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Climate Matters: Ethics in a Warming World by John Broome
(review)

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Book Reviews

Review: John Broome, *Climate Matters: Ethics in a Warming World*, W. W. Norton and Co., 2012

John Broome's *Climate Matters* is a timely, elegant, and accessible book. His book is deliberately interdisciplinary, as is much of his work in moral philosophy more generally. The discussion of what should be done, and by whom, to prevent the adverse effects of climate change is informed by many years of philosophical engagement with economic theory, especially problems arising in the conceptualization and technical implementation of cost-benefit analysis.

The central arguments in the book are informed as well by a long-standing engagement with climate change science. Broome brings to bear a perspective forged in the work of his role as a lead author—and occasional critic—of the report of Working Group III of the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

At the heart of the book is a somewhat unconventional thesis regarding the way we should view the moral division of labor between nation-states and individuals in mitigating the serious harm produced by climate change.

Roughly, Broome's thesis is that nation-states primarily have impersonal duties of beneficence—duties to bring about good consequences—while individuals have duties of justice, which on Broome's account are largely negative duties, or duties not to cause severe, avoidable harm to specific, identifiable others.

There are, of course, critics who deny that the distinction between the domain of justice and the domain of beneficence is as conceptually sharp or as normatively significant as often supposed. Indeed, Broome concedes some lack of sharpness but asserts that the normative difference is real (50).

In particular, Broome's claim is that “governments have a stronger moral mandate to make things better,” especially for their own citizens (188), but such duties are impersonal, or ones that are not owed to particular people (530). By contrast, the “key defining feature” of duties of justice is that they are owed to particular people who have rights not to be harmed (52).

Many of Broome's claims regarding the distinction between beneficence and justice are not developed in much philosophical detail even though it

is the centerpiece of the book. Discussions of rights, in particular, appear on only three pages, according to the index. The absence of more detail regarding rights is curious in light of two facts.

First, a great deal of the existing literature discussing the ethics of climate change relies heavily upon human rights theory. Many of the most well-known papers by Simon Caney and Henry Shue, for example, treat the predictable harms of climate change as violations of human rights. Broome's own catalogue of the main features of the harms of climate change, which he takes to be breaches of duties of justice, mirror in much detail the catalogues that human rights theorists generate. The harms caused are the result of what we do; the harms are serious; they are not accidental; and they are normally for the sake of our own benefit (55–57).

Second, Broome's book is published under the imprint of the Amnesty International Global Ethics Series. The aim of the series is to expand the traditional conversation surrounding human rights to include topics less widely addressed in that framework. However, on Broome's account, because matters of justice and human rights are primarily matters of individual moral duty, and duties of beneficence are primarily duties of governments, nearly half of the book (chapters 7–10) is devoted to various problems associated with governmental duties of beneficence. Matters of justice and human rights necessarily get far less attention than beneficence.

More precisely, some form of cost-benefit analysis is assumed to be both the most appropriate framework for understanding the nature of governmental duties of beneficence, and Broome explores a number of problems that reveal some significant moral limits on their use. Problems of trade-offs among future and present generations, as well as more general problems of trade-offs among the lives and overall health prospects of domestic and global population sub-groups are central concerns, and they are matters about which Broome has written widely in other contexts (64–68; 188–89).

Issues of human rights and the questions of justice they raise are primarily in the domain of individual morality for three reasons.

First, morality permits governments to act unjustly more often than it permits individuals to inflict injustices on particular people (64, 188). Presumably, Broome thinks that their duties to citizens in general are such that deliberate trade-offs have to be made, even while knowing the kinds of harms that will be imposed on some individuals. Individuals, by contrast, have no such "entitlement." Individuals are under strict duties of justice to not cause the harms associated with greenhouse gas emis-

sions (79–80), and concretely, that means that they should take steps to reduce their carbon footprint to zero, for example, by purchasing carbon offsets (85–89).

Second, Broome assumes also that any duties of beneficence owed by individuals are such that they “have very little duty to do much about climate change in their private actions” (65). Again, Broome’s argument is quick, but the suggestion seems to be predicated on the assumption that there is not much that any individual could do to make the world a better place. Individual duties of justice, by contrast, are stringent, not because of the great good they might achieve by reducing their own carbon footprints, but because it is simply unjust to impose risk of grave harm on others.

Third, Broome takes the government’s primary moral responsibility with regard to climate change to be duties to make the world better for future generations. He starts with the well-known scientific assumption that the lives of future people will be much worse than they would have been if we had controlled our emissions. But his explicit moral assumption is that it is the quality of life of future generations, not the harm we do to present people that is the biggest reason we have for controlling emissions (59–60). But the failure of states to control emissions is not an injustice to future generations, on Broome’s account, for two reasons.

One reason is “practical.” Because of the probable course of continued economic growth, the lives of future people are likely to be better in material terms than the lives of current generations. Broome concludes that whatever harm current generations impose on future generations by way of climate change is likely to be cancelled out, or at least, we can be seen as doing them no injustice as long as they are compensated in some way (60–61).

A second reason is theoretical. The issue is known as the “non-identity problem.” Because the actions of a current generation affect the identities of everyone who lives several generations later, later generations cannot complain that they were harmed by being made worse off than they would have been had emissions been reduced. The reason that they have no complaint of injustice from harms by climate change is that these very persons would not have existed but for climate change policies of various sorts. Hence the non-identity problem: there is no identifiable person who can be said to have been made worse off.

Individuals, by contrast, cannot offer a similar defense against the charge of injustice in the production of their own harmful emissions. Current persons, in particular those whose emissions are quite low, are being

harmful for the benefit of the global rich, and for that there is no escape from moral responsibility, but for some form of carbon offset strategy that can bring their contribution to harm to zero. The only way to discharge duties of justice is to avoid the imposition of risk of grave harm.

Broome's division of moral labor is intriguing, but there are three objections likely to be pressed.

First, many human rights theorists think that the moral responsibility of governments is as much—if not more centrally—defined by the special role of nation-states in securing human rights for their own citizens and by not acting in ways that undermine the human rights of non-citizens. To suppose that duties to make the world a better place, now and in the future, eclipse special moral responsibilities associated with human rights protection needs much more in the way of argument, given the way human rights are commonly understood.

Second, quite a few philosophers will find equally controversial Broome's assumption regarding the place of duties of individuals to avoid harm and duties to bring about the good. Even among those who agree that some duties not to harm are more stringent than duties to aid, many will find equally compelling the view that individuals also have stringent duties to aid others, at least when they can do so at modest costs to themselves. The fact that individuals acting alone may be less efficacious in bringing about the good, without some institutionalized system for collective action, may be an argument for the creation of appropriate institutional arrangements. However, it is not an argument that does much to support the assumption that such duties are far less prominent in the individual's moral repertoire.

Third, some critics will find Broome's resolution of the non-identity problem to be counterintuitive. For example, it is often said that individuals have no duties of justice with respect to not harming future generations because their identities depend on the very actions that also cause a lower quality of life than would have been possible for members of those generations.

But conceptualizing the duties to future generations as merely matters of impersonal beneficence avoids the problems posed by the non-identity objection at a very high cost. To suppose that duties of beneficence are not duties to particular people who are affected by one's actions—what is called the person-affecting requirement of duties of justice—is to suppose that duties to bring about the good are impersonal duties that are satisfied by increases in total utility, even if no particular person is made better off.

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To the extent that anyone (nations, individuals) has a general, impersonal duty to bring about a better state of the world, then we must accept the possibility—what Derek Parfit calls the Repugnant Conclusion—that we should adopt population policies that bring more people into the world even if their lives are barely worth living, as long as the existence of more people results in a net increase in aggregate utility. That prospect is the counterintuitive implication of a purely impersonal maximizing doctrine, rather than a person-affecting account of duties of beneficence directed toward making the lives of particular persons better. Broome's strategy simply ignores the high price paid by a theoretical framework that attempts to circumvent the non-identity problem by construing the duties as impersonal rather than ones owed to particular people (whose identity is unknown).

Moreover, there are other more plausible solutions to the non-identity problem, while preserving the intuition that future generations can be treated unjustly, even if not harmed in the way that the non-identity objection clearly rules out.

The argument of some human rights theorists is that rights violations do not depend upon a showing of harm to specific persons, but upon the violation of a general class of norms for the protection of the most basic human rights. Just as we do not, and need not, know the identities of contemporaneous persons whose rights are put at risk by our actions, the lack of determinate identity of the affected members of future generations is equally unproblematic. And just as individuals have duties of justice based in the requirements of human rights, governments have similar, perhaps even more stringent duties of justice.

In sum, Broome's book is an important addition to the small, but growing literature on the ethics of climate change. While there is much more that can and should be said about the way Broome understands the moral limits of beneficence, and the various forms of cost-benefit calculus that might be relied upon to deal with concrete problems such as climate change, it is perhaps the underlying way of mapping the moral domains of individuals and nations that warrants the most careful examination.

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