

Come Hell and High Water by Paul Keeling

According to Plato, Socrates was a philosophical “gadfly” who buzzed around ancient Athens challenging, and thus irritating, the *status quo*. “We are discussing no small matter,” Socrates said, “but how we ought to live.”

The history of western philosophy, beginning with Socrates, has concerned itself predominantly with how humans ought to treat each other, but the pace and scale of our current destruction of the global environment, especially anthropogenic climate change, now forces us to consider the moral standing of entities whose existence was previously unknown or whose welfare was taken for granted; unencountered human beings on the other side of the planet, future generations of humans who do not yet exist, as well as other species, ecosystems, and even the earth itself. Wrecking our home, the earth, is no small matter indeed and adds new significance and urgency to Socrates’s question of how we ought to live. We now need philosophers to explain our moral responsibility for the environment and help us navigate this unfamiliar moral territory.

In the November/December 2011 issue of *Philosophy Now* magazine, I published an article entitled “Greening the Gadfly” in which I urged philosophers to modernize their traditional role of “gadfly” and attend to the destruction of the global environment as an urgent moral problem of the highest priority. The word “philosophy” means “love of wisdom.” Wrecking your home is very unwise. So anyone who claims to be a philosopher must also think that wrecking our home, the earth, is unacceptable and demands our serious attention.

While “Greening the Gadfly” was in review, I learned of a new book called *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*, co-edited by Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael Nelson, both professional philosophers. Nelson and Moore, I’m happy to say, are green gadflies. They solicited over 80 essays from a diverse array of ethical and intellectual visionaries, including religious leaders, scientists, business experts, teachers, aboriginal activists and philosophers, who all, despite their different worldviews and professional expertise, call us to honor our moral responsibilities to the planet. Although the contributors sometimes take different paths to get there, their essays ultimately converge upon what the editors call the “missing moral premise,” which links the sinister environmental facts with the moral obligation to take decisive action:

The factual premise: If we do not act soon, anthropogenic environmental changes will bring serious harms to the future.

The moral premise: We have a moral obligation to avert harms to the future so as to leave a world as rich in possibility as the world we inherited.

Conclusion: Therefore we have a moral obligation to act, and act now.

The scientific community has reached wide consensus on the factual premise—the information is in. *Moral Ground* makes the case for the moral premise. The conclusion follows from the premises, which means that we cannot escape the obligation to act and at the same time profess to be a moral person.

When I got my hands on *Moral Ground*, I was especially curious to see what the professional philosophers, about 13 of them by my count, had to contribute to this argument. Of particular interest to me was the fact that many of us *do* take some responsibility for our ongoing individual and collective environmental misdeeds, but are simply paralyzed by the enormity and complexity of the problem. Virtually every aspect of modern life involves cooking the planet by burning fossil fuels, strip mining mountainsides, clear-cutting forests, paving wetlands—in short, rapaciously plundering the earth—and we now know what harm these are causing to present and future generations of earth's human and nonhuman inhabitants. This means that virtually every aspect of modern life is morally implicated to some degree. But many of these environmental harms, such as species extinction, ecosystem collapse and climate change, can only be averted by collective, coordinated action. Right now this isn't happening; our political leaders are failing to enact the necessary policies, such as putting a price on carbon to reflect its true environmental costs, or stopping the subsidy of environmentally damaging practices. So we are forced to either opt out of modern life or save the planet by acting on our own—and both seem impossible. If our collective, political efforts are insufficient or fail altogether, do we still have a moral obligation to act now as individuals?

It is very tempting to think that we don't. In a recent *New York Times* editorial entitled "Going Green and Getting Nowhere," Gernot Wagner argued that the changes necessary to do something about climate change are "so large and profound that they are beyond the reach of individual action" and that "only the right economic policies will enable us as individuals to be guided by self-interest and still do the right thing." Try to become a no-impact man, writes Wagner, and "you would, in fact, have no impact on the planet." NASA climate scientist James Hansen has pointed out that even if masses of conscientious, environmentally minded consumers stopped consuming oil, this would just lower the price of oil, and the oil would then be burned by people elsewhere who have other, competing moral concerns; what we need is a *policy* that's put a price on carbon. He says that without such policies it is "game over" for the climate. These arguments are convincing, but they troublingly imply that it is morally acceptable to continue a carbon-intensive lifestyle in the absence of a collective policy, because reducing our own individual emissions, even to zero, won't make any difference. This generates a paradox. The paradox is that it is morally acceptable for individuals to continue living in a way that, collectively, is morally unacceptable. We are on the hook and off the hook at the same time. So it is no surprise that even the most conscientious among us go about our business as usual and accept an unacceptable lifestyle. We just live with the cognitive dissonance, hoping that a solution will magically appear.

Ethical theory can help explain how this paradox arises. Both Wagner's and Hansen's arguments are what philosophers call *consequentialist*. Consequentialism is the ethical doctrine that the morality of an action is determined by its results or consequences. Actions that have positive

results are to be pursued, actions that have negative results are not. The principle of the specific action undertaken, or means, is of less importance than the results, or ends, that the action brings about. This is a plausible theory, but in the case of environmental problems, collective, coordinated action at the policy level is probably the only means to achieving positive results. Without such collective action, our individual efforts will make no positive difference and may even involve morally significant sacrifices for our own lives. On consequentialist grounds we would do better to give up and enjoy the fossil fuel party while it lasts.

But, for some of us at least, this seems wrong, and the reason is that, as the philosophy contributions in *Moral Ground* make clear, we in the modern world tend to be overly preoccupied with “getting results.” We have mostly forgotten the ancient Greek emphasis on personal virtue. This Aristotelian tradition is less concerned with the question “What will have the best results?” than it is with the question “What kind of a person should I be?” For example, we teach our kids to say “please” and “thank you” not so much because this practice produces better outcomes but because we want our children to be the kind of people who don’t take presumptively and who are grateful for what is given. In other words, being respectful is a virtue. Human virtues of respect, sensitivity, gratitude, aesthetic awareness and the capacity to love can also be directed toward the natural environment and are intrinsically motivating. *Of course* reducing our own ecological footprint or blocking a coal train shipment for a day will not save the planet, but if we treat these actions as environmental virtues and not just as a means of saving the planet, then their efficaciousness is rather beside the point. What matters is acting virtuously, come hell or high water.

We may in fact be facing hell *and* high water—in the form of parched agricultural land and charred forests, rising sea levels and floods. Perhaps no surprise then that of the 13 contributions by philosophers in *Moral Ground*, 10 of them count as virtue-based arguments. For these philosophers, what we call the environmental “crisis” is also a crisis in values. Dale Jamieson argues that the environmental crisis compels us to consider what makes our lives meaningful. For Jamieson, respectful care for nature and future generations is valuable in itself, and “what makes our lives worth living is the activities we engage in that are in accordance with our values, whatever happens in the world.” Michael Nelson calls this “caring without hope” and urges us to find motivation that “stands stubbornly apart from, not held hostage to, the consequences of our actions.” Nelson’s is a not-in-my-name approach, which involves “a commitment where we quietly, almost submissively, prop ourselves against those forces in the world that are working to bring ruin.”

Wagner and Hansen are right that we have a moral obligation to agitate for collective policies that reduce harm and prevent a bad situation from being even worse. But if our leaders fail us, and hell and high water are what we are facing, we should remember that acts of resistance and acts of care do not require *hope*. When Rosa Parks refused to surrender her bus seat to a white passenger in Montgomery Alabama in 1955, she didn’t act because she thought it would do any good. She acted because she refused to go along with something she thought was morally wrong and was “tired of giving in.” Righteous anger, indignation, outrage and disgust,

as well as love and compassion, can inspire action. When action springs from these motivations, the efficaciousness of the action is irrelevant. “What I am responsible for,” writes Jamieson, “is trying to make the world better. Whether or not I succeed is not entirely up to me.”

My own sense is that there are still consequentialist grounds for striving to prevent the worst possible environmental outcomes, even if a significantly degraded environment is unavoidable in the future. Failing that, if our environmental situation is basically hopeless and hell and high water are what we are facing, then virtue-based action may be the only possibility for living a moral life, as Dale Jamieson et al argue. But this will also need to be supplemented with a consequentialist shift in emphasis from mitigating and preventing environmental harm to adapting and surviving in an environmentally degraded world. We may have a moral obligation to prepare our children for making a living on a much tougher, harsher planet. That might mean teaching them to live more simply and lowering their material expectations. It might mean giving them basic skills around things like food and water security; the practical know-how of our great grandparents. Ironically, this could breed a new ecological consciousness, a renewed understanding of our interconnectedness with the natural world. But it won't be easy. Most of us (including me) lack these practical skills.

Perhaps what impressed me most about *Moral Ground* is the broad consensus that we all have a moral obligation to act, despite some divergences on what explains that obligation and what our obligation actually is. There is something here for everyone. Some of the arguments on offer are explicitly based in religion, while many others are secular. Some of the appeals to take action are what philosophers call “anthropocentric” (for humans' sake), while others are nonanthropocentric (for the sake of the planet as a whole). But as I was hit again and again from all sides with convincing (though variously formulated and expressed) arguments to accept moral responsibility for the planet and its future, these began to look like distinctions without much of a difference. This moral smorgasbord ends up being a strength rather than a weakness. Given the overwhelming urgency of the problems we are causing, we need all the reasons we can get to persuade us to take some action. And I'm happy to see that the gadflies are buzzing.