

Climate Matters: Ethics in a Warming World

J. Broome, 2012

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Review by Ewan Kingston

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This book is a clever and lucid contribution to public debate on the ethical aspects of climate change. Its philosophical argument begins with the distinction between public morality, which concerns issues such as government regulation of greenhouse gas emissions, and private morality, which concerns our individual personal emissions. While Broome gives greater attention to public morality, he draws surprising conclusions within the domain of private morality.

To come to these conclusions, Broome draws on another familiar distinction, between duties of justice and duties of 'goodness' (beneficence). Broome believes that duties of goodness to respond to climate change are irrelevant in our private lives. While one way I could bring about a better world is by reducing my greenhouse gas emissions, there are more efficient ways, such as donating to organisations that treat tropical diseases, to achieve the same goal. Thus, a duty to solely improve the world requires that time and money spent on reducing my own greenhouse gas emissions should instead be spent on these more efficient means. However this does not give me carte blanche to emit, because I have a duty of *justice* not to harm others, and my own emissions can be expected to cause significant harm. Thus, Broome argues, we (affluent individuals) should reduce our net personal emissions to zero. We can currently do so relatively easily by offsetting—paying a company to reduce total greenhouse gas emissions by the amount that we emit. Broome suggests reputable certifying bodies can effectively measure additionality (the extent to which an apparent greenhouse gas reduction would not have happened without the company's intervention).

He defends offsetting from other common objections, and highlights certain cancelling-out effects that can arise when, instead of offsetting, we voluntarily reduce our personal emissions.

Chapter 6 turns to the duties of governments to respond to climate change, and our duties as citizens to bring about such government action. In this domain, Broome argues, duties of justice have limited application, due to the non-identity problem. The identities of people not yet born are contingent on the timing of their conception, which in turn depends on a wide range of background conditions. While our particular private decisions will probably have very little effect on identities of future people who will be harmed by climate change, the climate policies of previous generations will significantly affect future identities. Thus, for Broome, a future person 'cannot plausibly claim she had a right to a better life' (p. 62) which societies have violated by emitting large amounts of greenhouse gas. Her very existence depends on those emissions. Thus governments, according to Broome, have duties of justice only to currently alive people. The bulk of their duties to respond to climate change, therefore, can be assessed in purely consequentialist terms.

Broome's argument for the insignificance of governments' duties of justice to future generations is a rare weak point in the book. It ignores the many ways these duties of justice can be expressed without reference to direct duties to particular individuals. It is at least plausible that duties of justice can be owed to persons as types, or to collections of people, or perhaps governments have a duty of justice not to create a situation in which future (undetermined) people's rights will be violated.

While the choice of an exclusively consequentialist framework for the remainder of the book is not adequately motivated here, it does allow Broome to focus deeply on cost-benefit analyses of climate change. Even those wary of the consequentialist approach should find value in Broome's work. To say the least, cost-benefit analyses will continue to inform

climate change policy, and the careful scrutiny Broome (a former economist) offers over the ethical dimensions of such work is a rare and important contribution.

Broome does not suggest a certain concentration of atmospheric CO₂ to aim at, a temperature rise to prevent, or a particular cap on emissions. Instead he investigates different aspects of what he believes are the main moral questions behind such a complex decision: how to measure the future bad outcomes from climate change, and how to weigh these against the costs of taking strong action now.

Chapter 8 contains a lucid discussion of discounting, involving four strong objections against using market rates of interest to indicate the appropriate rate by which we should discount future costs and benefits. Broome also makes a clear case for using disaggregated assessments of the several categories of goods affected by climate change, until cost-benefit analyses become sophisticated enough to combine them fairly.

One issue is particularly provocative. Broome insists we separate the problem of removing the negative externality of greenhouse gas emissions from the problem of finding the *best* solution for climate change. In theory, Broome argues, the current generation, reluctant to bear the costs of climate change prevention, could be compensated by being allowed to leave less of other resources for future generations. While it would be best for the current generation to reduce emissions *and* save significant resources for the future, conflating the issues of intergenerational saving and climate change into one cost-benefit analysis is unwise. Broome suggests that aiming to remove *only* the negative externality by allowing the current generation compensation from future generations has the potential to break the political stalemate in climate policy. He makes this argument cautiously, stressing its pragmatic and non-ideal nature, but even so, some may find the suggestion unpalatable.

In Chapter 10, Broome discusses how to value 'absences'—those lives that climate change will not end prematurely, but will cause not to exist at all, for example, through the reduction in carrying capacity of the Earth. Broome concludes that we cannot assume that such absences are morally irrelevant. Widespread philosophical disagreement about how to value such absences, combined with the urgency of the issue leads him to suggest that this issue is best settled through public democratic debate.

Those hoping for a detailed discussion of fairness in sharing the climate burden will be disappointed. Broome briefly addresses the fair distribution of the costs of climate change among this generation when he discusses allocating rights to emit greenhouse gas. However, his support for a position that incorporates historical responsibility for past emissions is merely asserted without argument. Given the substantial political controversy and burgeoning philosophical work on the issue of historical responsibility for climate change, a more apt approach would be to either treat the issue more thoroughly, or completely avoid it.

The bulk of *Climate Matters*, however, is excellent. Broome ensures that the climate science and economics are made simple, but not simplistic, and his moral arguments are presented crisply and vigorously. If the issues of population ethics fail to feature in public democratic debate as he hopes, it will not be because his writing is inaccessible. Yet the book is for specialists too; while the approach and emphasis may seem idiosyncratic at times, the material itself is of very high quality. This book contains numerous progressive ideas in climate ethics and deserves a wide audience.

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