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On welfare frameworks and catastrophic climate risks



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ABSTRACT

Recent theoretical work in the economics of climate change has suggested that climate policy is highly sensitive to ‘fat-tailed’ risks of catastrophic outcomes (Weitzman, 2009) [68]. Such risks are suggested to be an inevitable consequence of scientific uncertainty about the effects of increased greenhouse gas concentrations on climate. Criticisms of this controversial result fall into three categories: The first suggests that it may be irrelevant to cost benefit analysis of climate policy, the second challenges the fat-tails assumption, and the third questions the behavior of the utility function assumed in the result. This paper analyses these critiques and suggests that those in the first two categories have formal validity, but that they apply only to the restricted setup of the original result, which may be extended to address their concerns. They are thus ultimately unconvincing. Critiques in the third category are shown to be robust however they open up new ethical and empirical challenges for climate economics that have thus far been neglected—how should we ‘value’ catastrophes as a society? I demonstrate that applying results from social choice to this problem can lead to counterintuitive results, in which society values catastrophes as infinitely bad, even though each individual’s utility function is bounded. Finally, I suggest that the welfare functions traditionally used in climate economics are ill-equipped to deal with climate catastrophes in which population size changes. Drawing on recent work in population ethics I propose an alternative welfare framework with normatively desirable properties, which has the effect of dampening the contribution of catastrophes to welfare.

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Since the publication of the Stern review on the economics of climate change [63], economists have been heatedly debating the appropriate welfare framework for evaluating climate change policy [66,50,13,64,16,31]. Choices of key parameters in the standard discounted utilitarian model – the pure rate of time preference (PRTP) and the elasticity of the marginal utility of consumption – were identified as key determinants of the radical difference between the policy prescriptions offered by Stern, and those of his most prominent North American counterpart [51]. In the thick of this debate, Weitzman introduced his ‘dismal theorem’ in an influential and much debated paper [68]. In informal terms, the dismal theorem states that the evaluation of climate change policy is highly sensitive to catastrophic outcomes, even if they occur with vanishingly small, but ‘fat-tailed’,¹ probability. The dismal theorem suggests that such fat-tailed risks are an inescapable consequence of Bayesian statistics, and our ‘structural’ uncertainty about the response of the climate system to increased greenhouse gas concentrations. It argues that such risks can swamp all other effects on welfare, including those that arise from conventional discounting, and make willingness to pay to avoid them formally infinite. Weitzman argues that this has radical implications for the way we evaluate policies that aim to mitigate climate change,

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¹ We will refer to any probability distribution that decays polynomially in the tails (upper or lower, as appropriate) as ‘fat-tailed’.

and suggests that existing analyses based on integrated assessment models do not take sufficient account of such catastrophic risks, and thus recommend mitigation policies that are not ambitious enough.

This paper provides a critical analysis of Weitzman's dismal theorem, and the by now sizeable literature that comments on its content and interpretation. While the mathematical result Weitzman obtains (described in detail in Section 2) is beyond reproach, the assumptions upon which it is based are controversial, and have been heavily criticized. In Section 3, I divide these critiques into three categories—criticisms of the relevance of the dismal theorem for cost–benefit analysis, criticisms of fat-tailed probability distributions, and criticisms of the behavior of the utility function it assumes. Critiques of the dismal theorem in the first two categories show that the framework Weitzman employed is not robust to plausible changes in the assumptions of the modeling. However in both these cases, I demonstrate that the intellectual content of the dismal theorem can be reinstated by appropriate extensions and modifications of Weitzman's results, and by assessing the plausibility of the assumptions made in the criticisms themselves. Thus, I find that criticisms based on these two strains of inquiry are ultimately unconvincing. Criticisms of the behavior of the utility function are however robust—the dismal theorem may be 'resolved' by accepting that the traditional tool of constant relative risk aversion (CRRA) utility functions is not up to the task of evaluating fat-tailed risks. I demonstrate that a generalization of the CRRA-like utility functions assumed by the theorem – harmonic absolute risk aversion utility functions – provides finite welfare measures even when risks are fat-tailed, and moreover makes policy evaluation relatively insensitive to the tails of the consumption distribution for a plausible range of parameters. While such utility functions provide a technical resolution to the dismal theorem, they highlight the fact that the theorem's message is not so much a technical point about specific utility functions, but an ethical and empirical point about what the appropriate utility function for analysis of catastrophic risks should be. The key issue is: How should we 'value' catastrophic outcomes as a society?

If we attempt to address this question via Harsanyi-style aggregation over the preferences of diverse individuals, some counterintuitive results are possible. While individuals are unlikely to be willing to pay large sums to avoid very low probability catastrophic risks, implying that CRRA utility functions are indeed an inappropriate representation of their preferences, social willingness to pay need not be similarly constrained. I demonstrate that even if every individual's utility function is bounded, aggregate social welfare may still be unbounded below at positive consumption levels. This suggests that in some cases social evaluation of catastrophic risks is highly sensitive to the preferences of the most risk-averse members of society, even if they make up a vanishingly small fraction of the population. Thus, it is not a simple matter to reason from willingness to pay to avoid catastrophes as elicited from a sample of the population to social preferences over catastrophic risks.

In Section 4 I suggest that the ethical issues raised by the dismal theorem run even deeper than the choice of an appropriate social utility function. Any welfare analysis which admits catastrophic impacts on consumption must also deal with population change. The role of population change is not made explicit in the analyses of Weitzman and his critics – they implicitly assume an average utilitarian population principle. Yet average utilitarianism has been heavily criticized by philosophers and social choice theorists. I discuss an attractive alternative to average utilitarianism – critical level utilitarianism – that provides a more defensible approach to population ethics, and dampens the effect of catastrophic risks on welfare. Section 5 concludes by suggesting that the dismal theorem shows that the welfare framework that has thus far been standard in integrated assessment modeling is an inadequate normative basis for climate policy analyses which account for possible catastrophes. Nevertheless, alternatives with more desirable properties are available, and could be implemented in the next round of economic analyses of mitigation policies. These however require us to face up to ethical and empirical issues that have thus far been neglected.

1. Weitzman's dismal theorem

Weitzman [68] phrases his analysis in terms of a two period model. Current consumption is normalized to 1. Future consumption is given by the random variable c . Consider the following welfare function:

$$W = U(1) + \beta EU(c), \quad (1)$$

where U is the social utility function (which we will assume is concave and twice differentiable), E is the expectation operator, and $\beta \in [0, 1]$ is a discount factor on future utility. Suppose now that we are able to transfer an infinitesimal amount δ of consumption into the future, *with certainty*. What amount ϵ of current consumption should we be willing to sacrifice in order to make this transfer? In other words, what is the relationship between the values of ϵ and δ that will leave total welfare unchanged? Formally, this question is answered by setting

$$U(1-\epsilon) + \beta EU(c+\delta) = U(1) + \beta EU(c). \quad (2)$$

In the limit as $\epsilon, \delta \rightarrow 0$, one finds

$$\epsilon = \left(\beta \frac{EU'(c)}{U'(1)} \right) \delta. \quad (3)$$

This expression tells us the marginal willingness to pay for a transfer of a certain infinitesimal unit δ of consumption into the future. The stochastic discount factor M is defined as

$$M := \beta \frac{EU'(c)}{U'(1)}. \tag{4}$$

Weitzman proves the following theorem.

Theorem 1. *Suppose that*

- *The coefficient of relative risk aversion $\eta(c) := -c(U''(c)/U'(c))$ is strictly greater than zero as $c \rightarrow 0$.*
- *The consumption growth rate $y := \log c$ is distributed according to a probability density function $h(y|s) = (1/s)f((y-\mu)/s)$, where f is a normalizable function, μ is a known location parameter, and s is an uncertain scale parameter. Weitzman interprets s as a ‘generalized climate sensitivity’ parameter—this will be discussed below.*
- *The prior on s is of the form $p(s) \propto s^{-k}$, where $k > 0$, and you are given a finite number n of independent observations \mathbf{y}_n of the random variable y .*

Then we can conclude that

1. *The posterior distribution for y , $q(y|\mathbf{y}_n) \propto \int_0^\infty h(y|s) \prod_n h(y_n|s) p(s) ds$ scales like $|y|^{-(n+k)}$ as $y \rightarrow -\infty$.*
2. *The stochastic discount factor $M \rightarrow \infty$.*

The first part of the conclusion of the theorem is a result due to Schwarz [60], while the second part had been pointed out by Geweke [20] in the special case of some fat tailed parametric distributions (e.g. t -distribution, inverted-gamma distribution) for the posterior $q(y|\mathbf{y}_n)$. Weitzman’s contribution was to combine these two results, and give an interpretation of their consequences for climate change economics. He suggests that the correct way to interpret this result is that when there is what he terms ‘structural uncertainty’ (i.e. uncertainty about the parameters of the distribution for future consumption), policy choice is heavily dependent on the catastrophic tails of the distribution of future consumption, which in general are ‘fat’, i.e. decay to zero only polynomially in consumption. In fact, he suggests that the effect of these catastrophic fat tails swamps all other effects on the discount factor, including that of the PRTP (given by $-\ln \beta$ in this model) which had hitherto been the chief source of contention amongst economists.

2. Criticisms and extensions of the dismal theorem

2.1. Marginal vs. total willingness to pay

Weitzman chose to frame his results in terms of the stochastic discount factor, which as demonstrated in Eq. (3), determines willingness to pay for an infinitesimal certain transfer of consumption to the future. The fact that his result is framed in terms of marginal, and not total, willingness to pay, has been criticized by several authors, most notably [34,41]. They point out that the fact that marginal willingness to pay may be infinite is of very limited relevance for cost–benefit analysis—all it implies is that one would certainly want to transfer a non-infinitesimal amount of consumption to the future. Nordhaus [53] also emphasizes the absence of a policy variable from Weitzman’s analysis, and suggests that the dismal theorem has no special consequences for policy choice. I reprise and generalize these authors’ arguments below.

Suppose that we wish to determine the optimal transfer a from current consumption into future consumption. Then we need to pick a to maximize

$$U(1-a) + \beta EU(c+a). \tag{5}$$

The first order condition is

$$U'(1-a) = \beta EU'(c+a). \tag{6}$$

Now ask yourself whether this equation has a solution at $a=0$, which corresponds to the case of an infinitesimally small transfer. The answer is clearly no, if the conditions of Weitzman’s theorem on U and the probability distribution for c are satisfied. However this in itself does not mean that there is no solution other than the vacuous $a=1$. In fact, when the conditions of Weitzman’s theorem are satisfied, a solution $a^* \in (0,1)$ to the first order condition (6) is guaranteed to exist under very mild continuity conditions.

Proposition 1. *Assume that $U'(0) = \infty$, $U'(x)$ is finite for all $x > 0$, and that $U'(x)$ is a continuous function. In addition, assume $EU'(c) = \infty$. Then the first order condition (6) has a unique solution $a^* \in (0,1)$.*

Proof. Let $F(a) := \beta EU'(c+a) - U'(1-a)$. By assumption, $F(0) = \infty$, $F(1) = -\infty$. The continuity of U' implies that $F(a)$ is continuous on $[0,1]$. Therefore the intermediate value theorem tells us that there exists $a^* \in (0,1)$ such that $F(a^*) = 0$. The fact that $F(a)$ is decreasing (since U is concave) means that a^* is unique. \square

For Horowitz and Lange [34] and Karp [41], this fact renders the dismal theorem uninteresting. Karp [41] in particular shows that the optimal transfer a^* is about as sensitive to the PRTP, as it is to the probability of catastrophe in a simple binary lottery. Using this result, he suggests that even a moderate interpretation of the dismal theorem which suggests that catastrophic risks can swamp the effect of the PRTP, is flawed. I am however hesitant to dismiss the dismal theorem on these grounds. To see why, notice that this argument is predicated on the assumption that it is possible to transfer a finite amount of consumption a into the future *with certainty*. This seems a very strong assumption, especially so in the case of climate change, where catastrophic outcomes are at least conceivable for a wide range of abatement policies, owing to the long residence time of atmospheric CO₂ [62].

If we relax this unrealistic assumption, it is relatively straightforward to extend the dismal theorem to apply to policy choice, rather than policy evaluation. Consider a generalization of the decision problem in (5), in which this time it is no longer certain that a sacrifice of an amount a of current consumption gives rise to a certain payoff in the future. We will model the effect of a sacrifice of size a on the distribution of future consumption through the distribution function $q(c; a)$, which specifies the distribution of future consumption c for each value of the policy variable a . The decision problem is now to choose a to maximize

$$U(1-a) + \beta \int_0^\infty U(c)q(c; a) dc. \tag{7}$$

The first order condition for this problem is

$$U'(1-a) = \beta \int_0^\infty U(c) \frac{\partial q(c; a)}{\partial a} dc. \tag{8}$$

Define

$$I(a) := \int_0^\infty U(c) \frac{\partial q(c; a)}{\partial a} dc. \tag{9}$$

We identify three cases of interest:

1. $I(a)$ is finite for all values of a .
2. $I(a)$ diverges for $a \in [0, d]$, but is finite for $a \in (d, 1]$, with $d \in (0, 1)$.
3. $I(a)$ diverges for all $a \in [0, 1]$.

In case 1, both marginal and total willingness to pay are finite, and an optimal value of a exists. In the second case, marginal willingness to pay is infinite, but total willingness to pay is finite and greater than or equal to d —this is analogous to the case examined by Karp [41]. In this case the optimal value of a must be greater than d . In the third case, both marginal *and* total willingness to pay are infinite, and there is no $a < 1$ which satisfies the first order condition.

To make these three cases concrete, and tie them to some physical and economic parameters, consider the following set of assumptions: Suppose that future consumption depends on the increase in global average temperature above preindustrial levels (T) through a multiplicative damage function, i.e.

$$c \propto \frac{1}{1+D(T)}. \tag{10}$$

Assume, as is standard in the integrated assessment modeling literature (e.g. [51,33,69]) that $D(T)$ grows at most polynomially in temperature T , with leading order exponent γ , so that for large T

$$c \sim T^{-\gamma}. \tag{11}$$

Now pick a CRRA utility function

$$U(c) = \frac{c^{1-\eta}}{1-\eta} \tag{12}$$

and assume that the temperature change T is distributed according to a probability density that falls off like $T^{-g(a)}$ for large T , where $g(a)$ is a non-decreasing function of a , and we require $g(a) > 1$ for all a in order for the temperature distribution to be normalizable. In this model, a may be interpreted as the level of abatement spending. More abatement is assumed to flatten out the tail of the distribution of future temperatures.² With these assumptions, the contribution to the integral $I(a)$ from temperatures larger than $\bar{T} \gg 1$ is

$$\begin{aligned} I(a; \bar{T}) &\propto \int_{\bar{T}}^\infty \frac{(T^{-\gamma})^{1-\eta}}{1-\eta} \frac{\partial}{\partial a} [T^{-g(a)}] dT \\ &\propto \int_{\bar{T}}^\infty (T^{-\gamma})^{1-\eta} [-(T^{-g(a)}) \ln T] g'(a) dT \\ &\propto \int_{\bar{T}}^\infty T^{\gamma(\eta-1)-g(a)} \ln T dT. \end{aligned}$$

² It is of course possible that the tail becomes 'thin' at some finite value of a , in which case we may say that $g(a) \rightarrow \infty$.

Now for large T , we know that $\ln T$ grows more slowly than T^θ for any $\theta > 0$, so we can conclude that for large \bar{T}

$$I(a; \bar{T}) \propto \int_{\bar{T}}^{\infty} T^{\gamma(\eta-1)-g(a)} dT. \quad (13)$$

We now make use of the following fact of integration:

$$\int_{\bar{T}}^{\infty} T^{-p} dT \text{ converges if and only if } p > 1. \quad (14)$$

Thus, the integral $I(a)$ converges³ if and only if

$$g(a) > 1 + \gamma(\eta - 1). \quad (15)$$

Our three cases correspond to three types of behavior for the function $g(a)$:

1. $I(a)$ converges for all $a \rightarrow g(a) > 1 + \gamma(\eta - 1)$ for all $a \in [0, 1]$.
2. $I(a)$ converges only for $a \in [d, 1] \rightarrow g(a) > 1 + \gamma(\eta - 1)$ only for $a \in [d, 1]$.
3. $I(a)$ diverges for all $a \in [0, 1] \rightarrow g(a) < 1 + \gamma(\eta - 1)$ for all $a \in [0, 1]$.

Notice how the critical value of $g(a)$ at which the convergence properties of $I(a)$ changes depends on the parameter γ , which measures the steepness of the climate damages function, and η which measures the curvature of the utility function. Increases in either of these parameters decrease the range of values of a for which the integral converges. In general, increases in either of these parameters increase the importance of the tails of the distribution for T for welfare calculations.

To get a sense of the implications of (15), pick $\gamma = 2$, the value used in the DICE integrated assessment model [51]. Next, consider the theoretical distribution for climate sensitivity⁴ derived in Roe and Baker [57] (see Section 2.2.2). This distribution falls off as T^{-2} for large T . Let a_2 be the value of abatement that stabilizes CO_2 concentrations at twice their preindustrial level. Then, as we approach equilibrium, we have $g(a_2) \approx 2$. The inequality (15) therefore implies that $I(a_2)$ converges only if $\eta < 3/2$. Thus, under these assumptions, we know for certain that if $\eta > 3/2$, the optimal level of abatement spending must be larger than a_2 , i.e. it is optimal to keep CO_2 concentrations below twice their preindustrial level, given the assumptions of this calculation. Moreover, if $g(a) = 2$ for all abatement levels,⁵ $\eta > 3/2$ implies that welfare diverges for all values of a .

The correct value for γ , and in particular the behavior of the function $g(a)$, are not very well tied down in the existing literature. I would expect a $\gamma > 2$ —the damage function used by Nordhaus [51] has been argued to be implausibly flat [1], with 5 °C of warming giving rise to only a 6.5% drop in economic output.⁶ Weitzman [69], in contrast, estimates $\gamma \approx 6.7$. This value of γ makes the dismal theorem even more difficult to dismiss than in the example above, requiring $\eta < 1.15$ for convergence. As for $g(a)$, I do not think we can rule out the possibility of it being less than $1 + \gamma(\eta - 1)$, in which case the dismal theorem holds for all values of a , and not just for marginal willingness to pay. Nordhaus [53] claims that “when we introduce policies, the analysis underlying the dismal theorem no longer applies directly”. The analysis in this section demonstrates that, under the standard assumptions, Weitzman’s results are easily extended to policy choice as well, and that one needs only moderate risk aversion for dismal theorem like results to apply.

2.2. Where do fat tailed probability distributions come from?

The analysis above shows that we cannot plausibly rule out a divergence in social welfare at all abatement levels when consumption risks are fat tailed, and the utility function has the CRRA form. Yet where do such fat-tailed risks come from? Two arguments have been proposed—an abstract Bayesian argument, and an argument based on stylized models of the temperature response to increases in greenhouse gas concentrations, which centers around the concept of climate sensitivity.

³ It is easy to show that (15) also ensures that the original welfare function (7) exists. In the case where this inequality is not satisfied however the welfare function does not exist. Nevertheless, it is possible that an overtaking criterion may single out some maximal policies. One can show that if a maximal policy exists (even if the welfare function does not), it must be the policy $a = 1$. This is achieved by performing the above analysis with a modified objective function with a finite upper integration limit $\hat{T} < \infty$. Clearly all the relevant qualities exist for finite \hat{T} , and the original problem is reclaimed in the limit as $\hat{T} \rightarrow \infty$. Assume that (15) is not satisfied at any value of a . Let $a^*(\hat{T})$ denote the solution (if it exists) of the first order condition (8) as a function of \hat{T} . We know that in the limit as $\hat{T} \rightarrow \infty$, the right hand side of (8) tends to infinity. Then by the fact that marginal utility is bounded everywhere except at zero, if $\lim_{\hat{T} \rightarrow \infty} a^*(\hat{T})$ exists, it must be equal to 1. Thus when (15) is not satisfied, if a maximal policy exists it must be $a = 1$. I thank Larry Karp for bringing this issue to my attention.

⁴ Climate sensitivity is the amount of surface warming expected from a doubling of CO_2 concentrations, in equilibrium.

⁵ If we believe the model of Roe and Baker [57], this seems to be an inevitable conclusion, unless radiative forcing is reduced to exactly zero at some abatement level, a virtual impossibility on any reasonable time horizon due to the slow decay of atmospheric CO_2 . This is so since the quadratic tail in the temperature distribution arises only from uncertainty in feedback processes, and the central limit theorem—more on this later.

⁶ For comparison, earth’s average temperature was approximately 5 °C less than today at the time of the last glacial maximum, when two third of the planet was covered in ice. It is not unreasonable to expect changes of similar magnitude for a warming of 5 °C.

2.2.1. The Bayesian argument

The analysis in Weitzman [68] proceeds in the Bayesian paradigm, in which beliefs about the uncertain value of future consumption are based on a set of observations (he uses this as a loose proxy for scientific data or discoveries), a likelihood function that determines how observations are treated as evidence, and a prior distribution over the parameters of the likelihood function. This Bayesian framework is used to represent what Weitzman calls ‘structural uncertainty’ in our knowledge. What he means by this is that the parameters of the distribution from which consumption values are drawn are themselves uncertain. Thus, in arriving at posterior beliefs, we need to account for the evidence our observations provide, given particular values of parameters of the future consumption distribution, but then average over all possible values of these parameters with an appropriate prior. For reasons to be discussed below, Weitzman thinks the appropriate prior for the scale parameter of the consumption distribution is itself fat tailed.

Formally, by Bayes’ theorem, the posterior $q(y|\mathbf{y}_n)$ for the growth y is related to the likelihood function $h(y|s)$ and the prior $p(s)$ for the scale parameter via

$$q(y|\mathbf{y}_n) \propto \int_0^\infty h(y|s) \left[\prod_n h(y_n|s) \right] p(s) ds. \quad (16)$$

Schwarz [60] showed that, when $p(s) \propto s^{-k}$ (the Jeffreys prior), then $q(y|\mathbf{y}_n)$ is fat tailed, i.e. decays only polynomially, as $y \rightarrow -\infty$.

The crucial ingredient that leads to this result is the choice of prior, $p(s)$. It is the fact that this prior is itself fat-tailed that ultimately leads to a fat-tailed posterior as well. So, where does this prior come from? The prior that Weitzman deploys is an example of an ‘uninformative’ prior. That is, it is a prior that is supposed to represent a complete absence of prior knowledge. The argument that an uninformative prior for a scale parameters is best chosen to be of the form $p(s) \propto s^{-k}$ is due to Jeffreys [37], and was elaborated on by Jaynes [35,36]. The treatment in Jaynes [35] is particularly compelling. He argues that if we are truly uninformed about a data generating process, a transformation of the parameters of the probability law we use to describe it should reveal no new information. He imposes translational and scale invariance on a general probability law characterized by location and scale parameters, and shows that these symmetries uniquely determine the prior on the scale parameter to be $p(s) \propto 1/s$.⁷ Thus Jaynes’ procedure provides a unique mapping between a choice of transformation group (i.e. symmetries of the probability law), and the choice of prior.

Supposing one accepts this Bayesian approach and Jaynes’ argument that lack of knowledge should be represented by invariance of the system’s probability law with respect to a specified transformation group, the only escape from a fat tailed prior for s can be either to argue that an uninformative prior is inappropriate for the application in question, or that we have focussed our attentions on the wrong transformation group. The first option is the one preferred by Geweke [20]. I am wary of it in the case of the dismal theorem. In this case, the scale parameter s is argued by Weitzman to be a ‘generalized climate sensitivity’ parameter—I will discuss this in depth in the next section. For the moment, I simply point out that it is logically impossible to define an informative prior for climate sensitivity that is independent of knowledge of climate observations. Any informative prior, for example based on expert opinion [19], will of necessity be informed by such knowledge. This should rightfully be represented in our choice of likelihood function $h(\mathbf{y}_n|s)$ (i.e. a choice of climate model and noise distribution over temperature observations), and *not* in the prior. If we truly wish the prior to be independent of the observations (as it must be if we are to use the observations to make inferences about s —we cannot use them twice), it must represent a priori (in the Kantian sense), rather than a posterior knowledge. Hence the appeal of abstract mathematical techniques for specifying an uninformative prior, which are divorced from any knowledge of the data.

I believe that the second option – that we may have chosen the wrong transformation group for the probability law – carries more weight. In standard statistical applications the choice of a transformation group may be pinned down by thinking about the symmetries of the underlying system that generates our data \mathbf{y}_n . For example, if the data are measurements of the locations of a set of events, then one might reasonably expect our information about the system to remain the same if we make measurements in meters or feet (scale transformations), and if we make them in Paris or London (location transformations), if we are truly uninformed a priori. What is much less clear is what the appropriate transformation group should be for the growth in consumption, the variable in question in the dismal theorem. More specifically, it is unclear why one would expect Weitzman’s ‘generalized climate sensitivity’ to act as a scale parameter for the distribution of consumption growth, or indeed whether any such scale parameter exists. I can see no good argument that pins down the transformation group for the probability law that governs consumption growth, other than epistemically arbitrary considerations of simplicity and familiarity.

At a broader level, the transformation group method is not universally accepted as a satisfactory solution to the problem of choosing uninformative priors. A common alternative is to use the principle of maximum entropy [36]. Remarkably, this principle recommends an exponential distribution as the prior for a continuous positive parameter such as Weitzman’s generalized climate sensitivity. With such a prior, the posterior (16) will be thin-tailed. Thus, even taking

⁷ Weitzman’s more general prior $p(s) = s^{-k}$ does *not* follow from Jaynes’ argument. Although Weitzman’s prior is itself scale invariant, the full set of symmetries Jaynes imposes restrict it to $k=1$. This point has little consequence for the dismal theorem however as the improper prior $p(s) = 1/s$ is the *most* fat tailed of all the priors in the class Weitzman considers.

the Bayesian paradigm as read, Weitzman's framing of the problem is controversial, and relies on implicit assumptions that are not justified.

As a final remark on Weitzman's chosen framework for representing a state of ignorance, it is vital to recognize that the Bayesian approach, and the expected utility welfare framework it feeds into, is by no means the only game in town in situations of informational paucity. It has been argued [17,22,23] that the normative application of expected utility theory is only appropriate in situations of risk (where probabilities are known), rather than uncertainty (where probabilities are unknown), a distinction going back at least as far as Knight [44]. Strong Bayesians contest this, saying that Savage's subjective expected utility axioms define rationality in the face of uncertainty. If one holds this position, one is forced to describe beliefs with a subjective probability distribution, even when there is no information upon which to base such a choice. Hence the need to go through the mathematical gymnastics associated with choosing an uninformative prior. If instead one is willing to accept that the domain of application of expected utility theory is limited, then one must search for an alternative evaluation criterion that is appropriate in situations of ambiguity or ignorance. There are several such criteria available (e.g. [58,2,24,43]), which go variously under the names of ambiguity averse, or ignorant, decision rules. Applications of these criteria to climate policy (e.g. [71,48]) show that they can introduce quantitatively important new effects.

2.2.2. The climate sensitivity argument

I will now set the abstract Bayesian approach aside, and ask what climate science tells us about the relevance of the dismal theorem. As the inequality (15) demonstrates, if the probability distribution over warming at any finite time in the future is fat tailed enough (no matter how stringent our abatement policy), then a version of the dismal theorem applies. This holds for any fat-tailed distribution, whether it is justified on abstract Bayesian grounds, or derived from scientific and impacts models.⁸

A commonly used summary statistic for the effect of increases in CO₂ concentrations on temperature is climate sensitivity. Climate sensitivity (S) is defined as the increase in global mean surface temperatures that results from a doubling of CO₂ concentrations, *in equilibrium*. Weitzman [68] motivates his argument for fat tails being relevant to climate policy by appealing to scientific work on climate sensitivity estimation, which suggests that the distribution for S may itself be fat tailed. In order to investigate this argument, I will work with a conceptual model of climate sensitivity proposed by Roe and Baker [57].

Much of the uncertainty about the long-term effects of increases in CO₂ concentrations derive from uncertainty about *feedbacks* in the climate system. An easily visualized example of a feedback is the following: Imagine that CO₂ concentrations are increased. This leads to a rise in temperatures due to the increase in radiative forcing that results from more out-going long-wave radiation being trapped by CO₂ molecules. Now an increase in temperature may melt ice and snow. Since ice is a highly reflective surface, whereas water is not, if some ice is lost when temperatures rise, the amount of incoming radiation that is reflected back into space decreases. This gives rise to even more warming than would have occurred purely due to the radiative forcing effect of CO₂ molecules. That is, there is a positive feedback in the system—increases in temperature give rise to changes in the physical characteristics of the planet, which increases the amount of warming even further. There are many feedback processes in the climate system, some positive and some negative. The net effect of all these feedbacks is widely believed to be positive [57].

Consider a very simple model of climate sensitivity's dependence on the feedbacks in the climate system. Formally, define

$$S = \frac{\Delta T_0}{1-f}, \quad (17)$$

where ΔT_0 is the 'gray-body' climate sensitivity and f measures the strength of feedbacks. The gray-body sensitivity is the amount of warming that would occur if there were no feedbacks in the climate system, and is easily calculated based on very simple energy balance considerations.⁹ Values quoted in the literature for ΔT_0 are in the range 1.1–1.3 °C [26,59]. Roe and Baker [57] observe that what we actually measure from the instrumental record is the size of the feedbacks and *not* climate sensitivity itself. Assuming that the total feedback f is the sum of a large number of independent feedback processes, the uncertainty in f is well approximated by a normal distribution. Using the formula (17) to transform the probability density for f into a probability density for S , they find that the distribution for S must be skew, and has a quadratic fat tail, i.e. $p(S) \sim S^{-2}$ as $S \rightarrow \infty$.

Weitzman [68] uses arguments similar to these to argue that temperature distributions are fat-tailed. There are however several criticisms of the manner in which Weitzman applies these arguments to the economics of climate change, based on our scientific understanding of how increases in CO₂ concentrations affect temperature distributions [53,10,49,56]. I will explore only one version of these criticisms, which I believe is illustrative of the wider concerns on this front.

The key point to absorb about climate sensitivity is that even if we accept that its probability distribution is fat-tailed, the fact that it is an equilibrium quantity means that it tells us only about the amount of warming in the infinite future.

⁸ In reality, these two approaches are of course not independent. See e.g. Frame et al. [19].

⁹ All one needs to know for this calculation is the Stefan–Boltzmann law, the solar constant, the values for the effective emissivity and albedo of the earth, and the radiative forcing that results from CO₂ doubling—all very well established physics. See e.g. Hartmann [30].

Thus the focus on climate sensitivity as a legitimator of the fat tails argument is probably misguided, as any blow-up in expected marginal utility will be suppressed by an exponentially declining discount factor $\lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} e^{-\rho t} = 0$. The possibility remains however that temperatures may be fat tailed at finite time. However there are some reasons for believing that this is not the case. In order to understand this, one must first appreciate a second crucial fact about the influence of climate sensitivity on temperature trajectories. It has been argued on very general grounds based on dimensional analysis [27], and confirmed in climate models of all stripes [6,32], that the atmosphere's *adjustment time* is proportional to S^2 . The adjustment time is a measure of the time it takes for the system to reach equilibrium.

In order to understand the consequences of this fact, consider the following highly stylized model¹⁰ of the temperature trajectory as a function of climate sensitivity S and time t

$$T(t) = S \left[1 - \exp\left(-\frac{K\sqrt{t}}{S}\right) \right], \quad (19)$$

where K is a constant. Note that this trajectory is the warming pathway that would arise if the concentration of CO_2 were instantaneously doubled from its preindustrial value—it thus corresponds to a very specific emissions pathway. This model incorporates three desirable properties—first, the adjustment time is proportional to S^2 , second, $\partial T / \partial S > 0$, i.e. temperatures are increasing in sensitivity for all time, and finally, $\lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} T(t) = S$.

Notice the following fact about this model:

$$\text{For any finite time } t, \quad \lim_{S \rightarrow \infty} T(t) = K\sqrt{t}. \quad (20)$$

Thus in this stylized model, the amount of warming possible at any finite time t is *bounded*, even if the distribution for S itself is unbounded. In general, it is reasonable to believe that any model of the dependence of temperature trajectories on climate sensitivity that accounts for its effect on adjustment times will have this property. The important message of this stylized analysis is that there may be physical constraints which bound temperature change at finite time. It has been argued [10,49] that bounded temperature distributions can dispense with the dismal theorem. The model in (19) has the benefit of proposing an (admittedly stylized) physical mechanism that bounds temperature distributions, rather than assuming an *ad hoc* bound as Costello et al. [10] and Newbold and Daigneault [49] do.

While I agree that it may be possible to rule out fat tailed temperature distributions on physical grounds (at least for some well defined emissions pathways), I do not agree that this rules out fat tailed consumption distributions, or indeed consumption distributions that put non-zero weight on zero consumption [15]. I believe the objections expressed in Costello et al. [10], Newbold and Daigneault [49], Roe and Bauman [56] are an artifact of the unrealistic behavior of their damage functions for large temperatures. Following the standard assumptions in the integrated assessment literature [51,69,33], their analyses assume multiplicative damage functions that imply that consumption is non-zero for any finite temperature. This seems a highly unrealistic choice—for example, it implies that consumption will still be above zero when the average temperature reaches the boiling point of blood! If instead one accepts that the damage multiplier hits zero at some finite temperature T_H , the dismal theorem is back in play. This is so because, as one can see from (20), the maximum possible value of warming grows unboundedly as $t \rightarrow \infty$, even for the relatively moderate case of a doubling of CO_2 concentrations. Thus there will eventually be a time at which there is a non-zero probability that $T > T_H$, provided the distribution over S has support on $[0, \infty)$. Of course, for utility functions with coefficient of relative risk aversion bounded above zero, this will ensure that expected marginal utility diverges at this time, and so the dismal theorem reappears. Dietz [15] demonstrated that the PAGE integrated assessment model [33], used in the analysis of Stern [63], is able to produce scenarios in which consumption is driven to zero at finite time for climate sensitivity values as low as 3°C , adding to the plausibility of this story.

Weitzman [67] seems to have taken the criticisms of his result based on neglecting the dynamics of temperature trajectories on board. He goes to considerable lengths to show that a combination of factors – additive damage functions and uncertainty about the PRTP¹¹ – can still give rise to the dismal theorem even if temperature distributions remain bounded for all finite time, and the distribution over discount rates places an infinitesimally small weight on a zero discount rate. This is an interesting mathematical result about the limiting behavior of certain functions, but it is perhaps overly sophisticated for the application at hand. Provided we accept that there is some temperature T_H at which consumption hits zero, and there is positive weight on $T > T_H$ at finite time, a dismal theorem like result is guaranteed. Weitzman's work shows that this is not a necessary condition for a divergence in the welfare function—one can send

¹⁰ I am grateful to Gerard Roe for suggesting this model to me. It can be derived from the following differential equation for temperature change:

$$c_0 \sqrt{t} \frac{dT}{dt} = R(t) - \frac{T}{\lambda}. \quad (19)$$

Here the factor $c_0 \sqrt{t}$ represents the effective heat capacity of the oceans, which is known to grow with the square root of time as heat fluxes at the earth's surface diffuse into the deep oceans [27]. $R(t)$ is radiative forcing, which is equal to S/λ in the case of CO_2 doubling, and λ is proportional to S . Setting the initial condition $T(0) = 0$, the solution of this equation is (19). Weitzman [67] considers a similar model, except that he neglects the \sqrt{t} factor, so the temperature trajectories he arrives at do not have adjustment times with the correct quadratic dependence on S . See Baker and Roe [6] for a more realistic, yet still analytically tractable, model.

¹¹ Dasgupta [12] is critical of the use of models with many possible pure rates of time preference such as those in Weitzman [67] and Li and Löfgren [45]. Heal [31] also emphasizes that in general this approach leads to dynamically inconsistent plans. Thus it is not clear that this is a legitimate approach to normative welfare analysis.

$T_H \rightarrow \infty$ and have probability distributions that place zero weight on the worst events (and the lowest discount rates) and still obtain a divergence. This result is valuable, but to obtain the essential economic insights of the dismal theorem, one needs far less mathematical machinery than Weitzman employs: Any positive probability of zero consumption, no matter how small, implies welfare diverges for utility functions with a coefficient of relative risk aversion greater than or equal to one.¹²

The upshot of this analysis – of both the Bayesian argument, and that based on toy scientific models – is that if we interpret the dismal theorem in the narrow sense in which it is presented in Weitzman [68], then its conclusions are not robust. Changes to the Bayesian framework used to justify it can cause it to disappear, as indeed can properly accounting for the physics of the climate system. However such a narrow interpretation does not do the dismal theorem justice. Weitzman [68] is careful to describe his modeling work as an abstract parable, suggesting that we should focus on the broad-brush message, rather than the technical content, of the theorem. I believe this is the correct way to interpret his result. As we have seen, if we allow for consumption approaching zero at finite (but very high) temperature, as must be the case, and are not able to make transfers to the future with certainty (as seems plausible), then existing criticisms of the dismal theorem fail to persuade.

2.3. The role of the utility function

The previous section highlighted arguments for and against fat tailed probability distributions in the economic analysis of climate change. Much of the debate about the applicability of Weitzman’s results has focussed on these issues. In this section, I argue that a more pertinent line of inquiry may be to interrogate the role that the utility function plays in the dismal theorem. Indeed, taking the conventional expected utility welfare framework as read at this point, this is the main content of Weitzman’s result—it shows that welfare calculations are highly sensitive to the behavior of the utility function at low consumption levels, and that the widespread CRRA utility function is perhaps ill suited to applications with fat-tailed risks.

The fact that the expected utility model of choice under uncertainty cannot be trusted to provide meaningful results for certain utility functions has been appreciated since Menger [47] demonstrated that one requires utility functions to be *bounded* in order to be able to rank arbitrary lotteries. In fact, Menger [47] showed that for any unbounded utility function, a variant of the St. Petersburg paradox exists. If we restrict attention to lotteries with finite expected payoffs, then the constraints on the utility function may be weakened. Arrow [3] showed that if the utility function is concave, monotonically increasing, and *bounded below*, then expected utility exists for all lotteries with finite expected payoff. Note that this result does not require marginal utility to be finite at the origin—Arrow [3] shows explicitly that this condition is not needed. Thus utility functions that are finite at the origin, but have infinite marginal utility at the origin, are still able to rank all lotteries of interest. In the case of CRRA utility functions (12), these conditions are fulfilled only when $\eta < 1$. In order to extend this result to an existence result for expected marginal utility (and thereby the stochastic discount factor), define $V(c) = -U'(c)$, and assume that $U''' > 0$, i.e. the decision maker is *prudent* [42]. Then $V(c)$ is increasing and concave, and provided $V(0) = -U'(0)$ is finite, expected marginal utility will exist for all lotteries with finite expected payoff. In the case of a CRRA utility function (for which $U''' > 0$ is always satisfied), $U'(c) = c^{-\eta}$, and thus $V(0)$ is not finite for *any* value of η . With these results in mind, the dismal theorem is unsurprising—we are simply pushing a particular choice of utility function beyond its region of usefulness. Arrow [4] and Nordhaus [52] come to much the same conclusion.

2.3.1. HARA utility functions

There are alternative choices of utility function that are almost as easy to handle analytically as the CRRA utility function, and do not suffer from this difficulty. Weitzman [68] himself discusses a ‘value of statistical life’ cut-off parameter D such that $U(c) = 0$ for all $c < D$, and Pindyck [55] performs a set of illustrative welfare calculations with a similar model that places a cut-off on marginal utility, and demonstrates (unsurprisingly), that depending on the position of the cut-off, fat-tailed distributions may in fact be preferred to thin-tailed ones. Both of these approaches provide a technical resolution to the dismal theorem, but suffer from some drawbacks, as they require assuming that the utility function is not everywhere differentiable. As we shall see below, this is by no means a necessary assumption.

Consider the smooth harmonic absolute risk aversion (HARA) utility function, which is widely used in the finance literature (see e.g. [25])

$$\begin{aligned}
 U(c) &= \zeta \left(v + \frac{c}{\eta} \right)^{1-\eta} \quad \text{where } \zeta \left(1 - \frac{1}{\eta} \right) > 0, \\
 \Rightarrow -c \frac{U''(c)}{U'(c)} &= c \left(v + \frac{c}{\eta} \right)^{-1}.
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{21}$$

Clearly, this utility function has a coefficient of absolute risk aversion that is decreasing in consumption, and a coefficient of relative risk aversion that is increasing in consumption. In the limit $v \rightarrow 0$, the HARA utility function approaches a CRRA

¹² All we require is that $\lim_{c \rightarrow 0} \eta(c) \geq 1$, and not that the coefficient of relative risk aversion be greater than 1 for all c .

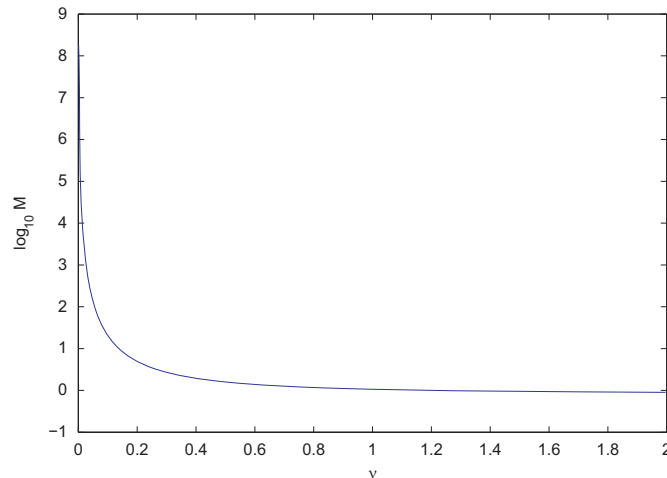


Fig. 1. Logarithm of the stochastic discount factor M , as a function of the parameter ν of the HARA utility function (21). $\eta = 4, \zeta = 1, \beta = 1$ in this figure, and consumption growth is assumed to be Cauchy distributed.

utility function (12). Notice however that for all $\nu > 0$, the coefficient of relative risk aversion for the HARA function is equal to zero when $c=0$. Moreover, it is easy to see that $U^{(n)}(0)$, the n -th derivative of U at the origin, exists for all n . Thus both expected utility and expected marginal utility exist for this utility function for arbitrary finite mean probability distributions for consumption.

To illustrate how the stochastic discount factor M depends on the parameters of the HARA utility function, suppose that $y = \log c$ is a Cauchy distributed random variable¹³—a prototypical example of a fat-tailed distribution, considered by Weitzman [68] and Costello et al. [10]. In Fig. 1, we plot the logarithm of the stochastic discount factor (4) as a function of the parameter ν in (21). Of course, $\lim_{\nu \rightarrow 0} M = \infty$ —this is obviously not representable on the curve in Fig. 1. What the figure shows is that M varies by a factor of about 10^8 between $\nu = 10^{-3}$ and $\nu = 1$. Thus, under this choice of utility function, social evaluation of fat-tailed consumption risks will be *extremely* sensitive to the choice of ν for low values of ν . However for ν greater than about 1, evaluation of fat-tailed risks is relatively *insensitive* to the value of ν —this suggests that the HARA utility function with $\nu > 1$ might provide a good alternative to CRRA utility functions when risks are fat-tailed. Note that the HARA utility function provides finite answers even when there is a non-zero chance that consumption is identically zero at finite time, e.g. if damage multipliers hit zero at finite temperature.

While the analysis above shows that welfare *evaluations* (i.e. the computation of a welfare function, or the stochastic discount factor, for a given policy) may still be very sensitive to the tails of a distribution when the utility function is bounded (i.e. for a small value of ν in (21)), this does not mean that welfare *comparisons* (i.e. policy choices) are also heavily dependent on the tails. In fact the following result, due to Chichilnisky [9], implies just the opposite.

Theorem 2. Let $x(t)$ and $y(t)$ be lotteries over a random variable $t \in \mathbb{R}$ with probability measure $\mu(t)$. Then if preferences over lotteries can be represented by expected utility functionals with a bounded utility function

$$x \succ y \Leftrightarrow \exists \epsilon > 0 : x' \succ y' \quad \text{where } x = x' \quad \text{and} \quad y = y' \quad \text{almost everywhere on any } \Sigma \subset \mathbb{R} : \mu(\Sigma^c) < \epsilon.$$

In the words of Chichilnisky [9], “*expected utility is insensitive to small probability events*”, provided of course that the utility function is bounded. Thus, even if the ν parameter of the HARA utility function is arbitrarily close to zero, implying that welfare measures are very large negative for fat-tailed risks, the ranking of alternative policies is *independent* of these very low probability outcomes. Thus boundedness of the utility function, even at a very large negative value (i.e. $\nu \ll 1$), dispenses with the dismal theorem entirely for the purposes of policy choice.

For Weitzman, the approach to resolving the dismal theorem via bounding the utility function is unsatisfactory. In his words, “*It is easy to put arbitrary bounds on utility functions... that arbitrarily cut off or otherwise severely dampen... low values of C. Introducing... these changes formally closes the model in the sense of replacing the symbol $+\infty$ with an arbitrarily large but finite number.*” As Fig. 1 shows, this is not the case if one allows for utility functions with coefficient of relative risk aversion that tends to zero for low c . In this case one can choose perfectly reasonable parameter values that guarantee that the stochastic discount factor is of order 1 for fat-tailed risks. Moreover, policy choice is independent of low probability events in this case. This modeling choice is only ‘arbitrary’, if one is wedded to the CRRA utility function as the normative baseline of welfare calculations.

¹³ The Cauchy distribution is the same as a student's t -distribution with one degree of freedom.

The widespread focus on the CRRA utility function is perhaps an instance of the ‘tools-to-theories’ heuristic [21], in which an analytical tool – the CRRA utility function – is elevated to the status of a theory, in this case of normative welfare analysis. If we believe the axioms of expected utility theory, as elucidated by von Neumann and Morgenstern [65], and especially Savage [58], we should evaluate uncertain prospects with expected utility functionals. However these axioms are silent as to which utility function, or indeed which probability distribution, is appropriate for a given application. It is up to us to furnish expected utility theory with a utility function that is true to our tastes, and a probability distribution that is true to our beliefs. Thus, if we feel that the CRRA utility function does not represent our preferences in the case of catastrophic climate change, we should not hesitate to replace it with another utility function that does. Nordhaus [52] performs some illustrative calculations that suggest that our willingness to pay to avoid catastrophes is not very large (he considers the case of payments to avoid killer asteroids), suggesting that the CRRA utility function may be too cautious to reflect individual preferences.

2.3.2. Aggregation of heterogeneous preferences

Although HARA utility functions may provide a more acceptable representation of individual preferences, it is social preferences that should enter welfare calculations. Indeed it is unclear in the analysis presented thus far exactly where the utility function comes from, and what it represents. Does it include prioritarian ethical judgements about welfare inequality, or measure only the empirical risk preferences of a representative agent [40], and more generally, how does it relate to the preferences of the individuals that make up society? Clearly, in addressing this question, we should draw on the resources provided by social choice theory.

It is important to stress that even though individuals’ utility functions may all be bounded at $c=0$, this does not imply that society’s welfare is similarly constrained. The analysis of HARA utility functions presented above assumed a homogenous population, each member of which has the same attitude to risk; or, equivalently, that a single representative agent may be identified whose risk preferences are given by the HARA utility functions examined above. This assumption masks some of the complexity of welfare analysis under catastrophes. Assuming an anonymous social ordering, and that the Harsanyi [28,29] social aggregation axioms hold, we should aggregate over the expected utility obtained by all individuals in order to arrive at social welfare under the catastrophic risk. Treating this aggregation exercise as a *fait accompli* can be misleading. In fact, one can show that even if every individual’s utility function is bounded for all c , aggregate social welfare may still diverge (or be very sensitive to the tails of the distribution over c). This suggests that it is not a straightforward matter to simply presuppose a HARA social utility function because our individual willingness to pay to avoid catastrophe, or that of a sample of the population, is small.

A simple example will suffice to make this point. Suppose that each agent in a heterogenous population consumes the same amount in all states of the world, but each has a different utility function.¹⁴ Suppose that agents’ utility functions are

$$U(c; \phi) = -(v+c)^{-\phi}, \quad (22)$$

where $v, \phi > 0$. Clearly, $U' > 0$, $U'' < 0$, and $U^{(n)}(0)$ is bounded for all agents. Assume an anonymous social ordering, that each agent has the same value of v , and that the density of individuals with preferences ϕ is given by $w(\phi)$. Then a social planner who evaluates consumption risks would need to compute the following aggregated expected utility integral¹⁵:

$$V = \int \left[\int U(c, \phi) p(c) dc \right] w(\phi) d\phi, \quad (23)$$

$$= \int \left[\int U(c, \phi) w(\phi) d\phi \right] p(c) dc, \quad (24)$$

where $p(c)$ is the consumption risk (we normalize the total population size to 1). Suppose now that $w(\phi)$ is a gamma distribution, with parameters (θ, k) , and consider the inner integral in (24). This evaluates to

$$\int U(c, \phi) w(\phi) d\phi = -\frac{1}{\theta^k \Gamma(k)} \int_0^\infty (v+c)^{-\phi} \phi^{k-1} e^{-\phi/\theta} d\phi, \\ \propto - \int_0^\infty \phi^{k-1} \exp\left(-\phi \left[\ln(v+c) + \frac{1}{\theta}\right]\right) d\phi. \quad (25)$$

Now in order for this integral to be finite, we require $c > c^*$, where

$$c^* := e^{-1/\theta} - v. \quad (26)$$

Thus if $1/\theta < \ln(1/v)$, the social welfare function diverges at $c^* > 0$, provided $p(c)$ puts positive weight on $c < c^*$, even though each individual’s utility function is bounded for all c . Since $1/\theta = \text{mean}(\phi)/\text{var}(\phi)$ for the gamma distribution, the divergence occurs if $v < 1$, and the mean of $w(\phi)$ is smaller than $\ln(1/v)$ times its variance.

Note that this result is in stark contrast to the well known Arrow–Lind theorem on public risk bearing [5]—the reason being that in this case the risks to individuals are correlated (the relevant case for applications to climate change), whereas

¹⁴ Note that Harsanyi’s axioms do not require these utility functions to be interpersonally comparable.

¹⁵ Fubini’s theorem guarantees that if the integral converges, we can change the order of integration. A simple *reductio ad absurdum* argument makes the result that follows water-tight.

the Arrow–Lind theorem assumes uncorrelated, and therefore diversifiable risks. The result has a similar flavor to the dismal theorem, in that it relies on the extremes of the distribution of ϕ to generate a divergence in expected social utility.¹⁶ It is thus subject to some of the same criticisms—e.g. perhaps it is unreasonable to assume that the distribution of ϕ has full support on $[0, \infty)$, or that $v < 1$, or indeed that the Harsanyi aggregation theorem is a reasonable basis for social choice¹⁷ [70]. Excepting these objections, its conceptual message is clear—social evaluation of correlated risks can be highly sensitive to those individuals who are highly risk averse, even if they make up an infinitesimal fraction of the population. This adds a complication to the already difficult issue of social aggregation when catastrophic risks are involved. It is not a simple matter to reason (as Nordhaus does [52,53]) that since spending on, for example, asteroid defense systems, is small, social willingness to pay is similarly constrained. Such spending decisions are made by small samples of the population, which have a very low chance of including the most risk-averse members of society.

3. The elephant in the room: population change

The HARA utility functions discussed in the last section provide a technical resolution to the dismal theorem, but they do not resolve the ethical problems it raises. Correctly interpreted, the dismal theorem says that social evaluation of fat-tailed risks depends sensitively on how we choose to treat catastrophic outcomes. If we believe such outcomes to be infinitely bad for society, then they can dominate all other ethical choices in a conventional welfare analysis based on expected utility theory. If they are not infinitely bad, we still face the difficult task of deciding how to ‘value’ a catastrophe that wipes out the whole human race (and other species as well). For example, if one adopts the HARA utility function, one still needs to justify a particular choice of v . As the previous section demonstrated, this is a by no means trivial exercise in social choice.

In this section, I want to suggest that the ethical problems that the dismal theorem raises run deeper than simply deciding on the behavior of the social utility function for low values of consumption. There is an implicit assumption in Weitzman’s welfare framework (and that employed by his critics), as represented by Eq. (1), that is by no means innocuous. This assumption relates to how the welfare function (1) accounts for population change.

Many applications of welfare economics need not concern themselves with population change, as they are concerned with marginal projects that are unlikely to affect which ‘potential persons’ come into being. However if there is any situation in which concerns about population change are likely to be relevant, then it has to be catastrophic climate change. Indeed, almost by definition, a climate catastrophe would entail a drastic, perhaps total, collapse in the earth’s population. The idea that we can consider states of the world in which consumption is drawn down to zero without accounting for a change in population is manifestly absurd.

The only way in which it is possible to interpret Weitzman’s welfare function (1) as accounting for population change, is if we interpret it as adopting an *average utilitarian* approach to population ethics. That is, an uncertain prospect is evaluated by computing the average utility of all people who happen to be alive in that prospect, and welfare is just the expectation of these average utilities. Then the function $U(c)$ that appears in (1) is just the average utility of a set of identical agents when their consumption is c . But is average utilitarianism a defensible approach to welfare evaluations when population varies?

3.1. Population principles and the dismal theorem

Since the publication of Derek Parfit’s ‘Reasons and Persons’ [54], formal approaches to population issues in social choice theory have been gaining momentum.¹⁸ Two recently published books [8,7] provide good overviews of the welfarist¹⁹ approach to the problem. Blackorby et al. [7] in particular set out a list of axioms that one might reasonably want variable population social welfare functions, or population principles, to satisfy, and provide representation results for various subsets of these axioms. They also prove several impossibility theorems which show that some combinations of these axioms cannot provide consistent and complete social orderings. Dasgupta [12] provides an alternative perspective on population ethics.

A key new concept that is introduced when considering welfare functions that account for population change is the *critical level*. Suppose that social welfare at a point in time may be represented by a function $P(\bar{U}, N)$, where \bar{U} is average utility and N is population size. This is the case for all population principles of interest²⁰ [7]. Now imagine adding a single

¹⁶ In fact, some might say that this is a stronger result than the dismal theorem. It shows that social welfare may diverge at a positive value of c , even for exponentially decaying distributions over ϕ . No fat tails in sight here.

¹⁷ Note however that a similar result would obtain if instead of adopting Harsanyi’s aggregation theorem, we took a Rawlsian approach to distributive justice, and maximized the utility of the least well off individual in society. Under catastrophic risks, this would be the individual with $\phi \rightarrow \infty$, for whom $U(c; \phi) \rightarrow -\infty$ for $c < 1-v$, $U(c; \phi) \rightarrow 0$ for $c > 1-v$. Thus social welfare would still diverge if $p(c)$ puts any weight on $c < 1-v$.

¹⁸ Of course, population issues have always been central to economics [46,61], and had been treated formally before Parfit (e.g. [11]). However Parfit’s book provided the impetus for an axiomatic approach to the problem that is rooted in social choice theory.

¹⁹ I use the term ‘welfarist’ to refer to the consequentialist welfare function type approach to social evaluation, which both these books largely follow. Strictly speaking, neither book is restricted to a purely welfarist approach, as both consider cases in which non-welfare information, e.g. birth date, affects social choice. For a deontological approach to population issues, see Kamm [38,39].

²⁰ We do not consider generalized utilitarian rules. Such rules depend on the non-linear average $\bar{U}_g = g^{-1}((1/N) \sum_{i=1}^N g(U_i))$, where the curvature of g measures aversion to welfare inequality.

individual to a population, holding the utility of all other members of the population constant. The critical level is defined as the utility level of the additional individual which leaves total welfare unchanged, i.e. her existence is socially neutral if her utility is at the critical level. Formally, the critical level of a population principle $P(\bar{U}, N)$, evaluated at a given level of average utility and population size, is defined as the utility level $C(\bar{U}, N)$ that satisfies

$$P(\bar{U}, N) = P\left(\frac{N\bar{U} + C(\bar{U}, N)}{N+1}, N+1\right). \quad (27)$$

As an example, consider average utilitarianism, for which $P(\bar{U}, N) = \bar{U}$. In this case $C(\bar{U}, N) = \bar{U}$, i.e. the critical level is equal to the average utility of those who live, and is independent of population size. Average utilitarianism thus entails a strong dependence between the value of additional population and the welfare of those alive. This conflicts with two key independence axioms: *utility independence* and *existence independence*.

Utility independence requires rankings of alternatives to be independent of the utility of individuals whose utilities are the same in both alternatives. Existence independence is a stronger requirement, which insists that rankings are also independent of the existence of individuals with the same utility in both alternatives. To see that average utilitarianism violates both these axioms, consider two different utility profiles: $U_1 = (a, b)$ and $U_2 = (a, c, d)$. Clearly $U_1 > U_2$ iff $(a+b)/2 > (a+c+d)/3$ under average utilitarianism. This ranking depends on the value of a , and therefore violates utility independence. Moreover, if a did not exist, $U_1 > U_2$ iff $b > (c+d)/2$. It is easy to see that both these inequalities cannot hold for all values of (a, b, c, d) , and so existence independence is also violated.

The fact that the critical level for average utilitarianism depends on \bar{U} implies that this welfare function also violates a further desirable axiom—the *negative expansion principle*. Suppose, without loss of generality, that we define $U=0$ as the value of utility at which an individual's life is just worth living.²¹ Then the negative expansion principle says that if we add an individual with $U < 0$ to the population, keeping everyone else's condition unchanged, then social welfare should decrease. Since the critical level for average utilitarianism is just average utility, which may be negative, it is possible to add an individual with negative utility to the population and increase social welfare, thus violating the negative expansion principle. In general, Broome [8, Chapter 13] argues that population principles with critical levels that depend on average utility are undesirable.

The most commonly deployed alternative to average utilitarianism is classical utilitarianism, whose population principle is $P(\bar{U}, N) = N\bar{U}$. This is the welfare function employed by the much used DICE integrated assessment model [51]. The critical level for classical utilitarianism is zero, and it satisfies existence, and therefore utility, independence. However it exhibits Parfit's *repugnant conclusion*; For every value of N , $\bar{U} > 0$ and $0 < \epsilon < \bar{U}$, the repugnant conclusion implies that it is possible to find an $M > 0$ such that $P(\bar{U}, N) \leq P(\bar{U} - \epsilon, N + M)$. In words, a welfare function that exhibits the repugnant conclusion allows *arbitrary* reductions in average utility (which keep $\bar{U} > 0$) to be offset by increases in population size. It is clear simply by looking at the product representation of the classical utilitarian welfare function, that the repugnant conclusion is implied in this case. While it may be reasonable in some circumstances to sacrifice some average welfare to promote a larger population, population principles that exhibit the repugnant conclusion allow this logic to be pushed to undesirable extremes. Insisting on population principles that avoid the repugnant conclusion places a brake on policies that promote population size—there is always a point beyond which it is no longer desirable to trade utility for population.

Neither of the two most commonly used population principles seems to provide a satisfactory approach to population ethics. Average utilitarianism violates two compelling independence axioms, as well as the negative expansion principle, while classical utilitarianism permits us to sacrifice all individuals' utility at the alter of population size via the repugnant conclusion. A simple alternative, critical level utilitarianism (CLU), avoids the pitfalls of both these principles, and is advocated by Broome [8]. Blackorby et al. [7, pp. 147–151] give an exhaustive discussion of CLU's desirable properties, relative to other population principles. CLU's population principle is

$$P_{CL}(\bar{U}, N) = N(\bar{U} - \alpha), \quad (28)$$

where $\alpha > 0$ is a constant, the critical level. CLU satisfies utility and existence independence, avoidance of the repugnant conclusion, and the negative expansion principle. It does not however satisfy a further requirement known as *priority for lives worth living*. Population principles that satisfy this requirement have the property that all alternatives in which every individual's utility is positive are ranked higher than all alternatives in which every individual's utility is negative. That CLU violates priority for lives worth living seems an acceptable compromise, and more desirable than dispensing with either utility or existence independence, avoidance of the repugnant conclusion, or the negative expansion principle. Indeed, priority for lives worth living seems the least inevitable of the axioms discussed thus far. It implies a kind of reverse repugnant conclusion, in that it insists that a population consisting of an arbitrary number of individuals with utility $-\epsilon$ is ranked as worse than an alternative consisting of a single individual with utility ϵ , for any $\epsilon > 0$. Thus, it does not accept that population may be an end in itself, for example because there is some existence value to the human species, and it may thus be worth maintaining some small population with reproductive capacity, even if its constituents live unpleasant lives.

²¹ This requires us to assume that utilities are ratio-scale measurable, rather than cardinally measurable, a standard assumption in population ethics.

How would the dismal theorem be affected if we were to employ a CLU function to evaluate climate policy? Let $p(c, N)$ be the joint distribution over (c, N) , and normalize current population size to 1. Then the CLU analogue of the welfare function in (1) is

$$\begin{aligned} W_{CL} &= \bar{U}(1-\alpha+\beta) \int N(\bar{U}(c)-\alpha)p(c, N) dc dN, \\ &= \bar{U}(1-\alpha+\beta) \int N(\bar{U}(c)-\alpha)p(N|c)p(c) dc dN, \\ &= \bar{U}(1-\alpha+\beta) \int \bar{N}(c)(\bar{U}(c)-\alpha)p(c) dc, \end{aligned} \quad (29)$$

where $\bar{N}(c) = \int Np(N|c) dN$ is the mean of the distribution for N conditional on c and $p(c)$ is the marginal distribution for c . Biological necessity requires that as $c \rightarrow 0$, \bar{N} must approach zero. Thus catastrophic events are given less weight in welfare assessments with CLU welfare functions than they are by average utilitarianism, since they correspond to low values of \bar{N} . This does not however mean that catastrophic risks cannot dominate welfare. If \bar{U} is unbounded below, fat-tailed consumption risks may still theoretically lead to a divergence in W_{CL} . However this seems a much bigger stretch for the CLU welfare function than it does for the average utilitarian function in (1), as it requires the product $\bar{N}(c)\bar{U}(c)$ to be sufficiently steeply curved for low c . If $\bar{U}(c) \sim c^{1-\eta}$ and $\bar{N}(c) \sim c^\theta$ as $c \rightarrow 0$, a sufficient condition for W_{CL} to be finite is that $\theta > \eta - 1$. If population declines exponentially as $c \rightarrow 0$, as seems very likely based on conventional population models, this inequality is always satisfied. Nevertheless, we cannot unequivocally rule out a dismal theorem like divergence. The only sure way to guarantee that welfare converges for all possible risks is to require that the utility function \bar{U} be bounded.

While the CLU welfare function provides a more acceptable framework for the analysis of policies that may affect the size of future populations, it also requires new inputs, i.e. values for the critical level α and the function $\bar{N}(c)$. $\bar{N}(c)$ is a purely empirical input, and may be estimated (at least in principle), by examining the dependence of fertility and mortality rates on nutrition levels [18]. α however is an ethical judgement about how good an individual's life must be for her existence to be socially desirable. Its value should not be too large (for obvious reasons) nor too small, as small values of α approximate the repugnant conclusion. Much like the P RTP, its value should be determined through public reason and debate. Choices for such ethical parameters “*should reflect conscious political decisions with respect to what are, after all, political questions*” [14, p. 120].

4. Conclusions

Weitzman's dismal theorem, and his subsequent work on the climate damages function [69], has done much to show that existing analyses of climate mitigation policy based on integrated assessment models are heavily dependent on poorly substantiated model assumptions, and may be insufficiently sensitive to low-probability, high-impact, outcomes. These points are all well made, however this paper has argued that perhaps the true message of the dismal theorem is to call into question the appropriateness of standard welfare frameworks for the analysis of climate change policy. Such concerns have been raised before [31]—the dismal theorem throws them into the spotlight. Climate change is a mega-problem—it requires us to evaluate and compare market and non-market impacts, come to terms with deep uncertainty, make inter-temporal trade-offs far into the next century, divide mitigation responsibilities equitably, and contemplate potential catastrophes. It is unsurprising that the old work-horse of a constant relative risk aversion expected utility functional is not up to the task of providing normatively acceptable assessments of climate policy. The dismal theorem makes this plain. While efforts to improve the empirical adequacy of integrated assessment models are underway, it is vital that a parallel program examines the ethical and formal foundations of such models. Accounting for deep uncertainty, social aggregation problems, population change, and catastrophes are certain to be necessary components of a more satisfactory approach. Any given treatment of these issues is likely to be controversial, yet not making them explicit is more problematic, as implicit, unjustified assumptions then determine policy prescriptions.

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