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Research Articles



The Protestant Dimension of the Ethical Critique of Carbon Commodification

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Abstract

Some influential philosophers have argued that carbon commodification is a morally bad means of combating global climate change. This article argues that the ethical critique of carbon commodification derives moral coherence and strength from its implicit religious foundation, that is, the “Protestant” understanding of social ethics on which it relies. The argument is threefold. First, the ethical critique of carbon commodification is not a strictly ethical position, as it typically depends on prophetic indictment as well as moral-philosophical concerns. Second, the ethical critique of carbon commodification involves a secularized continuation of the “Protestant” tradition within Christian thought. Third, its “Protestant-ness” gives the ethical critique of carbon commodification critical power, as the very occurrence of climate change implies coherency problems for the opposing dominant “Roman” tradition.

Keywords

carbon offsets – Christian tradition – climate change ethics – emissions trading – religion – Protestant tradition

1 Introduction

Carbon markets have become a main response to dangerous global climate change. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol created the commodity of an allowance to emit a particular amount of CO₂ within a certain period through three flexible mechanisms: emissions trading, joint implementation, and clean development mechanism. A cap and trade device, emissions trading permits countries and firms to trade allocated emission rights for money with other countries and firms. A carbon offset scheme, joint implementation allows rich countries to finance energy-saving projects in other industrialized countries to help meet their own obligations. Clean development mechanism, also a carbon offset instrument, allows industrialized countries to set up sustainability projects in developing countries and subtract the resulting emission differences from their own emissions. Important was also the 1998 switch of the European Union from an adversary to a defender of carbon markets and its later creation of a shared emissions trading system, which was followed by a launch of cap and trade schemes elsewhere (Paterson and Stripple 2012, 564; cf. Page 2011a, 38–39, 2011b, 260). Moreover, voluntary carbon offsets are increasingly employed. Oil companies and airlines invite customers to neutralize their personal contribution to climate change by paying for green energy projects (Sandel 2012, 76–77).

Yet carbon markets are contested. Despite its theoretical promise of efficiency through low-cost reductions, emissions trading has been criticized for increasing emissions and reducing efficiency when implemented in a complex and anarchic world (Holtmark and Sommervoll 2012; Spash 2010). Voluntary carbon offsets have been condemned for lacking scientific legitimacy and risking enhancement of global warming because of physical, practical, and legal issues regarding the equivalence between source and sink (Anderson 2012; Spash 2010, 183). But carbon markets also face more fundamental, ethical objections. One core objection is that use of the atmosphere, a natural good for which we are jointly responsible, should not be commodified. Carbon markets, then, serve as false instruments for the rich to soften their ecological guilt (cf. Paterson and Stripple 2012, 569). While some philosophers believe that carbon commodification may be morally justified (Singer 2002; Caney 2010; cf. Page 2011a, 2011b, 2012), other philosophers (whom I shall refer to as “our critics”) have strongly denied this (Sandel 2005, 2012; Skopek 2010; cf. Aldred 2012; Goodin 1994; Randalls 2011; Spash 2010).

In this article, I assume that the criticism of carbon commodification is justified but that the foundations for that critical position often remain unarticulated or, if articulated, wanting. I therefore intend to deepen the ethical

critique of carbon commodification by pointing out its dependence on certain beliefs or value systems regarding what is ultimate – unconditioned, uncaused, pre-political, pre-ethical –, thus, on “religion” (cf. Philpott 2002, 68).¹ More concretely, I argue that this position, despite its secular appearance, derives moral coherence and power from the particular religious – namely, “Protestant” – understanding of social ethics on which it tacitly relies. To defend such a thesis is not as strange as it may seem (cf. Kamminga 2013b). The ethical case against carbon commodification started two decades ago with Robert Goodin’s comparison of environmental offsets to “indulgences”, the monetary sums sinners paid the medieval Church to compensate for their wrongdoings (Goodin 1994; cf. Nelson 2010, 112–113). In this view, buying or selling permits to pollute is wrong, even if economic efficiency is maximized or environmental damage minimized thereby, since it is similar to the selling of indulgences by the Church. ‘Selling rights to destroy nature’ is like ‘selling God’s grace’, as you are selling something that is not yours to sell (Goodin 1994, 575, 578–579).

My argument is threefold. First, the ethical critique of carbon commodification is no strictly ethical position, as it typically depends on “prophetic” indictment as well as “technical” moral-philosophical concerns. To argue this, I shall make use of theological ethicist James Gustafson’s “modes of moral discourse” model in which both the “ethical” and “prophetic” modes have their place (Gustafson 1990). Since the position under investigation thus goes beyond moral philosophy, every reason exists for looking for some more ultimate foundation. Second, consequently, the ethical critique of carbon commodification involves a secularized continuation of the “Protestant” tradition within Christian intellectual thought. To show this, I shall draw on theological economist Robert Nelson’s reconstruction of the “Roman” and “Protestant” traditions and his analysis of economics and environmentalism as religions (Nelson 1991, 2010). As Nelson’s reflections on religion, economics, and environmentalism are profoundly relevant for this article’s topic as well as unique in their own right, to seek guidance in his work seems well-justified. Third, its “Protestantness” gives the ethical critique of carbon commodification valuable critical force as the very occurrence of climate change may entail deep coherency problems for the opposing, dominant “Roman” tradition. While making this final argument, I utilize philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s notion of “epistemological crisis” (MacIntyre 1988).

Three further assumptions of this article require explanation (cf. Kamminga 2013b). First, in focusing on basic beliefs about carbon commodification,

1 I thank Govert Buijs, Simon Polinder, and two reviewers for their comments.

I ignore difficulties concerning design and implementation, and assume practical viability (cf. Aldred 2012, 340, 357; Page 2011b, 265). Second, in applying Nelson's analysis of religion, I accept his view of religions as having 'comprehensive worldviews and myths that provide human beings with the deepest sense of meaning' (Nelson 2010, 348, cf. 1991, xxv). Religion, then, does not require a transcendent God, but refers to an all-inclusive, possibly secular(ized) worldview that binds fundamentally and provides a structure for addressing the realities of life. Whether adherents do or do not identify themselves as religious is irrelevant (Nelson 2010, xi, xv, 276). Third, in drawing on Nelson's framework of Roman and Protestant traditions without offering a comprehensive independent defense, I follow him in taking these labels as providing consistency concerning the main tenets of theological belief. Nelson's framework is inspired by Protestant theologian Paul Tillich's distinction between two "great lines of thought" that pervade the history of the West and Catholic theologian John Courtney Murray's division of "two tendencies" in the history of the Christian faith. Both Roman and Protestant traditions have Greek philosophical beginnings – Aristotle and Plato respectively –, but these have subsequently been absorbed and embodied in Christian traditions whose most central figures are Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther respectively. The medieval Church sustained the theology characteristic of the Roman tradition; the Reformation, led by the "protestors" against the established Church, offered the most typical account of the theology of the Protestant tradition. Yet the labels do not simply indicate what the churches so named have believed in each historical period (Nelson 1991, 17–23, cf. 172–174).

2 The Ethical Critique of Carbon Commodification

Before I can develop my argumentation, I must elucidate the ethical case against carbon commodification. Michael Sandel (2005, 93–96, 2012, 72–79), arguably the key ethical critic of carbon commodification, claims that "the right to pollute" ought not to be bought or sold since all people and countries have a civic duty to treat the atmosphere with respect and do their share by limiting their own environmental impact instead of paying others to do this in their place. By contrast, ethical defenders suggest that we need not be concerned about the location of emissions reduction because the atmosphere is "one" (Singer 2002). Thus, Peter Singer (2002, 45–47) argues 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. And Simon Caney (2010) and

Edward Page (2011a, 2011b, 2012) regard emissions trading as morally justified if schemes are designed justly as well as effectively (cf. Kamminga 2013a, 45–48, 2013b). Our critics resist such reasoning, however. Their case against carbon commodification – emissions trading (cf. Kamminga 2013a, 43–45) and carbon offsets – includes six arguments.

First, treating CO₂ emission as a tradable commodity will make countries, corporations, or people see pollution less as a moral offence and more like a business payment, which ‘entrenches an instrumental attitude toward nature’, Sandel (2012, 75) argues. A government that creates an allowances system with tradable emissions conveys the message that emission of polluting gas is not like littering but only an expense of industry, a matter of cost-benefit analysis without any moral stigma attached. Sandel grants that emitting CO₂ is not intrinsically wrong; life is impossible without it. Only aggregated are emissions harmful (Sandel 2012, 77, 188; Goodin 1994, 575–576; but cf. Aldred 2012, 342–345). What is objectionable, he insists, ‘is doing so in excess, as part of an energy-profligate way of life. That way of life, and the attitudes that support it, are what we should discourage, even stigmatize’ (Sandel 2012, 73). Sandel (2012, 74) opts for a governmental tax ‘big enough [to have] the virtue of making the polluters pay for the damage they inflict’. The opposition to taxation or direct regulation and preference for trading is not ethical but driven by political concerns of feasibility, market-friendliness, and industry compliance (Sandel 2012, 74; Spash 2010, 192; Brassett and Holmes 2010, 445–446).

Second, allowing rich countries to avoid real reductions in their own energy use by buying the right to pollute from others, or paying for programs that enable other countries to pollute less, ‘undermines the spirit of shared sacrifice that may be necessary to create a global environmental ethic’, Sandel (2012, 75) argues. This way, wealthy nations violate their civic duty to limit their own environmental impact, resembling a rich hiker who tosses a beer can in the Grand Canyon and who does not pay a fine for littering but hires someone to tidy up the Himalayas. Although CO₂ is more fungible than litter and global warming a cumulative harm, letting rich countries avoid changes in their wasteful ways ‘reinforces a bad attitude – that nature is a dumping ground for those who can afford it’ (Sandel 2012, 76). A global market in pollution rights, even if efficient, ‘may make it harder to cultivate the habits of restraint and shared sacrifice’, Sandel (2012, 76) holds. Jonathan Aldred (2012, 355–357) explains this moral loss by pointing out that emissions trading conflicts with equal burden sharing. The sacrifices involved in financial payment and behavioral change are incommensurable; typical of behavioral sacrifice is that no substitutes exist for the good given up. Thus, equal burden sharing demands equal behavioral effects.

Third, with carbon commodification a “crowding-out” effect – a gradual erosion of the environmental ethic – may occur, as participants are taught that their polluting emissions are all right if they compensate or nullify caused damage through the market (cf. Sandel 2012). Markets can work but can also teach people to see things instrumentally and of extrinsic value instead of intrinsically valuable and in need of responsible treatment (Sandel 2012, 9). With carbon trading a great danger exists that market values drive out non-market values, pollution permits deteriorate into instruments of profit, and an attitude of respect for nature is hollowed out (even) further. Aldred (2012, 347–348) explains that, even if this is not so for all parties involved, it is probably the case for some at least and thereby for the entire enterprise. At any rate, he adds, while direct evidence of environmental crowding-out may be lacking, emissions trading erodes a firm’s rationale for reducing its carbon footprint. By suggesting that emissions are morally neutral if the requisite number of permits is bought, trading weakens the stigma attached to having a large carbon footprint and, therefore, the reputational gain from reducing it (Aldred 2012, 351–352). That emissions trading, in accepting firms as parties, could avoid being troubled by persons as ethically intricate entities with intrinsic values that could be corroded (Page 2011b, 275) is misleading: firms are composed of persons, and whether firms could be ethical actors with the capability to bear responsibility becomes questionable this way. We should not treat the firm as a black box, but consider the people who determine its behavior. A firm’s demand for permits is a derived demand (Aldred 2012, 352).

Fourth, carbon offsets entail the danger that people who have bought them will feel they have no further climate responsibility. The risk is that carbon offsets function, at least for some, as an easy monetary tool to avoid the deeper changes in habits, attitudes, and ways of life possibly required to address the climate issue, according to Sandel (2012, 77). While carbon emissions are wrong only in the aggregate, individual-level offsets could still stimulate bad behavior. While driving a Hummer arguably displays wasteful self-indulgence or gluttony, drivers may not trade in their car for a hybrid if they can soften their guilt by donating money to an organization that plants trees in Brazil. Also, the pressure for broader, collective responses to climate change could weaken (Sandel 2012, 77–78). As Clive Spash (2012, 88) explains, providing offsets means that, rather than reducing their own harmful pollution, the global rich can maintain their energy-intensive lifestyles by placing the burden of emissions control on the poor in the South.

Fifth, Jeffrey Skopek (2010, 2086) objects that carbon offsets wrongly reduce responsible climate behavior to carbon-neutrality (which is compatible with excessive consumption). By converting environmental harm (and good) into

something to be measured in carbon, the market stimulates pure consequentialism. Use of natural resources is thereby governed not by a temperance ethic but by efficiency, that is, by a calculation of whether an action is worth either the carbon or its compensating monetary cost (Skopek 2010, 2079–2080). However, temperance, especially of rich and wasteful people, is what is intuitively called for and thus the act of choice. Also wrong is that the offset market's norm of carbon neutrality suggests that individuals need not carry the burden of reducing emissions themselves but may spread that through the market. Thus, the market displaces the view that people should embody environmental values by displaying concern for wasteful consumption in their own conduct (Skopek 2010, 2082).

Sixth, as they do not conceptualize emissions in terms of wastefulness, carbon offsets ignore, even obscure, key distinctions between good and bad “types” of carbon emissions, Skopek (2012, 2082–2085) argues. If avoiding wastefulness is a virtue, then carbon emissions that reflect wastefulness may be objectionable. And if some emissions are to be classified as wasteful and objectionable, carbon markets are wrong for blurring the line between wasteful and life-sustaining emissions. In harmful cases, paying is no complying. Thus, insofar as emissions are not equally objectionable, there are moral costs that may be lost in the carbon market system. If every emissions unit may be offset with an identical financial cost, then no unit – no matter how wasteful the cause – will count much. Even if a carbon market decreases aggregate emissions, it will do so by damaging the idea of wastefulness, Skopek (2010, 2087) concludes.

3 Ethics with Prophetic Indictment

This article's first argument, then, is that the above-presented critique of carbon commodification is not a strictly ethical position, as it hinges on prophetic indictment as well as moral-philosophical concerns. Here I apply Gustafson's moral discourses model, which holds that the “ethical” mode is necessary but not sufficient in medical, economic, and political ethics, since other forms, such as “prophetic” (the second important mode here), “narrative”, and “policy”, also make a distinctive contribution. Each of these modes advances a distinct perspective fueled by a specific sense of discomfort or feel that something is awry (Gustafson 1990, 126–127). Ethical discourse aims to decide how we should act in particular situations. It draws on rationally rigorous ways of reasoning as found in moral philosophy in order to develop action-guiding principles. Using “technical” language, ethical discourse brackets emotion and

compassion, and often assumes cultural, social, and economic contexts as given (Gustafson 1990, 127–130). In its indictment form (its other form is utopian), prophetic discourse aims to show how far society has fallen from what it ought to be. Often using emotive, passionate or even apocalyptic language, indictment focuses on the roots of what appears to be evil and leading to disaster if unstopped. Regarding incremental (policy) improvements as inadequate and ethical discourse as superficial because deep values are in danger, indictments aim to evoke a sense of urgency and crisis. Even when the prose is undramatic and more exact, the reader senses a profound concern for effects on precious but vulnerable values (Gustafson 1990, 130–136). As we shall see, the ethical critique of carbon commodification is not a fully rigorous “ethical” argument, as it ardently includes “prophetic” notions. That this argument calls for a subsequent religious understanding of the critics’ position can be illustrated by recalling that indictment typified the biblical writings of Hosea, Amos, and Jeremiah (Gustafson 1990, 130). I shall now revisit our critics’ six arguments in light of Gustafson’s distinction between ethical and prophetic.

Our critics’ first argument – emissions trading will stimulate agents to see pollution as amoral and nature as simply useful for human purposes – goes beyond moral philosophy in condemning human attitudes towards nature and governments’ passivity in making polluters pay heavily for their harmful offences. We should discourage and stigmatize the behavior of agents who have excessively emitted CO₂ due to their energy-wasting ways of life. Governments should penalize, not legitimize, such behavior, thus not bow to the force of concerns about political and economic feasibility. To clarify the prophetic depth of this argument: our critics will have little patience with a more rationalist argument such as Caney’s that emissions trading could be justified in terms of rights and justice and on the belief that the good of sustainable emission decrease weighs heavier than the possible bad of motivations of lower moral quality (Caney 2010, 207–209). While Caney believes Sandel’s civic duty to have intuitive value at most and to be therefore of little importance in the climate change context, Sandel (cf. 2012, 78) does not want social ethics to prioritize “rights” and “justice” and positive climate consequences over appropriate emission behavior by individuals and groups. Likewise, our critics will dismiss Page’s consequentialist argument that Sandel (and Goodin) fetishize(s) self-responsibility whereas a more efficient response to climate change outweighs a possibly eroded self-responsibility (Page 2011b, 267–268). In their view, we should not bypass or weaken the core issue by narrowing the emissions trading debate to one about efficiency and fairness, and should not assume the legitimacy and power of economic policies.

The second argument – permitting rich countries to largely buy off their environmental self-responsibility undermines the spirit of shared sacrifice as the keystone of a global climate ethic – is not merely moral-philosophical but prophetic for rejecting the room given to rich agents for arrogantly using nature as a dumping ground and refusing to express solidarity with poorer agents. For Sandel, a situation that calls for a common sacrifice obliges agents to take responsibility by – palpable – change in behavior without paying their way out (Aldred 2012, 353–355). To our critics, the things that really matter are restraint and global solidarity, not market efficiency. With emissions trading the poor will actually suffer the most, as they are the ones that must deal with behavioral limits and thus make the real sacrifice, whereas the rich can use their money to shield themselves from such discomfort. Thus, our critics will not accept more technical arguments such as Page’s that the fee-fine distinction is inconclusive in the case of greenhouse gas activities. They may concede that, while simple, more localized pollution actions such as littering (like the beer can example) should always be treated as unacceptable – and finable –, distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable greenhouse gas emission activities is harder. Some emission activities sustain human life; other emission activities serve many further human values. However, our critics will reject the conclusion that, when “overshooters” buy permits for emitting more than their present quotas, no harm results if other agents emit less than their quotas in proportion to the fees collected (Page 2011b, 268). Even if making an exact distinction between acceptable and unacceptable emission behavior will be (relatively) difficult, it will be intuitively clear that with excessive emissions behavior at some point the boundary between a life of sobriety and one of energy-squandering will be passed and that this has long happened. To downplay fine and stigma and overstress efficiency and fairness is to overlook the vice of wastefulness. That establishing the boundary between moderate and excessive emission behavior is problematic is no excuse.

The third argument – which doubts that with carbon commodification instrumental and intrinsic valuation of the environment can accord and fears that environmental crowding-out will occur – is prophetic rather than moral-philosophical, as it warns that intrinsic valuation should remain the basic value orientation and that we must be pessimistic about the capacity of carbon markets not to endanger nature’s intrinsic worth with their instrumental valuation of it. To legitimize carbon trading means having one’s ultimate priorities wrong and putting the proper way of valuing nature at risk, no matter the absence of direct empirical evidence for crowding-out. Having a large carbon footprint is wrong and reducing it should be socially valued. Our critics might accept Page’s claim that we normally assign monetary value to goods,

such as houses, holidays, and pets, to which we also assign intrinsic value and that by putting a high price on a good we hope that a later owner will provide the utmost care for it. However, they will reject Page's analogous claim that emissions trading need not reduce environmental value to market value and indicate a lack of respect for nature (Page 2011a, 62–63, cf. 2011b, 271–272). To them, the logical possibility that the price mechanism supports our intrinsic appreciation of a climate-related good has superficial value at best because, unlike Page's individual and concrete goods, the atmosphere represents a collective and highly abstract good that, as such, is far less accessible to intrinsic valuation if our concern for it is commercialized. Likewise, lack of direct evidence for environmental crowding-out through emissions trading does not stop our critics from pessimistically warning against it. With many parties involved, there will always be participants unable to resist the pressure towards valuing nature mostly instrumentally. Moreover, the very possibility of trading makes diminishing one's environmental impact less morally worthwhile. More basically still, the final participants in trading schemes are not firms but humans, whose ethical lives may be complex and affected with erodible intrinsic values. Thus, the critics' key – prophetic – point is that emissions trading is condemnable for imperiling the presence or development of intrinsic environmental values in individuals, the basic ethical agents. To appeal, then, to policy makers to help save emissions trading from crowding-out by promoting environmental morality and participants' intrinsic morality (Page 2011a, 52–53, 2011b, 276) is doubly dubious: it principally starts at the wrong end and is too confident about the impact of policy on individuals.

The fourth argument – carbon offsets stimulate people to believe their responsibility for climate change to have ended after purchase – is prophetic rather than moral-philosophical, as it, like the third argument, displays deep distrust of individual people's willingness to really change their behavior when given the opportunity to proceed rather painlessly. This argument includes a pessimistic estimation of people's readiness to avoid wastefulness if giving money can be a means to weaken their guilt and to offer a way out. Also, this argument assumes that with the option of carbon offsets people may not want to cooperate against global warming and rich people will seize the opportunity to continue their energy-wasting lifestyles. Thus, moderation is highly valued as a virtue and offsets are criticized for encouraging the vice of wastefulness, although it is not principally excluded that people will accept further climate responsibility.

The fifth argument – carbon offsets equate responsible climate behavior to living carbon-neutral, quantitatively – opposes a consequentialism of efficient

consumption and promotes an ethic of temperance instead; it thus opposes pragmatically calculating behavior as well as making ethics too technical, and stresses the moral significance of sobriety. Our environmental conduct should be directly, without more reflection, grounded in temperance, especially if we are rich and wasteful. Consequently, carbon neutrality and offset markets wrongly suggest that people do not need to change their wasteful consumption and emissions behavior themselves. Skopek's point is highly prophetic: living in harmony with nature would show us our obligations intuitively and help us resist "rational", tempting arguments for carbon offsets that suggest otherwise.

The sixth argument is also largely prophetic, as it castigates carbon offsets for uncritically overlooking, even disguising, key distinctions between good and bad types of carbon emissions, assumes the basic value of the virtue of avoiding wastefulness and the primacy of life-sustaining emissions, and relativizes the climate effectiveness of the market. As in the case of the second argument, Skopek and other critics will see strict arguments to the effect that it is very hard to distinguish exactly and fairly between wasteful and non-wasteful carbon emissions as shallow if not misguided. What counts is that carbon markets are wrong for blurring the line somewhere, at some point, between wasteful and life-sustaining emissions. Even if the line cannot be drawn exactly, we can know intuitively that harmful cases exist in which to pay is not to comply.

The above analysis of the six arguments shows that our critics have moved beyond the technical-rationalist core of social ethics toward a prophetic attack on carbon commodification. Not offering accurate principles about how governments or people should act (let alone adding policy recommendations), our critics do stay close to the non-theatrical tone of moral philosophy and aim to guide action. Yet they tangibly dislike the belief that quick environmental "success" of political institutions will promote their legitimacy. We should not treat climate change as a mere technical, bureaucratic issue, with the market as pragmatic, practically functional and politically feasible, solution and its logic of profit and growth unaffected (Randalls 2011, 127–128; cf. Kamminga 2013a, 49–53). As non-consequentialist, virtue (Skopek) or communitarian (Sandel) ethicists, our critics regard "effectiveness", "efficiency", and "justice" in environmental policy as superficial. Rather, they are zealous about deeper-lying social processes and value orientations. The climate "crisis" cuts deep: attitudes and habits regarding respect for nature, environmental risk-avoidance, temperance, personal responsibility, civic duty, shared sacrifice, and human solidarity are at stake. Stressing the intuitive (Skopek) and traditional (Sandel) as part of social ethics and worrying that deeper values are being reasoned away

theoretically and eroded practically, the critics want the rich and wasteful to repent and make behavioral sacrifices instantly. Accordingly, their ethical focus is individual and social, rather than policy-political, as they stress the value of good environmental conduct in individual people and groups (firms, nations), backed by punitive government measures when necessary. Sandel (2012) indicates a still deeper malady: carbon commodification is but one, albeit pivotal, sign of the increasing dominance of the market and “the economic” in social life. During the last decades, ever more things have become tradable, such as health care, procreation, education, public safety, criminal law, and environmental protection. While, then, the critics’ position is that human behavior should go against a history of wastefulness, it cannot be optimistic about humans’ capacity to act this way, if only because of the strong social tendency towards the opposite. Thus, following Goodin and supported by Aldred, Sandel and Skopek see carbon commodification as deeply wrong, for it is based on a readiness to take undue environmental moral risks, ignores profligacy as the root cause of the climate crisis, and shields historically big polluters “justly”.

4 “Protestant-ness”

As the ethical critique of carbon commodification is not strictly ethical argument but also, and strongly, dependent on prophetic assumptions and values, there is ground to search for a belief system that provides ultimate coherence to this position and its arguments. Second, then, I argue that the ethical carbon commodification critique implicitly entails a secularized continuation of the “Protestant” tradition within Christian intellectual thought. I start by explaining both the “Roman” and “Protestant” traditions as reconstructed by Nelson (cf. Kamminga 2013b). Next I show that our critics’ position typically exhibits Protestant beliefs. Thus, its “Protestant-ness” provides their stance with its deepest meaning.

To understand the Protestant tradition means, first, to learn about the Roman tradition to which Protestantism was a theological response. The Roman tradition, Nelson explains, rests on the conviction that there are rationally grounded laws of nature and that mankind is morally bound and practically motivated to follow these. The idea of a cosmic-and-ethical system of natural law is central to Thomism, as in the Aristotelian and Stoic philosophies and again in eighteenth-century liberalism. Aristotle is the first and Aquinas the second great representative of this tradition, which achieved another high point in the (not so new) Enlightenment with Locke, Smith, and Bentham, and which shaped Keynesian economics and twentieth-century welfarism. The

Roman tradition believes that human reason and action may lead to progress and justice. Life is lived to achieve happiness. Private property is a socially beneficial instrument. 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 regards political prudence as a virtue (cf. McCloskey in Nelson 1991, xiii).

Nelson (1991) argues, convincingly (Barkley 1992; Stackhouse 1993; cf. Gordon 1993), that the optimistic Roman tradition has strongly influenced economic thought and practice. Post-Enlightenment history witnesses a conviction that economic progress will end the practical and spiritual problems of mankind. Eradicating evil is no longer reserved to a divine power but mainly a matter of eliminating scarcity. The credo of “economic religion”, then, is that satisfying all important human material needs means eliminating the key cause of hostility and war. Having failed to reveal physics-like laws of society, modern economics with its practitioners as its high priests will still establish “heaven on earth”. Thus, the twentieth-century bureaucratic welfare state is the key modern embodiment of this Roman faith (Nelson 1991, 2010, 139, cf. 111). Economic religion’s followers have the duty to let markets do their work and to encourage new technologies, scientific management, or other steps toward greater economic efficiency. To obstruct global economic progress would be a “sin” (Nelson 2010, 32). Economic religion confidently adds that the deterioration of the quality of environmental assets is not due to any moral failure related to a false worship of economic growth, but simply to a practical failure of economic pricing policies that can and should be improved (Nelson 2010, 84).

Beginning with Plato, “the first Protestant”, the Protestant tradition is skeptical about human reason, regarding it as the source of illusion rather than human improvement. Commonly weak and deluded, humans cannot master their destiny. In fact, by its very arrogance, humanity often worsens its hardships and sufferings. The story of history is one not of progression but of regression: man’s decline from harmony, contentment, and well-being to maladies such as war, selfishness, and jealousy. Human reason and action will not lead mankind toward realization of the ultimate goal because 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: 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. For Augustine, Luther, Calvin, but also Marx and Freud, alienation

from its true reason and nature is the core element of the condition of humanity. 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 human affairs. 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 social “justice”, as institutions set up for such purposes will not perform as intended by reason but randomly (or worse). The Protestant tradition, then, is other-worldly, pessimistic (which is not the same as fatalistic), and negative about political interventionism and its consequences (Nelson 1991, 49–59), placing a particularly strong emphasis on the Christian doctrine of original sin (Nelson 2010, 133, 114).

Nelson (2010) argues that the Protestant tradition has had a deep impact on recent environmentalism, shaping its core tenets albeit not its frequent activism. “Environmental religion” rejects the Industrial Revolution’s break of human economy and society from the constraints of nature, dismissing utilitarian purposes for using nature without respect for the basic, inherent value of nature (Nelson 2010, xvi, 5, 108). Accordingly, environmentalism displays a Protestant-like suspicion of money and wealth, extravagant consumption, and self-indulgence, and now also regards climate change as a key source of future calamities (Nelson 2010, 107, cf. 76–77). In Calvinist style, environmentalism points to human corruption by greed, excess of human pride, man’s desire to possess knowledge that should remain God’s alone, and punishments that God will inflict on those who have violated His commands. The source of temptation is no longer a snake in the Garden of Eden, but modern natural science and economics, which have led humans to believe that they can possess God-like, technological powers (Nelson 2010, 9, xvii). Rejecting economic growth maximization, environmentalism holds that human impact on nature must be minimized. Discarding the economic belief that non-economic costs can be ignored in utility calculations, environmentalism opposes market solutions, as it fears that these conflict with moral, spiritual, or communal justifications for environmental protection and function as licenses to abuse the environment (Nelson 2010, 58). Environmental religion, then, deplores the destruction of the ideal, Eden-like world by human “progress”, and demands that we repent and return. Its urgency is a direct inheritance of the Calvinist and Puritan emphasis on moral corruption: it is ‘Calvinism minus God’ (Nelson 2010, 132). Indeed, as industrialization has produced a great increase of carbon emissions, human actions have changed the earth’s climate, God’s domain. Therefore, global catastrophes loom: the oceans will rise and the earth will flood, with dramatic consequences (Nelson 2010, 11). ‘In environmental

religion, global warming is a sin against God, not an issue to be resolved by economic calculations of possible future benefits and costs to human beings' (Nelson 2010, 12).²

As questions about Nelson's categorization of various thinkers and the precise historical correctness of his typology need not concern us here,³ I can now show why the ethical critique of carbon commodification fits neatly into the Protestant tradition as a further secularized environmental extension. Accordingly, our critics' position will appear incompatible with the Roman tradition. To start with, both environmental religion and the ethical critique of carbon commodification uphold prophetic indictment discourses (Gustafson) that attack "wrong" value orientations, although the former more clearly employs dramatic and even apocalyptic language whereas the latter sounds more sober due to the impact of moral philosophy. Next, key elements of the Protestant tradition and its environmentalist secular offspring are plainly present in our critics' stance.

Thus, the critics' arguments show their suspicion of reason, (economic) liberalism, and utilitarianism (or consequentialism), which have supposedly ignored the human inclination to (environmental) sin. The critics stress the social and environmental dangers, rather than usefulness, of self-interest and private property of atmospheric pollution, and also the very inappropriateness of an economics-based, cost-benefit approach to the environment and climate change; these are seen as painfully revealing an instrumentalist, sinful disrespect for nature. Consistent with Protestant environmentalism, our critics

2 Nelson (1991, 74–80, 2010, 137–138) stresses that the Weber thesis about Calvinism's impact on the rise of capitalism is flawed, at least theologically. Like environmentalists today, Calvin would not have supported economic and other forces of modernization from his theology, as one may work to be rich for God but not for the "flesh and sin" that have imbued modern society.

3 Commenters have doubted whether Nelson has classified all thinkers correctly (Gordon 1993; Heyne 1993; Stackhouse 1993; Goodin 1992). However, Nelson (1991, 20–21, 30) stresses that none of the thinkers always endorse all "their" tradition's beliefs; decisive for classification is predominant emphasis, not perfect fit. The traditions are actually constituted most, albeit not fully, by earlier "adherents": the Roman tradition by Aristotle and Aquinas; the Protestant tradition by Plato, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin (Nelson 1991, 27–81). But of most basic significance are not the individual thinkers but the two overall, Roman and Protestant, traditions that have consistently disagreed about the role of human reason (McCloskey in Nelson 1991, xiii-xiv; McCloskey 2006, 195–198; Barkley 1992) and that have developed themselves through the figures that embody (different) major elements. And, as noted earlier, each tradition possesses its own theological center of gravity, i.e. the medieval Roman Church and the Protestant Reformation, respectively. Also, to dispute Nelson's localization of thinkers seems odd without accepting the basic soundness of his Western religious traditions framework.

believe that the intrinsic value of nature has top priority and should not be jeopardized by instrumental valuation driven by practical or policy considerations. The critics advance a pessimistic outlook on the allocating role of markets and prices in the environmental realm as well as elsewhere in society (Sandel) and on the vigor of individual morality, as people are corrupted in the sense of being highly vulnerable to environmental crowding-out. The pessimism typical of the critics' perspective also comes to the fore in Sandel's suggestion that politics, by its very embrace of emissions trading, is actually crowding out environmental morality. Our critics display a Protestant disregard for Roman concepts of effectiveness, efficiency, and distributive justice, which are seen as shallow and short-term concerns that also condone infinite growth and wastefulness. Their attention to climate change, particularly the way in which they stress that basic values are endangered by carbon commodification initiatives, suggests that they, similar to Protestant environmentalists, see it as a pivotal example of human retrogression. Also Protestant is that they see the government in the role of constrainer and punisher, taxing environmental perpetrators heavily for their misconduct. Furthermore, they uphold an overall environmentalist approach in which good emissions are broadly distinguished from bad ones, thereby opposing a pragmatic, prudential, and policy-oriented approach in which no moral distinction is made between kinds of emissions.

Since the key features of the critics' position fall into the Protestant tradition, with or without God, its Protestant-ness and, simultaneously, anti-Roman-ness seem clear. Our Protestant critics demand proper, individual and social respect for nature and equal burden sharing by individual behavioral change, rejecting the "reasonableness" of a commodification solution that consolidates the vices of wastefulness and extravagance. While carbon commodification is Roman-rooted (Goodin 1994; Nelson 2010, 112–113, cf. 1991, 71; Kamminga 2013b),⁴ our critics hold dear values and assumptions that have the Protestant tradition as their source.

4 The non-Protestant, Roman nature of emissions trading can be clarified further by noting its reliance on a supportive government. It is such a Roman economic progressivist institution (Nelson 2010, 305–306) that sets the cap, creates and allocates emission rights, controls the market, and ideally strives for social justice as well as utility. When employing Protestantism's "priesthood of all believers", or "egalitarian individualism", (environmentalist) Protestants would endorse our carbon commodification critics' stress on individual and social moral responsibility with no intermediary role for an institutional "church" (cf. Nelson 1991, 76–77, 2010, 108). Thus, regarding emissions trading, too, they would criticize today's "churches" – nation-states, and the European Union – as new "Rome's", legitimized by economic religion (cf. Nelson 2010, 331, 333, 347).

5 “Protestant-ness” as Strength

Third, I argue that its “Protestant-ness” gives the ethical critique of carbon commodification ultimate force, as the very existence of climate change entails deep coherency problems for the opposite and dominant Roman tradition. “Protestantism”, then, seems superior to “Romanism” in the present context since climate change threatens to make the latter tradition lapse into incoherence and the former is better able to tackle it while displaying the Roman “epistemological crisis”. Thus, a reformulated Roman tradition may not be able to furnish a systematic and coherent solution for the climate crisis, to explain the reason for the crisis, and to show that it can do all this while retaining continuity with the original tradition. Indeed, adherents of the Roman tradition may have to recognize that the ideas of the Protestant tradition offer a progressive solution to their problems and that this rival yet fellow Western Christian tradition is even rationally superior (MacIntyre 1988, 360–362).⁵ While it will be hard to resolve the debate purely ethically, we may have to agree on the eventual unacceptability of carbon commodification (Kamminga 2013b).

Nelson’s claim of Roman dominance in modern economics and society finds further confirmation in the current international practice and theoretical justification of carbon commodification. The professional economist’s Roman method is to place monetary value on natural objects. By including such estimates in overall economic analyses, government decisions may still be based on cost-benefit calculations, as they now also aim to cover environmental values and benefits. One could, then, think that there is no need to abandon Roman economic religion: having reformulated their tradition, professional economists may continue to be modern society’s high priests, encompassing even moral considerations regarding the environment within the domain of economic calculation (albeit with nature as merely having instrumental value) (Nelson 2012, 58–59). In this renewed economic approach, environmental goods need not be seen as “priceless” (Nelson 2010, 71; cf. Page 2011a, 62–63, 2011b, 271–272). Indeed, with economists one could then argue that the best way to control pollution is to allow markets to function as well and as much as possible. Also, one could then ignore the environmentalist moral objection that such a government policy would officially sanction immoral behavior. If, then, consumption should be reduced at all, it is because of prudential reasons, not because it is good for the soul or does not really make people happy (Nelson 2010, 72). And by reformulating the Roman tradition further,

5 While the present argument employs MacIntyre’s concept of “epistemological crisis”, it differs from his ‘emerging Thomistic conclusion’ (MacIntyre 1988, 403).

ethical defenses of carbon commodification may be straightforward in their rationality. If carbon commodification can be implemented not only effectively and efficiently but fairly as well, it seems reasonable to believe that the adjusted Roman tradition is adequate to the task of dealing with climate change.

Yet I think that such a Roman social-ethical way of thinking, which would promote even more room for “the economic” in society, would ultimately fail, for it may have a flawed view of what global climate change actually means. One core problem of a Roman defense of carbon commodification is its optimism about a state-regulated climate market system, as one could plausibly argue – and environmentalist Protestants probably will argue – that it is grotesque to believe that a mechanism that has largely caused the “problem” will now help to solve it (cf. Northcott 2007). Epistemologically, Romans lack the capacity to examine thoroughly how the climate problem, or crisis, has arisen in the first place. If we adopt a Protestant perspective, however, we may be able to stress that, more than anything else, it is the Western economy with its immense energy use and the history of the industrialized world of dealing with the environment and human economy-induced climate change that makes the Roman rationalist optimism no longer warranted and even incoherent. Indeed, as the dominating Roman economic thought and practice of “heaven on earth” through endless economic growth as “good” (Nelson 1991) itself has been at the base of the climate crisis, one cannot plausibly and – this is the ultimate point – properly defend solutions based within the same intellectual tradition or value orientation, such as carbon commodification. As Samuel Randalls (2011, 127) puts it, the commodification of carbon through markets ‘is tied up in a calculative, managerial approach to the environment, which looks for cost-effectiveness, just allocations of carbon allowances and equitable international frameworks’, without being able to critically address underlying, more fundamental ethical assumptions about the nature of the good life for individuals (the “good climatic citizen”), as it is at home only in policy-making and formal-ethical discourses and so obscures such deeper questions.

This leads to a second core problem for the Roman tradition: this tradition cannot appreciate that the climate crisis (which is more than a “problem”) puts the uncomfortable question of how people ought to live on the agenda (cf. Skopek 2010; Northcott 2007). While carbon commodification ‘promises a painless way to avoid human-induced climate change which will leave the growth economy unaffected in its pursuit of happiness through materialism’ (Spash 2010, 192), we may no longer credibly expect the market to be able to bring moral salvation and legitimize its continuing domination thereby. Therefore, it makes full sense to believe that there is a moral injunction to

protect and preserve the “natural” climate that transcends all economic calculations, and that changing the climate is ‘playing God’ in a truly dramatic way (Nelson 2010, 79). Adopting a Protestant environmentalist perspective may make us see the economic-ethical defense of carbon commodification as the final convulsion of a progressive yet false economic god that failed to bring (material) heaven on earth without also engendering dangerous side-effects such as climate change and perhaps even having misconstrued man’s essential nature (cf. Nelson 2010, 40–41). Thus, as Protestant environmentalist ethics will stress, what climate change means is that the rich should stop their consumerist and wasteful ways of life and that the poor should be supported yet also prevented from taking over the lifestyles of the rich. Ultimately, the Roman-rooted disrespect for nature should not be legitimized but bent back.

If the above analysis is plausible, conversion from Romanism to Protestantism is called for in order to deal ethically with the “shock” of climate change. As carbon commodification ethics should take its place within the Protestant tradition, the implication is that commodification is ultimately intolerable. Yet a Protestant ethics need not always resist carbon commodification. As Nelson observes, the Platonic-Augustinian-Lutheran tradition sees economic competition and pursuit of self-interest as forces of darkness, yet accepts that these might be temporarily necessary in a sinful world, but only as a result of the fallen condition of human beings. If private property divides people yet prevents sinful human beings from engaging endlessly in strife and warfare, it may be admissible (cf. Nelson 2010, 116). Accordingly, a Protestant ethics could grudgingly allow carbon markets for realist(ic) considerations, although not for ethical ones that actually make carbon commodification look better than it is.

6 Conclusion

While defenses of carbon commodification will be grounded in the Roman tradition, the ethical case against commodification (which challenges unlimited economic growth) has its roots in the Protestant one. The human-induced climate crisis seems to offer strong evidence for that single doctrine of the Christian faith that Reinhold Niebuhr (1965, 24) famously declared empirically verifiable: original sin. Ethical opponents of carbon commodification may not wish to rely explicitly on such religious notions themselves. Yet their case does have the Protestant intellectual tradition in its genes – something not to be deplored. Their carbon commodification critique earns its place within an “architectonic critique” of modern society.

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