Ethics, Environmental Justice and Climate Change

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Ethics and Justice in Climate Change: An Introduction

Paul G. Harris

Climate change is the most profound challenge facing humanity. It has already started to affect communities and individuals, almost always in adverse ways and sometimes with extreme suffering and death. This has been manifested acutely in extreme weather events, but also chronically in prolonged droughts and associated adverse impacts on food production. The practical issues associated with climate change, for example those related to international negotiations and domestic economic and social policies, have been extensively addressed in scholarly literature. Much of that literature has informed real-world policymaking. But climate change is also a normative problem: it presents individuals, communities and businesses with challenges and choices that raise profound questions of what is right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust. Scholars have debated these normative issues. Arguably, effective long-term policies on climate change will never be realized if these debates are not listened to and understood by policymakers, diplomats and other government officials, as well as by those influencing climate policies outside governments. Importantly, the lessons arising from these debates will have to be integrated into international agreements, national regulations, local policies and individual human behaviors.

Climate change also presents real challenges for the non-human world: just as people are affected by human-caused changes to the earth, so too are other animals, plants and indeed entire ecosystems. The global atmosphere is growing warmer as a consequence of pollution from greenhouse gases, notably carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels, with impacts on environmental systems: the oceans are absorbing heat and becoming acidified from carbon pollution, threatening marine ecosystems; some regions are already experiencing dramatic changes, such as warming in the Arctic and other areas historically characterized by cold and ice. Climate change threatens millions, possibly billions of people with death (over the long term), but it also threatens the continued survival of billions of non-human individuals and many entire species — to say nothing of the interdependence among humans and the natural world. (This assumes that we can still think of a natural, non-human world in the contemporary Anthropocene — the epoch during which humans have become the largest force shaping Earth’s ecosystems [see, Whitehead 2014; Hamilton et al. 2015].) These environmental changes present their own profound questions of what is right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust.

Given their vital importance for the future of climate change and related questions of ethics and justice, this volume brings together a selection of journal articles that highlight key issues, with emphasis on human-oriented research (in large part because that is what scholars have chosen to study, for obvious reasons). As with other Edward Elgar research collections, this
one is designed to help readers quickly and easily access an extensive body of English-language journal articles. The collection of articles here is not exhaustive, and it does not include all of the most important works. However, it does include a large sample of work on the ethics and justice of climate change, including that by the most prolific scholars. As such, the volume captures most of the major debates and issues in this growing scholarly field. This short introduction highlights these considerations, points to other key sources (especially journals and books), and very briefly summarizes the ideas that are elaborated in the articles that follow.

The Ethics and Justice of Climate Change: From the Practical to the Ethical

Climate change is both a practical and an ethical problem. Practical issues receive much of the consideration of scientists, policymakers, and indeed citizens, with our attention often directed toward things such as the concrete causes of climate change (for example, types and amounts of energy consumed), its consequences (for example, sea-level rise, increasingly severe storms, droughts and the like), related technical problems (for example, energy-saving technologies and alternative energy) and policy issues (for example, energy taxes and environmental regulations). Less often, questions of ethics and justice related to climate change come into the foreground: Is it morally wrong to pollute the global environment? If so, what is the philosophical or ethical basis for saying so? Is it fair that those individuals and communities least responsible for climate change — the world’s poor — are most adversely affected by it? What kinds of duties and responsibilities arise for nation-states, businesses, and individuals, notably those who are most affluent? Should future generations, and indeed non-humans, be given consideration when answering these and related questions? If so, which moral theories or philosophies should serve as our guides?

Importantly, the practical and ethical aspects of climate change are very often directly connected. For example, affluent communities and individuals believe that they are ethically entitled to pollute the environment (as they seem to be, at least if we deem our past and present behavior to be ethical), or they feel that they have no obligation not to do so, least of all to compensate those affected (communities, individuals, ecosystems, animals), they are unlikely to support, less so push for, government policies and regulations that will mitigate the causes of climate change — that is, reduce greenhouse gas pollution and behaviors causing it — or to help those who are affected by climate change to cope and adapt.

The connection between the practical and the ethical — what is done relative to what should be done — has been repeatedly manifested in the international negotiations on climate change. For decades now, representatives of developing and poor countries have argued that they ought not be obligated to limit their climate-changing pollution, which often means burning much less cheap coal, until developed and wealthy countries first stop their pollution of the atmosphere and compensate the poorer countries for the consequential suffering they will experience and indeed seem to be experiencing already. For the poor, climate change, and how the world responds to it, is very much a question of justice: those who cause the problem should stop doing so (arguably one of the most basic premises of justice) and they should make amends for their actions. Not surprisingly, while many developed countries have shown rhetorical sympathy for these ethical arguments — it is hard to see how they could do otherwise — relative to the scale of the problem they have collectively done very little to act on such rhetoric. Meanwhile, some formerly poor countries are joining the ranks of developed societies, with millions of people adding to the global consuming and polluting classes. These new consumers have a sense of entitlement — “if you got rich polluting the earth, we should be able to do so, too” — that is based on an understandable sense of (in)justice. However, the practical consequences of implementing this conception of justice would be every bit as bad for the environment as is people and countries of the historically affluent world continuing to pollute as they have done for a century and more.

Ethical considerations are often matters of perception. What one person or community perceives to be fair or, at least, possible may not be separated by another person or community. This raises the question of where ethics and morals, and where understandings of what is right, just, and good, come from. In short, what are the bases of ethical judgment about climate change, and how can we and ought we to inform policies of governments and the actions of individuals and other actors? Can different perceptions of ethics and justice related to climate change be reconciled? Until the practical causes and consequences of climate change are separated from these and other normative considerations — squaring what is right and wrong, just and unjust, with past, present and future behavior — the world’s responses to climate change will almost certainly continue to be too little, too late. But succumbing to effective long-term solutions to climate change will not be found or implemented if they are not ethical and just — and perceived to be so.

Understanding Climate Ethics and Justice: Literary Resources

The amount of scholarly literature on climate change is now absolutely enormous. It is hard to imagine any single person being able to read it all, let alone comprehend it all. For better or worse, the vast literature on questions of ethics and justice related to climate change is much more manageable. Such literature is almost entirely of recent vintage, and only in the last two decades has it started to flourish. This recent blooming of scholarship makes perfect sense: it was only after scientists made us aware of climate change, and began to describe its causes and consequences, that philosophers and ethicists (and others interested in climate ethics, such as economists and political scientists) could realize the importance of this issue. The scientific literature, most prominently the assessment reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (most recently Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2014), has served as the basis for what is now a substantial body of scholarly work, found in books, journals and across the Internet, which can and arguably does inform climate policies.

This volume brings together a substantial sample of journal articles from this larger body of scholarly literature. In doing so, it directs attention to a number of journals that have dedicated many pages to the topics of (and related to) climate ethics and justice. These journals include, but are definitely not limited to, Climate Policy, Climatic Change, the Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy; Environmental Politics; Environmental Values; Ethics and International Affairs; Ethics, Place and Environment; Globalization, International Affairs; the Journal of Global Ethics; the Journal of Political Philosophy; the Journal of Social Philosophy; Nature Climate Change; Philosophy and Public Affairs; Science, Science and Engineering Ethics; and
of climate change. Readers are encouraged to use WWW search engines (for example, Bing, Google, Yahoo), bearing in mind that their results are often commercially oriented, to find up-to-date websites, pages and even videos related to climate ethics and justice.

Key Topics and Themes

The articles that follow address key questions of climate change ethics and justice. (Like other Edward Elgar research collections, this one focuses on journal articles. As such, book chapters are not included in this volume. Readers are encouraged to refer to the edited books mentioned above.) To help direct readers to some of the larger debates, the articles are organized into eight thematic sections. Within each section, articles are organized by year of publication. The selection is decidedly contemporary, with the majority of articles having been written since the year 2000 and the remainder since 1990. The headings and themes that are used here to categorize the articles are by no means exclusive, nor is this categorization the only or necessarily the ideal way to organize the material. (The books mentioned above offer alternative approaches that readers are encouraged to consult.) Due to the overlapping nature of the scholarly debates—something that researchers must contend with—many of the articles would fit very well into sections other than those in which they are placed. Readers who do not see the topic they are looking for in the section headings are encouraged to read through the article titles and indeed dig into the articles themselves. There is far more here than can be revealed in the title of the volume or in the section headings. Now to the key topics and themes.

Ethics, the Environment and Climate Change

Part I includes six articles on ethics, the environment and climate change. This section of the volume is intended to provide a framework for the subject matter and to make it clear that questions of ethics and justice related to climate change exist within the broader contexts of ethics and the environment per se. In Chapter 1, John Backlund and Paul G. Harris look at some of the implications of the ‘land ethic’, an approach that was developed by the environmental philosopher Aldo Leopold. From this perspective, which values whole ecosystems in their own right, human behaviors are judged not just at the level of international relations, but also at the level of international relations. The authors present an empirical study of the phenomenon of ‘dual climate change responsibility’, drawing moral distinctions between the two groups of responsibility. They argue that the ways in which responsibilities are assigned depends very much on whether we are talking about mitigation or adaptation, something that climate experts and others aim to bear in mind. In Chapter 2, James Allen and others develop the notion of ‘dual climate change responsibility’, drawing moral distinctions between the two groups of responsibility. They argue that the ways in which responsibilities are assigned depends very much on whether we are talking about mitigation or adaptation, something that climate experts and others aim to bear in mind. In Chapter 3, Jonathan Aldred describes an influential report on the economics of climate change as a basis for critically assessing the way that scholars (and others) think about cost-benefit analysis in the context of climate change. In doing so, he highlights tensions that exist between the supposed objectivity of cost-benefit analysis, with its focus on market preferences, and more nuanced ethical arguments.
The ethical implications of one of the major impacts of climate change, sea-level rise, are explored in Chapter 4. Sujatha Byravan and Sushir Chella Rajan consider whether there are ethical obligations owed to those who suffer from rising seas, and if so what it would mean to act on these obligations. In Chapter 5, Paul G. Harris takes a geographical perspective in arguing that many discussions of climate ethics have been misplaced. He shows that climate ethics cannot be fully understood if it is portrayed in terms of nations and states. More appropriately, he says, we should be thinking in terms of individual rights and obligations, regardless of nationality (a topic examined in detail in Part IV of this volume). Dale Jamieson is one of the most prolific theorists of climate ethics and justice. In Chapter 6, the final chapter of this section, he looks at some of the complex relationships between climate change, responsibility and justice. In particular, he argues that the threat of climate change to the value of "respect for nature" means that it presents problems for traditional portrayals of moral responsibility and indeed global justice. The latter receives more sustained attention in the articles that follow in Part II.

**Synopses of Climate Justice**

Part II presents five synopses that highlight the tight connections between climate ethics (and philosophy) and climate justice. It serves as a foundation for understanding more focused analyses in this issue. Chapter 7, by Stephen M. Gardiner, gives an extended survey of ethical questions related to climate change. Before summarizing much of the related literature, he argues that climate change is, fundamentally, an ethical issue that should concern both moral philosophers and ordinary individuals. In Chapter 8, Ludwig Beckman and Edward A. Page present an introduction (as part of a special issue of the *Environmental Politics* journal) to interrelated questions of climate justice and democracy. They highlight four themes, namely the context and scope of justice in the context of climate change, democracy from global and intergenerational perspectives (the latter of these articles in Part III of this volume), the implications of poverty and poverty for climate justice, and the ramifications of climate justice for science and society. Simon Caseley, one of the most prolific philosophers of climate justice, explores the distribution of greenhouse gas emissions in Chapter 9. He critiques some of the more common ways by which philosophers approach questions of distributive justice in this subject area, in the process arguing that "static" approaches can divert attention away from some of the most morally significant considerations (something addressed at length in Part V of this volume).

In Chapter 10, Matthias Prisch surveys the field of climate justice while making specific arguments about what it means for international agreements and policies. He points out the difficulties posed by the global and intergenerational attributes of climate change, noting the resulting implications for distributive justice, corrective justice, cost-benefit analysis and, importantly, action to do something about the problem. In Chapter 11, Simon Caseley explicates two kinds of justice related to climate change, specifically what he calls "burden-sharing justice" and "harm-avoidance justice". He shows that the former has received most of the attention in debates about climate change, but he argues that the latter ought to receive much more attention than it has been given to date. Doing this would have significant implications, not least by directing more attention toward moral obligations associated with helping people adapt to the inevitable impacts of climate change (which receives more attention in Parts VI and VII of this volume).

**Intergenerational Justice**

Part III briefly addresses a theme that dominated the climate change debate in previous decades and remains highly germane to this day: intergenerational justice. It highlights issues such as the determination of historical responsibility and whether (and how) future generations can (and should) be represented. In Chapter 12, Lawrence E. Johnson argues that future generations' moral significance must be accounted for, but not on the basis of an individualistic, "person-affecting" ethic. Instead, he makes the case for an alternative ethic, one that is based on obligations to humanity as a whole. In Chapter 13, Stephen M. Gardiner introduces many of the themes that animate his book on climate ethics and justice, *A Perfect Moral Storm* (Gardiner 2011). Like most other contributors to this volume, he makes the case that questions of ethics are fundamentally connected to the formulation of policies addressing climate change. However, realizing such policies is complicated by the moral "storm" to which the title of his book refers. That storm, created by a convergence of theoretical, intergenerational and global problems, effectively "corrupts" the ability of policymakers to take effective action. To end this section of the volume, in Chapter 14 Robin Attfield explores the scope of ethics in the context of climate change. He points out that many of our responsibilities with respect to climate change are "mediated" because there is a lag, which might be decades or even centuries, in the time between any action we might take and its effect. One consequence is that such mediated responsibilities, both causal and moral ones, tend to be discounted in value: we are more likely to overlook the impacts of what we do if those impacts are far away temporarily. Attfield begins the work of remediating this perversely discounting of the future, making important points for evaluating (and acting upon) responsibility and for making (and acting upon) political decisions related to climate change.

**Equity and Justice among States**

Part IV comprises six articles on equity and justice among nation-states. This has understandably been a key theme—arguably the key theme—in international negotiations on how governments and the global community should address the causes and consequences of climate change. This section of the volume includes two articles by Henry Shue, arguably one of the most influential scholars of climate ethics and justice (if not the most influential). Chapter 15 reproduces Shue's seminal essay from *Law and Policy* journal on "subsistence emissions" and "luxury emissions". He asks four questions: What is the fairest way to allocate the costs of preventing avoidable climate change? What is the fairest way to allocate the costs of coping with unavoidable climate change? What "background allocation of wealth" would enable a fair process of answering these questions? And what is the fairest way to allocate future greenhouse gas emissions? As one might expect, especially if one is familiar with the arguments in his book, *Basic Rights* (Shue 1980), when answering these questions Shue weighs in favor of subsistence emissions. Implicit in Shue's argument is that some actors are more responsible than others. This differentiation is central to the concept of "common but differentiated
Arguments that the polluter-pays principle—the notion that those who pollute are responsible for paying to clean it up or, preferably, paying the costs of not polluting in the first place—is appealing but insufficient for determining who is responsible for bearing the burdens of climate change. He develops a person-centered, hybrid moral theory that overcomes the weakness of the polluter-pays principle. In Chapter 22, Axel Gossens advances cosmopolitanism and deep egalitarianism—whether a person’s suffering is a result of his or her circumstances or personal choices—as principles of justice that should guide the global climate change regime. He argues that the fair allocation of greenhouse gas emissions, the manner by which associated burdens should be distributed, and whether the trading of emissions quotas should be dramatically revaluated, should be assessed in the light of cosmopolitan and deep egalitarianism.

In Chapter 23, Paul G. Harris draws on cosmopolitan thinking to propose a cure for what he calls the ‘impotence’ of international approaches to addressing climate change. He argues that intermediate approaches have diverted attention away from the roles of individuals, most importantly the many millions of affluent people in developing countries who are able to avoid the responsibility for climate change by hiding behind their nations’ relative lack of responsibility vis-à-vis other states. The cure is found in locating more responsibility to act on climate change, and to hold those who suffer from its consequences, accountable and capable persons regardless of their nationality or where they live. Aaron Matyas expands on the ways in which cosmopolitans can inform our understanding of climate change. In Chapter 24 he develops a cosmopolitan political conception of justice and makes the case for a ‘global social contract’ to address the problem, in the process directly addressing some of the challenges to cosmopolitanism from climate change. Finally, in Chapter 25 Paul G. Harris and Jonathan Symons focus on what cosmopolitanism might say in practical terms, for determining how to justly adapt to the impacts of climate change. They argue that assistance for adaptation should focus on promoting human welfare (instead of compensating states), with financial resources for doing so coming from policy measures that charge affluent people, whether they be in developed or developing countries, for their greenhouse gas emissions.

**Human Rights**

To say that climate change has implications for human beings is an understatement. Put simply, climate change will contribute to enormous human suffering and death. These implications, and specifically the rights, needs, and entitlements of human beings, are emphasized in Part VI. In Chapter 26, Tim Hayward contrasts emissions rights and human rights, arguing for achieving climate justice through an equitable distribution of ecological space. He shows how norms of human rights can be used to determine the just distribution of greenhouse gas emissions. Surprisingly, he argues that doing so is more pertinent to international than to domestic justice in this context, concluding that there is no human right to pollute. Instead, there is a human right to a clean environment, and thus the means to live a decent life. In Chapter 27, Derek Bell asks whether climate change violates human rights. He answers in the affirmative, showing how climate change violates fundamental rights to health, physical security, subsistence and life. He addresses a number of common objections from philosophers and points to duties that arise from a basic-rights argument, especially for the most powerful and affluent individuals of today.
Many of the impacts of climate change, such as sea-level rise and desertification, as well as local conflicts arising from increasingly scarce resources, will force potentially millions of people to migrate—to become 'climate refugees'. In Chapter 28, Armin de Stals looks at what this means as we think about associated questions of compensation and rectification. He argues that displacement caused by climate change is an environmental injustice, especially so when people lose their home territories and are forced to become refugees due to chronic environmental impacts. Given that it may never be possible to rectify this injustice, Stals makes the case that justice demands that the world do as much as possible to prevent it from happening.

Duties and Responsibilities of Individuals

People certainly have rights that are associated with climate change. It can therefore be argued that they also have responsibilities. These are the focus of Part VII, which comprises five articles. In Chapter 29, Christopher Brown looks at whether individual citizens (in the United States) have duties to 'challenge' climate change and, if so, how they might act on such duties. Brown takes a legal perspective to illustrate how climate change presents ordinary citizens with moral choices that differ from those faced by other actors; such as politicians. Because climate change is a crisis, the duty to take action is high, this duty is not restricted to limiting one's greenhouse gas pollution, it extends to actions not often contemplated in the literature, notably litigation. In Chapter 30, Marion Boudotin argues that individuals have obligations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. This is justified on two rationales: moral integrity and a relational conception of personhood. Because individuals are not atomistic, instead being part of a community — that is, living in relation to others — behaviors that harm (or might harm) others create individual duties. This idea that climate change creates responsibilities for individuals is explored further in Chapter 31, written by Axten Hille. Hille rejects the common misconception that individual behaviors, because they individually make little contribution to climate change (or indeed to other large phenomena), do not create responsibilities for individuals. He explores why this misconception is so common and poses a simple question: if individual actions are not the cause of climate change, what is?

One reason that capable individuals act too rarely on obligations associated with climate change is because it does not present a very big problem for them individually. Those causing the most harm are often those most capable of coping. In Chapter 32, Carline McKinnon addresses this 'motivation problem'. She argues for individuals to be good members of an intergenerational cooperative union that effectively leads to greater climate justice. Importantly, those who are doing the most harm are also those who are able to do the most without suffering significant hardship, and indeed individual action would be easy (such as choosing to go on holiday by air). Building on these and similar cosmopolitan conceptions of climate justice, in Chapter 33, Steven Vanderheiden makes the case for globalizing responsibility for climate change. He argues that mitigation and adaptation can be brought within a single conception of justice, linked by an account of responsibility that transcends corrective justice and distributive justice. According to Vanderheiden, justice at least requires that individuals (and communities) accept (or be forced to accept) responsibility for the climate change for which they are culpable.

Ethics, Justice and Climate Policy

Finally, Part VIII comprises eight chapters that give us insights into the policy implications of climate ethics and justice at different levels of analysis — individual, sub-national, national, international and global. As such, these chapters make vital connections between the practical and ethical aspects of climate change. Chapter 34 reprints one of Dale Jamieson's early articles on the ethical and policy implications of climate change. In it he contends that climate change is not just a scientific issue, nor is it only one of politics; it is also a moral problem that requires unconventional ethical reasoning. At the very least, today's highly polluting lifestyles should be replaced by simpler ones and accompanied by greater humility about our individual and collective environmental impacts. In Chapter 35, also by Dale Jamieson, the ethics of 'intentional climate change' — geoengineering — is explored. Jamieson proposes a set of conditions that would have to be satisfied before intentional manipulation of Earth's climate could be morally permissible. Importantly, he argues that such conditions have not yet been met, although continued research on geoengineering may be justifiable. In Chapter 36, Jouni Paavola and W. Neil Adger look at questions of adaptation to climate change. They identify a number of 'justice dilemmas' that arise in making adaptation policies, notably responsibility for impacts, sharing the burdens of adaptation, distribution of financial assistance and fair participation in decision-making. According to Madeleine Heyward, equity in the international climate change negotiations is a matter of perspective. In Chapter 37, she presents a framework of equity principles that have arisen, revealing how contentious the different perspectives have become, thereby challenging international policymaking. As Heyward reveals, the burdens of climate change are distributed matters greatly for climate policy, but how that distribution of burdens is perceived by different actors may matter at least as much.

In Chapter 38, Edward A. Page identifies the agents that should bear the burden of paying for mitigating climate change. He argues that it is necessary to reconcile three approaches to burden sharing — contribution to causing climate change, ability to pay for the mitigation of it, and whether (and how much) an actor benefits — to arrive at practical solutions. In Chapter 39, Henry Shue makes a call for leadership to bring about vigorous and urgent action on climate change. One of the ways that he justifies urgent action today is by invoking the Good Samaritan. The current generation is the one that is here to take action to address an urgent problem, one that will only grow worse if we fail to act, so its capable members must act. The responsibility to act is greatest among these most capable of doing so. In Chapter 40, David Schlosberg develops a capabilities-based approach to just adaptation policy. He shows how such an approach can bridge a gap between abstract conceptions of climate justice and real-world policymaking. Finally, in Chapter 41, Dale Jamieson looks at the road ahead for the world's responses to climate change. He describes past and ongoing failures, critiques some prevailing ethical arguments and makes a case for domestic action even as international negotiations continue. As he notes, however, we all must learn to live with climate change. Wherever solutions might be found, climate change is here to stay — as are the perennial questions about climate ethics and justice.
Conclusion

Researching climate ethics and justice is not an esoteric undertaking exclusive to philosophers. It is an inseparable and vital part of the real world climate change puzzle. This is because what is right and wrong, good and bad—that is, what is ethical (some may prefer to say moral) or not—and what is fair and equitable or unfair and inequitable—that is, in simple terms, what is just or not—has been and will always be central to explaining the causes of climate change, deciding how to cope with its consequences and choosing the best ways to mitigate it in the future. Furthermore, what is ethical or just (or not) is both a matter of logic and reasoning, which philosophers and ethicists can help us with, and one of perception, which involves understanding a variety of goods and bads and different kinds of justice and injustice. As such, it is hoped that the articles in this volume help to bridge the gap between philosophical reasoning and perception, which is much of what happens in the academy and in journalistic articles, and formulating practical ethical arguments and guidelines that can shape policy at all levels, from the individual all the way up to the global community.

It is not hyperbole to say that one cannot think about climate change, least of all act upon it effectively, without considering ethics and justice in their many manifestations. As the earth's climate changes, so the policies that cause climate change increase and so the impacts of climate change become more manifest and more painful, questions of ethics and justice will increase in importance. With each passing year, the practical and the ethical will become more and more intertwined.

References

Part I

Ethics, the Environment and Climate Change