

# THE MORAL AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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Climate change presents us with a complex moral problem that our current political system is not well-suited to address. Thus, it should not be surprising that we are failing to address it.

In fact, climate change presents us with several distinct challenges. The first and most obvious involves coping with the changing climate itself. For societies that are not well-adapted to normal climate variability in the first place, the more frequent and extreme events produced by climate change will be devastating. These effects will ramify through their economic, social, and political systems, spreading out into the international order. In addition, much of what we value about non-human nature will be lost since the clock of evolutionary adaptation runs much more slowly than that of human-caused environmental change. These are the kinds of problems that we can expect to face on the relatively optimistic scenario that the shifts in the earth system caused by climate change will be relatively moderate. Should major ocean or atmospheric circulations fail or sea levels rise catastrophically, the whole idea of adaptation will seem “quaint” at best.

## **Climate Change as a Moral Problem**

While the challenge of coping with a changing climate is daunting, it is one that is widely recognized and discussed. The moral and political challenges of climate change are relatively neglected. Climate change is a dramatic challenge to our moral consciousness, but it is not often perceived this way because it lacks some of the characteristics of a paradigm moral problem.

What are these characteristics? A paradigm moral problem is one in which an individual acting intentionally harms another individual; both the individuals and the harm are identifiable; and the individuals and the harm are closely related in time and space.

Consider Example 1, the case of Jack intentionally stealing Jill's bicycle. The individual acting intentionally has harmed another individual, the individuals and the harm are clearly identifiable, and they are closely related in time and space. If we vary the case on any of these dimensions, we may still see the case as posing a moral problem, but its claim to be a paradigm moral problem will be weaker. Consider some further examples.<sup>1</sup>

- Example 2: Jack is part of an unacquainted group of strangers, each of which, acting independently, takes one part of Jill's bike, resulting in the bike's disappearance.
- Example 3: Jack takes one part from each of a large number of bikes, one of which belongs to Jill.
- Example 4: Jack and Jill live on different continents, and the loss of Jill's bike is the consequence of a causal chain that begins with Jack ordering a used bike at a shop.
- Example 5: Jack lives many centuries before Jill, and consumes materials that are essential to bike manufacturing; as a result, it will not be possible for Jill to have a bicycle.

While it may still seem that moral considerations are at stake in each of these cases, this will be less clear than in Example 1, the paradigm case with which we began. The view that morality is involved will be weaker still, perhaps disappearing altogether, if we vary the case on all these dimensions simultaneously.

Consider Example 6.

- Acting independently, Jack and a large number of unacquainted people set in motion a chain of events that causes a large number of future people who will live in another part of the world, from ever having bikes.

For some people the perception persists that this case poses a moral problem.

This is because the core of what constitutes a moral problem remains. Some people have acted in such a way that harms other people. However, most of what typically accompanies this core has disappeared. In this case it is difficult to identify the agents,

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these examples are inspired by those given by Jonathan Glover in "It Makes No Difference Whether Or Not I Do It," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume 49*, 1975, pp. 171-190.

victims, or causal nexus that obtains between them; thus, it is difficult to assign responsibility, blame, and so forth.

These “thought experiments” help to explain why many people do not see climate change as an urgent moral problem. Structurally, the moral problem of climate change is largely the same as Example 6. A diffuse group of people is now setting in motion forces that will harm a diffuse group of future people. Indeed, if anything, the harms caused by climate change will be much greater than the loss of the opportunity to have a bicycle. Still, we tend not to conceptualize this as a moral problem because it is not accompanied by the characteristics of a paradigm moral problem. Climate change is not a matter of a clearly identifiable individual acting intentionally so as to inflict an identifiable harm on another identifiable individual, closely related in time and space. Because we tend not to see climate change as a moral problem, it does not motivate us to act with the urgency characteristic of our responses to moral challenges.

### **Climate Change as a Challenge to Our Political System**

Climate change challenges our political system in addition to the problems that it poses to our moral consciousness. One way to see this is by distinguishing political action based on values, from political action based on interests and preferences. These terms are ambiguous and often used in cross-cutting ways, so a certain regimentation is required in order to make some important distinctions.

Values, as I will use the term, are close to the core of a person’s identity and are relatively stable: they reflect how someone wants the world to be, not merely what the person may want for himself. Preferences, on the other hand, do reflect what people want at a particular moment. Preferences and values can come into conflict in our behavior. Someone may both value an egalitarian distribution of wealth, and prefer to be very rich. This may express itself in her voting for egalitarian political candidates while seeking to make the sharpest possible financial investments. Unless irony is at work, a similar conflict can be seen in people who put Sierra Club bumper stickers on their hummers. The term ‘interest’ is often ambiguous between what a person may currently want and what is good for her. We can speak of someone’s interest in health while at the same time noting her interest in smoking. Bringing these thoughts together we can say that values express people’s view of how the world ought to be, interests concern what is

good for them either in the short or long term, and preferences express what it is that they currently want.

That the American political system is based on interest-group politics is a commonplace among many political scientists. Indeed, politics is sometimes defined as “who gets what, when, where, and how.” To the extent that this is true, it will be difficult to respond politically to climate change. For many of those who will be most harmed by climate change do not participate in the American political system (see Agyeman et al. this volume). These include non-human nature, future generations, citizens of other countries, and even disenfranchised and alienated American citizens. In reply, it is sometimes said that these interests gain political representation through the active participation of others who care about them and assert their interests. To some extent this is true, but it is obvious that at best these marginalized interests are represented only as shadows rather than in their full vivacity. This can be seen by comparing the case in which my interests are represented by someone with many interests of their own who also cares about me, and the case in which I assert my own interests.

However, it is not entirely true that America is an interest group democracy. It is often remarked in electoral analyses that voters do not always express their interests in the ballot box. For example, poor people often vote for rich people who will give themselves tax cuts at the expense of their poor supporters; soldiers often vote for leaders who will put their lives at risk; even criminals sometimes vote for candidates who want to crack down on crime. There are many ways of trying to explain this behavior, but one way is to say that people often act politically on the basis of their preferences rather than their interests. This is not surprising since there are many cases outside of political life in which preferences and interests diverge and we find our preferences compelling. For example, I want to eat tiramisu, even though it is not in my interest to do so. Even more strongly, I may want to smoke although it is counter to my interests. And I may want to drive my SUV despite my valuing of nature and future generations.

One reason people act politically on the basis of preferences rather than interests is the power of “branding.” (see Smith and Perlov, this volume). By and large candidates do not seek to convince the public of the wisdom or justice of their policies; instead, they

attempt to make themselves a “brand” with which people want to associate.<sup>2</sup> In doing this they exploit deep facts about the psychology of social animals like us who evolved in small societies, largely dependent on emotion rather than reason in guiding their behavior.<sup>3</sup> Since asserting positions and making arguments are at best not part of the branding process and at worst antithetical to it, political campaigns have become the last place to find serious discussion of important public issues. It is tempting to blame politicians and their handlers for this, but we citizens are also to blame. We tend to punish politicians (of whatever political stripe) who take strong, understandable positions on important public issues.

When branding rather than reasoning is the main point of public discourse, it is not surprising that a political system based on preferences and anchored in branding would fail to come to terms with an issue as complex as global warming. How dated is former president Lyndon Johnson’s frequent appeal to his father’s favorite Bible passage, “Come now and let us reason together”(Isaiah 1:18). Indeed, rather than appealing to reason, some of those who oppose taking action on climate change have consciously adopted disinformation as a political strategy (see McCright, this volume). Many parties to the debate have treated value statements as lines in the sand rather than as invitations for dialogue (see Regan, this volume). It is hard not to believe that this way of practicing politics will lead to disaster, whether on this issue or some other. In the end, we have collectively produced outcomes from which many of us individually feel alienated. This is true both in our politics and in our collective production of climate change.

There is another way of thinking about how a democratic political culture should function, one centered on deliberative engagement with values rather than on branding.<sup>4</sup> The deliberative ideal is reminiscent of the Enlightenment views that dominated

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<sup>2</sup> A wonderfully insightful exposition of this thesis is Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985). For a more scholarly treatment, see David Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> The idea that we are primarily emotional rather than rational animals (contra Aristotle) is an ancient idea that achieved its fullest philosophical expression in the work of the eighteenth century philosopher David Hume. It has been explored in great detail by such contemporary psychologists as Daniel Kahneman and Daniel Gilbert, and such moral philosophers as Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard. The political consequences of this has been explored in such books as Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter With Kansas?* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> A vast literature on deliberative democracy has developed in recent years. For a sample, see Jon Elster, ed., *Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

European and American political thought in the eighteenth century. It is based on the idea that the best society is one that is a democratic expression of the reflective views of its citizens, based on their most fundamental values. These views require constant examination, which is why free speech is important, and also a foundation in our best understandings of the world, which is why education matters (see the chapters by Bateson, and Grotzer and Lincoln, this volume).

This sentiment would have been familiar to the founders who recognized that American democracy was tenuous and made stringent demands on its citizens. It is reflected in the following anecdote told about Benjamin Franklin. As he was leaving the hall in Philadelphia on that sunny day in 1787 when the Constitutional convention had finished its work, a woman approached him and asked, "Mr. Franklin, what kind of government have you given us?". He is said to have replied: "A Republic, madam, if you can keep it."

There is much that is important about Franklin's reply. I want to highlight only his sensitivity to the precariousness of the American system of government. To Franklin, and many of the other founders, a political system is not an abstraction delivered by gods. It is a set of institutions designed by people to serve their deepest purposes. Our political system must be one that we can successfully manage. It is no good demanding of ourselves what we are incapable of delivering, and there is no question that our psychologies and nature constrain and condition the kinds of institutional arrangements that are manageable by us. In general, what we need both to keep our republic and to address slow onset long-term problems like climate change is a sense of ownership and identification with the outcomes that our actions produce. It is this sense of ownership and identification that allows us to overcome the alienation from the collective consequences of our actions (see Conn and Conn, this volume).

### **Climate Change and Character**

How can we gain this sense of ownership and identity? This requires an ideal of character for what is required to live in a highly interconnected, globalized world.<sup>5</sup> Here I can give only a brief sketch of some fragments of this ideal, what might be called "the

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<sup>5</sup> I have discussed this at greater length in "Ethics, Public Policy, and Global Warming," reprinted as Essay 18 in my *Morality's Progress: Essays on Humans, Other Animals, and the Rest of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

green virtues.” Before sketching these virtues, however, it is important to acknowledge the complex relationships that exist between our character as individuals and the societies into which we are born. Institutional structures deeply affect what kind of people we will be, but what kind of people we are also has profound effects on the nature of our society. We cannot opt for changing ourselves rather than changing the world or the world instead of ourselves: in an important sense of the expression, we are the world.

Humility is a widely shared moral ideal that is not often connected to a love of nature or the importance of living lightly on the Earth. Yet indifference to nature is likely to reflect the self-importance or lack of self-acceptance that is characteristic of a lack of humility. A person who has proper humility would be horrified at the prospect of changing Earth’s fundamental systems, and would act in such a way as to minimize the impact of their behavior.

Temperance is an ancient virtue that is typically associated with weakness of will. However, conceived more broadly, temperance relates to self-restraint and moderation. A temperate person does not overconsume; he “lives simply, so that others may simply live.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally, we can imagine a virtue that we might call mindfulness. Behavior that is rote and unthinking, as is the case with much of our environmentally destructive behavior, is the enemy of mindfulness. A mindful person would appreciate the consequences of her actions that are remote in time and space. She would see herself as taking on the moral weight of production and disposal when she purchases an article of clothing (for example). She would make herself responsible for the cultivation of the cotton, the impacts of the dyeing process, the energy costs of the transport, and so on. Mindful people would not thoughtlessly emit climate changing gases.

As I have noted, it is easy to see that institutions play important roles in enabling virtue. Many of these roles (e.g. inculcation, encouragement) have been widely discussed from Aristotle to the present. It is also important to recognize that how societies and economies are organized can disable as well as enable the development of various virtues (see chapters by Atcheson, and Dilling and Farhar, this volume) . For example, in a

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<sup>6</sup> This expression is attributed to Ghandi. See <http://www.dropsoul.com/mystic-quotes.php> (accessed June 16, 2005).

globalized economy without informational transparency, it is extremely difficult for agents to determine the remote effects of their actions, much less take responsibility for them. Thus, in such a society, it is difficult to develop the virtue of mindfulness.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Climate change presents us with many challenges, and many people are working hard to overcome them. In this essay I have focused on the moral and political challenges of climate change. They are important because seeing an issue as a moral problem can provide the motivation for individual and political action. The moral and political challenges are related because the ideal of a deliberative and reflective politics requires citizens who express particular moral virtues in their behavior.

The language of morality is the language of care, empathy, responsibility, and duty. This language has largely been absent from discussions of climate change. Instead the language of science, economics, and technological development has been dominant. Of course there are important roles for such discourses, but people do not change their lives on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis. Successfully addressing climate change requires long-term, sustainable changes in the way we live. This will only come about when we take responsibility for our actions, and express our concern for future generations and the health of the Earth through our everyday actions. The transformation that is required is not only personal, but profoundly collective and political as well. The hope for such a change rests on a new kind of open-hearted dialogue about what we are doing to ourselves and our children in the mindless pursuit of more and more stuff. As the nineteenth century philosopher John Stuart Mill told us long ago, it is not economic growth for its own sake we should strive for, but rather improvements in the “Art of Living.” This he, he thought, could only be obtained in a world that to a great extent remained free of human domination.<sup>7</sup>

Climate change is not only a challenge to our ethics and politics, but also has the potential for improving them. Successfully responding to climate change can make us better people and help us to reclaim our democracy. This connection between the state of our souls and the fate of the Earth was clearly seen by Walt Whitman, the sage poetic

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<sup>7</sup> See the selections from Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy*, reprinted in Lori Gruen and Dale Jamieson, eds., *Reflecting on Nature: Readings in Environmental Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 29-30.

observer of American democracy, when he wrote: “I swear the Earth shall surely be complete to him or her who shall be complete.”

This should give us heart. We must begin from where we are--changing ourselves, changing our leaders, and changing our institutions--but from here we can change the world. Biking instead of driving or choosing the veggie burger rather than the hamburger may seem like small choices, and it may seem that such small choices by such little people barely matter. But ironically, they may be the only thing that matters. For large changes are caused and constituted by small choices.<sup>8</sup> And in the end, however things turn out, it is how we live that gives meaning and significance to our lives.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Beef production is extremely energy and water intensive, and cows are a major source of methane emissions. A molecule of methane has more than 20 times the global warming potential as a carbon dioxide molecule.

<sup>9</sup> For a good bibliography on ethics and climate change, see <http://rockethics.psu.edu/initiatives/climate.asp> (accessed June 15, 2005).