Moral Grandiosity of Epic Proportions

by Theodore Dalrymple

Activists in several cities of the world have recently taken to gluing themselves to works of art in public galleries, or throwing soup at them, or smashing their protective glass, or interfering with art auctions, as they recently did in New York. They do all this in order that humanity should stop using oil or other hydrocarbons.

Their choice of target is no doubt significant. In a post-religious world such as ours, art is often an object of veneration. As yet, the protesters haven't destroyed a great work of art, but the day can't be far off before they do, since they aren't being heeded as, in their opinion, they ought.

Now, clearly the theory of global warming caused by human activity, if true, is important; though it's as important if

it is *not* true. On this question, I don't feel qualified to pronounce, though I must admit to a suspicion, or several suspicions, about the rush to electric vehicles.

Apart from the protesters' ineffable certainty and self-righteousness, what unites them is their moral grandiosity. They make Napoleon seem like a self-doubter, a hesitant actor in the world. Their self-confidence is greater than their intellect, which often seems rather modest. For example, the female of the couple who smashed the protective glass of a Velazquez painting in the National Gallery in London turned to harangue those present, telling them that women didn't get the vote by voting. Unfortunately, she omitted to mention that there are many other things that people obtained not by voting, for example, the Gulag.

Moral grandiosity seems to be of almost epidemic proportions these days. Everyone pronounces on the largest questions and thinks that, by doing so, he has discharged some important moral duty, more important by far than his conduct in the trifling affairs over which he has direct control. A bad person is thus one who has the wrong opinions rather than the one who behaves badly. The right opinions sanction bad behaviour and the ends justify the means.

I don't know whether it's a coincidence or not, but quite a lot of modern moral philosophy encourages this not very attractive way of thought and being. It isn't entirely new, of course: Charles Dickens, in the character of Mrs. Jellyby, in "Bleak House," satirized the tendency to focus one's moral concern on far distant objects. Mrs. Jellyby, while actively promoting the welfare of the natives of Borrioboola-Gha on the left bank of the Niger, neglects her own children completely and allows them to live in squalor. She exhibits what Dickens, with brilliant concision, calls *telescopic philanthropy*.

A dominant thread in modern moral philosophy is utilitarianism, the theory that we should always act so as to increase the sum of human happiness, or reduce the sum of human misery, as much as possible. The connection with the Just Stop Oil demonstrators is clear. They reason as follows:

Global warming is occurring because of the use of fossil fuels.

Global warming will lead to the extinction of mankind.

Global warming is therefore the most important moral problem facing mankind.

Smashing the protective glass of a Velazquez painting will help bring about an end to the use of fossil fuels.

Therefore, I ought to smash the protective glass of the Velazquez painting; in fact, it’s morally obligatory for me to do so.

But this utilitarian thinking is both ludicrous and savage. Suppose, out of kindness, that I drive my aged next-door neighbor to the hospital for treatment of her relatively minor condition. According to the theory, the money for the fuel that I use in doing so would be better employed in providing life-saving treatment for children somewhere in the poorest part of the world. By doing the latter, I would be maximizing the reduction of human misery.

Imagine saying to your next-door neighbor, “I would like to take you to the hospital, but unfortunately I would do more good if I donated the cost of the fuel that I would use in taking you to help the children of Burkina Faso”! He or she wouldn’t only think that you were making excuses for your callousness, but also that you were mad.

There are obvious practical problems with this theory of morality (which is put forward in all seriousness by moral philosophers). If I take my neighbor to the hospital, I can be fairly sure that I have done him or her a good turn, that I have done some good in the world. If instead I give the money for the fuel to an intermediary to help the children of Burkina Faso, I have little idea of what good it will actually do.

There are other theoretical problems. First, desirable ends aren’t measurable on the same scale. There’s no universal measure of desirability. How do you decide beyond all possible doubt whether it’s better to delight children with a party or help a neighbor with her garden refuse, assuming that you can’t do both?

Further, the future consequences of an action can’t be altogether known, and the theory demands that we should take future consequences, to the last syllable of recorded time, into account when we make a decision about what is moral to do. If I take my neighbor to hospital, I can be fairly sure that I will have done some good; if instead I donate the money to a cause, I can’t be certain. Indeed, it’s even possible to do harm by donations: Civil wars have been kept going by foreign aid.

The more closely the good is connected to my conduct, the more certain it is; the further away, the less certain. That’s why Willam Blake said that he who would do good must do good in minute particulars. Clearly, the connection between smashing the protective glass of a painting by Velazquez and the cessation of the use of fossil fuels (even if such an end were desirable) is tenuous to non-existent. On the other hand, smashing glass is fun—how rioters love and are intoxicated by the sound of tinkling glass!—but doing good in minute particulars is not.