Introduction

Martin Schönfeld

Published online: 14 January 2010
© Martin Schönfeld 2010

The Phenomenology of Climate Change

Climate change is hitting us like a cement truck. It is big, it is bad, and it flattens all old values.

Perhaps the first thing to note about climate change is that it is an emerging reality. This seems trivial, but it is strange. Information on the causal links is quite old. Science published the first paper on climate change when I switched from kindergarten to primary school (in 1970). So most of us have known what’s going to happen for a long time already. Our fossil consumer culture emits greenhouse gases. The gases add to global warming. This warming creates climate change. But nobody except scientists, hippies, and foreigners really cared. Kyoto 1997 was watered down by Gore. Bali 2008 was sabotaged by Bush. And Copenhagen 2009 was Obama’s failure abetted by Chinese selfishness. Every year carbon emissions keep rising higher, and every year climate forecasts are getting grimmer. And now, forty years after the first peer-reviewed warning (which, in turn, largely summarized information accumulating since the early twentieth century) climate change starts to feel real. Many places we know are running short on water. The north polar ice cap is melting away. There are hotter heat waves in summer and harsher cold snaps in winter. And this is only the beginning. As Tim Flannery put it, “in the years to come this issue will dwarf all the others combined. It will become the only issue.”¹ This transformation affects Philosophy.

Another thing to note about this emerging reality is that it makes more losers than winners, at least initially. As long as civil evolution is not yet underway and planetary mitigation of climate change is not yet happening, the willful transformation of the Earth System will see no beneficiaries. It’s not even clear who the biggest loser will be. Is it life? Surely some life will make it through the transition, and certainly the extinction is bound to create a clearing for new life to arise, just like the climate change a quarter billion years ago that ended the Permian gave dinosaurs the chance to flourish in their era from the Triassic to the Cretaceous. But for now, and in non-geological time scales, the damage to life is immense. The Holocene, which had lasted since the

¹ Corresponding Author: M. Schönfeld
University of South Florida
email - mschonfe@cas.usf.edu
last Ice Age, and which has been teeming with life-forms, some of them amazing complex, some of them astonishingly simple, is coming to an end. The Anthropocene is starting up. Biodiversity across the board is crashing. Life is a great loser of climate change.

But so is humankind. In the Global South, formerly known as the “Third World,” climate change will hit hard. Desertification threatens to halve the harvests in Africa. Deglaciation threatens to turn the great rivers coming from the Himalayas into seasonal waterways, imperiling the nearly three billion (!) people who up to now have relied on the steady flow. Latin America is at risk of drying out to such an extent that parts of the remaining Amazon jungle will become a savannah. Australia is locked in a cycle of recurrent droughts. The American southwest risks becoming a dust bowl. Southern Europe is becoming scarily dry.

And it’s not only theoretical, and not only in the future. The humanitarian catastrophe in Darfur is partly due to climate change. The monsoon hasn’t been coming regularly anymore; the land accordingly keeps getting drier, and the consequent reduction of its carrying capacity has made it impossible to sustain two groups of people, migrating herders and sedentary farmers. So they kill each other. Peace needs rain, and the rains aren’t coming.

It doesn’t just hit the weakest. Since World War II, the United States of America was a cultural beacon in the Global Village. The American Dream sounded fabulous. Wasn’t America cool? Climate change has changed all this. The American four percent of the world population are responsible for the lion share of cumulative CO2 emissions. At the turn of the millennium, Americans were still responsible for a quarter of the total. At present the average American has four times (!) the carbon footprint of the average Chinese. And if this wasn’t enough, US policy for the past fifteen years is the reason why there are no globally binding emission caps. Thus a new reality is the global recognition of America as the willful perpetrator of the malaise.

Not even those lucky to live in the high north will be winners of climate change. Conceivable benefits, for example to agriculture in the subarctic latitudes, will be outweighed by the foreseeable costs. The conversion of tundra to woodland and of taiga to farmland comes at a lethal cost to nonhuman life. And the societies there will need to put up with more and more displaced peoples, climate refugees from down south.

From Environmental Ethics to Climate Ethics

Striking about climate change is the immensity of it. It is a process of a magnitude that never happened before in the history of civilization. Seen from a distance, our planet
is changing colors. The white of the North Pole is melting into blue. The greens of temperate regions are wilting into more arid hues, beige, ochre, and burnt sienna. The blue-green planet is turning into a blue and yellow world. The blue alters chemical composition. Climate change causes marine acidification. Parched lands will be ringed by sour seas. A new world is in the making.

The carbon emissions rev up the Earth System’s capacity for trapping not only heat but also power. Global warming is just one side of the greenhouse coin. The other side, for want of a better word, can be described as a powering up. As the Earth System, aided by the net gain of greenhouse gases mostly made in USA, soaks up more force, its swings become violent. Whether you look at weather over millennia, decades, or days, nature’s way is wavelike. Add energy, and the wave gets, well, wavier. Peaks soar higher; troughs plunge deeper. Weather amplitudes grow.

Farmers like small waves. A bit of sunshine, a bit of rain, a little warmth, and a little coolness are perfect. A little bit of everything is what spells a great harvest. Just as gentleness is good for farming, the growing weather swings are a destructive threat to world food supplies.

Add to this that the human population keeps growing, despite the shrinking carrying capacity, and that we have trapped our civilization into an economic system that thrives only if it grows (the very definition of malignancy in oncology), and it is clear that the way of life we know it is coming to an end. For the factors that create a perfect storm for human civilization, climate change is the new framework of reference. This has consequences for Environmental Ethics.

In the past, Environmental Ethics used to be a marginal field. It was not a requirement for Philosophy majors, and as a professional area of specialization it often was a path to nowhere, at least not into the Ivy League or other elite schools. When I was a graduate student, leading US philosophers in the field of environmental ethics were in out-of-the-way places such as Stevens Point, Wisconsin (J. Baird Callicott); at Athens, Georgia (Gene Hargrove and Frederick Ferré); or at Fort Collins, Colorado (Holmes Rolston). Present centers of the field are in Denton, Texas (where Environmental Ethics is housed) and Athabasca, Alberta (where The Trumpeter is housed). Even geographically, Environmental Ethics has been marginalized.

In more than one way, Environmental Ethics was the opposite of Philosophy of Mind. If you are in a typical department as a faculty or as a student, you are familiar with the conventional image. Whoever studies Philosophy of Mind must evidently be as sharp as a tack, and definitely has to be tough-minded. Philosophy of Mind is a specialization that gets you tenure-track positions at the best places. But Environmental Ethics, by contrast, seemed to be for softies, who fail to make clear-cut analytic distinctions, who
commit the naturalistic fallacy, and who reason about luxuries such as animal rights, eco-feminism, or deep ecology.

But all this is the past. Climate change puts us in such peril that Environmental Ethics is bound to move from the academic margins to the philosophical core. If we define Philosophy as an inquiry into human existence in the world, then surely an inquiry into the sheer survival (and evolution) of said existence, and into the absolute sustainable limits of said world must matter. Seeming luxuries are now survival gear. We ignore Environmental Ethics at our own peril, running the risk of earning a Darwin Award. The wisdom to be loved is now environmental. And Philosophy of Mind fades to the kind of luxury wise survivalists can no longer afford. The old center will not hold; it will vanish. The old periphery, streaming inwards, will replace it.

The new core position of Environmental Ethics in the philosophical disciplines has a price. Much thought in the environmental ethical literature concerned the adjudication of conflicts of interests between humans and nonhumans. Clearly, as humans trash the planet, nonhumans are on the receiving end, but as nonhumans have arguably interests too (yes, even plants; look it up!), questions of their comparative moral worth, and our relative ethical responsibility, arise. Answers were often framed in plausible non-anthropocentric ways. But climate change makes interspecies conflicts moot. The existential interests of humans and nonhumans, previously at loggerheads, begin to converge. Climate change tells us that we really do sit all in one boat. And if our nonhuman kin goes down, the Earth System fails and we will go down with them. But can we still call such Ethics environmental if it starts to concern the hopes of everyone?

The reason for the likely transition from Environmental Ethics to Climate Ethics is structural. Environmental degradations of the past used to form an ever lengthening list of specific issues. Activists who wished to help didn’t know where to turn. Save the whales, the rainforests, or the coral reefs? Fight against coal power stations or nuclear reprocessing plants? Deal with acid rain, plastic bags, toxic food, or stop smoking? Focus on people and consumerism, or on nature and biodiversity loss? Be for or against technology and science? Climate change is the new black hole in a galaxy of degradations. It pulls everything into its gravity well. I predict that all environmental issues will soon be contextualized in terms of the conceptual pull of climate change, whether this is land use, biodiversity loss, environmental justice, or anything else. And this makes things simpler. Environmental degradations morph from a chaotic list to an orderly system, with the causality of climate change at the heart of the new order.

Climate Change and the New Paradigm

But while this makes things simpler, by integrating them in a systematic framework, it makes thinking about them harder. As soon as we start thinking about the emerging
reality of climate change, we run into difficulties. Climate change challenges conventional Philosophy and confronts us with shortcomings in our formal training, in our pedagogical techniques, and in our favorite assumptions. It even puts our notion of philosophy into doubt.

Formal training in Philosophy serves the goals of thinking better and learning to reason. Critique and analysis have been the central elements of this training over the past century. This has made Philosophers experts in deconstruction and dissection. Critique and analysis are central to philosophizing, but we learn from climate change that these tools are not enough. They are necessary conditions of good thinking, but they fail to distinguish us as Philosophers. They are what we have in common with lobbyists for Exxon Mobil and speech writers for US Republicans. In fact, we could say that our old formal tools in Philosophy are good for training oil lobbyists, Republicans, and other skeptics. Skepticism, in the days before climate change, was a respected stance. Not anymore. Now it reeks of corruption and boils down to laziness.

The debates over the reality of climate change that have raged in the United States for the past decade are symptoms of a data fog created by a flood of information. Sheer analyticity doesn’t cut through the fog. We already know how to take stuff apart. Now we need to learn how to put things together. Climate change triggers a paradigm shift, and the new identity of Philosophers later this century will be richer and more multi-layered than before. Critique will be joined by creativity. Analysis will be balanced out by synthesis. Clearing up the data fog requires the rational craft of conceiving gestalts and the speculative art of identifying wholes. This is more than a lofty vision, for it has concrete ramifications. It means, for example, that Philosophers better get over their infatuation with David Hume fast. It is embarrassing to overhear discussions about Humean doubts on causal flows in Philosophy colloquia when our colleagues in climatology presuppose such flows in rigorous models on climate forcing.

Our pedagogical techniques are challenged by climate change as well. Teaching philosophy in the good old days before climate change used to rely on strategies such as evenhandedness. What better way of teaching students about complex moral questions than to confront them with both sides of one issue? Over climate change this way fails us. Evenhandedness has been twisted into a clever ruse of the American Disenlightenment. The tactic aims to keep doubts alive after peer review has settled an issue. Since policy makers hesitate to act when doubts persist, the tactic is effective. It used to work for Big Tobacco, and it has worked for Big Oil.

The abuse of a pedagogical strategy does not discredit it. But what is the use of evenhandedness when the future of civilization is at stake? George Monbiot once put it this way: our dependence on biological production is absolute. As we are hitting biospherical limits in our cultural development and economic growth, we learn that
these limits are non-negotiable. There is no countervailing perspective, no other side, to the fact of the limits. Evenhandedness, here, would be irresponsible and stupid—there is no difference between the use and the abuse of this pedagogical strategy. The biospherical limits are there. Our existence depends on not breaking through them. Moreover, the near infinite variability of our existence plays out in well-defined physiological boundaries. Without fresh water, clean air, and fertile land, we are nothing—absolutely nothing. And this surely is interesting.

The end of evenhandedness also means that the Age of Irony is over. Richard Rorty is passé. Doubts are not cool. Socratic ignorance is irresponsible. Climate change is a bipartisan threat for conventional philosophizing. It highlights systemic shortcomings of analytic and postmodern thought alike. Thinking about climate change points us to a paradigm shift.

And this questions the very core assumptions of what Philosophy may mean. There is a danger to slide into the opposite extreme, to move from doubt to dogma, from irony to preaching. But we can avoid this by remembering that the Anglo-Greek conception of Philosophy as a love of wisdom (which isn’t always requited by the beloved) is only one of several conceptions. Philosophy doesn’t have to be done in the Anglo-Greek way. Consider the Chinese conception of Philosophy: not a “love of wisdom” but instead a “study of wisdom” (zhé xué or 哲學); the notion of Philosophy as a repository of wisdom that works, metaphysically and morally. Another approach is to retrieve the old German notion of Philosophy. In the Enlightenment or Aufklärung, Philosophy was seen as a “world-wisdom” (Weltweisheit)—sensible inquiries into surrounding realities and the meaning thereby suggested. Perhaps a combination of the two alternatives can help. What we need is workable world wisdom, to cut through the fog, for a clearing up of cloudy reason. What we need is to toss skeptical, self-centered, and self-serving inquiries, for the sake of cosmopolitan, future-oriented, and radically green Enlightenment.

This issue of Essays in Philosophy is about Climate Ethics. It combines essays written from the stance of practical philosophy on the meanings of this emerging reality. What these essays have in common is that the authors all present more or less unconventional ideas. Since conventional modes of thinking are at fault for the emergence of climate change, conventional modes are the problem, and it is unlikely that they can function as the solution. So it may be necessary to start thinking outside the box. But how does one do that? Where do we begin? The alternatives may look strange and surprising, and they may sound foreign. But they may well contribute to guiding our discipline to the new paradigm. The essays assembled here constitute the first steps in new directions. It is up to the readers to blaze the trails farther.
1Tim Flannery, *The Weather Makers* (New York: Grove, 2006), 8

2Bryan Walsh, “A River Ran Through It,” *Time* December 14, 2009, 56-62; see figure p. 60