficient, for all trading parties favorable, way of halting and even gradually diminishing total pollution (cf. Shavell 1997).

Emissions trading is disputed, however. Although economically-theoretically emissions trading promises efficiency by ensuring that emission reductions occur where the costs of cutting are low, it has been criticized for leading to increased emissions and reduced efficiency in practice when applied internationally in the absence of any supranational agency (Holtmark and Sommervoll 2012; cf. Spash 2010). More fundamentally than empirical criticisms concerning its failure to reduce emissions are the ethical objections emissions trading faces (cf. Paterson and Stripple 2012: 569). Thus, Michael Sandel (1997, 2012) has insisted that the 'right to pollute' the environment should not be traded, as all people and countries have a civic duty to treat the atmosphere with respect and thus to 'do their share' by limiting their own environmental impact instead of paying others to do this in their place (cf. also Aldred 2012). Emissions trading, Sandel claims, 'entrenches an instrumental attitude toward nature, and...undermines the spirit of shared sacrifice that may be necessary to create a global environmental ethic' (2012: 75). Robert Goodin (1994) has even cast the ethical critique in religious terms by comparing carbon offsets to 'indulgences', the monetary sums sinners paid the medieval Church to make up for their wrongdoings (Goodin 1994; cf. also Nelson 2010: 112-113). 'Selling rights to destroy nature' is like 'selling God's grace' (Goodin 1994:

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575), which is not yours to sell (1994: 575, 578-579).

Nevertheless, philosophers such as Peter Singer (2002), Simon Caney (2010; cf. Caney and Hepburn 2011), and (with reservation) Edward Page (2011a, 2011b) have argued - largely in response to objections such as Sandel's and Goodin's - that emissions trading may be a morally justified means of fighting global climate change. For Singer, Caney, and Page, to criticize emissions trading as a violation of some civic duty or a threat to environmental values and solidarity, let alone as a neo-medieval indulgence practice, cannot convince. Their basic idea is that, since the atmosphere is 'one' (Singer 2002), it is unimportant where emissions are cut; if agents could better meet their obligations by reducing emissions elsewhere, it would be odd to insist that doing so is wrong (Duus-Otterström and Jagers 2012: 749). The present article, then, offers an analysis of this defense of emissions trading. I claim that this ethical position cannot be adequately understood without doing something that its adherents seem unwilling to do: acknowledging its dependence on certain beliefs or value systems regarding what is ultimate (unconditioned, uncaused, pre-political), thus on 'religion' (cf. Philpott 2002: 68).

Concretely, the thesis of this article is that the ethical defense of emissions trading is not merely ethical but, regardless of its secular outlook, religion-dependent.[1] My argument is twofold. First, the ethical case for emissions trading cannot rely on pure moral-philosophical argument, as it must, and (implicitly) does, include particular basic views about economic policy (cf. Gustafson 1988; Kamminga 2008). Second, as a result, the ethical case for emissions trading is to be understood as a further secularized continuation of the 'Roman' tradition as opposed to the 'Protestant' one within Western intellectual thought. To show this, I shall employ 'theological economist' Robert Nelson's reconstruction of these two religious Western traditions and his analysis of the religious meanings of economics and environmentalism (Nelson 1991, 2010). I shall conclude by suggesting that the 'Roman-ness' of the position discussed indicates its ultimate weakness. The implication, then, is that Goodin (cited above) was on the right track.

Before I can begin, I must clarify three assumptions to be made in this article. First, in examining basic beliefs regarding emissions trading, I set aside difficulties concerning practical design and implementation, and assume an idealized version in which emissions trading is taken in its practically 'strongest' version (cf. Aldred 2012: 340, 357; Page 2011b: 265). Second, in applying Nelson's analysis of the role of religion, I accept his rather broad view of religions as entailing 'comprehensive worldviews and myths that provide human beings with the deepest sense of meaning' (Nelson 2010: 348). Thus, 'religion' does not require a transcendent God, but refers to an all-inclusive, possibly secular(ized) worldview that is taken as fundamentally binding and functionally provides a framework for understanding and dealing with life's realities. Whether adherents do or do not recognize themselves as religious does not matter then (Nelson 2010: xi, xv, 276; 2006: 663-664).[2] Third, in utilizing his framework of 'Roman' and 'Protestant' traditions, I follow Nelson in assuming that these labels achieve a consistency about the main tenets of theological belief. While the medieval Church long sustained the theology characteristic of the Roman tradition and the Reformation offered the most typical statement of the theology of the Protestant tradition, these labels do not necessarily or fully indicate what the institutional churches of these names have believed in each historical period (Nelson 1991: 22-23).

The ethical defense of emissions trading

Ethical support for emissions trading surfaced in the early 2000s (Ott and Sachs 2000). Thus, Peter Singer (2002: 45-47) quickly argued that emissions trading, by making it easier for rich countries to move toward emissions reduction and by offering great financial benefits for developing countries, will provide the best outcome for the atmosphere. However, Simon Caney (with Cameron Hepburn) and Edward Page have advanced broader, more nuanced views. These philosophers defend, or suggest, the moral adequacy of emissions trading, provided that schemes are designed justly as well as effectively.[3] As such, the ethical case for emissions trading has come to include a set of arguments that largely are counter-arguments to

criticisms of emissions trading such as Michael Sandel's and Robert Goodin's (alluded to in the introduction).[4]

A first ethical argument for emissions trading, then, is that the global rich may well use their material welfare in order to buy extra emission allowances, as the critics' strong appeal to self-responsibility is inappropriate. According to Caney (2010), while Sandel's civic duty idea applies to cases such as voting, military service, and jury service - in which it is surely wrong to trade rights or duties - it hardly, if at all, does so in the climate context. To begin with, the intuition underlying Sandel's claim can be accommodated without having to reject emissions trading. The claim that it is immoral to trade the 'right to pollute' as people should limit their own environmental impact concerns the ethical (in)appropriateness of participation in emissions trading, not the justice of such a scheme. The civic responsibility idea may contribute to the 'ethical' debate about how people ought to behave, but not to the 'justice' debate about what rights people possess. Next, from the perspective of emissions reduction personal motivation does not count. Whereas with voting and jury service the motivation of participants is vital for their success, in the present case the reason why someone discharges herself from the ethical responsibility is not relevant: that need not have consequences for the quality of emission reduction. What counts is that people respect the established boundaries; why they do so (for money, fear of punishment, public cause involvement) does not really matter. Thus, intuitive beliefs that support 'civic responsibility' in certain situations do not hold in the climate context and thus do not delegitimize emissions trading, Caney (2010: 207-209) argues. For Page (2011b), Sandel's, and to some extent Goodin's, arguments turn responsibility into a fetish. Even if emissions trading undermines the duty to responsible behavior, this seems a price worth paying if the result is a more efficient response to climate change. Page adds that participants in emissions trading can still be forced to change their environmental behavior on top of their emissions market participation in sectors that fall outside the scheme. Even in case of an all-embracing trading system can rich participants not avoid emissions reduction of their own: since the number of emissions permits will gradually be reduced, their price will at some point make buying off emissions unaffordable (Page 2011b: 267-268).

A second defense argument entails that Sandel's idea of a morally stigmatizing pollution fine is deeply troubling and should be rejected. Sandel (2012: 72) argues that a government that creates tradable emission permits, instead of setting limits on emissions and fining companies that exceed the limits, conveys the message that emission of polluting greenhouse gas is not like littering but simply an expense of industry free from any moral stigma. Wealthy nations being able to buy their way out is like how the rich hiker who throws his beer can into the Grand Canyon does not have to pay a fine for littering but hires someone else to clean up litter in the Himalayas (Sandel 2012: 75-76). However, our defenders think that Sandel's fee-fine distinction is less convincing for greenhouse gas activities than in case of more localized forms of environmental pollution. While simple pollution actions such as littering, as in Sandel's beer can example, should be regarded as unacceptable and finable each time, distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable greenhouse gas emission activities is far more difficult. Some emission activities are necessary to sustain human life; other such activities serve many human values beyond subsistence level. Greenhouse gas emission and littering are incomparable in the sense that we strive for an optimal pollution level in the first case and try to prohibit pollution in the second case from the belief that every environment polluting action, no matter how small, is wrong. Every emitted individual ton of CO₂ does not create moral harm; it is the aggregated damage from a certain threshold that is wrong. Fining or stigmatizing each human action that leads to greenhouse gas emission would be absurd. When someone buys permits in order to emit more than their quota, no harm arises if others emit less than their quota's related to the fee received (Page 2011b: 268; Caney and Hepburn 2011: 22-23).

Third, it is false to assume that we cannot simultaneously act according to a financial incentive and show respect for the natural environment through a way of life in harmony with nature, Page (2011a, 2011b) argues. Sandel's thesis of the incompatibility of intrinsic and instrumental valuation clashes with the common sense experience of assigning monetary value to goods - houses, holidays, pets - to which we also ascribe intrinsic value. Moreover, multiple motivations often signal our deep wish to protect the good concerned: by putting a high price on a work of art or on a pet, we hope that a later owner will care for it even more attentively than in case of a lower monetary value. In this way, the price mechanism becomes a typical vehicle of intrinsic respect for a good. Thus, establishing a market price for a good does not automatically tie the trader to the belief that the good can be replaced by another good with the same market price and is solely a tradable good. Analogously, emissions trading does not reduce the value of the atmosphere to a market value, as long as the participants are convinced that the scheme is organized

fairly and entails the most effective method for protecting the atmosphere. Emissions trading need not imply lack of respect for a common source. A comparison with elderly care, child labor, or trade in human organs - surely cases 'beyond all prices' or 'priceless' (cf. Sandel 2012: 11, 95, 110-114) - applies partially at most (Page 2011a: 62-63; cf. 2011b: 271-272).

Finally, a fourth argument for emissions trading is that there is insufficient direct empirical evidence for so-called 'crowding-out' to justify its abandonment (Page 2011a, 2011b). In Sandel's view, a gradual erosion of the environmental ethic may occur, as participants are taught that there is nothing wrong with their polluting emissions as long as they compensate or nullify caused damage through the market (Sandel 2012). Page, however, argues that the empirical base for such crowding-out is weak. While acknowledging that environmental scientists have found some empirical evidence and theoretical support for crowding-out of environmental morality by pricing, he denies that this makes emissions trading illegitimate. To begin with, the crowding-out effect observed with individual persons in experimental, controlled conditions is not directly applicable to market interventions such as emissions trading, because this complex system of incentives and motivations applies to companies and countries in non-laboratory conditions.[5] Also, the preconditions for crowding-out to occur can be avoided. A trading scheme that accepts companies instead of individual citizens will thus include participants of which the ethical life is fairly simple and normally not affected by intrinsic values that could be undermined. One can also try to strengthen the intrinsic motivations of the participants through supplementary and supporting policies; policy makers should do their utmost to push environmental morality to a high level and keep it there (Page 2011b: 273-276; cf. 2011a: 51-53).

Ethical with an economic policy focus

My first argument is that the ethical case for emissions trading as just described cannot be a moral-philosophical one alone, as it typically rests on particular economic policy assumptions as well. Key to understanding this argument is theologian-ethicist James Gustafson's 'varieties of moral discourse' model, which highlights the 'narrative', 'prophetic', and 'policy' modes of moral discourse as well as the 'ethical' one (Gustafson 1988; cf. Kamminga 2008). As Gustafson explains, ethics, or moral philosophy, asks what basic principles should guide our actions. It draws upon rationally rigorous modes of moral reasoning in order to develop such principles. Thus, I shall argue that the ethical defense of emissions trading is not a fully rationally rigorous argument in this sense, but a largely 'policy' (Gustafson) one, as it appears characterized by a positive view of the importance and contribution of economic policy (and a negative appraisal of more gloomy, 'prophetic' concerns). The present argument, then, will facilitate a religious view of the defense position. I shall proceed by discussing the four defense arguments in turn.

The first defense argument, which supports the use of material welfare by the rich and downplays the relevance of self-responsibility, is not just ethical but typically policy-dependent. Caney justifies emissions trading in terms of justice (if indeed arranged fairly) and from the belief that the positive consequences (sustainable emission decrease) weigh heavier than the possibly negative ones (motivations of morally lower standing). For Caney, insofar as Sandel's civic duty assumption has value, it is merely intuitive and not of much interest in the climate change context: in contrast to the cases of selling the right to vote or jury service, 'civic responsibility' is not necessary for emissions trading to be successful. Now, from a moral-philosophical perspective, this is a largely consequentialist argument that derives its power from the urgency of the climate problem. However, it cannot work without the assumptions that (i) ethics should prioritize justice and positive climate consequences over appropriate behavior on an individual level, and (ii) emissions trading (ideally) possesses the practical capacity to create those good outcomes within the requirements of justice. Thus, Caney's climate ethics is not just moral-philosophical but attaches high value to policy considerations and displays serious optimism about the effects of policy. Page's criticism that Sandel (and Goodin) is (are) actually fetishizing self-responsibility can be seen as a confirmation of this. Page concedes that emissions trading may erode the duty of responsible behavior, but he, too, offers a consequentialist justification: the good result of a more efficient response to climate change outweighs the potentially bad outcome of eroded self-responsibility. Like Caney, Page accepts the possibility that

Sandel is right with his observation of basic value loss, but tries to circumvent or weaken the issue by focusing the ethical discussion about emissions trading on efficiency and distributive justice, thereby displaying a belief in the legitimacy and power of economic policy. In Page's case, this belief is further strengthened by his insistence that with emissions trading participants can still be forced to more self-responsible behavior. More than moral-philosophical argument is it the sake of policy relevance that makes our defenders oppose the arguably more 'prophetic' (Gustafson) point of Sandel that in a situation in which a common sacrifice is called for, agents ought to take their own responsibility by - palpable - change in behavior instead of buying one's way out through payment (Aldred 2012: 353-355).

The defenders' second argument, which opposes Sandel's claim that emissions trading wrongly eliminates the idea of fine and stigma, derives its force from policy as well as moral-philosophical considerations, while suggesting that more basic value orientations (and thus prophetic considerations) are irrelevant. Page and Caney's claim that making a sharp distinction between acceptable and unacceptable greenhouse gas emission behavior is considerably more difficult than with an individual trespassing has moral-philosophical relevance but is at the same time more practical than fundamental. Now critics of emissions trading have come to agree with defenders that some emission activities are simply needed for the maintenance of human life and others serve a spectrum of human values above subsistence level. Sandel (2012, cf. 1997), too, does not reject individual emission activities as such. Unlike throwing litter on the road from the car window, emitting CO₂ into the air is not intrinsically wrong: life is impossible without it. Only aggregated are CO₂-emissions harmful (Sandel 2012: 77, cf. 188; Goodin 1994: 575-576; but cf. also Aldred 2012: 342-345). However, what critics such as Sandel find objectionable about CO₂ emission 'is doing so in excess, as part of an energy-profligate way of life [that] we should discourage, even stigmatize' (2012: 73, cf. 188; Skopek 2010). What critics claim, then, is that the climate problem reveals a false value orientation in modern, economized society: one that embodies the vice of wastefulness. It would therefore be morally reprehensible of the rich and of wealthy nations to try to buy themselves out of responsible environmental behavior through emissions trading instead of acting in line with the ethics of fine and stigma. After all, emissions trading treats all emission units - no matter how wasteful the cause - equal, as to be offset with an identical financial cost (Skopek 2010: 2082-2085). Although litter is less fungible than greenhouse gases and global warming a cumulative harm, emissions trading 'reinforces a bad attitude - that nature is a dumping ground for those who can afford it' - and '[makes] it harder to cultivate the habits of restraint and shared sacrifice' (Sandel 2012: 76, cf. also Aldred 2012: 355-357). Again, then, the defenders' typical focus on economic policy comes to the fore: they value effectiveness and efficiency higher than avoidance of wastefulness (cf. Skopek 2010: 2087), and their belief that it makes little sense to try to draw the boundary between excessive and non-excessive emission behavior signals a concern for what is practical and manageable.

The defenders' third argument, which entails that intrinsic and instrumental environmental valuation may well go together if emissions trading is implemented, is justified by an appeal to common sense experience yet actually driven by policy reliance as opposed to Sandel's more pessimistic, prophetic concerns. Whereas Sandel suggests that, like in other cases, intrinsic and instrumental valuation cannot exist simultaneously, Page rejects a full comparison with elderly care, child labor, and organs trade, claiming that a legitimized and functional emissions trading system need not reduce the value of the atmosphere to a market value; the price mechanism can maintain, if not enlarge, our intrinsic appreciation of the atmospheric good. However, in contrast to the examples of individual, concrete goods - houses, holidays, pets, artworks - that Page mentions, in case of the atmosphere we are dealing with a collective and highly abstract good that, as such, seems much less susceptible to intrinsic valuation when our concern for it becomes commercialized. Page, then, relies not so much on common sense experience in case of the atmospheric good but, implicitly, on a positive, hardly verifiable (or falsifiable) assessment of the capacity of emissions trading not to hamper intrinsic environmental valuation.

Regarding its fourth argument, the defense case cannot work without optimism about the capacity of emissions trading, by itself or in combination with supplementary and supporting policy measures, to avoid financial incentives to crowd out intrinsic motivation. Now it should be noted that Sandel (cf. 2012: 93-130) offers little empirical evidence for environmental-moral crowding-out, speaking more in terms of possibilities than of certainties or even probabilities. However, what is remarkable is that Page, while pleading for a morally responsible introduction of emissions trading and explicitly acknowledging that serious social-psychological and behavioral-economic evidence for environmental crowding-out exists, does not himself show that with this instrument the risk of environmental crowding-out is not present. In fact,

one could argue that, in view of the already stressed abstractness and collectiveness of the atmospheric good but also the high number of parties involved, it would be very hard to avoid or disprove crowding-out (cf. Aldred 2012: 347-348). One may also suspect that the danger of crowding-out (at least in the sense that further development of intrinsic motivation is being restrained) is especially great in the climate context, as the descendants of those who have initiated this humankind-threatening problem so far have demonstrated little understanding of their own responsibility for the damage caused. Page, however, does little more than arguing that the crowding-out effect with individual persons in laboratory-like situations is not applicable to emissions trading between firms and countries in the real world, and that measures could be implemented to weaken the crowding-out problem triggered by emissions trading. But his claim that, in accepting as parties firms instead of persons, emissions trading will not be beset by ethically complex entities with intrinsic values that could be undermined, ignores that firms themselves consist of persons (that could experience crowding-out) and gives rise to the question of whether firms can be ethical actors with the capacity to carry moral responsibility at all (see also Aldred 2012: 352). Clearly, then, this claim of Page is hardly moral-philosophical, but imbued with policy considerations. Most strikingly, Page's appeal to policy (makers) to rescue emissions trading from crowding-out by promoting environmental morality and the intrinsic morality of participants reveals a strong belief in the need for and social impact of policy in climate ethics.

The above analysis of the four arguments shows that our emissions trading defenders make a very specific contribution to the debate, one that moves away from the center of ethics - that is, moral philosophy - toward economic policy. Within the boundaries of justice they attach overriding value to practical functionality (effectiveness, efficiency) and political feasibility, assume that economic policy can have considerable power toward the good, and consider potential value loss at deeper levels (concerning the virtues of moderation, personal responsibility, shared sacrifice) a 'price worth paying' (Page). Accordingly, as 'problem-solvers' opposed to the more 'prophetic' nature of their opponents' position, the defenders will have no real patience for the moral implications of the deeper-lying processes their critics point to, such as the dominance of 'neoliberalism' as ideological social orientation, which narrows climate change to a technical, bureaucratic problem, with the market as pragmatic solution and the market logic (with its emphasis on profit and the need for growth) intact (cf. Randalls 2011: 127-128). In fact, the defenders' case embodies policy-oriented moral concerns as well as moral-philosophical reasoning across the board. Indeed, the defense position entails a policy-ethical argument for further extending the market toward the inclusion of climate-related goods.

A recent case of 'Roman-ness'

Since the ethical case for emissions trading is no strict moral-philosophical argument at all but heavily reliant on economic policy assumptions and values, there is every reason to see if some framework exists that provides ultimate coherence to this position and its arguments. Second, then, I shall argue that the ethical case for emissions trading is to be understood as grounded in a specific religious tradition, that is, as a further secularized continuation of the 'Roman' tradition as opposed to the 'Protestant' one within Western intellectual thought. I start by explaining these two religious traditions as distinguished and extensively reconstructed by Robert Nelson. Next I aim to show that our defense position exhibits key Roman assumptions and values and is directly at odds with the contrasting Protestant tradition. Thus, it is its 'Roman-ness' that makes the present position ultimately hang together.

The Roman tradition, Nelson explains, rests on the conviction that there exist rationally grounded laws of nature and that mankind is ethically bound and practically motivated to follow these laws. The all-pervading idea of a cosmic-and-ethical system of natural law is central to Thomism, as in the Aristotelian and Stoic philosophies, and as again in the liberal philosophy of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Aristotle is the first and Aquinas (who reconstructed Aristotle's thought in conformity with Christian theology) the second great representative of this tradition, which achieved another high point in the Enlightenment with thinkers such as John Locke, Adam Smith, and Jeremy Bentham, and which has come to exert a dominant influence in Keynesian economics and twentieth-century welfarism.[6] The Roman

tradition believes that human reason and action may lead to progress, universal justice, and human equality. Life is lived to achieve happiness. Private property is a socially beneficial instrument of the common good. Individual self-interest is natural and just, but a social obligation exists to help the poor. The role of government is to help create the good life. This tradition, then, is this-worldly, commonsensical, empirical, pragmatic, and utilitarian (Nelson 1991: 28-33), emphasizing human-centered concerns such as social justice and the common good (Nelson 2010: 132). It typically defends the virtue of political prudence (cf. Donald McCloskey in Nelson 1991: xiii).

By contrast, from Plato onwards, the Protestant tradition is deeply skeptical about human reason, which is seen as the source of illusion, not of human improvement. Men cannot master their fate, as they are frequently weak and deluded. Indeed, by its very misplaced confidence, humanity often worsens its suffering and misfortunes. The story of history is one not of advance but of retrogression: man's decline from harmony, contentment, and well-being to maladies such as war, selfishness, and jealousy. Human action and the use of human reason will not move mankind toward realization of the ultimate goal, as people lack this capacity within themselves. Mankind's current state cannot be perfected, as men have become too corrupted and sinful to offer a satisfactory foundation of gradual improvement. Progress requires a basic transformation in the quality of human existence: a whole new man. Thus, hope for humanity's progress is to be found in an autonomous force outside human influences, such as divine intervention or an impersonal law of history. Alienated from their true reason and nature, men have fallen into a trap in which they must hope for divine or other outside mercy and so wait for revelation. For Augustine, Luther, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, alienation is the core element of the human condition. Life is lived not for happiness, but for disciplined labor in the service of God or history. Self-interest and economic competition exert an evil influence in the affairs of man. Communal living and common ownership are the highest form of existence. The task of government is one of coercively controlling sin and unruly natures, not one of eliminating poverty or creating justice, as institutions set up for such purposes will not perform as intended by reason but randomly, if not worse. The Protestant tradition, then, is other-worldly, pessimistic, and negative about political interventionism and its consequences (Nelson 1991: 49-59), heavily emphasizing the Christian doctrine of original sin (Nelson 2010: 133, 114).

In order to demonstrate the relevance of these basic Roman and Protestant characteristics for the modern age, Nelson's next step is to show that now two competing 'secular religions' exist - economics and environmentalism - that both originate in Christian beliefs and practices. Applying his framework to economics, Nelson (1991) argues that the optimistic Roman tradition has been the most influential in shaping modern economic thought and practice. Post-Enlightenment history witnesses a widespread belief (confessed or not) that economic progress will eventually solve both the practical and spiritual problems of mankind. For many modern people, eradicating evil from the world is not to be expected from a divine power, but a matter of eliminating economic scarcity. The economic credo, then, is that if all important human material needs can and will be satisfied, the most important cause of war and other forms of human hostility will be overcome. It is modern economics (with its practitioners as the high priests of the economic religion) that will establish 'heaven on Earth'. Thus, the recent welfare state can be regarded as the most important modern embodiment of this Roman faith (Nelson 1991).[7] Followers of economic religion have the duty not to interfere in market workings, halt new technologies or scientific management, or block other steps toward greater economic efficiency. It would be a 'sin' to stand in the way of global economic progress (Nelson 2012: 32). As economic religion optimistically adds, the worsening of environmental quality (air, water, soil, atmosphere) is not due to moral failure associated with the false worship of economic growth, but simply to a practical failure of economic pricing policies. What is needed is development of an appropriate set of property rights, which halts the free access of many environmental assets. Improving pricing policies would work in environmental realms, too (Nelson 2010: 84).

Nelson's application of his framework to environmental issues explains why the secular religion of environmentalism has followed a Protestant route (Nelson 2010). Environmental religion rejects the Industrial Revolution's revolutionary break of human economy and society from the constraints of nature (cf. Nelson 2010: xvi, 5). Environmentalism involves a Protestant rejection of narrowly utilitarian goals for 'using' nature while ignoring the basic, inherent value of nature (Nelson 2010: 108). Accordingly, environmentalism displays a Protestant suspicion of money and wealth, extravagant consumption, and self-indulgence, now also viewing climate change as the key source of future biblical calamities (Nelson 2010: 107, cf. 76-77). Reflecting its Calvinist roots, environmentalism teaches of human corruption by greed, of an excess of human pride, of a desire of humans to possess forms of knowledge that are God's

alone, and of punishments that God will inflict on sinners who have violated His commands. The source of temptation is no longer a snake in the Garden of Eden, but modern science (physics, chemistry) and economics, which have led human beings to believe that they can have God-like, technological powers (Nelson 2010: 9, xvii). Rejecting economic growth maximization, environmentalism wants the human impact on nature to be minimized. Rejecting the economic belief that noneconomic costs can be ignored in utility calculations, environmentalists typically oppose market solutions, as they fear that these will conflict with moral, spiritual, or communal justifications for environmental protection and function as economic licenses to abuse the environment (Nelson 2010: 58). Environmental religion, then, assumes an ideal, 'Eden'-like world that is being destroyed by human 'progress', and demands that we repent and return to 'Eden'. Its moral urgency originates in Calvinism and Puritanism and their emphasis on moral corruption (Nelson 2004: 62). Indeed, as modern industrialization has caused a great increase of greenhouse gas emissions, human actions have thereby changed the earth's climate, which is actually God's domain. Therefore, global catastrophes loom because of global warming (Nelson 2004: 11, 64-65). Environmental religion regards global warming as a 'sin'; therefore, economic cost-benefit calculations cannot resolve the issue (Nelson 2010: 12).

Arguably, then, the ethical defense of emissions trading is at home in the Roman religious tradition, including its modern economic appearance, of which it can be seen as a further secularized extension. In the full wake of the Roman tradition, our defenders advance, implicitly when not explicitly: the importance of reason, liberalism, and utilitarianism (or at least consequentialism); the social usefulness of self-interest and private property of emission units (albeit not of the atmosphere itself); the value of an economic approach to environmental and climate issues; an optimistic view of the allocating role of markets and prices in the environmental realm as well as elsewhere; optimism about the robustness of individual morality (no real risk of crowding out) in the absence of conclusive empirical evidence to the contrary; the need for justice and the 'God' of efficiency and effectiveness; and the positive role of politics. Also, they uphold an overall pragmatic and policy-oriented approach in which no place exists for distinguishing morally between sorts of emissions. Thus, the defense entails an argument for extending the market so that it also includes climate-related goods. Indeed, all the features of this position fall into the Roman tradition. Strikingly, Nelson's claim of Roman dominance in modern economics is even confirmed by the current international practice and theoretical justification of emissions trading.

At the same time, the defense position is directly at odds with core elements of the Protestant tradition and its modern environmentalist appearance, which confirms its Roman-ness. Our defenders clearly reject a Protestant distrust of reason, liberalism, and utilitarianism (or consequentialism), and do not wish to take into account past and present human tendencies toward (environmental) 'sin'. They do not believe in the social and environmental dangers of self-interest and private property of emission permits and the inappropriateness of a cost-benefit approach to environmental and climate issues, as such issues are not seen as displaying a deep and sin-like disrespect for human nature. They reject a pessimistic view of the allocating role of markets and prices in the environmental realm as well as elsewhere and pessimism about the robustness of individual morality, as people, or at least the companies they set up, are not treated as corrupted and troublingly susceptible to crowding out. They do not wish to treat efficiency and effectiveness as merely superficial and short-term concerns that also wrongly legitimize unlimited growth and wastefulness. They do not conceive of climate change as a most typical example of human decline and politics as constrictor and punisher. They do not distrust justice-creating institutions, and find an overall environmentalist-prophetic approach unfruitful. As all the features of the defense position are at odds with the Protestant tradition, there may be little doubt about its Roman-ness.

Remarkably, my position entails disagreement with Nelson's own suggestion that emissions trading is a libertarian idea rooted in the 'egalitarian individualism' also housed by the Protestant tradition. For libertarians, he argues, rather than imposing government regulations with their political and bureaucratic difficulties, improving property rights will be the best solution to environmental problems. Accordingly, the government could create emission rights and assign them to individuals and businesses, which would own and be able to trade in the rights in a market (Nelson 2010: 108, 305-306, 329-330). Nelson's picture of environmental libertarianism is inaccurate, however, as emissions trading rather entails an application of libertarian market ideas within an overall Roman perspective. What we encounter here is a free market within a state context, one artificially created by that state. It is the government that sets the cap, allocates use rights, controls the market, and ideally strives for social utility and justice. The market, then, has no fundamental role, but is merely used as an instrument. Presumably, (Protestant) libertarians would

find emissions trading objectionable for entailing 'rigged markets in the sense that the overall level of emissions would be under political [and bureaucratic] control'[8] (cf. also Nelson 2010: 331, 347). Again, we see how 'Roman' emissions trading is.

Conclusion: Roman-ness as weakness?

The 'Roman-ness' of the ethical defense of emissions trading may well indicate its ultimate weakness, with the consequence that, in the final analysis, emissions trading is unacceptable. Thus, the ethical case for emissions trading appears to morally sanction a policy that promotes still greater room for economics in society, as it is optimistic about the potential of state-regulated markets for dealing with climate change. However, one could argue that it is wrong to believe that assistance in the fight against climate change may be expected from a mechanism that has actually contributed to the climate problem. Indeed, Roman defenders of emissions trading may not be able to assess how the climate problem, or, rather, climate crisis, has arisen in the first place. Because of their approach, the defenders cannot take the increasingly socially dominant role of 'the economic' into account, whereas the Western economy with its immense energy use has been at the root of the climate crisis. But why would the market now (still) be able to bring moral redemption? The only thing we can know for sure is that the social domination of the market will be strengthened this way. As Clive Spash writes, 'emissions trading promises a painless way to avoid human-induced climate change which will leave the growth economy unaffected in its pursuit of happiness through materialism' (2010: 192). More than anything else, it is the history of how the industrialized world has dealt with the environment and climate change that suggests Roman optimism to be warranted no longer. As the dominating Roman economic thought and practice of 'heaven on earth' through never-ending economic growth as 'good' (Nelson 1991) itself has been at the base of the climate crisis, one cannot, so it seems, plausibly and properly defend solutions based within the same intellectual tradition or value orientation, such as emissions trading. The Roman ethics of emissions trading could be the final convulsion of a progressive, yet false god (cf. Nelson 2010: 40-41).

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Notes

[1] The argument and text occasionally draw on discussions in some of my earlier articles (Kamminga 2013, 2011, cf. 2008).

[2] Thus, economics can be a major example of a religion (Nelson 1991). Nelson (2006: 668) explains that the twentieth century professional economic belief that its research would reveal economic 'laws' of society similar to the physical laws of nature has not, and will not, become reality. Instead, 'it follows other faiths in that it provides an interpretation of history, a final destination for mankind; an understanding of the origins of sin in the world, and a basis for making moral judgments' (Nelson 2006: 663).

[3] Page (2012) has argued that the efficiency and environmental benefits of emissions trading may come at the price of corrosive effects for procedural justice and political legitimacy. Yet he insists that these moral weaknesses suggest the need for 'reform and revision' of emission trading schemes, not their impermissibility (Page 2012: 946, cf. 2011a: 53-58).

[4] One argument advanced by the ethical defenders of emissions trading that I shall not discuss is that emissions trading does not turn the atmosphere into tradable portions of privately owned property, but allows merely the bounded, temporary, and regulated right to use the atmospheric commons beyond its sink capacity (Ott and Sachs 2000: 14; Page 2011b: 263, 269; Caney 2010: 204-205; Caney and Hepburn 2011: 11-12). The point is that this argument seems insufficiently distinctive for the defense position (although serious juridical and practical objections have been advanced; Aldred 2012: 341-342; Spash 2010: 180). Thus, key suppliers of criticism such as Sandel and Goodin do hold that emissions trading assumes people to have 'the right to pollute' or 'pollution permits', but they do not insist that emissions trading introduces the right to a tradable slice of the atmosphere itself.

[5] Page (2011b: 274-275) also argues that crowding-out need not be a specific and thus decisive objection to emissions trading, as all key approaches to environmental policy - direct regulation, government spending, voluntary agreements, and economic instruments - apply financial incentives to encourage users to lower emissions; crowding-out could occur in all these situations. However, Page seems to overlook that emissions trading is distinct in that the utilized incentives do not reflect some moral rejection of pollution (or moral approval of counteracting it); quite the contrary. That is also why we speak of the possibility of crowding-out in this case.

[6] Nelson (1991: 17, 30) acknowledges that the thinkers he discusses do not always exhibit all 'their' tradition's beliefs.

[7] Ironically, like other large and bureaucratic welfare and regulatory states, a historically Protestant nation as the United States has developed itself in a 'Roman' way (Nelson 2010: 139, cf. 111).

[8] <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/richard.wellings/libertranspol.htm>.

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