

## **Andrew Light**

*George Mason University*

Most environmental philosophers work on ethical issues concerning the environment and we try to really think about what the value of nature is and the value of different forms of the human interaction with nature, which are not just simply reducible to economic value. So I think that the early history of the field is really defined by philosophers trying to say that an exercise in cost benefit analysis – if we're looking at say a proposal to put in a new dam and a river – is not sufficient to answer the question of what's the value of the project and whether or not something is being destroyed in the process that can't be replaced.

So for myself, I look a lot at issues involving ethics of restoration ecology and try to recreate ecosystems that don't exist any more. Such as trying to restore the environment, the ecosystem of tall grass prairies in the Midwest. Trying to restore the communities of coral reefs in the critically endangered ocean communities and, like a lot of other people, now I'm thinking a lot about ethical issues involving climate change. Especially involving questions about what sorts of obligations we have to future generations to do something about the problem of global warming that we have created.

There's a whole bunch of things involved in climate change. One set of issues involves the assumption that we do have some kind of positive moral obligations to future generations to provide them with as much and as good a quality of life that we have enjoyed. We have negative obligations, for example, not to leave around huge problems that they're not going to be able to deal with. So in that respect, climate change is one of the most important problems that we've got in terms of our obligations to future generations because of the depth of impact that global warming could possibly have on future quality of life.

We can think about this in a number of different ways. In terms of what kind of environment they're going to inherit, whether it would be possible for them to enjoy not only the diversity of life around them, of non-human life, but also the diversity of different kinds of human life that we have given the really inviting environment in which our species has evolved.

You know Jim Hansen [of NASA] has said in a recent paper that it looks like we are rapidly leaving the kind of carbon load in the atmosphere that led to the evolution of our species and the flourishing of diverse forms of human life. If we are leaving this world then what will the next world look like? And then the questions are do we spend the resources that we have in making it possible for them to adapt to a rapidly changing climate or do we mitigate the problem and hopefully bring down the carbon load so that it won't affect them as adversely? That's in terms of thinking about obligations to future generations and I think more recently given how many things we can point to around the world where it looks like climate change is in fact causing problems in "the here and now" – not the distant future generations that we may never encounter – but the people that we currently share the planet with. On just about every metric of looking at possible

harms to persons, public health issues, access to clean water, clean air, questions about children's health about economic security, all of these are exacerbated by climate change.

The one thing we're pretty certain of is that the carbon that is in the atmosphere – that is causing climate change now – was put there by us in the developed world and it is a disproportionate share. This gives us a direct causal link to the kinds of responsibilities that we will have to these other people. So it's no longer a question of "it's unfortunate that people live in Africa and they are impoverished and because of a history of colonialism or the particular geographic conditions or climatic conditions it's much more difficult for them to have been able to build as strong and as viable economy as we have." It's no longer a question of charity. Now we have direct responsibility because we are causing the exacerbation of those questions of public welfare and public health.

We [in the developed world] have a direct responsibility in terms of causing that problem. The emissions in Peru did not cause the melting of the glaciers there. This is unlike in the past when we have seen environmental problems being much more what we would call a "point source problem." For example, you've got a polluter that's polluting a river system – putting a toxic substance in there – it's coming out of more or less one source and it's causing a problem at that location. Then the responsibility is at that location. And in the past, we might have looked at very complicated arguments about what are the sorts of global economic pressures are causing these kinds of pollution problems in developing countries. To what extent are economic forces in the developed world exacerbating the creation of this kind of polluting firm? To what extent are we shipping off our polluting industries to other countries? And now the argument is really not that complicated. We are putting the carbon in the atmosphere and that is leading to the loss of these glaciers that is directly impacting the people [of Peru].

Unfortunately, it looks like we're not going to be able to mitigate climate change to any degree to save those places insofar as they are dependent on that particular kind of ecosystem. So the best that we can do at this point is to do some kind of rigorous forecasting exercises to find the places in the world that are going to go first and do everything we can to try to make it possible for those people to have the kinds of livelihoods that they will choose to have. Not the ones that they are unfortunately forced into because of these [environmental] problems.

[The United States is not solely responsible.] It's true that we have just been eclipsed by China in terms of absolute tonnage of CO-2 that goes into the atmosphere, but we are the largest emitter per capita. And that's the problem and that's the greater degree of responsibility. When we think about this, it raises all sorts of moral questions because essentially we've got a classic "collective action problem." We all think that we have to do certain kinds of things in our lives in order to increase our own welfare, increase the welfare of our children. And we think that all those things — from driving our kids to school, to driving them to soccer practice, to the various ways in which we heat our homes — that we do in our every day lives that rely on carbon energy of some form help us. But collectively, when we all do this at the same time, we are causing worse problems

for future generations. So there is a kind of inability to see that we are not acting in our own best interest.

One of the moral questions is “*whose responsibility is this?*” Is this up to individuals to voluntarily curb their behavior? Or is the way that we’re going to get to a more sustainable collective way of living going to come through some kind of government action? Action that in fact is going to redesign the world in a certain way so that the smartest way we can live – the only way we can live – is one that collectively decreases our carbon footprint? I’m a proponent of the latter. I think that it’s too much to ask individuals to make all of their changes in their every day lives. A lot of us live in cities where we don’t have meaningful options for some forms of transportation that in fact would give us a smaller individual carbon footprint. And so that’s where the government really does have to step in and help to redesign the infrastructure of cities and redesign transportation systems. Redesign the ways in which we get our energy, so that when we turn on the light switch, when we get in our cars, we are just not causing this problem which we think is giving us immediate gain, but in the long run is going to hurt us or at least certainly hurt our children and our grandchildren.

For a long time, I lived in New York City near South Street Seaport, which is famous the world over for being a kind of a Disneyland, a shopping mall of a seaport. It is not a living, working port. It’s got some old ships in it, but it’s a tourist attraction. And if I imagine a world in which that’s the best that we have as a vestige of what was a very significant part of human history, which was our life in relationship to the oceans and the importance of our life in relationship to the oceans, then we’ll have lost something incredibly important in human history.

We will have lost the vestige of a segment of our evolution – not as a species, but certainly our cultural evolution in relationship to each other, in relationship to the other species that we share the planet with especially the ocean species. That culture is represented everywhere. We find it in our art. We find it in our literature. We find it in folk tales and folk wisdom. We find it in individual stories that family members pass down from generation to generation to generation. We are a people who were of the sea, either through our knowledge of working through a navy or some sort of commercial endeavor. And when that gets lost it would be as important a loss as if for some reason we lost our relationship with the land by losing traditional forms of agriculture. If there weren’t any small farming firms any more and there were only giant agricultural enterprises growing genetically modified food, then we would have lost something extremely important.

It’s also important because we really don’t know what the future holds. I mean just from the perspective of precaution. We certainly don’t want to lose the forms of knowledge that we have gained over hundreds and thousands of years of having some kind of relationship with the oceans and with the seas. We don’t know what’s going to come down the pike – natural disasters, human made disasters, some combination of the two – and so to lose that knowledge by losing all these places, turning them only into museum pieces is to endanger ourselves.