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Review of 'The Ethics of Climate Change'

Chapter 7
in *Environmental Ethics, An Overview for the Twenty-First Century*
by Robin Attfield

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Chapter 7: Pages 202 - 220



Module Environmental Philosophy
Assessment 1
MA Ecology and Spirituality

That such a thing happens now, at this rate,
on an overcrowded, over-used planet,
is like a collective suicide attempt.¹



Figure 2: Tania Hoesli, Changing Alpine Landscape 2 [11.09.2013] Pizzas d'Anarosa, Switzerland

Today, however, we know exactly what is going on.
To show no reaction nevertheless, is shameful.²

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¹ Schellnhuber, H. J. (2018) 'Wir beamen uns gerade in eine Heisszeit'. *TagesAnzeiger*, 02 June 2018, <<https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/wissen/natur/wir-sind-in-eine-falle-getappt/story/25167022>> [accessed 25 October 2018]

² Schellnhuber, H. J. (2018) 'Wir beamen uns gerade in eine Heisszeit' [accessed 25 October 2018]

Cover picture, Figure 1, Tania Hoesli: Changing Alpine Landscape 1 [24.09.2013] Stein glacier, Switzerland
The Stein glacier decreased 590m within 6 years (2010-2015), on average 98.3m per year
GLAMOS Swiss glacier monitoring network,
<<http://swiss-glaciers.gliaciology.ethz.ch/glacierlist?year=2015&submit=Go%2521&order=&field=>>>
[accessed 26 October 2018]

1. Introduction

I write this review about the chapter 'The Ethics of Climate Change' in the midst of the sixth mass extinction, where sea levels are rising, polar caps and glaciers melting, habitat loss advances and climatic zones move with high speed; in a time where human actions are causing an enormous environmental imbalance on local and global scale.³

'The Ethics of Climate Change' is the seventh and last chapter of the book *Environmental Ethics, An Overview for the Twenty-First Century* by Attfield Robin. The first edition got published in 2003.⁴ The first publication of the second edition was 2014. The book got fully revised and expanded; especially it got completed with new chapter 'The Ethics of Climate Change'.⁵ The explanation of the situation, the background of the limited carbon budget, the relevance of the Precautionary Principle, the importance of the inclusion of the non-human interest in the whole picture, principles of equity and the limited possibilities of geo-engineering are some of the key points of that chapter. The main statement includes that an overall solution for effective strategies of mitigation and adaptation remain desperately needed and that governments, as well as corporations and individuals are bearing responsibility for action.⁶ Justifiably Attfield takes the overall findings of the IPCC reports for granted and respects their scientific consensus. He recognises that "the cumulative impacts of small contributions to global warming" can irreversibly destabilise whole ecosystems with enormous consequences for all life on this planet.⁷ In his publication *Mediated Responsibilities, Global Warming and the Scope of Ethics* (2009) he examines the backgrounds and consequences of these mediated responsibilities.

After background information about the author of the reviewed chapter, we plunge into some highlighted content of 'The Ethics of Climate Change', try to crystallise the main challenges in order to find the next step forward. This review ends in the conclusion, where some strengths and weaknesses of this chapter get illuminated.

³ IPCC (2018), Attfield (2014); Attfield (2009) p. 230; Grubb (1990) pp. 67-68

⁴ Stephens (2015) p. 105

⁵ Stephens (2015) p. 105

⁶ Attfield (2014) pp. 202 - 220; Attfield (2009) p. 233; Grubb (1990) p. 69; Stephens (2015) pp. 109-110

⁷ Attfield (2009) p. 230

2. About the author

Robin Attfield, MA (Oxon), PhD (Wales), DLitt (Cardiff) taught Philosophy at Cardiff University, Wales from 1968 to 2009, and became a Professor of Philosophy in 1992. Attfield wrote between 1970 and 2010 remarkable 16 books, 191 articles or chapters in academic journals or books and 36 reviews!⁸ He has made major contribution to define a substantive environmental ethic.⁹ Mainly teaching, researching and writing at Cardiff University, he spent one year with his young children and his wife in Nigeria to teach 1972/73 at the University of Ife and later some month teaching in Nairobi. In the late 1970s Attfield became a member of the religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and got thematically into environmental philosophy. He started also to publish in this field. In the beginning it was not at all easy to find publishers for his books, but after the book *The Ethics of Environmental Concern* (1983) this was no longer any problem. During the nineties Attfield was in great demand and travelled the world to present his papers and give talks about environmental philosophy, whereas he continued also to give papers with other themes too.¹⁰ Starting with the first edition of the book *Environmental Ethics* (2003), he also started to write about global warming and the scope of ethics. Soon after he participated in a UNESCO Working Party on environmental ethics (2006).¹¹

Attfield wrote 'The Ethics of Climate Change' clearly out of a biocentric view and is maintaining "that all living creatures have a good of their own, and have moral standing as such, and further that their flourishing or attaining their good is intrinsically valuable".¹² He combines his biocentric view with consequentialism, the normative theory that holds that the morality of actions and policies depends on foreseeable outcomes.¹³ So the understanding of moral standing has to be combined "with a form of consequentialism that recognizes the full range of capacities whose development or fulfilment comprises the good of various creatures including human beings, and which also recognizes the greater value of the interests that relate to complex and sophisticated capacities such as autonomy".¹⁴ Consequentialism "clearly involves obligations relating to all foreseeable generations", even though there is a "spatial and temporal distance" in between.¹⁵ Therefore Attfield shows clearly that the present generations do have responsibilities or obligations in regard of possible people/ lives of the future and that these "future-related obligations need not be restricted to duties to identifiable individuals, nor to duties with regard to the immediate future".¹⁶ Also the cosmopolitan stance declares that "we belong to a moral domain or sphere of all human beings in which obligations and responsibilities between individuals anywhere exist in principle".¹⁷ The main reason for Attfield's anti-anthropocentric position is his conviction than human-centred reasons cannot "supply grounds for preserving enough non-human creatures", nor "the range of creatures that environmentalists and environmental ethicists would standardly wish to preserve".¹⁸

⁸ Attfield (2010) pp.129 - 159; <<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/people/view/135184-attfield-robin>> [accessed 27 October 2018]

⁹ Schriver (1984) pp. 295-296

¹⁰ Attfield (2010) pp.1-12

¹¹ Attfield (2010) pp.1-12

¹² Attfield (2014) pp. 10 and 222

¹³ Attfield (2014) pp. xi and 223

¹⁴ Attfield (2014) p. 44; Stephens (2015) p. 106

¹⁵ Attfield (2014) p. 105

¹⁶ Attfield (2014) pp. 104 and 105

¹⁷ Dower (1998) p. 72

¹⁸ Attfield (2014) p. 76

3. Highlighted content: The challenge of responsibility

Where sustainable development, the Precautionary Principle and biocentric consequentialism meet

The basic definition of sustainable development is that "future generations should have resources (both technological and natural) to meet their own needs, comparable to those available in the present".¹⁹ The current exploitation of non-renewable natural resources is contradictory thereto "unless equivalent resources become available through technology", whereas the limits of substitution of technology for natural capital would need to be argued and the countless other consequences included into the discussion.²⁰

Attfield's fundamental protest about the economic dispute on sustainability in quite anthropocentric terms is in accordance with my own perception.²¹ He criticises that this economic stance treats plants and animals as nothing but resources, where as according to biocentric consequentialism they are seen as "living creatures with a good of their own".²² Further he describes "the carbon and nitrogen cycles, and the proportion of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere" as major ecosystems that have to be sustained.²³

One tool to sustain major ecosystems is in the current legislation based on established principles. In the Swiss Federal Act on the Protection of the Environment, the Precautionary Principle is positioned in the very first article in these words: "Early preventive measures must be taken in order to limit effects which could become harmful or a nuisance".²⁴ So already if there is a risk "of human action crossing some ecological threshold, ... the principle is clearly brought into play, even in its weaker versions".²⁵ Subsequent in the second article the Polluter Pays Principle is specified: "Any person who causes measures to be taken under this Act must bear the costs".²⁶ Through the perspective of heavy and irreversible environmental damage that climate change is causing, Attfield attributes a clear case for application of the Precautionary Principle, and Brown et al. write undoubtedly "ignoring the Precautionary Principle in these circumstances is 'ethically intolerable'".²⁷ Even if it results in major changes in our lifestyles, Attfield is convinced that some ethical constraints have to be introduced.²⁸

Nevertheless we're miles and miles away in Switzerland both from taking early preventive measures to limit effects of the climate crisis, and also from the Polluter Pays Principle. The whole air traffic, the use of fossil fuels in general, the unsustainable conventional farming sector and many more concerns are in any form or by any means far away from a true-cost pricing. And in many countries

¹⁹ Attfield (2014) p. 144

²⁰ Attfield (2014) pp. 144-149

²¹ Attfield (2014) p. 145

²² Attfield (2014) pp. 144-149

²³ Attfield (2014) p. 147

²⁴ The Federal Assembly of the Swiss Confederation, 'Federal Act on the Protection of the Environment 814.01' <<https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/19830267/index.html>> [accessed 26 October 2018]; Attfield (2014) p. 156

²⁵ Attfield (2014) p. 157

²⁶ The Federal Assembly of the Swiss Confederation [accessed 26 October 2018]; Attfield (2014) p. 156

²⁷ Attfield (2014) p. 203; Brown et al. (2005) p. 27

²⁸ Attfield (2014) p. 204

on this planet the latter is still held true.²⁹ In the case of climate change the Precautionary Principle, the Polluter Pays Principle, environmental sustainability and biocentric consequentialism just get skilfully ignored.

To get out of this dead end road, Attfield goes deeper and looks carefully at principles of equity (with references to Simon Caney's work), the Contraction and Convergence approach (which already has significant support from ethicists as well as politicians), and examines Henry Shue's reflections on humanity's carbon budget. He argues profoundly, according to his principles and makes it totally clear to the reader that the central goal of climate policy must be mitigation. And mitigation alone is not enough. Next to crucial mitigation, adaptation is also desperately needed, especially in developing countries, which had and still have very small contributions to the total carbon emissions, but are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change.³⁰

On the one hand Attfield is motivating the reader to follow the realisable path of solutions, which already get significant support in the international political boardroom, and on the other hand he also expresses harsh critique on the common anthropocentric stance. Another main purpose of his chapter 7 in his revised book is "to foster the kind of campaigning which the study of this subject often encourages".³¹ Silently and thoughtfully I wonder: Is the 'realisable path' enough? Are we, the Western World, going to change our lifestyle radically within the next decade 'just' through the Contraction and Convergence approach? Can there be a real solution within the anthropocentric stance?

If we look at the forums of decision making or the capitalist system, we recognize soon that the main priority is to defend the personal interest, the concerns of our party or company in order to bolster our (economic) growth, and later the interests of our nation. Our way of thinking and decision making is diametrically opposed to allow the interests of future people, nonhuman species or foreigners on the other side of the planet being adequately recognised in our current policy.³²

A main argument against stronger regulations of mitigation in Switzerland, which I experience with every polling day in our direct democracy, is to maintain the free choice of product and lifestyle for any citizen. So the system boundaries end on the Swiss borders. We the Swiss want to obtain our free choice for super cheap products and many people don't care about how our products of free choice have consequences for other human beings (far away or in the future).

Attfield has observed that to stand up for a long-term good of humanity is even considered to be unconstitutional because it has come to be seen as undemocratic, in a interpretation of democracy that the policy needs to satisfy the interests of the electorate.³³ "For governments, like citizens, cannot but be seen as bearing mediated responsibilities for the far-flung impacts of their actions and policies", which makes it even more of a challenge to take the full range of impacts into account. To respond to this reality, it would be crucial, that while decision making, members represent the many unrepresented parties (future people, far-flung impacts, affected species, affected ecosystems, etc.) with the rights and power to have their reports be properly considered.³⁴

²⁹ Attfield (2014) p. xiii

³⁰ Attfield (2014) pp. 204-212

³¹ Attfield (2014) p. xii

³² Attfield (2009) p. 234

³³ Attfield (2009) p. 234

³⁴ Attfield (2009) p. 235

Through this method strong voices such as Greta Thunberg's, would amongst others be able to take part on the big table of decision making. How do we get there and what would be the result? The 15 year old Greta Thunberg, one main actor of the current climate protection movement in Sweden, declares very succinctly what the current challenges concern. "The world uses and consumes 100 million barrels of oil a day - there is no policy that wants to change that - there are no laws to keep that oil in the ground. So we can't save the world by playing by the rules, because the rules have to change. Everything needs to change. And it has to change today! What you do now, we children cannot undo in the future. So please, treat the crisis as the crisis it is, and give us a future. Our lives are in your hands."³⁵

4. Conclusion

Even though for me as a non-native English speaker the chapter 7 was laboured to read, it grabbed me through the differentiated consideration and balanced critiques of various positions. Having dealt with the subject of climate change already for many years, this chapter still opened up new perspectives to me. Attfeld has a cautious systematic approach and wrote with this chapter a direct and efficient overview over this huge theme, with a stunning summary at the end. Consistently argued, he analyses the different pros and cons of an issue carefully. Attfeld cites main authors in the field such as Simon Caney, Henry Shue and Stephen Gardiner among many more. This helps the readers to form their own opinion.

A point where I strongly disagree with the author is Attfeld's statement that the best perspective to mitigate climate change is to concentrate only on the limitation of carbon emissions, and to ignore methane, nitrous oxide and all the others.³⁶ If we aim to limit global warming to 1.5 °C, also non-CO₂ emissions play a significant role. It is clear that carbon is the most important greenhouse gas, which does not mean we therefore can just ignore the others. It is essential to include the global warming potential (GWP) and the retention time in the atmosphere into our picture. Supplemental considerations concern there being interactions between the greenhouse gases, which cannot just be discounted either.³⁷

What I believe is lacking in the passage about geo-engineering is Attfeld's discussion about the technological approach of carbon capture and recirculation. In contrast to the idea of carbon capture and storage (CCS; which is technically not possible yet) the captured carbon is through the specific recirculation used to optimise the production process of goods.³⁸ This is a technology already applied in Switzerland where the captured carbon is used for example to increase the

³⁵ Greta Thunberg (2018) 'Fridays for future. The school strike continues!' #climatestrike #klimatstrejk #FridaysForFuture (16 September 2018) <<https://twitter.com/GretaThunberg>> [accessed 25 October 2018];

Greta Thunberg (2018) 'Over 10 000 people in Helsinki today for the #ilmastomarssi / climate march!' #nytonpakko #climatestrike (20 October 2018) <<https://twitter.com/GretaThunberg>> [accessed 25 October 2018]

³⁶ Attfeld (2014) p. 205

³⁷ IPCC (2008); Ciais et al. (2013) pp. 502-510; IPCC (2018) pp. 7; 16; 17 and 19

³⁸ Attfeld (2014) pp. 212-216

growth of vegetables in greenhouses by 20%.³⁹ His examination about this already applied method of carbon capture would have taken my interest.

I cannot support Piers H.G. Stephens critique that this 2nd edition and especially the chapter 7 of Attfield's book misses its target, because of bad luck in timing of its release. Stephens came on this negative judgment since Gardiner, Jamieson and Callicott have published in the meantime three books, which are likely to become standards in the literature about climate ethics.⁴⁰ Attfield cited different publications of all the three authors throughout his book. In chapter 7 Attfield references Gardiner's work *Some Early Ethics of Geoengineering the Climate*.⁴¹ Stephens is right with the comment, that a scholar is best advised to complement the chapter 7 with other readings in the field of climate ethics and especially with the three mentioned new publications, whereupon this is also one of Attfield's purposes, "to enhance the study and critical understanding of environmental ethics".⁴² The further reading list even motivates the reader to immerse oneself totally into the subject and not end with this oeuvre.

With the chapter *The Ethics of Climate Change* - which is well suited to use as a study and class paper - Attfield gifts an important contribution to the study and emergence and therefore a strengthening of environmental ethics in general and the ethics of climate change in particular. He affirms that education in ethics has a high significance for him. Having a paper like this well embedded in this class book, with glossary, reading list etc. is a great opportunity to launch into a deep journey into environmental ethics, to deepen one's understanding of the biocentric consequentialism stance and to get motivated to find answers for all the questions that remain open.

Thank you Dr Attfield, environmental ethicist first and foremost!

³⁹ Climeworks AG (2015) 'Climeworks: Baut erste industrielle Anlage zur CO2-Filterung aus der Luft', *ee News Erneuerbar* (22 October 2015), <<https://www.ee-news.ch/de/erneuerbare/article/32229/climeworks-baut-erste-industrielle-anlage-zur-co2-filterung-aus-der-luft>> [accessed 24 October 2018]

⁴⁰ Stephens (2015) p. 110; Attfield (2014)

⁴¹ Attfield (2014) pp. 214 - 2015

⁴² Attfield (2014) p. xii





Figure 4: Tania Hoesli, Parts of the Rhône Glacier in the Swiss mountains are covered [01.08.2017]. They use mat of fibres in order to decelerate the deglaciation for keeping the tourist attraction, the ice cave, accessible a little longer.

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