

Stephen M. Gardiner and David A. Weisbach

*Debating Climate Ethics*

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In *Debating Climate Ethics*, climate ethicist Stephen Gardiner and policy expert David Weisbach debate whether climate policy should be informed by economists and scientists only, or also, in addition, by philosophers. Weisbach defends the former option, Gardiner the latter. Part I, 'In Defense of Climate Ethics', is by Gardiner; Part II, 'Problems with Climate Ethics', is by Weisbach. Part III contains Gardiner's reply to Weisbach ('The Feasible is Political') and Weisbach's reply to Gardiner ('We Agree: The Failure of Climate Ethics').

Should climate ethics remain academic or should it also guide policy? This is a timely question, but also *spatial*; that is, a matter of one's geography of thought. Anglophone nations share a philosophy-politics disconnect, clout by scientific illiterates, and major responsibility for climate change. The topic of the debate may not be very meaningful elsewhere. In places as diverse as Brazil, Taiwan or Switzerland, it is more common for philosophers to have their voices heard, especially during crises. In the West, this tradition dates to the Enlightenment. In the East, it dates to the adoption of Confucianism as state doctrine and was exemplified by figures such as Sun Yat-sen, founder of the Chinese republic. So, outside its cultural space, the topic of the book is a non-issue, and the answer a no-brainer. Inside this space, it is a question.

Readers bruised by the American Disenlightenment will be glad to know that doubt and denial have no place here. Both debaters acknowledge that climate change is the challenge of a lifetime. Both agree that science matters, and that ethics has merit – the question is whether ethics should influence policy. And both agree, to cite Weisbach, that 'it is in our self-interest to pursue aggressive emissions reductions' (p. 241).

Gardiner's case rests on his previously established points (Gardiner 2011). He argues that 'the economic realists get the problem wrong, and dangerously so', and that the 'official rejection of ethics prevents us from raising central questions that need to be discussed' (pp. 8–9). 'Ethical considerations are right at the heart of the main policy decisions that must be made', such as determining the proper speed of emission reductions, the allocation of emission rights, and the compensations for impacts (p. 14). Together with the corruption eroding our institutions (pp. 39–42), Gardiner's well-known four 'storms' – global, intergenerational, ecological and theoretical – disclose climate change as a problem for which ethical tools are indispensable.

Weisbach's case rests on two objections, an alternative and a concern. The objections are the accusation of 'climate change blinders' (pp. 138–41, 205–11, 218–24, and 229–32) and the violation of 'feasibility constraints' (pp. 141–46, 201–5, 211–14, 224–27, and 232–36). The alternative to ethics is agency based on self-interest (pp. 146–49 and 170–200). The

concern is the failure of existing theories of ethics (pp. 257–59). This concern echoes Gardiner’s acknowledgment of a ‘theoretical storm’.

‘We wear climate change blinders, when we think that climate change policy is the tool we need to use whatever ethical problem happens to be in front of us, forgetting that there are many tools and policies at our disposal’ (p. 140). Weisbach suggests that ethical tools such as promises or contracts are not useful. Climate treaties are overrated: better tools to fight warming include trade changes, subsidy removals or charitable donations (p. 140). Weisbach’s second objection concerns feasibility constraints of policy. Ethics puts demands on us, but since its demands are too hard, they are little more than ‘idle chatter’ (p. 142). The alternative is to trust in self-interest. Since future harms of climate change will eventually affect us (p. 137), we need to start reducing emissions now if we wish to save our necks (p. 170). But we must be realistic, for reductions will take a long time. The ‘iron law of wealth’, that ‘increased wealth means increased energy use’ (181), combined with reliance on fossil fuels, means that ‘energy transitions are slow’ (p. 182); ‘even a 100-year horizon ... is not that long in terms of the needed transformation’ (p. 183). Theoretical failure concludes Weisbach’s case: since climate ethics makes unrealistic demands, ethicists should go back to their drawing boards. They can rejoin the debate after they draft theories that ‘make sense and work’ (p. 256).

Who is right? To this reviewer, Gardiner wins because Weisbach misrepresents the facts, giving information that has not been properly vetted. This dooms Weisbach’s case; his side of the story misrepresents impacts, constraints and responsibility – effectively, every aspect of climate policy that counts.

On impacts, Weisbach states that climate harms are still in the future (pp. 137, 241) and that many people ‘will’ be affected (p. 137). But the harms of climate change are unfolding, and have been gaining in geopolitical momentum. The links of the chain connecting climate change to the Arab Spring and the Syrian War have been described (e.g. Sternberg 2013; Perez 2013; Kelley 2015), while at the Horn of Africa, people’s livelihoods are being destroyed (Burke 2017). Weisbach irresponsibly belittles these realities and harms of climate change. On feasibility constraints, Weisbach omits non-American empirical information concerning the so-called iron law of wealth and the ‘100-year horizon’ decarbonisation timeframe. Weisbach’s ‘iron law’ is falsified by European energy revolutions: Denmark’s primary energy use has remained constant in the past forty years (1972–2012), but its GDP grew by more than 100% and it has reduced its annual carbon footprint by 25%. What kind of ‘iron law’ is this, if a highly developed country *increases* its wealth while *decreasing* its fossil energy use? The European *Energiewende* has shown what is feasible. On responsibility, Weisbach presents a table listing GHG emissions with cumulative changes 1990–2010 as ‘central to applying theories of justice to climate change’ (pp. 163–4). China comes first, the U.S. second, and the E.U. third. This misrepresents data, because not all countries have equal demographic size; more populous countries will emit more GHGs, and assuming equal rights, they are *entitled* to emit more. For accurately determining national shares, emissions must be measured from the carbon pulse start (ca.

1750), not the past twenty years (cf. IPCC 2013, FAQ 12.3, 1106). Contra Weisbach, the crisis is the fault of the U.S., not China.

I conclude with a look at the debaters' common ground: the 'theoretical storm' (p. 259). James Garvey puts it this way: 'We're not much good at thinking about our long-term future, non-human animals and nature, the value of persons who might never exist, spatially and temporally smeared actions and so on' (2008: 61). Granted. But: the damage is spreading and time is of the essence. We must integrate ethics into policy and we can meet its demands, for the reasons cited. Our theoretical ineptitude means that the novel reality highlights conceptual limits, but this is no reason to throw out the baby with the bathwater. In this regard, there should be no difference between philosophy and science. Science is open-ended, its theories incomplete by default. But limits in explanatory power are no reason to prefer ideology over facts, self-interest over fairness, let alone libertarianism over ethics, as Weisbach does. Self-interest is what made market-oriented policymakers lose control over climate change in the first place, as the *Stern Review* made clear (2007: xviii). And if self-interested practices are what created the market failure of climate change, how can the practices that caused the problem work as its solution?

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