

REASON IN A
DARK TIME
WHY THE STRUGGLE
AGAINST CLIMATE
CHANGE FAILED—
AND WHAT IT MEANS
FOR OUR FUTURE

Dale Jamieson

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
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Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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ISBN 978-0-19-933766-8

9 8 7 6 5 4 3
Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

For Mickey Glantz
and Rikki Kimberly and her mother

The very essence of civilized culture is that we...deliberately institute, in advance of the happening of various contingencies and emergencies of life, devices for detecting their approach and registering their nature, for warding off what is unfavorable, or at least for protecting ourselves from its full impact....

—John Dewey (1910:16)

One more word about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it.... When philosophy paints its gloomy picture then a form of life has grown old. It cannot be rejuvenated by the gloomy picture, but only understood. Only when the dusk starts to fall does the owl of Minerva spread its wings and fly.

—G.W.F. Hegel (1952:12–13)

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Preface

The dusk has started to fall with respect to climate change and so the owl of Minerva can spread her wings. We can now begin the process of understanding why the global attempt to prevent serious anthropogenic climate change failed and begin to chart a course for living in a world that has been remade by human action.

We are stuck with climate change. This book is about what it is, why we are stuck with it, and what we can learn from our failures to get out of the ditch. Without intending to do so, we have committed ourselves and our descendants to a world that is qualitatively different from the one that gave rise to humanity and all of its creations. Now we hope to limit the pace and extent of the change, but despite international treaties we cannot seem to do so, even with the advice of the world's best scientists. This book is a contribution to helping us think through why this is so and what it means.

Sometimes people hear this as pessimism. I say it is realism. If we are lucky, climate change will not be worse than other things that humanity has survived. During the last century about 231 million people died in war and many more from famine and other disasters.¹ Yet the arts and culture thrived. In some places material prosperity bloomed as never before, and billions of people lived in freedom and dignity. Perhaps it will be this way with climate change. On the other hand, if we are not going to be so lucky, it would be good to start making preparations now.

I am a philosopher by disciplinary training but some of my colleagues will have a hard time recognizing this as a philosophy book. I can only say that when it comes to thinking about the real world (an exercise in what philosophers call "non-ideal theory"), the facts matter. So does history. It is important to situate the subject under investigation in the world of our shared experiences. This would not have seemed as strange to my philosophical heroes (Hume and Mill) as it does to many philosophers today. Still, readers might want to know (for reasons of attraction or avoidance) that Chapters 5 and 6 are the most traditionally philosophical chapters in the book.

Not only am I a philosopher but my roots are firmly in the "analytic" tradition. Those who keep track of such matters will find traces of internalism,

¹ Leitenberg 2006.

6.5. RESPECT FOR NATURE

Respect for nature has been celebrated at various places and times to different degrees.²⁶ It is a persistent if not universal value. There are at least precursors of this idea in Kant and strong assertions of it in the Romantic tradition.²⁷ It is frequently attributed to indigenous peoples and found in various Asian traditions. While it is difficult to say exactly what this virtue consists in, it is relatively easy to give examples of the failure to express it.

As we saw in Section 6.1, according to some eminent scientists “it is clear that we live on a human-dominated planet.”²⁸ If we dominate our planet, then surely we can be said in an important sense to dominate nature. Dominating something can be one way of failing to respect it, so it is plausible to say that in virtue of our domination of nature we fail to respect it.²⁹ But what exactly does it mean to dominate nature?

In Section 5.4 I claimed that domination is related to the extent to which an agent has power over a subject. When an agent’s power is of a certain kind or extremity, it can compromise a subject’s autonomy to the extent that the agent can be said to dominate the subject. In the literature of environmental ethics, nature is often seen as autonomous in the sense of self-determining.³⁰ Rather than being autonomous (i.e., governed by its own laws and internal relations) nature is increasingly affected by human action. While humans (and other forms of life) have always influenced their environments, what makes the present human relationship to nature one of domination is the degree and extremity of human influence. Human influence on nature is now so throughgoing that it constitutes domination.³¹

Domination can be expressed attitudinally in the ways in which we think and feel about nature as well as substantively. We often treat nature as “mere means,” as if it did not have any value or existence independent of its role as a resource for us. As a society we seem to treat the Earth and its fundamental systems as if they were toys

²⁶ Respect for nature can be thought of as a duty as well as a virtue, which is how Paul Taylor (1986/2011) understands it, and also how I regarded it in Jamieson 2010b. See also Wiggins 2000.

²⁷ On Kant, see Wood 1998; for an expression of respect for nature in Romantic poetry, see Coleridge’s poem “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner.”

²⁸ Vitousek et al. 1997: 494.

²⁹ There is a sense of “domination” in which it does not imply a lack of respect (e.g., one team can be said to dominate another in a game) but for reasons that are given below (e.g., that our lack of respect for nature expresses attitudinally as well as substantively) and for others that are obvious it is not this sense that is in play here.

³⁰ See, for example, Katz 1997; the essays collected in Heyd 2005; and Turner 1996. What Turner means by “wildness” is related to what I mean by “autonomy.” For reservations, see O’Neill et al. 2007: 134–137.

³¹ This is why Vitousek (1997) used the language of domination. These are also the sorts of reasons why McKibben (1989) took climate change to mark “the end of nature.” While this was an exaggeration, McKibben was making an important point: Though it does not mark the end of nature climate change is a mark of the Anthropocene. For more on these themes, see Jamieson 2008: 166–168 and Jamieson 2002: 190–196.

that can be treated carelessly, as if their functions could easily be replaced by a minor exercise of human ingenuity. It is as if we have scaled up slash-and-burn agriculture to a planetary scale.³²

One of the insights of the social movements of the 1960s was that a vicious circle can take hold with subordinated groups.³³ Mistreatment diminishes respect, which leads to further mistreatment, which further diminishes respect, and so on. The same vicious circle can take hold with nature. Dominating nature both expresses and contributes to a lack of respect, which in turn leads to further domination.

Respecting nature, like respecting people, can involve many different things. It can involve seeing nature as amoral, as a fierce adversary, as an aesthetic object of a particular kind, as a partner in a valued relationship, and perhaps in other ways. These attitudes can exist simultaneously within a single person.

When nature is seen as amoral it does not constitute a moral resource in any way. Moral concepts arise, on this view, either from divine commandment, as in the case in the Hebrew Bible, from reason (as in Kant), the emotions (as in Hume), or are artificial human constructions laboriously created and maintained to provide us with refuge in an otherwise heartless world (as in the story told by Thomas Hobbes). One memorable statement of nature as amoral occurs in chapter 5 of the *Tao Te Ching*, attributed to the Taoist sage Lao-Tse: “Heaven and Earth are impartial; they treat all of creation as straw dogs.” In ancient Chinese rituals, straw dogs were burned as sacrifices in place of living dogs. What is asserted here is that the forces that govern the world are as indifferent to human welfare as humans are to the fate of the straw dogs they use in ritual sacrifice. On this view we should respect nature because of its blind, unpurposing force and power.

Seeing nature as amoral can easily slip into seeing nature as an immensely powerful even malevolent adversary, and humanity as weak, vulnerable, and in need of protection.³⁴ If humanity and its projects are to survive and thrive, nature must be subdued and kept at bay. Nature, on this view, is the enemy of humanity.

Amoral nature can be respected for its radical “otherness” that cannot be assimilated to human practices. Nature as an adversary can be respected for its power and abilities in pursuing its ends, which are fundamentally at odds with those of humanity. Seeing nature as amoral or as an adversary can provide grounds for respecting nature but can also provide a rationale for dominating nature.³⁵

A third way of respecting nature sees profound aesthetic significance in its overwhelming power. This thought is powerfully developed in Edmund Burke’s 1757 work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.

³² I owe this image to Jeremy Waldron.

³³ This theme was especially prominent in the work of Franz Fanon and Malcom X.

³⁴ Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man* is a wonderful film on this and related themes.

³⁵ Mill is an interesting case of someone who saw nature as amoral but maintained a fundamental respect for nature, in part for its otherness, but also because of its aesthetic qualities and the ways it contributes to human life.

The human experience of the sublime is, according to Burke, a “delight,” and one of the most powerful human emotions. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, the experience of the sublime involves such “negative” emotions as fear, dread, pain, and terror, and can occur when we experience deprivation, darkness, solitude, silence, or vacuity. The experience of the sublime arises when we feel we are in danger but it is actually not so. Immensity, infinity, magnitude, and grandeur can cause this experience of unimagined eloquence, greatness, significance, and power. The sublime is often associated with experiences of mountains or oceans. Such experiences may occasion wonder, awe, astonishment, admiration, or reverence. In its fullest extent, the experience of the sublime may cause total astonishment.

The idea of the sublime was profoundly influential on nineteenth-century American culture, notably through painters such as Thomas Cole and Frederic Church. It went on to be an important influence on American environmentalism through the writings of John Muir and, more recently, Jack Turner (1996), Dave Foreman (1991), and other advocates for “the big outside.” Indeed, the case for wilderness preservation is often made in the language of the sublime.

Finally, there is the idea of nature as a partner in a valuable relationship. People often speak of particular features of nature as if they were friends, lovers, or even parents. People who see elements of nature as friends often feel that they learn from nature as they do from other companions. Some speak of nature in language that is usually reserved for lovers.³⁶ Indeed, we often speak of those who want to protect nature as “nature lovers.” In some people, nature elicits feelings of filial devotion. John Muir wrote that “[t]here is a love of wild nature in everybody, an ancient mother-love.”³⁷ Many of us also associate nature with a feeling of being home. I grew up in San Diego, California, and the sights, smells, breezes, and quality of light that I experience when I am there are transformative, especially when I step onto the beach at Torrey Pines, just north of the city.

This idea of nature as a partner in a valuable relationship makes itself felt in economic language when people talk about “natural capital” or “ecosystem services.” On this view protecting nature returns monetized benefits. Damaging nature damages ourselves.

These different ways of respecting nature support somewhat different attitudes toward nature and reasons for respecting it. Rather than discussing the details, I will mention three reasons for respecting nature that seem quite robust across times and cultures. Respect for nature can be grounded in prudence, can be seen as a fitting response to the roles that nature plays in giving our lives meaning, and can also spring from a concern for psychological wholeness.

³⁶ There is even a blog “52 Ways to Fall in Love With the Earth” which can be viewed at <http://52ways.wordpress.com/>. Retrieved July 18, 2013.

³⁷ http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5297.John_Muir. Retrieved July 18, 2013.

One reason for respecting nature is that it is in our interests to do so. The geoscientist Wallace Broecker (2012: 284) compares our climate-changing behavior to poking a dragon with a sharp stick. Angering the dragon of climate is not likely to be a good business plan for maintaining human life on Earth. Versions of this argument are ubiquitous in the environmental literature and something like this view is implicit in slogans such as Barry Commoner’s (1971) “third law of ecology” which states that “nature knows best.” It can also be seen as providing the foundation for the precautionary principle.

A second reason for respecting nature is that, for many people and cultures, nature provides important background conditions for lives having meaning. It is easy to think of examples from history, literature, or contemporary culture. Blake’s idea of England as a “green and pleasant land” is important in English literature, history, and identity. The cherry orchard in Chekhov’s play of the same name defines the life of everyone in the community. Think of the role that landscape plays in the lives of indigenous peoples. For that matter, think of how the “flatirons” define Boulder, Colorado.³⁸

An analogy may help to bring the point out more clearly. Representational painting is not the only kind of valuable painting but it is one very important kind. Indeed, it may be the mother from which other forms of valuable painting emerged. Representational painting exploits the contrast between foreground and background. What is in the foreground gains its meaning from its contrast with the background. What I want to suggest is that nature provides the background against which we live our lives, providing us with an important source of meaning. It is thus not surprising that we delight in nature and take joy in its operations, and feel grief and nostalgia when familiar patterns are disrupted and natural features destroyed.³⁹ In these respects, meaning and mourning are closely related concepts.⁴⁰

A third reason for respecting nature flows from a concern for psychological integrity and wholeness. As Kant (and later Freud) observed, respecting the other is central to knowing who we are and to respecting ourselves. Indeed, the failure to respect the other can be seen as a form of narcissism. Some work in environmental psychology gestures toward a story in which the recognition of nature as an “other” beyond our control is at the root of our self-identity and communal life.⁴¹

Many of these same reasons for respecting nature apply to respecting those who have gone before and those who will come after. Seeing ourselves as related to others in these ways is important to respecting ourselves and knowing who we are. It is

³⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flatirons#A_symbol_of_Boulder. Retrieved July 18, 2013.

³⁹ For an articulate example of these feelings regarding the devastation of Utah’s red rock canyon country by the creation of Lake Powell, see Lee 2006 and Abbey 1985. A similar sense of loss and nostalgia can be engaged by urban projects such as Robert Moses’s plan to build a highway through Manhattan’s Washington Square Park (see Caro 1975).

⁴⁰ I owe this thought to Sebastiano Maffetone.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Clayton and Opatow, 2003.

also central to giving meaning to our lives. Such respect is also likely to help us from destroying ourselves.

The idea of respect for nature may seem in tension with another thought that is often articulated by environmentalists. On this view the ultimate source of our environmental problems is our separation from nature. The solution is to see humans as part of nature. From this perspective, nature is inside of us and we are part of nature. Our skin is a permeable membrane that is itself part of the natural world.⁴² How can we respect nature when we ourselves are part of nature?

Such claims can be irritating because it is easy to hear them as trivial, false, pernicious, or mystical. For a naturalist such claims seem trivial. Of course we are part of nature. What else is there for us to be part of? Yet in another sense it is clear that we distinguish people from nature in much the same way that we distinguish artifacts from natural objects. Someone who cannot make such distinctions, at least in the ordinary case, either does not know how to speak the language or has some serious psychological deficiency or disorder. The claim that we are part of nature can also seem pernicious since it seems to imply that there is no moral difference between a human being killed by an earthquake and one who is killed by another human being. Of course those who claim that humans are part of nature typically want to deny this implication, but this is where the mysticism sets in.

Nevertheless, I think there is important truth in the claim that humans are part of nature. We can take many different perspectives on the relationship between ourselves and nature. For example, we can see nature as a set of cycles and from within this single perspective there are multiple views. From the point of view of biogeochemistry, nature is the carbon cycle, the nitrogen cycle, and so on. On this view we, like other natural objects, are instances of these cycles. At another level of analysis we can say that breathing and respiration are instances of the same cycles that govern the atmosphere; our circulatory system as well as various cellular processes are instances of the hydrological cycle; digestion and metabolism recapitulate the soil cycle; and we are as subject to the laws of thermodynamics as any planet or star. We could go on acknowledging other perspectives and various points of view within them. From these perspectives we are not separate from nature. Not only has nature brought us into existence and sustains us, but it also constitutes our identity.

This may seem hopelessly abstract or romantic but it is because of these perspectives from which we see ourselves as part of nature that we cannot fully reduce nature to competing baskets of distributable goods, at least not without radically changing our own self-understandings. We are hesitant about markets in kidneys and more than hesitant about markets in brains, in part because we see these organs as partly constitutive of who we are. Even if we allow such markets we will not be tempted to think that everything that is important about a kidney or a brain is expressed by its market value. It would be strange for someone to do a benefit-cost

⁴² These themes are suggested by Suzuki and McConnell (1997).

analysis of a brain as if its value in a shadow market were its most important feature. The same sort of strangeness attaches to attempts to assess in market terms "the value of the world's ecosystem services and natural capital."⁴³ A residue remains of our relation to nature that cannot be fully expressed in the language of economics. This dimension is primordial, and occurs in various traditions around the world. It cannot easily be dismissed.⁴⁴

Much that I have said in this section is sketchy and unsatisfactory. The important points, which surely need fuller development and deeper reflection, are these. Respect for nature is an important virtue that we should cultivate as part of an ethics for the Anthropocene. Respect can be manifest in many different ways within a single person, sometimes simultaneously. Nature itself is not a single thing and we can respect elements or dimensions of nature while expressing contempt for others. Respecting nature is respecting ourselves.

6.6. GLOBAL JUSTICE

One aspect of the dream that dies hard is the view that anthropogenic climate change is fundamentally a problem of global justice that can be assimilated to other such concerns. This view holds out the hope that climate change can be solved by a global deal. On this view an international group of adults, acting as agents of states or of other powerful institutions, pursuing national and institutional interests but constrained by considerations of justice, meeting behind closed doors somewhere like Breton Woods, can put the world back together. Indeed, it is their responsibility to do so. Exactly what the deal should or could be is a matter of some dispute. What happens if they fail is something people do not like to think about.

There are important differences among people who have such views. Some just want to make a deal; they care very little about justice. Others care passionately about justice and argue that justice matters practically because nations will not agree to deals that they see as fundamentally unfair. What these people have in common is a state-centric view of how the climate change problem can be solved.

Some of those who are committed to this view have been shaken in recent years by the failure of world leaders to respond adequately to climate change. Increasingly they worry that there are no adults left in the world or that the few who remain have been exiled to cushy sinecures where they can be safely ignored. The politics of some countries seem to have been seized by resentful adolescents engaged in never-ending popularity contests. In other countries it really does seem like the lunatics are running the asylum.

⁴³ This is the title of Constanza et al. 1997. According to the authors, the value in question is in the range of \$16–54 trillion per year. For a critical discussion, see Sagoff 2004: ch. 6.

⁴⁴ Sagoff (1991) and Dworkin (1993: ch. 3) argue points that are similar to this—Sagoff when he distinguishes nature from the environment, and Dworkin when he talks about species as sacred.