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The Inevitability of Climate Change

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“We are stuck with climate change,” say Jamieson and Di Paola. Combating climate change is a project where any likely solution in the foreseeable future through “a transformation in global values has come to an end.” It is not easy to deny this claim. In fact, I am in broad agreement with it, so that my words here will not be devoted to a critical examination of the authors’ provocative remarks about the uneasy relation between climate change and global justice theories. Rather, I shall provide some constructive notes, and start by asking an important question: should we be disappointed for our failure to act? And where do we go from here?

The orthodox response is: we should be highly disappointed with the failure of states to support a shared set of policies and practices rooted in a view of climate change justice. There appears to be a clear connection between the effects of climate change and global injustices, illustrated powerfully by the examples presented by the two authors, where a changing climate contributes to mass flooding, millions of displaced persons, and more frequent (and powerful) natural disasters. This increased global suffering caused by anthropocentric activities calls for anthropocentric solutions, or so the orthodox response claims.

This response takes two general forms. The first is pro-conservationist. This approach recommends solutions to climate change that involve reducing, if not ending, continued and unabated anthropocentric contributions to climate change. One example is the policy of enforcing a *per capita* “ecological footprint” for each state, establishing a global cap on emissions to secure future sustainability.¹ The idea is we could end the continued existence of climate change if we each remained within our footprints. A second example is the so-called Polluter Pays Principle (PPP) whereby carbon emitters pay a tax on the emissions they produce, so as to provide a disincentive to excessive emitting and generate funding to support efforts to counter effects caused from the emissions still produced.² A third possibility is to argue that anthropogenic climate change causes violations to individual human rights.

The orthodox response for providing solutions to the problems of climate change also takes a second form as pro-adaptation. The argument there is that climate change might have less harmful effects if we could better adapt to expected future changes. If coastal communities are threatened by rising sea levels, then one solution is to adapt to these changing conditions and create new flood defences or even floating cities. On this view, climate change is a problem to be managed through advances in future technology.³

Most proposals accept some element of both conservationist and adaptation approaches. There are problems with each of these approaches that raise serious questions about their effectiveness, which I cannot address here for lack of space. Nonetheless, there is a more fundamental problem at the heart of all orthodox responses: they simply fail to address the real challenge that climate change presents.⁴

We are stuck with climate change indeed. But climate change is not a problem to be solved, but a challenge to be managed more effectively. Orthodox responses rest on the crucial and mistaken assumption that climate change can be brought under control, if only humans relate to the planet differently whether through pro-conservationism or pro-adaptation. Its proponents express a disappointment in our inability to bring climate change forever under our control. They claim this

¹ See Wackernagel and Rees 1996.

² See Caney 2008.

³ See Kahn 2010..

⁴ See Brooks 2013.

could be the case if only there was greater global solidarity, a sufficiently low cap on carbon emissions, or some other policy.

In response to my first question: we should not be disappointed. The disappointment is mistaken because it assumes climate change requires human beings for its existence. It is easy to overlook the fact our Earth has experienced climate change, including ice ages, prior to human civilization. Human activity can make climate change occur more rapidly, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient for climate change to occur. So the fact that human emissions are responsible for the present challenges arising from climate change does not mean no climate change could occur if only our emissions were less. Our impact has an effect for sure, but it does not operate in isolation from many other factors.

We cannot stop the climate from changing, but we can and should manage how it changes far more effectively. The risk of a future ice age may be ever present, but it does not follow there is nothing we can do to ensure that the inevitable becomes not more likely, also considering the catastrophic potential consequences at stake. Climate change is a challenge to be managed to ensure catastrophes are not hastened, and their potential damages are minimized. So if we should be disappointed with our responses to climate change, we should for a new reason: climate change is a larger problem than often thought. It is a problem unlikely to go away despite our best efforts in the most ideal circumstances. Responses that show insensitivity to this fact are misled and misleading, and will not get us far.

In response to my second question: the inevitability of climate change need not reduce our efforts but should rather *increase* them. If climate change is not a phenomenon which we might just eradicate, like polio for instance, then we must accept there being no quick fix, and begin to sustain a concerted global campaign to respond more effectively to the challenges it presents. Jamieson and Di Paola would probably agree with this. This signals, perhaps, a new phase in climate change philosophy and, possibly, a new phase in anti-climate change policy. The problem is as inevitable as it is, for humanity, unprecedented. It is a wicked problem, as the authors note, and should be thought of and treated as such. And the real challenge it presents is not how it might be “solved”, but rather how it might be better managed.

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