

The Ethics of Climate Change: right and wrong in a warming world

Reviewed by David Chalmers

Abstract

James Garvey. *The Ethics of Climate Change: right and wrong in a warming world*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008. 179 pages.

Although public concern about human-induced climate change has increased remarkably in the past few years, the greenhouse gas emissions fueling the problem have too. This apparent paradox begs explanation, and the explanation cannot be simply that the problem is unsolvable—although not always cheap, solutions clearly do exist. So why are greenhouse gas emissions still rising, and are current emission levels morally defensible? In a timely book on the ethics of climate change, James Garvey seeks to provide answers to those questions through the lens of moral philosophy. He argues that scientific evidence, although crucial, cannot on its own bring about action and that individual and governmental responses to the problem are primarily a function of values. The book's core message—that governmental action to transform human use of the atmosphere is morally imperative—is both well argued and compelling. This central message is convincing enough for the book to have real potential as a call to action, and on that basis it deserves widespread readership. At the same time and precisely because the book's essential point is so important to consider, it is unfortunate that Mr. Garvey's state-centric approach, his tendency to oversimplify solutions and his informal, almost patronizing writing style distract and detract from the book's overall effectiveness.

Mr. Garvey starts with the relevant science underpinning his message and analysis. The effectiveness with which he lays out the most important scientific facts about climate change in an easy to understand yet impactful manner is impressive. Given the fact that few full-fledged climate change skeptics are likely to read the book, Mr. Garvey probably spends more time convincing the reader that humans are in fact changing the planet's climate than is necessary, but at least he does so well. He next describes the likely impacts of climate change and, crucially, explains why its impact will disproportionately affect the poor. He also persuasively demonstrates that uncertainties about climate sensitivity and precise impacts, while very real, ought to be seen as cause for more action, not less, and that the choices humans make now are the key determinant of future climatic changes.

In the book's second chapter, Mr. Garvey temporarily leaves climate change behind and turns his attention to morality as such. The focus here is proving why having morals and acting upon them is important. This is done effectively although the arguments sometimes comes across as unnecessary and even a bit patronizing—it is hard to imagine that many readers are unaware of the fact that morals should be built upon solid justifications and acted upon. The explanations of

consistency, utilitarianism, and Kant's conception of right and wrong are interesting and fairly pertinent to following sections. The discussion of environmental ethics, on the other hand, is not formulated in a way that is particularly relevant to the main argument and probably should have been either left out or better linked to the issue at hand.

Mr. Garvey next turns to the question of responsibility. A big part of the reason the human response to climate change has so far been morally inadequate, Mr. Garvey argues, is that our usual value systems are ill-equipped to deal with the spatial and temporal complexities of the problem. Meaningful change will require collective action on an unprecedented scale, and this will require that responsibility is effectively assigned and assumed. Mr. Garvey convincingly argues that because their cumulative emissions are many times greater than those of developing countries, the bulk of the moral responsibility for harm caused rests with developed countries. Equally convincing is his argument that developed countries have the most responsibility to act now, not just because they have caused most of the problem, but also because they generally have greater financial and technical capacity to act.

The book next looks at the main arguments for not doing anything about climate change—uncertainty, costs, technological rescue, and waiting for others to act—and systematically demonstrates that they are not only unpersuasive but morally reckless. The arguments in this chapter, the book's strongest, are both carefully crafted and strongly supported by scientific evidence. In regard to geo-engineering, Mr. Garvey rightly worries that wishful thinking about the dubious promise of geo-engineering options could delay the emission reductions so desperately needed. With respect to the morality of waiting for others to act, Mr. Garvey effectively utilizes the doublethink made famous in *Catch 22* to illustrate the twisted logic that has characterized the Bush administration's climate change stance. The quote is worth repeating:

“...Let somebody else get killed.”

“But suppose everybody on our side felt that way.”

“Then I'd certainly be a damned fool to feel any other way. Wouldn't I.”

The analogy is, of course, imperfect. In *Catch 22*, Yossarian had not caused the war, nor did he personally benefit by fighting. By contrast, the U.S. is more responsible for climate change than any other country and would in fact benefit by acting. There are good moral reasons that the U.S. and other developed countries ought to act first but as Mr. Garvey correctly points out there are good pragmatic ones as well—to not do so would ultimately be self-defeating.

Having established the moral inadequacy of arguments for inaction, Mr. Garvey turns his sights to what changes are morally imperative and draws connections between the moral implications of climate change and the scope for real-world governmental action. He suggests three criteria that any morally adequate proposal must take into account—historical responsibility, present capacities, and sustainability—and rightly points to contraction and convergence, a framework that would aim for total global emissions to contract as per capita emissions broadly converge, as a morally attractive emission reduction strategy. Although the chapter was on the whole among the book's most effective and pragmatic, Mr. Garvey's talk of sanctions, while well intentioned, comes across as punitive and counter-productive in light of geo-political reality.

Having focused most of the book on the moral implications of climate change for governments, Mr. Garvey focuses his last chapter on the need for individual action. He points out that the majority of readers emit many more greenhouse gases than most other people on the planet and

then refutes ten common “excuses for inaction.” He does this effectively but fails to suggest any specific lifestyle changes individuals can make that might be particularly effective. The chapter would have been stronger if he had, simply because some sorts of choices—what one eats, for instance—are much more impactful than others, and that has moral implications. More importantly, he barely explores the extent to which individuals can influence governmental policy. After having concentrated intently on the role of states, this is a curious and unfortunate omission. Mr. Garvey could have been much more explicit about just how important systemic solutions such as a carbon price are, and he could have highlighted the victories concerned citizens have already won. By not drawing those connections, by creating the illusion that government functions mostly in a vacuum, he misses a big opportunity.

In the same way that the creation of an overly rigid divide between individuals and governments weakened Mr. Garvey’s message, so too did a tendency to oversimplify both the problem and solutions. Mr. Garvey is absolutely right to question the morality of the current use of the planet’s carbon sinks but wrong to pay so little attention to the risks of perfect equality of emissions as a better alternative. He only very briefly engages the Rawlsian view that an unequal distribution of resources is acceptable if and when it helps the worst-off, yet the complex interconnections between economies, carbon emissions, and well-being are neither simply understood nor easily unraveled. In light of that complexity, the Rawlsian perspective should have been afforded more consideration.

That developed countries have benefited tremendously and inequitably from their carbon emissions, that climate change will most hurt developing countries, and that this is morally wrong is beyond doubt. It does not follow that carbon emissions, wherever emitted, are always or solely a bad thing. It does follow that emissions urgently need to be substantially reduced in ways that hurt as few people as possible, benefit as many people as possible, and decrease global inequality. This can be done, but it will require an acknowledgment of complexity and interconnection that was sometimes lacking in Mr. Garvey’s analysis. The book is primarily rooted in philosophy and could not be expected to address detailed policy options. It could have and should have, however, further pursued the idea that it is not enough just to reduce emissions—they must be reduced intelligently, equitably, and efficiently. If they are not, carbon reduction efforts risk harming many more people than they help, and that would hardly be morally defensible.

Mr. Garvey also somewhat oversimplifies the relationship between climate change and the full extent of its possible human impacts. At one point he states that “The moral weight of all those miserable future lives can seem crushing.” This is not particularly helpful. Yes, some future lives will in some ways be made miserable by climate change and yes that moral burden can seem crushing. Yet this sort of statement seems somehow too absolutist, and it ignores the potential that climate change could conceivably lead to a more equitable world where nationalism becomes less potent and states cooperate more. That is not to say that climate change will not cause harm; it undoubtedly will. It is to say that solutions should aim at least as much toward creating opportunities as they do toward preventing harm, and that they should focus at least as much on maximizing the potential for climate change-related peacemaking as they do on minimizing climate change-related conflict. Whether climate change will cause more peace or more conflict is entirely dependent upon human valuation and reaction, and it could go either way.

A final criticism of the book relates to its tone. At one point Mr. Garvey informs the reader that he is “not willing to do more than dip my toe into the literature on such things as denial, dissociation, repression, and the like...” but to “feel free to pursue it if you find it interesting.” At

another point the reader is told that “It seems likely that you have more brains than most people on the planet” and at another asked to “Think less about rum and more about greenhouse gases.” Some readers may find these sorts of comments, which are pervasive, engaging and friendly; others might find them a bit patronizing. It will be unfortunate if readers’ receptiveness to Mr. Garvey’s message is much diminished by his tone, which this reviewer found a bit inappropriate for the subject matter.

Despite Mr. Garvey’s sometimes patronizing tone and tendency to oversimplify, his central message that effective, equitable climate change solutions are morally imperative is both compellingly argued and profoundly important. Until something better comes along, this book should be recommended to friends and colleagues as well as required reading for university courses on ethics. The more today’s students engage with and act upon the moral implications of climate change, the better off tomorrow’s students are likely to be.

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A Publication of:



University for Peace

