



Ethics Bites

Climate Change

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This is *Ethics Bites*, with me David Edmonds

Nigel Warburton

And me Nigel Warburton

David

Ethics Bites is a series of interviews on applied ethics, produced in association with The Open University.

Nigel

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David

Not so long ago there was almost no philosophy on what is today's most urgent political issue – global warming. Now there's a burgeoning philosophical literature in the area. Climate change raises a range of moral questions. Who's responsible for the situation we're now in? How should we live, to avoid making things even worse? And what obligations, if any, do we have to future generations? James Garvey works at the Royal Institute of Philosophy and is author of a book on the ethics of climate change.

Nigel

James Garvey, welcome to *Ethics Bites*.

James Garvey

Thank you very much.

Nigel

The topic we're focusing on today is ethics and climate change. I know you're not a scientist but you have done a lot of research into the effects of climate change; I wonder if you can sketch what's going to happen unless we take very serious action.

James

Well the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has done a lot of surveys of the literature and they give us a range of 1.1 to 6.4 degrees Celsius as the amount of warming we can expect in the next century. The bottom end of that is associated with a world in which we don't emit another whisper of carbon dioxide. The changes that are already underway are things like retreat of snow cover. That's worrying because 1/6th of the population gets its water from melting snow and ice. Hot extremes will become more frequent. Typhoons and hurricanes will become more intense. Precipitation will change throughout the world – places that are already wet will become more so, and there'll be more flooding. Places that are dry will experience more drought. There's a possibility of worse to come; things like the gulf-stream could shut down in the future if things carry on as they are. And also of course the sea level will rise. If you think in terms of plants and animals, something like 15% to 37% of plants and animals will be locked into extinction by 2050. We're living through the 6th major extinction our planet has experienced. The last one did in the dinosaurs. In 2003, 35,000 people died as a result of just heat in Europe, so the heat alone can kill us. And it's also true that as the sea level rises, peoples' lives will have to change: half the people on the planet currently live on the coast.

Nigel

So that's a pretty grim forecast. What are the ethical issues for us?

James

There's a lot of unnecessary suffering ahead if we don't make certain choices now. And I suppose that's as moral as anything – avoiding human suffering.

Nigel

But I could respond to that, I'm not likely to be the one who's going to suffer – why should I care about future generations?

James

Whatever else morality is, it involves sometimes putting the needs of other people before one's own. And it's true that one of the strange facts about climate change is that it involves generations now cutting back and making sacrifices for people who aren't yet born. But every day hopefully, if you're a good person, you'll make sacrifices for people who are right in front of you – and there's not much of a moral difference between someone right in front of you and somebody on the other side of the world when it comes to a moral decision. And similarly there's not much morally relevant difference between someone alive today and someone alive in 100 years.

Nigel

Well, I'd say the moral difference is that they might or might not exist. I don't know how many people will exist in 100 years from now or that anybody will.

James

This thought is owed to the British philosopher Derek Parfit. It's called the non-identity problem, and the idea is that personal identity is a radically contingent thing. If my father hadn't got off the bus when he did, and my mother didn't fly back from Mexico City when she did, the particular sperm and particular ovum required to make me, me wouldn't have got together and I wouldn't have existed.

In the environmental context part of the idea is that if we choose a green path and make decisions now that will result in a completely different set of human beings in the future, say in 300 years, than would have existed had we just carried on with business as usual. One of the funny consequences of that thought is that maybe people in the future have no room to object to our failure to adopt green policies, because they wouldn't have existed had we not failed to adopt green policies.

There are lots of things to say in reply to that. One way is to go utilitarian and consider the two sets of people that would exist given our two sets of choices. On the one hand we could make green choices and bring into being, say in 300 years, a set of people in a sustainable world. If we make a different set of choices having to do with business as usual, we'll bring into being a set of people whose lives will be characterised by much more suffering, suffering caused by droughts and water shortages. It's then left to you to simply choose which set of people you'd rather bring into being. If you think about that that leads you with the thought that the green choices are the better choices.

Nigel

And you don't think that the fact that these harms take place in the future is irrelevant. You think there's a strong moral reason to sacrifice growth today for the sake of future generations?

James

I think there is. I'm convinced that spatial distance is morally irrelevant when it comes to doing what's right. So the philosopher Peter Singer famously argues that if you're walking past a child who's drowning you ought to wade in even at some cost to yourself, even if it means getting your clothes a bit muddy you ought to do it. And the fact that there's a child in Africa, the fact that that child is some distance away is not relevant to the obligation you have to do something even if you're inconvenienced in some way. And I'm inclined to think that

temporal distance doesn't matter much either. That whether the child is alive today or in a year, I think you still have to have some obligations towards that child.

Nigel

For most of us going green could be seen as a kind of self-deception about climate change. I put my bottles in the recycling unit, I switch the odd light off, I take the bus instead of driving by car occasionally, or I buy a bicycle; now that's not going to make very much difference to the planet, surely.

James

That's true. One of the hardest things to get past when you're thinking about climate change is the thought that your own actions have no relevant consequences or no big consequences. The way I get past it is that I think the United States, for example, is the biggest contributor to climate change, maybe 4% of the population of the planet is responsible for 25% of emissions, but yet it does nothing about climate change. I also think it's got the most room to reduce – the most luxury emissions – so it's got more room to reduce than others. And you can feel moral outrage at that.

It's possible to think about your own life and to recognize that say an American is responsible for a lot more per capita than somebody from Uganda and think that they ought to be doing a lot more – so in my own life my own per capita emissions are much higher than the average person on the planet's emissions. And I can feel a kind of moral outrage at that, just as I do at America. I can think that I've got a lot more room to reduce my emissions just as America does. Though it's not the same magnitude of harm that I do, it's still harm and it's still wrong.

Nigel

I know that you think there is something distinctively different about ethical issues around climate change from other typical areas of applied ethics – I wonder if you can say a little bit more about that.

James

There are lots of applied moral problems – there are things like euthanasia, abortion, and GM crops and cloning and all that – and you can look at those from a safe distance, as it were from behind a couch, peering over. And hope that nobody is going to clone you. And think that if you skip through life happily, maybe there'll be no euthanasia in your life, no abortion in your life – but climate change is a problem for every single human being who lives in a society that's fuelled by fossil fuels. Everything that I do, hot showers in the morning, toast and tea and long haul flights, all of that – I'm stuck with the question of whether or not what I do is right or wrong. Whereas maybe no-one will clone me...

Nigel

But also the success of what I do is dependent on what others do in the case of climate change. Because I might sacrifice all kinds of things that would give me pleasure like the hot bath, and other people don't bother to sacrifice those things, and the same consequence results.

James

Two things in response to that. One is the fact that other people carry on doing something wrong doesn't give us room to refrain from doing what's right. George Bush argued that we should refuse to sign up to Kyoto because China and India weren't signing up – so why should America make cuts if other countries weren't making cuts. And you can think about that in your own life – why should I give up things when other people aren't. But if it's true that there are moral consequences to my use of a precious resource, it doesn't matter what other people do, I still have those demands placed upon me. If there were plenty of carbon sinks in the world, and it was an infinite resource, there wouldn't be questions of distributive justice, there wouldn't be questions of responsibility arising, but just given the fact of scarcity, certain moral questions just lock in and affect us.

Nigel

Yet if what's driving this is worry about the consequences of actions and if these grim forecasts are accurate – and if I know that most other people won't be as radically green as I might be prepared to be, perhaps I ought to just enjoy my life because it may be the end of the human race and why not go down with the Titanic dancing with the band playing.

James

Spend the money on beer rather than sea walls! First of all it's not all doom and gloom. It's true that if we make sacrifices now or changes now we've got a better shot at adaptation. It's also true that if you think your actions are inconsequential you can draw two conclusions. You can think that, well, beer and party. Or you can think, maybe I should get together with other people and together our actions will have some consequence. Maybe that's an argument not for inaction but for collective or group action.

Nigel

What about the sceptics who say it's true that global warming is occurring but human beings adapt very swiftly to changing environments. One of the remarkable things about history is the way that technology has been driven by economics. Incentives will increase for finding alternatives to fossil fuels, for instance.

James

There's a lot of hope in a technological rescue. Technology has in the past done good things. But it certainly can't do everything. A lot of faith, for example, is put into a hydrogen economy. But at the moment hydrogen is not even a power source.

Nigel

The best way to stop carbon emissions is to reduce the population. Are you going to go that far and say we ought to impose restrictions on the number of children that people can have?

James

I do think it's true that there are probably too many people on the planet using too many resources. It's difficult to get away from that conclusion. It's a horrible thought that the right thing to do is to place restrictions on human beings. Because a lot of human happiness has to do with children, and raising children. I'm not sure I'm willing to say that there ought to be legislation or that people's lives should be interfered with to that extent.

Nigel

Yet for some people not being able to drive a car or have a central heating system that is inefficient but effective in their terms, are fundamental to their happiness and different people achieve happiness in different ways.

James

I don't think it's true that human happiness consists entirely in having inefficient boilers. There are lots of changes that can happen to a life that will result in a perfectly happy life and a perfectly warm life. Children is a different matter. Maybe that's part of the satisfactions of a human life. But I don't know that an inefficient boiler is.

Nigel

Perhaps not an inefficient boiler. But air travel. That's a classic case where a lot of fuel is expended moving people around the world – and a lot of people have acquired a life style which involves global travel. Now that seems to me, for many people an aspect of their chance of happiness.

James

Maybe what's needed is a clearer conception of happiness or a better notion of the good life. I don't think that the good life is tied to long haul flights. I think those are going to have to go.

Nigel

The industrialized world has clearly used a disproportionate amount of the world's natural resources to date. Do you think that as a result, the people who live in those countries now should in some way make amends for their disproportionate use of these resources?

James

I do. The history of the thing matters a lot. I think Peter Singer argues that the developed world has broken the climate. And one of the things he says is, to put it in terms of a child can understand, if you broke it you're responsible for it. Somebody might say, but I didn't do it – I'm not responsible for that. I'm not responsible for the sins of my father. And that's certainly true. But it assumes that the actions of your grandparents have nothing to do with your lives now. If your grandmother goes in for some car jacking in her day, you can't be held responsible for that and you shouldn't be held responsible for that. But the industrial activities of our grandparents and our grandparents' grandparents are responsible for climate change along with our activities – but also we're the beneficiaries of those activities. The developed world is developed precisely because of all that. So there's a sense in which we're obliged to do something about it, even if we weren't there 100 years ago.

Nigel

Is history the only thing relevant to the question of responsibility here?

James

Our values grew up in very small tribal groups, so we're very good at spotting rights and wrongs locally. If somebody shoplifts a bottle of tequila you can tell immediately that something's wrong there. It's much more difficult to think we got up this morning and we had toast and tea and coffee and we've been doing that for some time and we drive to work and we have hot showers in the morning, and everything. And putting all of those millions of little events together over time and saying you're then somehow responsible for the sea level increasing in China in 100 years and the deaths of people that result from that is a difficult thing to approach. You can, though, approach responsibility from three directions.

One of them is history. The fact that certain countries have a longer and larger history of industrialization and therefore have put more of the stuff in the atmosphere and therefore are responsible for more of the damage.

You can also think about the present. Present entitlements, or capacities. Ignoring the history of climate change you can just think well now it's quite disproportionate the uses of our carbon sinks. Maybe, therefore, there's a responsibility for those who use more to cut back a bit. You can also think about present capacities. For example, some countries have more luxury emissions than subsistence emissions, so it's easier for them to make cuts. They also might have a better infrastructure – maybe they're a superpower and they have the brains and the money to make cuts.

And you can finally think about the future. And you can think that every developing or developed nation has a responsibility to do something to ensure that the future is a reasonable place for people to live in.

Nigel

And what about sanctions, do you think there should be sanctions as a way of shaping the behaviour of those countries that are particularly damaging to the environment?

James

Absolutely. As Hobbes said, covenants without the sword are but words. And if sanctions were the right thing to do to South Africa under apartheid, certainly they were the right thing to do because South Africa was harming its own people. And those who refused to take actions on climate change are harming more than just their own people, but the people all over the world – and no doubt it's the most poor who will be the most affected who will be the least likely to be able to do something. So I think sanctions are warranted yes. I also think that collective action or civil disobedience on the part of people within a country are justified as well.

Nigel

Is there anything at all to be optimistic about here? Because you've painted quite a worrying picture about humanity's future.

James

Philosophers are traditionally rubbish at predicting the future. I can report on what other people say. Some argue that it's too late and we've already past some tipping points. The best we can do is build some bunkers. Not everybody is that pessimistic. That's a minority view. Some authors argue that maybe this is a strange kind of chance that humanity has. We're very good at uniting against a common enemy. Maybe climate change will enable us to put thousands of years of stupidity behind us and we'll see that we're all the same creatures fighting against the same thing.

There's also an uncomfortable bit of the fence in the middle – if we don't realize that we have to make sacrifices for other people and we don't do it, we deserve what's coming. I don't know what to think. I've got a friend who tells me whenever I go on about this, there's never been perpetual injustice or permanent tyranny, and that human beings always make the right choice in the end – but it would be good if we could get a move on this time.

Nigel

James Garvey, thank you very much.

James

Thank you

David

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