
Book Review

Brian G. Henning and Zack Walsh, *Climate Change Ethics and the Nonhuman World* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 226 pp., \$160 (hbk), ISBN: 9780367406103.

Climate Change Ethics is another academic sampler filled with well-constructed arguments grounded primarily in utilitarian and deontological approaches, focused on the topic of climate change, and including the mandatory warnings and logical gyrations required to keep safely away from the Scylla of anthropocentrism. Every article—and this bears emphasizing—is thoughtful, properly researched, and exhaustively well-documented. If these articles were pocket watches they'd be solidly made and fully functional. The scholarly integrity and competence of the work demonstrates concise professionalism and attention to detail. It's all good stuff.

But, apart from a chapter on object-oriented ontology and a useful discussion re-examining our pedagogical approaches to these questions, the text contains nothing surprising or new. These perfectly competent arguments are repackaged versions of analyses we've seen elsewhere, in multiple iterations, over the last forty years. That they are now constellated around the topic of climate change does not make them new; old wine can always be safely transported in new skins. A more dangerous and, hopefully, more provocative criticism of the text is made explicit in the introduction to the text itself. The editors write:

Despite their philosophical differences, many philosophers take a primary (if not the primary) goal of environmental ethics to construct a more adequate conceptual framework and axiological foundation for *thinking* about the nature of moral obligation. Given this, it is surprising that major anthologies on climate ethics have generally not included non-anthropocentric approaches to climate ethics. (p. 3, italics mine)

Ostensibly this statement critiques environmental ethics for failing to adequately target climate change, but it discloses a set of presuppositions directing us toward a deeper and more urgent critique. While dodging the Scylla of anthropocentrism, they row right into Charybdis.

How we *think* about things matters—no question—but the current public 'debate' about global warming should make it clear that *thinking* about the nature of ethical obligation, understanding the inadequacy of our conceptual frameworks or, more directly, working out axiological foundations that determine the moral worth of judgments, does nothing to help us *be* more ethical. Thinking about our moral obligations does not help us meet our moral obligations.

This anthology, like so many over the last decade, has put me increasingly in mind of Aristotle's contention that ethics is a practical, rather than a (merely) theoretical

science and, increasingly, of his excoriating observation in Book 2 of *Nicomachean Ethics* regarding the need to habituate ethical behaviour:

It is correct therefore to say that a man becomes just by doing just actions and temperate by doing temperate actions; and no one can have the remotest chance of *becoming* good without doing them. But the mass of mankind, instead of doing virtuous acts, *take refuge in argument*, in discussing virtue, *and fancy that they are pursuing philosophy and that this will make them good men*. In so doing they act like invalids who listen carefully to what the doctor says, but entirely neglect to carry out his prescriptions. That sort of philosophy will no more lead to a healthy state of soul than will the mode of treatment produce health of body (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1105b10, italics mine).

Our ethical motivations (how our dispositions have been habituated), and not our intellectual inferences, determine the ends for which we act. It is our belief in, and our habituations with regard to, the possession of property rights or the primacy of pleasure for instance, that determine *what* we choose to do. These culturally acquired habits are, arguably, the two central players in planetary degradation. So long as academic responses to nature remain theoretical, rather than practical, any proposed solutions will remain theoretical. Constructing adequate conceptual frameworks—the central task of academic ethics over the past few centuries—has allowed academic privilege to divide the field into increasingly smaller and concise partitions, with increasingly hyphenated conceptual fences (e.g. environmental-ethics, climate-change-environmental-ethics, decolonialized-climate-change-environmental-ethics, etc.). This tactic has allowed us to neglect our own prescriptions and take refuge in endless discussions about the nature of virtue, like Aristotle's invalids comparing symptoms, and thus avoid taking our own medicine. Like Charybdis, these discussions tend to swallow the practical relevance of all that thinking.

Such arguments remain theoretically interesting of course but, practically speaking, they remain irrelevant to the ethical well-being of the planet and, more directly, to our own species. Doing something about climate change requires us to consider it a practical and not merely theoretical matter. Continuing to emphasize the latter to the exclusion of the former will allow us to continue creating clever new conceptual models without ever having *to do* anything—which begins to sound increasingly like thinking while Rome burns.

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