

# Introduction

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This volume is guided by two thoughts. First, philosophers have much to contribute to the discussion of climate change. Second, reflection on climate change can contribute to our thinking about a range of general topics that are of independent interest to philosophers. This volume will be of interest both to philosophers working on climate change as well as those working in a range of other fields, ranging from public policy to economics to law to empirical disciplines including psychology, the science of climate adaptation, mitigation, and beyond. Part of what we aim to establish in this volume is that philosophers are in a strong position to collaborate in the kind of interdisciplinary conversations needed to tackle pressing challenges for the world such as climate change.

In this short introduction, we explain the guiding thoughts behind this volume, and provide a broad overview of some of the key themes that connect the chapters here. We also situate the chapters here within the broader interdisciplinary discussion of climate change. (A detailed abstract for each chapter precedes this introduction.)

The first guiding thought behind this volume is that philosophers have much to contribute to the discussion of climate change. This is because philosophers have developed important intellectual tools and ideas that can help everyone think more clearly and carefully about central issues raised by climate change.

For example, consider that the best scientific evidence suggests that climate change will have profound effects on a global scale, and that what we do in the near future can alter those effects for better or worse. In light of this, climate change poses some of the most profound ethical challenges of our time. Regardless of how we respond to climate change, our actions (or lack thereof) will have good effects on some and bad effects on others. To decide how to respond collectively, we need to think about *who and what* matters, about *what sorts of effects* on them matter, and about what would be a *just or equitable* way of arranging those effects. For example, should our aim in responding to climate change be merely to maximize the total economic output of the world, as many influential economic models assume? Or should we also value the health and well-being of all humans equally regardless of whether those individual people are rich or poor, and thus regardless of their contributions to global economic output? And what about future

humans, who do not yet exist, and who may or may not exist at all depending on what policies we choose? Does the health and well-being of the environment and non-human animals matter as well even beyond its value to humans? How should the burdens of adaptation and mitigation be distributed given the nature of the climate change problem and its causes? The first section of essays—*Valuing Climate Change Impacts*—addresses these questions of value theory about what ultimately makes outcomes better or worse, in connection with responses to climate change and beyond.

At the same time, even supposing we have answered the preceding questions and thus are confident which responses to climate change are better and worse, we must still grapple with further political questions: which of these responses are politically infeasible, and how should feasibility affect which response we decide to aim for with policy and political advocacy? More generally, to what extent are classic goals of political philosophy—such as liberalism, protection of basic rights, justifiability to each person of the structure of society, and so on—helpful in identifying the best way to restructure society in response to climate change? And might the problem of climate change itself provide a challenge to some of these classic goals of political philosophy? The fourth section of essays—*Climate Change and Politics*—addresses these questions of political philosophy.

Even if we were to settle all of the preceding questions about what we collectively should do about climate change both nationally and internationally, there is a gap between those facts and what conclusions you and I should draw for our own individual behavior. In particular, we need to better understand the connection between the best *collective* responses to a problem such as climate change, and what actions *individual* people should take. For example, is climate change essentially a global collective action problem that requires a global carbon pricing response in a way that makes no special action required by individuals, beyond merely supporting and complying with such a collective-level scheme? Or instead are individual people required to take costly actions even beyond that, given that climate change is literally killing more and more people all the time as a result of our collective emissions? The third section of essays—*Climate Change and Individual Ethics*—addresses these questions, and provides a toolbox of important resources for thinking well about these (and other) pressing ethical questions that face us as individuals in contemporary society.

Another set of issues arises from the notorious mismatch between (a) the actual beliefs and motivations of people in the world right now concerning climate change, which are demonstrably inadequate to cope with the challenges we face, and (b) what beliefs and motivations would be needed for us to effectively respond to climate change—and how to get from (a) to (b). The second section of essays—*Cognition, Emotions, and Climate Change*—demonstrates how philosophers can help us to understand and evaluate the nature of the relevant motives and beliefs, and contribute to the effort to improve the beliefs and motivations of

people in order to create the right conditions for an adequate response to climate change to emerge.

In addition to the issues above that structure this volume, there are many other noteworthy issues that appear throughout the volume. To take one example, philosophers can help illuminate and critically examine the often obscure metaphysical and ethical assumptions about the future that underlie influential contemporary policy discussions about climate change. This is an especially pressing topic because experts often agree that the best response to climate change depends heavily on the correct approach to specific questions about the future, namely intertemporal discounting and population ethics. The chapters in this volume demonstrate how philosophy can help us to make further progress toward shared understanding, and perhaps even narrowing our uncertainty about these issues. In addition, other issues that appear throughout the volume include:

- The ethical and political significance of uncertainty, and risk, and decision-theoretic principles
- The significance of feasibility considerations and ideal vs. non-ideal theory in political philosophy
- The ethical importance (or unimportance) of making a difference in one's actions as a single individual person
- The epistemology and normative psychology of risk, beliefs, and emotions regarding oneself and others, including updating beliefs in light of the assessment of external experts

The sixteen chapters collected in this volume contribute to these important topics, and give readers important entry points into the burgeoning philosophical literature on themes relevant to climate change. Our goal was to include philosophers working in different subareas of philosophy, ranging from ethics to political philosophy to epistemology to the philosophy of science. We have also sought to include both philosophers who have already made important contributions to philosophical discussion of climate change, as well as those who had not written directly on this topic prior to this volume.

The second thought that animates this volume is that thinking about climate change can be illuminating for a range of topics of abiding interest to philosophers. For example, philosophers aim to understand the nature of political norms, distributive justice, how to respond to uncertainty, our obligations to non-human animals, the relationship between collective and individual responsibility, the ethical significance of currently non-existent future persons, and when the state is justified in using coercion to promote its policies. The threats posed by climate change not only make these issues more pressing; they can also shed new light on them, giving philosophers important reasons to revisit assumptions that have structured much of our thinking about these questions. In addition to the issues

directly addressed in this volume, other important philosophical questions about climate change that are not addressed here but that promise to lead to more general philosophical insight include:<sup>1</sup>

- Individual and collective responsibility for climate change, and the relationship between the two, including issues regarding historical responsibility, benefitting from injustice, and corrective justice
- Institutional responsibility, for example the responsibilities of universities to invest in research and/or divest from fossil fuels and animal agriculture
- Responsibility for climate-based immigration and refugees
- Climate change and the application of distributive justice to the global sphere
- The potential ethical significance of intentions and/or the distinction between doing vs. allowing harm to responsibility, or to reasons for action
- The epistemology of scientific risk assessment: empirical evidence, scientific models, and subjective: assessing the empirical evidence for anthropogenic climate change
- The role of scientific expertise in public discourse and political decision-making
- Civil disobedience and political action
- The ethics of communication and public persuasion
- The ethics of agriculture, including issues about the emissions footprint of animal agriculture
- The ethics of procreation, including issues about the emissions footprint of having children
- The ethics of species loss and wilderness loss
- The ethics and epistemology of risks related to potential technological solutions to climate change, including geoengineering
- The ethics of difficult tradeoffs, including between meeting the current urgent needs of the desperately poor for cheap energy vs. the needs of future people
- Economic growth, climate change, and the correct objective/axiology for evaluating social policy
- The importance of public justification and the legitimacy of coercion and international institutions, especially in the face of looming catastrophe and unsolved global collective action problems, and general ethical and political principles that apply in emergencies and global collective action situations
- Technocracy and the importance of public justification, especially given empirical issues that are opaque to citizens, and the time inconsistency of the costs to citizens now vs. benefits to others (mostly non-citizens) in the future
- Religious toleration and religion-based denial of climate change

<sup>1</sup> Many of these topics are addressed in other work that has appeared in climate change and philosophy.

In light of the above, we believe that philosophical work on climate change—including the work showcased in this volume—can make an important contribution to the broader interdisciplinary conversation about this pressing topic. We hope the volume also spurs others (both from within philosophy as well as from other fields) to enter these conversations, and collaborate together for the good of society and future generations. In our view, understanding climate change, and discussing how to address it, should be at the very center of public conversation for the foreseeable future. We think that philosophy can make an enormous contribution to that conversation, but will do so only if both philosophers and non-philosophers understand what philosophy can contribute. We hope that this volume contributes to that understanding.

