
BOOK REVIEW

The Ethics of the Climate Crisis

Robin Attfield

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Environmental ethics and population growth in the work of Robin Attfield

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Those familiar with environmental ethics will need no introduction to Robin Attfield, a leading figure in the field for over four decades. Across his many books, Attfield has expertly surveyed the scientific and historical dimensions of humanity's impact on nature, as well as exploring the ethical foundations of that impact and of our responses to it.

Attfield's most recent book, *The Ethics of the Climate Crisis* (2024), applies much of his earlier thought to the specific, and perhaps most pressing, environmental problem facing humanity: climate change. As with previous works, Attfield's empirical exploration of the subject is detailed and once again concerned with the practical application of ethics. In particular, he is concerned with demonstrating the ethical case for climate action at all levels of society – from the state and global corporations down to the individual citizen.

Attfield begins by presenting a concise but comprehensive account of the science of climate change, exploring both the causes and the effects as well as demonstrating the robustness of the evidence. Focusing on the notion of tipping points, he makes a strong case for the urgency of action. Although his focus in this work is on climate change, he clearly shows how the tripartite crises of biodiversity,

air pollution and climate change are related in the harm caused to humans and other species and in fact form a single and inseparable environmental emergency with interconnected tipping points.

Having outlined the scientific evidence for the scale of the climate crisis, Attfield turns to the ethical case for action. Underscoring the central role of agency to ethics, Attfield focuses on the capacity of individual and collective actors to reflect and choose, despite constraints, actions that mitigate harm to others. He extends the cosmopolitan, biocentric and consequentialist perspective developed in his earlier works, such as *The Ethics of Environmental Concern* (1983) and *The Ethics of the Global Environment* (2015). While acknowledging the inevitability of a human standpoint (perspectival anthropocentrism) he firmly rejects narrower anthropocentrism confining moral value solely to humans. At the same time, Attfield critiques ecocentrism for being overly holistic in its emphasis on ecosystems and argues for biocentric consequentialism as an alternative – a perspective that recognises the moral worth of all living beings, both present and future. This ethical stance is paired with a commitment to cosmopolitanism and the ideal of a universal human community, offering a framework for addressing environmental issues on both local and global scales.

Central to Attfield's argument in *The Ethics of the Climate Crisis* is the concept of need: 'Needs are either necessary conditions for well-being to remain intact, rather than being undermined, or indispensable components of well-being itself' (p. 55). Attfield's cosmopolitanism expands ethical responsibility across space and time to include the needs of all current and future human beings. His biocentrism, meanwhile, broadens this concern beyond human needs to encompass the well-being of all living entities. He argues that applying the precautionary principle is essential to safeguarding these needs against serious environmental risks, particularly the threat of crossing ecological tipping points. Although his primary orientation is consequentialist, Attfield demonstrates that his argument aligns with other moral frameworks, including Rawlsian contractarianism, rights-based ethics and deontological theories such as Kantianism.

Having established his ethical framework, Attfield turns to a more practical examination of climate justice. He focuses on the injustices climate change creates, particularly the rich world's responsibility for historic greenhouse gas

emissions and the developing world's heightened vulnerability to climate impacts. Effects such as drought, flooding, famine and extreme weather strain poor communities, forcing adaptation and, in severe cases, displacing people – sometimes permanently – through desertification or sea-level rise.

Attfield argues that, given the Global South's low per capita emissions, urgent development needs and disproportionate exposure to climate risks, affluent nations – who have historically benefited from emissions and continue to pollute the most per capita – bear a moral duty to assist. Consistent with his biocentric outlook, this duty extends to non-human life, grounded in both the intrinsic interests of individual organisms and their ecological roles supporting broader systems of life, including humanity.

Climate justice, assistance and recompense could take many forms, but all will involve the transfer of resources from wealthy to poorer countries – not only to support climate mitigation and adaptation but also to promote development and alleviate poverty. Attfield argues that an expanded UN Conference of the Parties (COP) Loss and Damage Fund could provide a method of compensating those affected by climate change and enable sustainable development including climate mitigation and adaptation. At the same time, developed countries should enhance their own mitigation and adaptation (embodied in the COP Nationally Determined Contributions or NDCs) measures to achieve the IPCC's target of 1.5° C above preindustrial levels. While Attfield views recent UN COP climate and biodiversity resolutions as disappointing for their insufficient scope and urgency, he argues these developments evidence that real progress toward climate justice is possible and notes a welcome growing shift in UN discourse toward a more biocentric, less anthropocentric perspective.

As a sociologist, I am sceptical of drawing sharp distinctions between anthropocentrism, ecocentrism and biocentrism (as defined by Attfield), and have argued instead for a continuum where others see binary oppositions (Samways, 2023, 2025). While moral philosophy aims to define principles of 'ought' and 'should', my focus is on how internalised values – ethics included – shape actual social practices. Agents' worldviews, or hermeneutic frames, are better understood as shifting coalitions of discourses and dispositions, allowing for conflicting values to emerge in different contexts. Since biocentric and ecocentric

ethics often coexist with more dominant anthropocentric values in routine decision-making, a discourse of 'ecologically enlightened anthropocentrism' (acknowledging that human interests are contingent on the sustained functioning of ecosystems) would appear to be both more evident and a more promising route to social change. Indeed, where Attfield sees a shift in UN rhetoric toward biocentrism, I interpret the UN's stance as one of ecologically enlightened anthropocentrism resulting in a narrative shift toward the softer end of the anthropocentric continuum (Samways, 2025).

Attfield's citation of Graham et al. (2017) showing that concern for abstract future generations is increased by when they are framed as family members (grandchildren etc.), supports the idea that people care about distant others. Yet public opinion remains inconsistent and often tracks economic conditions (Kahn and Kotchen, 2011; Scruggs and Benegal, 2012). People routinely ignore or deflect the suffering of distant others, including animals and future generations. Despite increased awareness of animal welfare, meat consumption remains high and factory farming dominant – 85 per cent of UK animal husbandry uses intensive methods, and the number of factory farms continues to rise (Ritchie et al., 2019; Compassion in World Farming, n.d.). Similarly, while climate concern has grown, many resist changing high-emission behaviours like flying or eating meat (Alcock et al., 2017; Fisher et al., 2018; Vieira et al., 2023; Colombo et al., 2023). Evidence suggests that only direct experience of climate impacts reliably alters both concern and behaviour (Spence et al., 2011; Broomell et al., 2015; Demski et al., 2017).

A more significant concern arises in Attfield's final chapter, where he turns to how society should respond to the climate emergency. While he rightly critiques apocalyptic fatalism and techno-optimism as obstacles to meaningful action, his dismissal of population growth as a relevant factor is problematic. In a brief paragraph (pp. 128–29), he downplays its role, arguing that technological and industrial factors are more important and citing Hans Rosling's (Rosling et al., 2019) sanguine developmental narrative.

This is a notable shift from Attfield's earlier works (Attfield, 1983, 2015), which offered more nuanced treatments of population. Previously Attfield acknowledged the complexity of the issue, warning against simplistic carrying capacity arguments,

recognising that population intersects with development, poverty and global justice, and concluding that policies aimed at an environmentally sustainable population should be pursued (1983).

Attfield is correct that consumption, particularly in affluent societies, has been the main driver of emissions. Between 1950 and 2020, global emissions increased sixfold while the population tripled – with the majority of the former taking place in the Global North and the latter in the Global South (Samways, 2022). Yet the aggregate impact of more people consuming, even modestly, cannot be ignored and, if the welfare of the poorest half of the global population is to improve, then their consumption must also grow. Population remains a multiplier of environmental impact, and as both the IPCC (2023) and IPBES (Brondízio et al., 2019) note, it is a significant indirect driver of environmental degradation. Indeed, population growth accounted for roughly a third of carbon emissions increase between 1990 and 2019, with its associated emissions outweighing the reductions achieved through technological advances (Chaurasia, 2020).

Addressing population growth poses unique challenges. Because of demographic momentum, even sharp declines in fertility today will not significantly reduce global population in the near term. However, over longer timescales, sustained fertility reduction can have substantial effects. The problem is that delayed action reduces these options. Had fertility rates fallen sooner, today's emissions and pressures on resources would be markedly lower (Bradshaw and Brook, 2014).

Attfield argues that population growth is slowing, and generally this is true. However, the concern is not whether rapid population growth will come to an end, but whether, without deliberate action, fertility decline is rapid enough to prevent ecological overshoot (Coole, 2018). For the last five decades the world population has grown by about 80 million annually (O'Sullivan, 2023) and is projected to peak at 10.3 billion in the 2080s (United Nations, 2024). Whether we can ensure a good life for all within planetary boundaries for the current, yet alone the projected peak, population remains doubtful (O'Neill et al., 2018).

Attfield's argument throughout *The Ethics of the Climate Crisis* is one of how our choices affect the welfare of other beings across time and space. The future size of the global population will depend upon individual and institutional choices

and the structural conditions which surround them. Fertility decline is associated with improvements in education, healthcare and the status of women, and, while cultural factors mediate these effects, the case of South Korea shows that rights-based family planning policies can accelerate transitions¹ (Samways, 2022). However, it is sobering to note that, if low-income nations emulate South Korea's developmental path and associated ecological footprint, global sustainability will be jeopardised. Reducing consumption in wealthy countries remains essential, but should be accompanied by ethical and effective efforts to bend the population curve.

In failing to address this, Attfield's latest work misses an opportunity for a frank discussion of demographic change within a justice-based environmental framework. His earlier, more thoughtful, engagement is largely absent, replaced by a brief endorsement of Rosling's optimistic developmentalism. This silence may reflect broader discomfort with discussing population ethics, but it is a conversation we cannot afford to avoid.

In sum, *The Ethics of the Climate Crisis* is a powerful and timely contribution to environmental ethics. Attfield presents a robust, pragmatic and deeply humane case for climate action. His cosmopolitan and biocentric consequentialism offer a thought-provoking alternative to conventional notions of ethical responsibility. Yet, by dismissing the population question, the book forgoes a critical dimension of the crisis it seeks to address. Given his lifelong commitment to ethical clarity and courageous thinking, one hopes future work will revisit this essential topic.

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1 Indeed, South Korea's fertility rate is now so low that the country faces the problems posed by an ageing population - something shared by many developed countries.

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