Some Scalar Issues in Climate Ethics

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Over the past three decades, the term “global ethics” has increasingly replaced “international ethics” in the discourse of social and political philosophers. Setting aside for the time being the ways that the rise of “global ethics” sometimes attends the pursuit of a “minimal fundamental consensus” among the world’s moral and religious traditions (Kung 1993), it seems fair to say that many philosophers prefer the term “global” over “international” because the latter too narrowly focuses on the moral agency of nation-states.

The implicit claim here is that the ethical challenges facing the world today are of the sort that cannot be reduced to matters of relations among or between state actors. Many prognosticators assert that in the 21st century, ethical issues will show ever less respect for territorial borders. Terrorism, organized crime, and human trafficking often serve as examples of such transnational moral challenges, but there are many other contemporary ethical issues that cannot be fully addressed by individual states alone; for example, reproductive and medical tourism, informal internet economies, and, of course, climate change.

The intensifying processes of globalization have forced scholars and policy-makers to recognize the limited capacities of nation states and have re-imagined interest in cosmopolitanism of various kinds. Ethical reflection on globalization has insinuated a novel moral subject—the global citizen—whose obligations and scope of moral agency certainly exceed those of the national citizen. Increasing attention to ethical issues that refuse to abide by the logic of political boundaries has undergirded a sustained, cosmopolitan interrogation of the responsibility of individual persons in our global age.

This paper reflects on the importance of global ethics as a frame of analysis for the moral challenge of climate change. It proceeds in three parts. In the first, I take note of the concerns raised by cosmopolitan thinkers about the limitations of international frameworks in elaborating and executing just responses to global warming. My goal here will be to outline the chief limitations of the liberal international order according to political philosophers interested in questions of interstate cooperation relevant to climate solvency. In its second section, this paper considers the central alternative espoused by many global ethicists, namely the idea of a planetary citizenry responsible directly to one another in an age radical interconnectedness. This section will briefly describe some of the main problems that attend the shift from states to persons as the kind of agents most suited to respond to climate change. In the concluding section, I will combine these two lines of critique, suggesting that they corroborate the need for philosophical attention to other kinds of agents and other scales of analysis.

Moral Limitations of National Sovereignty

Even a cursory appraisal of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) indicates how adept the international community has been at failing to establish sufficient consensus for meaningful, coordinated action. Philosophical analyses that take as fundamental the moral saliency of nation states and international organizations are to some degree or another statist in that they necessarily center on the doings of state actors. In considering climate diplomacy, political philosophers have outlined at least three structural problems endemic to the international order, all of which can be linked to the liberal norms that orient the relations among sovereign actors in the contemporary geopolitical arena.

The first, and most basic, of these problems is the manifest contradiction between the national interest
of any one major carbon emitting nation and the
global good enjoyed by all nations collectively.
Simplistically, the changing climate presents a classic
commons problem: the consequences of our
industrial activities are distributed globally, but the
benefits are concentrated nationally (see Gardiner
2008). This externalization of costs appears to be
built into the mismatch between the planetary nature
of atmospheric processes and the provincial
territoriality of political processes. Henry Shue
identified this problem more than two decades ago.
In his essay Subsistence Emissions and Luxury Emissions,
he wrote:

the challenge of preventing additional avoidable
global warming takes this shape: How does one
reduce emissions for the world as a whole while
accommodating increased emissions by [the still
developing] parts of the world? The only
possible answer is: by reducing the emissions of
one part of the world by an amount greater than
the increase by the other parts that are increasing
their emissions. (Shue 2008)

This logic, premised on the idea that the
remaining economic benefits of carbon emissions
should be equitably distributed among the world’s
nations, is precisely why the United States refused to
ratify the Kyoto Protocol. Serious international
action on climate change would require several or all
of the biggest emitting nations to act unselfishly, that
is, against their own interests and in the interests of
humanity generally. But, quite by design, this is not
what nation-states are designed to do; above all else,
they exist primarily to protect their own national
interest. Political theorists disagree about whether
such interests reflect the will of the citizenry or the
concerns of the state itself (or some combination of
the two), but in any case, national interest is a species
of value that is exceedingly difficult to align with the
global common good (for example, see Luban and
Walzer 2008).

The second structural impediment to climate
solvency indicated by political philosophers closely
resembles the first, but concentrates on conflicting
interests across temporal, rather than spatial,
dimensions. This concern focuses on the way that
electoral democracies exacerbate intergenerational
inequities, especially in states with short electoral
cycles (e.g. the United States and Australia), which
more strongly incentivize candidates to develop
platforms that place short-term gains over longer-
term interests. Stephen Gardiner has called this the
“tyranny of the contemporary,” a dynamic also
evident in electoral issues like social security,
Medicare, the national debt, and the disposal of
nuclear waste, each of which passes costs along to
subsequent generations while benefits are accrued in
the present.3

Curiously, this political dimension of the
intergenerational problem is worse in liberal
democracies than it is in authoritarian societies:
democratic regimes are necessarily preoccupied by
electoral cycles and subject to the demands of the
current generations of voters in ways that do not
constrain illiberal regimes. It does not seem, however,
that this is a problem exclusive to democracies, like
ours, characterized by hyperactive media cycles and
compact electoral rhythms. Rather, as Gardiner has
argued, representative democracy as such is
structurally predisposed to put the interests of the
current generation of voting age adults ahead of those
of future generations.

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democratic governance.

If democracy as a system of governance is
characterized by a temporal tragedy of the commons,
in which each generation has the incentive to gain by
passing costs along to future publics, then our failure
to muster the political will to tackle climate change
represents a problem built into the fabric of modern
political life. It seems far-fetched to assume that
contemporary citizens would be able to advocate the
interests of future generations by proxy in any
systematic or philosophically coherent fashion.
Because traditions of electoral representation are so
deeply embedded in the liberal political tradition, the
challenge presented by climate change may require a
profound reflection and reimagining of democratic
governance aimed at better incorporating the interests
of future generations of citizens.

The third problem indicated by those concerned
about the atmospheric inadequacies of the nation
state and of international frameworks might be called
the “straightjacket effect.” Because climate change presents the international community with a challenging collective action problem, nations find themselves compelled to cooperate, yet simultaneously constrained by such cooperation. Mike Hulme captures this succinctly: “the nation state is too limited in its freedom of manoeuvre, having to work through disputed and sluggish international treaties” (Hulme 2009). Transnational issues prompt states to yield autonomy in order to gain collaborative advantage; but the resulting multilateral compacts often constrain state sovereignty in unexpected ways, and tend to disproportionally limit the powers of smaller nations with powerful neighbors.

**The Shortcomings of Cosmopolitan Individualism**

Is the individual person (rather than the state) a kind of moral agent or actor readily suited to address climate change? The cosmopolitan individual has become a central object of focus among global ethicists. Especially since the beginning of the present century, moral philosophers have accorded considerable attention to the responsibilities of individual persons in confronting climate change, with engaging debates among virtue ethical, utilitarian, and Kantian perspectives (for example, see Singer 2010). In the main, “secular and religious commenters on climate change” have used the “language of individual moral culpability for the emission of carbon dioxide” (Hulme 2009).

Two reasons account for this mounting emphasis on individual responsibility. The first stems from the transnational structure and diffuse nature of global moral challenges like climate change. Because many contemporary ethical issues are embedded in complex networks—like markets, ecosystems, and the internet—they cannot be neatly reduced matters of inter-state relations. The networked character of contemporary society underscores the significance of individual moral responsibility.

The second reason for the contemporary emphasis on cosmopolitan individualism stems from a surge of philosophical attention to issues of global justice during the 1970 and 1980s. Peter Singer’s work on poverty alleviation stands out as the most visible contribution to this ethical concentration. His uniquely forceful utilitarian calculus placed individuals squarely at the center of the moral equation provoked by newfound experiences of global interconnectedness, arguing specifically that each of our economic transactions bears the opportunity cost of providing direct aid to the world’s most needy people.

This intellectual move—tantamount to eliminating the distinction between acts and omissions—has dramatically widened the scope for ethical reflection by contemporary social and political philosophers. The concept of the global citizen asserted by Singer and his compatriots requires that the individual employ moral reflection at all times and in every aspect of his life. This is a major departure from the liberal political tradition, which holds as one of its basic premises the idea that individuals are radically autonomous agents. But as Peter Brown writes, the atomistic tendencies of “political liberalism [were] flawed from the beginning” because “there are no actions that affect us alone” (Brown 2013). Whether or not one accepts this critique, the tremendous improvements in our understanding of human ecology are situated in the context of a cosmopolitanism of which Singer is perhaps the most well known exponent. The stakes for individual moral reasoning are dramatically higher in an era where even seemingly insignificant actions like flushing the toilet or choosing where to buy a T-shirt have social, economic, and environmental ramifications across vast distances in time and space.

If theorists are increasingly demure about the hegemony of the nation-state in global ethical issues, then the alternative has been to emphasize the role played by individual global citizens in grounding the pursuit of global justice. Ethical responses that follow from this emphasis are private, in that they articulate norms such as dietary choices, personal carbon allowances, individual environmental footprints, and consumer responsibility. The ethical milieu of global citizen, it seems, is primarily an economic one, and navigating the fraught landscape of consumptive transactions appears as the foremost duty of the moral individual. Some, like Michael Sandel, have worried that private, market-oriented solutions to carbon pollution are inadequate because mechanisms like carbon offsets function like indulgences and run the risk of encouraging wealthy individuals to increase, rather than decrease, their emissions (Sandel 2012). Commoditizing environmental harm may, he claims, remove the moral sting from bad behavior.

Yet questions about the satisfactoriness of a privatized climate ethic run deeper still. Many
environmental ethicists remain committed to what Thomas Pogge calls “interactional moral diagnostics,” by which he means evaluating “actions, and the effects of actions performed by individual and collective agents” (Pogge 2008). With respect to their climatic effects, individual actions are certainly subject to moral scrutiny; however, the tremendous gap in scale between individual actions and the harms to which they contribute places the traditional mechanisms for “interactional moral diagnostics” under tremendous strain. As Pogge puts it, the “indirect effects” of our everyday transactional decisions “are not only too numerous trace. They are also, in most cases, impossible to estimate” (Pogge 2007).

The sheer complexity of the modern global economy would seem to present an epistemological barrier, impenetrable to consumption-based efforts to address climate change. Even though it is clear that fossil fuel use and the consumption of goods produced by non-renewable processes causes harm to the environment, it is beyond the capacity of any one individual to fully understand the implications of each and every consumptive decision he makes through the course of one day of living in a post-industrial economy: “the source of the risk is distant and intangible—no-one can see climate changing or feel it happening—and the causes of risk are diffuse and hard to situate” (Hulme 2009).

Anthony Giddens has also written about this difficulty, identifying the intangibility and invisibility of the effects of carbon emissions as a restraint on effective responses, and generously labeling this pitfall “Giddens paradox” (Giddens 2011). If the whole of our economic behavior is subject moral scrutiny, then how are individuals to account for supply chains that change on a digital time-scale, the synergistic effects of the chemical effluents from household cleaners that have 37 active ingredients, or the ecological effects of food products derived from hundreds of agricultural sources? Samuel Scheffler makes a similar point in claiming that cosmopolitanism highlights the importance of various large-scale patterns of activity that the individual agent cannot in general control, but within which individual behavior is nevertheless subsumed in ways that the individual is, at any given time, unlikely to be in a position to fully appreciate.

[This] claim…is not, of course, meant to deny that individual human beings are the fundamental units of agency. (Scheffler 2008)

Climate change raises important questions about how individuals are to understand the distinction between harms they cause, harms they fail to prevent, and harms they enable (Barry et al. forthcoming).

Rob Nixon calls this the problem of “slow violence,” a kind of aggregate harm that is difficult for moral philosophers and policy makers to comprehend theoretically. The difficulty, Nixon claims, lays in the complexity of understanding how and whether diffuse, diverse, yet related harms are to be taken as a systematic whole. The difficulty of capturing the gross harm of “slow violence” also comes in part from the gradual, systemic nature of impacts of climate change—the crisis we face is unlikely to have a specific, identifiable thresholds. We know that that climate change will make tropical storms more frequent and intense, that it will amplify various infectious disease vectors, and that, because of ocean acidification, it will have terrible implications for fisheries; but it is incredibly difficult to accurately attribute to individuals causal or moral responsibility for these diffuse harms across timescales measured in decades or centuries. The kind of harm manifest in global warming is slow-motion Armageddon, disaster by shades, and is thus extremely difficult to see as a coherent whole.

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Philosophers like Robin Attfield and Derek Parfit have written extensively on questions related to “mediated responsibilities,” “temporally distant harms,” and “diffused impacts,” all of which continue to prove exceedingly difficult for individuals to incorporate into their everyday moral considerations. As Attfield puts it, “agents are often inclined to disregard (or at least discount to some degree) mediated impacts of their action or inaction, whether good or bad. But even if this was once understandable, the changed context of ethics
makes it irresponsible for such disregard to continue” (Attfield 2009). I agree, but I am less convinced than Attfield that our everyday consumptive practices are easily scrutinized with respect to their foreseeable climatic implications. Before doubling down on the premise that autonomous individuals are the kind of agent most well suited to grapple with the ethical challenge of climate change, we need to clearly answer whether the moral calculus of climate change is at our grade level. In sum, personal environmental virtues amount to little if they lack a coherent social vision (Treanor 2010).

Climate Ethics as a Goldilocks Problem

The arguments presented here assert that the nation-state is a kind of moral agent too large and too rigid to adapt to the intensely global nature of climate change and that the individual is a moral agent too atomistic to transcend his own embeddness in the structures involved in the climate crisis. However, if states are too brittle, and persons are too little to sufficiently respond to climate change, then it is not yet apparent what the alternatives might be, as Goldilocks would have said, a kind of intermediary scale of moral agency that is “just right.” If I have successfully indicated some of the ways that the climate problem exposes weaknesses in the scalar tendencies of global ethics, then what conclusions can we reasonably take away?

It would be tempting to address these shortcomings by scaling up and arguing for more robust, centralized forms of global governance with a mandate for and from humanity as a whole. Yet since Kant’s 1795 Perpetual Peace, political philosophers have raised serious doubts about the viability and acceptability of a world government. The solution to the unruliness of international affairs is certainly not to be found in replacing those problems with global authoritarianism, nor in seeking political uniformity against the messiness of cultural pluralism.

Because climate change is a problem shared by all of humanity in common, it may be tempting for some to claim that its solution demands a singular, universalist moral framework. However, this notion certainly overreaches:

those who argue that climate change presents us with a unique opportunity to seek out shared ethics in an interconnected world and then deploy these ethics on a global scale to diffuse our fears about climate change are well intentioned. But…the fissures and canyons that quickly start opening once we descend from the high and lofty peaks of religious sentiments about ‘care for creation’ and ‘respect for life’ are not ones that can easily be bridged. (Hulme 2009)

If, as I have been suggesting, the conventions of liberal political theory that dominate social philosophy over-emphasize the capabilities of nation states and over-estimate the moral capacities of individuals, then perhaps the appropriate response is not to scale the heights of universal governance, but instead to think more creatively about intermediate scales of collectivities and polities that might prove more fertile for climate ethics. Because my framework in this paper has been schematic, I want simply to chart some potential routes for future ethical reflection on such intermediate scales.

Some scholars have pursued “environmental populism” as an alternative to the neoliberal market-based responses or coordinated state interventions that dominate contemporary global discourses about climate change. This moderate path indicates the linkages between “individual consumers and their role in social networks and movements…and implies new social forms of co-operation and participation for securing climate goals” (Hulme 2009).

This is an area where philosophers have made significant contributions, especially Seyla Benhabib, Iris Marion Young, and John Dryzek. Young’s work in particular is instructive here, in that her writing aims at exploring the middle ground between “interactional” and “institutional” modes of moral diagnostics. Her “social connection model” of responsibility rests in part on a conception of “shared responsibility,” which she distinguishes from collective responsibility. Young argues that theories of collective responsibility decouple individual agents from moral responsibility, reserving that as a characteristic of groups of agents (i.e. states).

From the theoretical vantage point of shared responsibility, by contrast, individual agents are not absolved of responsibility, but rather conjoined by their mutual obligations. Shared obligations can only be “discharged through collective action;” in other words, Young’s “social connection model” insists that
individual responsibility for structural injustices is always political and never private (Young 2006). For Young, that we are each causally responsible for the changing climate does not mean that we are left to our own devices to redress the issue, alone floating in a sea of consumer choices and utilitarian trade-offs. Instead, the fact that we are, each and every one of us, culpable to some small degree for the harms associated with global warm, binds us together in a special kind of politically responsible body.

This is promising direction for climate ethics, I think, and Young is not alone in pursuing it. For example, Attfield’s work on mediated responsibility calls for better “dovetailing” between informed individual economic decision making and the public regulation of markets (Attfield 2009). Bronwyn Hayward has put Young’s “social connection model” to use in arguing for stronger regional mechanisms for transnational dialogue on climate issues (Hayward 2008). Young’s intuitions about collective action problems also find confirmation among social theorists and social scientists. Notably, Eleanor Ostrom’s call for “polycentric approaches” to climate change mirrors the plurality of Young’s social connection theory. Because “the actions generating GHG emissions are taken at multiple scales,” Ostrom argues, it is only sensible that responses also be “organized at multiple scales generate benefits to those who act, ranging from households, farms, and cities at a local scale to regions within a state, states, regional units that cross state boundaries, and the globe” (Ostrom 2010).

If one thinks geographically about the kinds of entities that unite collective interests yet are less unwieldy than states, the role of cities, counties, and metropolitan areas comes into clearer focus. As Benjamin Barber puts it, “citizens of the province and nation think ideologically and divisively, neighbors and citizens of the towns and cities think publicly and cooperatively)” (Barber 2013). The political nimbleness of cities has not been lost on regional and municipal policy makers, who have been at the forefront of climate solvency efforts worldwide. Though not signatories to the agreement, a number of major cities, including Seattle and San Francisco and London, are tellingly on track to meet the emissions reductions outlined in the Kyoto Protocol. The social connection model encourages us to think about the various ways our responsibilities are shared, and this is not limited to polities like cities and counties, but also underscores the salience of other forms of associational life, like membership organizations, religious institutions, universities, neighborhoods, etc.

Political borders have frequently proved to be impediments to broad scale climate cooperation: polities rooted in territoriosity are enmeshed with the protection of national interest and seem blunt tools for securing global goods. Transnational actors—like civil society groups, religious organizations, and yes, even corporations—exist in political spaces unconstrained by such provincialities. Social scientists have been quite attuned to the role of these kinds of collectivities in addressing climate change, but philosophers have been slow to follow, perhaps in part because there is little precedent in moral theory about how to conceptualize such groups as agents. Thinking of transnational actors as agents raises a host of messy philosophical issues, but I am convinced that this can be a valuable and viable avenue of theoretical inquiry. The “major groups” represented in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change—women, children, the scientific community, business and industry, farmers, NGOs, etc.—are a bit clunky, but underscore the importance of representation through political channels other than states. Global ethicists should take such transnational actors more seriously if they are genuinely committed to grappling with problems that transcend national boundaries.

Notes:

1 “Global ethics” seems to have first appeared as a term for political theorists and philosophers in the 1940s, but was scarcely used until the early 1990s, when it rapidly became a commonplace designation. See Maclean 1943, pp. 517-523; Buller et al. 1991, pp. 767-775.

2 In November of 1998, during the final years of the Clinton Administration, the United States joined as a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol, the result of six years of UNFCCC negotiations. However, the U.S. Senate had already made clear that it was unwilling to ratify the Protocol, having unanimously passed the Byrd-Hagel
Resolution, a non-binding indication of congressional disapproval of UNFCCC plan in July of 1997. Ratification of the Protocol was never put to a vote. In March, 2001, the Bush Administration formally withdrew the United States as a party to the Protocol. See Ackerman 2001.

3 See Gardiner 2011. Chapter Five is especially pertinent to this issue. I acknowledge, as does Gardiner, that there is deep disagreement among moral theorists about how to account for the interest of future persons and am well aware of the complexities concerning discounting, the lack of clarity about what future interests might include or exclude, etc. However, I take it as axiomatic that 1) future generations will have interests, 2) that we in the present have some degree of responsibility in protecting these interests, and 3) that degraded environmental conditions, especially irreversible environmental harms like ocean acidification or massive despeciation, will impinge on these interests.

Sources:


Hulme, Mike. 2009. Why We Disagree About Climate Change. Cambridge.


