CLIMATE CHANGE IN 1,000 YEARS

James Garvey

In issue 15, John Shand addressed the moral issue of climate change and suggested that what might happen in 1,000 years time is not as important, morally speaking, as many of us think. Here, James Garvey responds.

If you are of a certain frame of mind, few things are better than reading the work of a philosopher who just says exactly what he thinks, plainly, boldly, right there on the page. So it was with real pleasure that I read John Shand's paper, 'Fear of the future', which appeared in the Autumn 2007 issue of *Think*. It would be hard to find a better example of plain, bold philosophy. It would be hard to find a topic nearer my heart: the ethics of climate change. It might be hard, too, to find more claims in a paper which I don't accept. I'll work through some of them in what follows.

Shand raises a number of objections to the thought that we should worry about the way our world will be in 1,000 years. He cites the Tyndall Centre's 2006 paper, 'Climate Change on a Millennial Timescale'. The paper is a disconcerting thing. By the year 3000, the report concludes, global warming could more than quadruple, with temperatures rising by as much as 15 degrees – that's probably curtains for a lot of life on Earth, maybe almost all life on Earth. Sea levels could rise by more than 11 meters, which is high enough to swamp whatever low-lying area you care to mention. Abrupt climate change events could occur, planetary disasters, for example the ocean currents which move heat around our world – and keep the UK a green and pleasant land – might shut down. Ocean pH could fall dramatically, wiping out entire marine ecosystems.

All of this could happen, the report warns, if this generation does not undertake major reductions in emissions. Our twitchy climate system is such that, unless we take serious action now, the planet we pass on to those who come after us is going to be a very unpleasant place indeed. Shand's bold question is,

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roughly: why should we worry about what will happen 1,000 years from now?

I'll accept the part of Shand's answer. What we ought to do cannot follow just from facts about what might happen. I'm with him when he says that 'The facts are what they are, but we still have to take a view of those facts in order to decide what to do.' (p. 53) The view I take on the facts is coloured by reflection on moral philosophy. I think that climate change presents us with a host of moral problems. You can't find the answers in an ice core or a climate model, though. You have to think your way through them.

I argue elsewhere that the moral demand for action on climate change has at least three sources: historical conceptions of justice, present entitlements and capacities, and sustainability [J. Garvey, *The Ethics of Climate Change* (Continuum, 2008), chapter 3]. There's no space to rehearse it all here, but we can at least wave a little at thoughts on sustainability. The Tyndall Centre's report is worrying to me not just because of the facts, but because of what I think those facts are likely to involve, namely, needless human suffering. I feel a moral nudge towards action on climate change because I think unnecessary human suffering ought to be avoided. I don't know if I can do better than that last sentence, but maybe thoughts on the normative system of your choice will shore that thought up for you, if you think it needs support. I don't.

In a nutshell, I think action on climate change is morally required for a number of reasons. Some of those reasons have to do with the future – the near future, as well as the way things will be 1,000 years from now. If our best scientific take on things tells us that action is required now if we want to head off an extra 15 degrees of warming, the sea rising to deadly levels, planetary disasters of several kinds, then I'm all for the action. Some buzzers and bells might be added, but in short, I'm all for it because taking the action stands a chance of avoiding human suffering. The fact that the suffering in question won't happen for a while does not make it any less worthy of moral consideration.

Do Shand's objections budge that view of action on climate

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change? He offers a number of objections, some having to do with the science of climate change, theology, extinction, denial, economics, and responsibility. There are other objections, but we have more than enough to make a start.

1. Scepticism

He does say that some scepticism about the factual conclusions of the report is possible. What's the right thing to think about this sort of scepticism? We do have a division of cognitive labour, and I certainly can't claim to be an expert on the science necessary to assess the findings of the Tyndall Centre. I do know that the Centre is not populated by scientific slouches. Their work is recognized in the field as good stuff.

If you are sceptical about the science of climate change, you can roll up your trousers and wade in as far as you like. For my part, I've waded in a little, to the point where I think I understand the basics of the greenhouse effect and the summary reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. All of that jives with the work of the Tyndall Centre. If you feel a bit sceptical about the report's predictions, wade in and see for yourself.

Shand does raise a particular objection having to do with extrapolating variables. He says that the report 'assumes that as the variables change, the effect, if any, on the growth of the other variables is predictable. But there is often nothing more misleading than extending a line up (or down) a graph on the basis of a direction indicated by the present data.' (46)

In fact, the results of the report in question have a lot to do with climate models, and although Shand mentions models, the results do not depend on the sort of extrapolation he mentions here. Scientists do not extrapolate from available data outside of their range. They use complex, process-based models that represent our physical, chemical and biological understanding of how the climate system works. They then conduct experiments in these model worlds. Predictions having to do with climate change resulting from increasing greenhouse gases are based on what many take to be incontrovertible facts about physics. What is uncertain is the

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precise magnitude of warming due to feedbacks in the climate system, feedbacks which we understand better as research continues.

If you're still worried about the effects of variables on each other, I'm told that you can arrive at a first order estimate of the way things will be without a complex model and just with a few simple equations treating the energy balance of the planet. Getting the variables to affect each other in the right ways, though, is part of building good climate models, and there are methods available to test them and see how a given model is doing.[1] If you still don't buy it, as I say, feel free to wade in for yourself.

2. Theology

There are worries, too, having to do with theology, the possibility that some dubious theological perspective is being smuggled in to the call for action to help those in the future. Shand notes that he'll be gone in 30 years time, and maybe his children and grandchildren will be gone in 150 years or so. 'I'm afraid my interest in my decedents rather runs out at that point, let alone my interest in anyone else's' (p. 48). He argues that the only way that people 1,000 years from now could matter to us is if we take up a religious perspective, if we think that the way things will be long after we are dead matters because it's all part of a divine plan, judged in the twinkle of some cosmic eye.

I admit that the moral obligations we have to one another are a mixed bag. I don't have children, but I recognize particular, special obligations to my family, friends, and those near to me in other senses. I think probably I have obligations of varying sorts to other people too – people I don't know very well, people I've never met, people spatially distant, even people in the future. You can test your intuitions in the latter connection by asking yourself if I'd be doing something wrong by booby-trapping a time capsule, leaving instructions that it be opened in 1,000 years. My intuitions, for what they're worth, tell me that such an act would be wrong. It doesn't matter how far into

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the future the people I harm are. Their lives can and should figure into my thoughts about what to do now.

What matters is that those future people are people, and people matter morally. People who will be around after I'm gone – even after I'm long gone – are people too. That's why they figure in to a part of my reflection about action on climate change.

Moral thinking of whatever stripe demands this kind of consistency, this concern for people generally. It's why a utilitarian thinks that everyone's pain matters, not just her own pain or her mother's. It's why a Kantian universalizes her maxims. Perspective matters, Shand argues, and 'one can't just care equally about everything spread through all of space and time' (p. 48). That's true, but it doesn't stop me thinking that future people have some sort of moral standing and should figure into our thoughts about what we ought to do about climate change. It nearly goes without saying that you can think all of this quite happily without bothering God. I just did.

3. Extinction

At least some people worry that unless serious action is taken now, human extinction is a serious possibility. Shand asks, 'From what point of view (let us say it is true) would it be a bad thing for the human race to become extinct in 1,000 years' time?' (48). He argues that it might make sense from a theological perspective, from the point of view of failing to achieve some divine purpose, but suggests that such a point of view is a non-starter. He argues that human extinction only seems a tragedy if we smuggle in something impossible, a point of view available only after everyone is dead.

What about our point of view? Shift the question around to one which might matter more in this connection. Would it be bad to be responsible for the extinction of the species? Would it be a moral mistake for our generation if it wipes out humanity? You can take Shand's point in this connection, but still think the answer to these sorts of question makes action on climate change paramount. If humanity goes, a lot goes with

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it – no more dreams or hopes or smiles in the moonlight, no more of the satisfactions we know something about, no more Shakespeare or Mozart or Michelangelo, on and on and surely on. What's also gone is not just all we have, but everything we might have or do. If removing all that from existence isn't a moral mistake, what is?

4. Denial

Shand considers a point in connection with denial, and he does it well. It's usually buried behind a claim or two, but many people have the thought: Why should we give up easy, comfy lives of high-energy consumption? As Shand puts it, 'Why is it wrong, say, to live for now and "be merry, think not too much of tomorrow"?' (49) He says, rightly, that 'the answer lies in debatable values that we choose…it cannot be settled by an assembling of facts' (p. 49). Again, that's probably true, but it's wrong to live for now, in this sense, because we know that living high-energy lives results in dangerous anthropogenic climate change. It heats up the planet, and this has all sorts of dire effects on human beings, people alive now and those who will come after us. There is room for debate about the values we've got, but 'living for now' depends on a kind of selfishness in this connection, doesn't it? Can you defend that sort of thing against the need to avoid unnecessary human suffering?

Suppose you and your friends depend on the limited amount of water which bubbles up from a common well each month. Suppose you live for today, be merry and think not much of tomorrow, and use up the month's water in your hot tub. This results in some unnecessary human suffering – your friends go thirsty for a bit, their crops suffer, there's hunger in their future now, and maybe a few die. The Earth's carbon sinks are a bit like that well, and we are using them up at the expense of those who come after us. Should we live for now at their expense? Can you defend that sort of thought against the need to avoid unnecessary human suffering?

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5. Economics

Economics might give one pause too. Shand argues that 'there might be economic mechanisms that will register changes and adjust beneficently to the consequences of climate change.' (49) If we really want to have renewable resources, he argues, what we should do is use up our fossil fuels as quickly as we can, so they become scarce and expensive, and alternatives will be encouraged economically.

The trouble is that we probably can't wait for economics to do the work for us. Anyway, economic values are not environmental values, and maybe the latter are better suited to the problem at hand. Certainly we can't wait for the economic mechanisms associated with scarcity to kick in. The Tyndall Centre's report, to note just one, tells us that the scenario which avoids dangerous climate change over the long term 'allows for about one quarter of known fossil fuels to be used'. Economics can certainly play a role, but we're going to have to do something more than wait for it to solve our problems.

6. Responsibility

Shand detects a kind of sentimentality associated with worries about what future generations will make of us. It gets said that future generations will damn us, will say we failed them, unless we do something about our warming world. On occasion, talk of future generations is supposed to make us feel bad, and maybe the hidden hope is to push us towards sustainable action. When there is an appeal to emotion in this connection, it can do no more than get a part of our attention. A lot more is needed to earn our assent. Shand is right to think that there's no argument for action in a mere appeal to emotion. There are, fortunately, a number of arguments which do not appeal to emotion and which issue in the conclusion that action on climate change is required – arguments having to do with historical conceptions of justice, present entitlements and capacities, and sustainability.

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Conclusions

Maybe you can think of other objections to the claim that people who will live 1,000 years from now should figure into our thoughts about what to do about our climate. Part of the point of the Tyndall Centre's report, though, is that our generation's decisions matter quite a lot. The only scenario which avoids future horrors is the one which sees a steady linear phase out of greenhouse gas emissions from 2025 to 2200. This means that we have to take action, start changing our lives and our societies, more or less right now. Otherwise, we commit our descendents to a great deal of unnecessary suffering.

Whatever objections you can think of, whatever reasons you might have for delaying or watering down action on climate change, your reasons are going to have to trump a fairly solid moral demand. The demand is roughly this: we ought to avoid unnecessary human suffering. If you think that's true, and you think that action is required, starting right now, if we are to head off the worst of climate change, then you should conclude that the action in question is morally demanded. You should also realize that, deep down, the people who will be alive in 1,000 years matter to you.

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Note

[1] I'm grateful to Timothy Lenton at the Tyndall Centre for explaining this to me. If I've misrepresented what he and others are up to, that's my fault.

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