

Moving Toward a Global Moral Consensus on Environmental Action

Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson

In the summer of 2012, some 10 percent of the earth's land baked under intense heat, a tenfold increase from baseline years. Ninety-seven percent of the surface of the Greenland ice sheet warmed enough to show signs of thawing. The temperature in the state of Kansas broke 115 degrees—an all-time record. And the *U.S. Drought Monitor* reported that 62.3 percent of the United States was suffering from moderate to extreme drought. Hot, dry weather also scorched Moscow, which was cloaked in haze from wildfires. All but 24 percent of the Arctic Ocean was ice-free that summer, the lowest point since measurements began at 50 percent in the late 1970s.¹

Startling changes, to be sure. But along with the increases in temperature has come an important expansion in the world's understanding of the environmental emergencies that beset the planet. The waves of climate and other environmental change are scientific issues. They are also technological and economic issues. What is new and significant is an increasing awareness that environmental emergencies, especially those caused by rapid climate change, are fundamentally moral issues that call for a moral response.

The call for a response based on justice, compassion, and respect for human rights comes from scientists as well as activists and moral and religious leaders. Averting climate change, NASA scientist James Hansen says, “is a great moral issue” that he compares to the fight against slavery; it is an “injustice of one generation to others.” Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu writes, “Climate change is a moral challenge, not simply an economic or technological problem. We are called to honor our duties of justice. . . . We are called to honor our duties of compassion.” Environmental issues are human rights issues, former Inuit Circumpolar Council Chair Sheila Watt-Cloutier writes: “We are defending our right to culture. . . . We are defending our right to be cold.” And the Dalai Lama says that a “clean environment is a human right like any other. It is therefore part of our responsibility toward others to ensure that the world we pass on is as healthy, if not healthier, than when we found it.”²

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The emerging global consensus about the moral implications of environmental crises is an important development, given the underlying logic of policymaking. That logic is expressed in the form of the practical moral syllogism: Any argument that reaches a conclusion about what we ought to do must have two premises. The first premise is factual, based on empirical, usually scientific, evidence—*This is the way the world is, and this is the way the world will be if it continues on this path*. But facts alone do not tell us what we ought to do. For that, we need a second premise. The second premise is normative, based on our best judgment of what is right and good, what is of value, what is just, what is worthy of us as moral beings—*This is the way the world ought to be*. From these two premises together, but from neither alone, we can devise policies that empower our values and embody our visions of the world as it ought to be.

This logic helps explain some of the impasses blocking action to avert the emergencies. It helps explain a strategy of climate change deniers, for example. Given the logic of the practical moral syllogism, individuals who would reject climate action and the changes it would require can either deny the science that supports action or deny collected human wisdom about how the world ought to be. Unsurprisingly, they choose to attack the science. It is far easier to pick a fight about, say, whether dramatically increasing levels of carbon dioxide will help or hurt humankind than to quarrel about, say, whether we have a moral obligation to protect children from harm.³

The logic also helps explain the frustration of scientists, who see an astonishing decoupling of scientific consensus and public belief, as well as, in some cases, an inverse correlation between the amount people know about climate change and the political will to act. Indeed, scientists have heroically expanded knowledge and explained it to the public on the assumption that if people only knew, if they only knew, then they would act. This, unfortunately, is a fallacy. Better to say, if people only knew the facts about the harmful effects of climate change on the human prospect, and if they affirmed basic principles of justice and compassion, then they would act. It is from the partnership between science and ethics that policies are born. For this reason, university departmentalization and the myriad isolations of expertise, science/religion divides, and other forces that weaken the connection between the realm of the first premise (generally science and technology) and the realm of the second premise (literature, art, religion, indigenous wisdom, ethics, history) have made it harder to devise effective policies.

Shared Moral Principles That Require Action

Hidden behind the well-publicized disagreements about climate change is a body of shared wisdom about fundamental moral principles of human and political action. Just as the world's scientists are achieving a hard-won global

consensus about the facts, it is possible to move toward a global consensus about basic principles of morality. This section looks at just a few of the principles fundamental to a global moral response to climate change and other environmental crises.

Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person. This basic moral principle, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is echoed in constitutions around the world. If there is a fundamental, globally shared moral vision, this is it. If we accept what scientists tell us about the effects of environmental assaults, and if we accept this definition of human rights, it follows that the carbon-spewing nations are embarking on the greatest violation of human rights the world has ever seen. The consequences of global warming and widespread environmental degradation—flooding people from their homes, exposing them to new disease vectors, disrupting food supplies, contaminating or exhausting freshwater sources, uprooting the material bases of traditional cultures—are a systematic denial of human rights. By whom? By the wealthy nations and the wealthiest subpopulations of all nations, who cannot or will not stop releasing more than their fair share of carbon into the atmosphere. For what? For the continuing consumption of material goods and the accumulation of wealth. “An environmental human rights movement is the vision under which I labor,” writes biologist Sandra Steingraber, “from which I am not free to desist, and which may, if we all work together, become a self-fulfilling prophecy.”⁴

Justice, and intergenerational justice in particular, requires an equitable distribution of benefits and burdens. Climate change is not only a violation of rights; it is a violation of the principles of justice. The people who are suffering and will suffer the most severe harms from climate change (at least in the short term, until it engulfs us all) are unlikely ever to see the putative benefits of the profligate use of fossil fuels and natural resources. Moreover, they are the people least responsible for causing the harm. The people who are causing the harm are off-loading its consequences onto those least able to speak in their own defense. Who are the voiceless? They are future people, who do not exist and so cannot defend themselves against the profound destabilization of the world. They are plants and animals and ecosystems, destroyed wholesale to support the lifestyles of the present. They are marginalized people everywhere—economically marginalized and geographically marginalized, in sub-Saharan Africa, in the circumpolar regions, in low-lying islands, in areas of flood or drought or disease or famine. And they are children. That is a violation of distributive justice.

Humans have an absolute obligation to protect children from harm. The suffering of any child is unjust. Small children can never deserve to suffer, because they can never do a wrong that might justify suffering in return. But adults are harming children, even as (especially as) we believe we are acting to

provide for them. It is ironic that the amassing of material wealth in the name of very privileged children will harm them in time. Consider the poison in the plastic car seat, the disease in the pesticide-treated fruit, the coal company in the college investment portfolio, the mall where there had been frogs, the carbon load of a distant summer camp. But the harm that adult decisions will do to the children who are not as privileged is not just an irony; it is a violation of our obligation to protect them. The world's less privileged children are the ones who will suffer the most as seas rise, fires scorch cropland, diseases spread north, and famine returns to lands that had been abundant. At this point in history, few can claim the excuse of ignorance. Few can claim they are acting unintentionally. The damage to children's future is a deliberate theft. "This is not the future I want for my daughters," President Barack Obama has said. "It's not the future any of us want for our children."⁵

We have an obligation as moral beings to act with compassion. Of all the virtues that a human being can possess, the greatest may be compassion. Compassion: to "feel with," to imagine ourselves in another's place. Understanding the joys or sufferings of others, the compassionate person is joyous or suffers too. Thus the truly compassionate person strives to create conditions that bring forth joy and to prevent or diminish conditions that create pain. But the price of the accelerating use of fossil fuels and the waste of natural thriving will be paid in human and animal suffering. If virtuous people are compassionate, if compassionate people act to reduce suffering, and if climate change will cause suffering around the world, then we who call ourselves virtuous have a moral obligation to avert the effects of the coming storms.

It is wrong to wreck the world. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community," conservationist and ecologist Aldo Leopold wrote. "It is wrong when it tends otherwise." By this principle, the waste and spoilage that cause climate change are wrong. The timeless unfurling of the universe, or the glory of God, or an unknown mystery, or all of these together have brought the Earth to a glorious fecundity, resilience, and beauty. To let it all slip away because we are too preoccupied to save it? That is wrong. And when the destruction is done knowingly and in exchange for something of far lesser value, this is immorality at its most incomprehensible. A full appreciation of the beauty and wonder of the world calls us to action. If this is the way the world is—beautiful, astonishing, wondrous, awe-inspiring—then this is how we ought to act in that world: with respect, with deep caring and fierce protectiveness, and with a full sense of our obligation to the future, that this world shall remain.⁶

Moral integrity requires us to make decisions that embody our values. It is possible to believe the world is trapped between two unacceptable alternatives. One is the moral complacency that comes from blind hope. The other

is the moral abdication that comes from blinding despair. Certainly, there is good reason for despair. Vermont Law School professor Gus Speth wrote, “All we have to do to destroy the planet’s climate and ecosystem and leave a ruined world to our children and grandchildren is to keep doing exactly what we are doing today.”⁷

But to think that hope and despair are the only two options is a false dichotomy. Between them is a vast and fertile middle ground, which is integrity: a matching between what we believe and what we do. To act justly because we believe in justice. To act lovingly toward children because we love them. To refuse to allow corporations to make us into instruments of destruction because we believe it is wrong to wreck the world. This is moral integrity. This is a fundamental moral obligation—to act in ways that are consistent with our beliefs about what is right. And this is a fundamental moral challenge—to make our lives into works of art that embody our deepest values.

A Competing Moral Value that Blocks Climate Action

Even as consensus grows on the moral necessity of climate action, disagreement grows as to the proper steps to take. A substantial minority of the U.S. populace, for example, believes that the steps required to combat climate change are wrong, primarily because they limit personal freedom. It is surely correct that effective climate action will increase social constraints. It will require limiting the freedom of commerce, limiting the freedom of consumer choices, and, in a variety of ways, limiting the freedom of some to benefit at the expense of others. Climate policy disputes are one manifestation of a division between those who think the primary purpose of government is to bring people to common action, so they can do together what none of them can do alone, and those who think the primary purpose of government is to protect individual freedom of self-development and self-realization.⁸

Either way, freedom has value as a means to the ends people seek. That value raises a paradox of unsurpassed importance: If unfettered freedom unleashes a climate chaos that threatens to undermine the great systems that sustain our lives and nations, then what will be left of freedom? What the world faces is a choice between social constraints democratically chosen and the fierce, uncontrollable, lethally unleashed constraints of flood, fire, and the societal chaos that will accompany rapid ecological changes. (See Box 21–1.)⁹

From Moral Imperative to Moral Action

Work is advancing on many fronts to harness the power of moral conviction in efforts to slow climate destabilization and ecological disruption. Moral arguments about climate change do not have to be abstract and complex; recent scholarship suggests powerful new frames for moral arguments. Ac-

Box 21–1. Ethics at the End of the World

It is possible that planetary civilization will move smoothly into the future through prudence and grace, with all its ethical wisdom intact. But what if we fall hard into a future marked by chaos, scarcity, and calamity? What of ethics then?

Moviemakers like to portray a post-apocalyptic world as post-moral—solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short—governed by animal instincts unrestrained by human decency. It is certainly a possible scenario, and even a probable one if we fail to act to prevent global average temperature increases from reaching high-end projections of 6 degrees Celsius. But of course this Hobbesian future is not the only scenario. It is possible that ethics will not disappear but will change. Among the expected casualties of ecological collapse may be those parts of western ethics-as-usual that have not served us well. In a world in which there are few good consequences to be found, for example, we might see the end of utilitarianism, which judges the morality of acts by the desirability of their consequences. We might see as well the end of egoism or radical individualism, as ecological collapse forces us finally to accept that we humans are created and defined by our relation to cultural and ecological communities—that we flourish not as isolated utility-maximizers but as

members of communities of interdependent parts.

What will replace the ethics that no longer serve us well? When we study terrible times (concentration camps, wars, the forced relocations of Native Americans, and many more examples), we most often see moral behavior based on personal integrity, by which people choose to do what is right for no other reason than because it is right. To act justly because we believe in justice. To act compassionately because we believe in compassion. “When we are no longer able to change a situation,” wrote Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, “we are challenged to change ourselves.” This may be the one choice remaining to us even in the darkest futures we can imagine: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way,” Frankl noted. Making difficult choices, helping others get through the demanding and grim ecological transitions of the future—these may be true acts of moral courage. But the fact is, we have the opportunity to be morally courageous right now, choosing to match our actions to our beliefs about what is right and good, just and beautiful, worthy of us as moral beings.

Source: See endnote 9.

cordingly, the world is now seeing strong, innovative moral climate change initiatives based on moral rights, conscientious objection, and religious conviction, to name a few, and new efforts to reimagine ethics as well as the institutions that embed moral values.¹⁰

Moral Rights. The Earth Charter in 2000 was the first global effort to expand moral consideration to the earth. It called for “respect for the Earth and life in all its diversity,” recognizing that “every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.” Since then, many nations have formally granted moral standing and legal rights to the earth. Ecuador declared in 2008 that Nature has the “right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions and its processes in evolution.” In *La Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra* (the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth), Bolivia defined 11 rights for the environment in 2011, including “the right to life and to exist; the right to continue vital cycles and processes free from human alteration; the right to pure water and clean air; the right to balance; the

right not to be polluted; and the right to not have cellular structure modified or genetically altered.”¹¹

These laws have the important effect of changing the burden of proof, so that anyone who would do harm to the earth must provide good reasons why this is justified. But efforts to encode obligations to the earth do not stop there. For example, a campaign is under way in Britain to make “ecocide” an international crime comparable to genocide and likewise actionable as a fifth “crime against peace” that can be tried by the International Criminal Court.¹²

Conscientious Action. The world is seeing an increase in direct action or civil disobedience that is guided by moral integrity—the refusal to acquiesce passively in actions believed wrong. For example, 12,000 people surrounded the White House in November 2011 to push President Obama to keep his campaign promise to “end the tyranny of oil.” More than 200 were arrested, including event organizer Bill McKibben, who wrote, “This is, at bottom, a moral issue.” In Sydney, Australia, a crowd of 10,000 cheered Climate Project coordinator Nell Schofield when she decried the government’s lack of action as “not only embarrassing, . . . [but] morally reprehensible.” Around the world, thousands have been arrested in demonstrations against fracking, mountaintop removal, open-pit mines, and other particularly destructive industrial practices.¹³

In July 2012, the first-ever nationwide anti-fracking rally in Washington, D.C., demonstrated the increasing solidarity of secular and religious environmental activists. Catherine Woodiwiss of the Center for American Progress noted that the protests were “couched in sweeping moral language—an example of the increasingly values-based lens being applied to public discourse about climate change and green energy technology.”¹⁴

Faith-based Action. A growing number of religious denominations and leaders continue to move into the world of environmental activism, driven by a sense of moral responsibility to address human injustice, to relieve human suffering, and to serve their Creator as stewards of divine creation. In the past year, religion-based campaigns included a Global Day of Prayer for Creation Care organized by the Evangelical Environmental Network, with presentations by evangelical leaders from the United States, Europe, Latin America, and Africa. Interfaith Moral Action on Climate, a newly formed collaborative endorsed by 45 groups and scores of religious leaders, sponsored a Cultural Implications of Climate Change program with talks by leaders from Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Baha’i, Hindu, and Native American faith traditions. To traditional religious concerns of social justice and compassion, these initiatives bring a powerful commitment to “creation care,” the obligation to protect divine creation and to honor Nature—a spiritual imperative especially strong in indigenous religions, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.¹⁵



Activists deliver petitions with 160,000 signatures to ban fracking to New York Governor Cuomo's office in October 2012.

Reimagining Ethics. Evolutionary science, ecological science, and almost all the religious and spiritual traditions of the world tell us that human/nature dualism and human exceptionalism are fundamentally mistaken; rather, humans are deeply of the earth, embedded in emergent systems that are interconnected, interdependent, finite, and beautiful. Recognizing that a truly adaptive civilization will align its ethics with the ways of the earth, a

number of organizations are articulating or calling for an earth-based ethic to replace anthropocentric utilitarianism, which measures acts by their usefulness to human ends. An example of such an ethic is the Blue River Declaration, written by an interdisciplinary seminar convened by the Spring Creek Project in Oregon's Cascade Mountains in 2011. The authors concluded: "Humanity is called to imagine an ethic that not only acknowledges, but emulates, the ways by which life thrives on Earth. How do we act, when we truly understand that we live in complete dependence on an Earth that is interconnected, interdependent, finite, and resilient?"¹⁶

Reimagining Institutions. An ethic of care for the earth calls into question many of the institutions of "business-as-usual," including the corporation. Traditional corporations maximize for one and only one value: shareholder profits. So far, 12 states have passed legislation to create a new kind of corporation, called the B-corporation—the "B" standing for benefit. B-corporations integrate social benefit directly into the missions and charters of their businesses, offering if not a moral shift, at least a moral promise. By November 2012 there were 650 B-corporations in 60 industries in 18 countries, with a combined worth of \$4.2 billion.¹⁷

A Paradigm Shift in Worldviews

Along with these moral responses to climate change comes the call for a Great Turning, as Joanna Macy puts it, toward a paradigm shift in worldview, away from the conviction that humans are separate from and supe-

rior to the rest of creation. Humans are part of this world, fully and deeply nested into intricate, delicately balanced systems of living and dying that have created a richness of life greater than the planet has ever seen. In our common origins and in our common fates, in the interdependence of our functioning, we and the rest of the natural world are kin. Because we are part of the earth's systems, humans are utterly dependent on their resilience and thriving. How soon we grasp that reality will determine not only our ecological and social future but our moral future as well.¹⁸