

Ethical Response to Global Warming

(Notes from Dr. Sara Shady's presentation at the Friends of the Bethel University Library's Forum: "Christian Responses to Global Warming" on May 7, 2006)

When I began thinking about what ethical theory to use as the basis of my argument for why we have an ethical obligation to halt or even reverse global warming, I soon realized that it would be a difficult choice. Nearly every ethical theory tells us that we should be doing something about global warming. From the perspective of utilitarianism, we must look at the consequences of our actions to determine if they are right or wrong. An action is right to the degree that it promotes pleasure and minimizes pain for all affected by the action as far into the future as can be predicted, and wrong to the degree that it results in more pain than pleasure. Clearly the long term consequences of global warming will produce more harm than benefit, so we ought to fight against global warming. From the perspective of deontological ethics, we have a duty to respect and protect the rights of others. One can certainly argue that neglecting global warming neglects the rights of present and future generations to inhabit a healthy earth. If one is a Divine Command theorist, a failure to respond to global warming seems to violate the biblical principles of creation care. And, even the egoist must think seriously about whether allowing global warming to continue ultimately goes against his or her own self-interest. This is only a skeleton list of reasons to support an ethical obligation to halt global warming, so it seems to me that explaining why we *should* care is not a difficult task.

What I find to be the interesting ethical question is why we *don't* seem to care. Why aren't we motivated to consider the long-term harmful consequences of global warming? Why aren't we taking the rights and interests of future generations seriously? Why aren't we obeying God's mandates to care for creation? *Why* aren't we even doing that which is in our best interest to do?

Addressing our lack of moral motivation will be the focus of what I want to say this evening. I believe there are myriad psychological, sociological, political, and cultural reasons behind our lack of response to global warming. But I want to focus on the *ethical* dimensions of this issue and suggest three things that we ought to be doing to motivate ourselves to respond to global warming: (1) use narrative to remind us of who we are, where we have been, and where we are going, (2) remember our status as creatures in relationship to both a created world and a creator, and (3) cultivate the virtues needed to become persons who care about and act upon our ethical obligations to all of creation.

Before I talk about each of these points, I do want to address one of the major objections to an ethical obligation to fight global warming. Many argue that we don't need to do anything about global warming, because there is no such thing as global warming. I think there are several responses to this objection. First, it identifies an obligation that we have to do good science. If one wants to say that global warming is not happening, then one needs to defend that view scientifically. We need to avoid the tendencies to over-inflate or under-inflate concern about global warming for political reasons. And, we need to make sure that our scientific position on the issue is not a masked justification for continuing our preferred lifestyles. Second, I believe that both scientific arguments for and against global warming entail ethical obligations to the environment. If scientific evidence does indeed suggest that global warming is happening, then we have an obligation to fight against it for all of the reasons mentioned above and more. If we find that global warming is not happening, I believe that we still have an ethical obligation to think seriously about our responsibility to care for creation. For surely there are other reasons to do many of the things that would be done to halt global warming, such as reduce consumption of

resources, impose and follow clean air standards, change the ways we think about transportation, and protect native habitats.

I want to return now to the three themes I have identified as motivations for ethical action regarding global warming. The first of these reaffirms what my colleague, Thomas Becknell, has said. Narrative can be a useful tool in ethical thinking. It reminds us that we are actors in a story, not merely passive observers. Narrative reminds that our actions impact the other characters in the story. And often, what seems to be the fitting conclusion to a narrative is also the fitting conclusion to an ethical argument.

{ Karen Warren, an ethicist at Macalester University, has done considerable work with narrative in her writings on the environment. In a now famous essay published in the journal *Environmental Ethics* in 1990, she describes two different days of rock climbing up on the North Shore.¹ On day one, she focuses all of her attention entirely on making it to the top. After a frightening fall, she is relieved to be caught by the belay rope, regains her confidence, and conquers the rock by making it to the top. On day two, as she rappels down a rock slowly, she becomes aware of all of the other characters around her. She notices the lichen, mosses, and tiny flowers growing in the crevices of the rock. The rock itself becomes a partner in the activity. As she describes, “Gone was the determination to conquer the rock, to forcefully impose my will on it; I wanted simply to work respectfully with the rock as I climbed. And as I climbed, that is what I felt. I felt myself caring for this rock and feeling thankful that climbing provided the opportunity for me to know it and myself in this new way.”² }

I believe that when we think about global warming, we too often think of ourselves as the only characters in the story. When I start to think of the long term effects, for example, I worry

¹ Warren, Karen, “The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism” (*Environmental Ethics* 12:2, Summer 1990) pp. 125- 146.

² Ibid, p. 134.

about what will happen to the Boundary Waters, as I have found this area to be the place in the world where I am most at peace and rest. I worry about how the landscape will change, but mostly for selfish reasons. I don't want global warming to change the landscape of Northern Minnesota, because I enjoy it the way that it is and I want my one-year old son to be able to experience it exactly the way that it is now. This merely self-interested thinking is problematic, however, for many reasons. With regard to the problem of our lack of ethical motivation, I think that when we consider ourselves as the only characters in the story, we start to believe that the problem isn't such a big deal. "If global warming changes our landscape, I'll get over it. I'll adjust. I'll learn to enjoy the new landscape." This is the sort of thinking that I hear in casual conversations when people joke that they actually are looking forward to global warming, because they won't have to suffer through bitterly cold winters.

Returning back to the concept of narrative, I believe our thinking would change if we start considering the other characters in the narrative. How would my thinking change if I considered seriously the impact on moose, beavers, loons, wild blueberries, lupine, and Aspen trees in addition to the impact on my family? How about the impact on lichen, algae, and even black flies? What if I extend my narrative beyond Minnesota? How does climate change affect subsistence farmers, nomadic tribes, and the poorest of the poor? The conclusion that "I'll just have to learn to get over it" is no longer a fitting an end to the story. I may be able to adjust to a changing climate landscape, but will the rest of creation?

I believe these questions begin to lead us to the second theme that I have identified as something that can help motivate us toward ethical action. We need to remember our status as creatures who are always in relationship with the rest of the created world and the Creator of the

world. As Christians, I believe that biblical narrative has important things to tell us about our role in the world regarding environmental issues such as global warming.

How moose or aspen or black flies are affected by climate change should concern us for at least two important reasons. First, God has entrusted humans with the special job of acting as the caretakers of creation. While I do not have time to develop a theological argument for why I believe we are to be stewards, servants, and caretakers of creation rather than lords and rulers over creation, I believe that scripture is rather clear that if we do not act in such a way as to prevent harm to creation we are failing at our responsibility. I think that for many of us, our inclination is to find a way to wiggle out of this responsibility. For example, I hear students say: “God is going to create a new heaven and a new earth, so why should it matter what we do with this one?” Sometimes I respond by asking them to imagine God asking the following question in response: “I created the dodo bird and called it good. What happened to it?”

The biblical narrative reminds us that the world does not belong to us to do with what we please. This brings me to the second reason why I believe that we should be concerned with how climate change will affect moose and aspen and black flies. We were created by God, just as the rest of creation was, and in that sense we share something important with the rest of creation. We are not the creators, we are creatures. I believe that evangelical Christianity has largely forgotten this dimension of our relationship to the world around us, but it is not absent in the history of Christianity entirely. For example, consider this excerpt from St. Francis’ Canticle of Brother Sun:

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord, Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing . . . Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun, who is the day and through whom You give us light, and he is beautiful and radiant

with great splendor; and bears a likeness of You, Most High One. Praised be you, my lord, through Sister Moon and the stars, in Heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful. Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind, and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather through which You give sustenance to Your creatures . . . Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.³

Or from the Protestant tradition, consider the following excerpt from Articles I and II of the Belgic Confession:

We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that there is only one God . . . We know Him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, which is before our eyes as a most beautiful book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many letters leading us to perceive clearly the invisible things of God.⁴

These texts remind us of our humble position before our creator God. They also remind us of the honorable status shared by everything that God has created. They remind us that we ought to revere, respect, care for, and sustain *all* of creation, both human and non-human. Our actions matter, because they do not impact us alone. They also impact the rest of what God has created.

Understanding our status as creatures who are called to care for ourselves and the rest of creation begs an important question. What sort of people do we need to be to do this job well? So, the third direction that I believe we ought to consider to address our lack of moral motivation regarding global warming is virtue ethics. Virtue ethics, as a subfield of ethics, argues that we

³ St. Francis of Assisi, “The Canticle of Brother Sun”, in William C. Placher, ed, *Readings in the History of Christian Theology*, v. 1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988).

⁴ de Bres, Guido, The Belgic Confession, 1561. Quoted from <http://www.canrc.org>.

ought to shift the focus in ethical inquiry away from answering questions about what it is good or bad to do in a specific situation to how to become good people in the expectation that good people will do good acts in specific situations. The word virtue means excellence. Virtues are those character traits that are needed to actualize one's full potential as an excellent human being. No one is born virtuous, or excellent. Rather, through education and practice, one learns how to avoid vicious activities and develop virtuous habits.

In recent years, Steven Bouma-Prediger, Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Hope College, has contributed considerably to developing an account of ecological virtues. According to Bouma-Prediger, "certain virtues are indispensable if Christians are to responsibly fulfill their calling as earthkeepers. In short, certain traits of character are central to earth-care."⁵ Bouma-Prediger's list of ecological virtues includes the following: respect, receptivity, self-restraint, frugality, humility, honesty, wisdom, hope, patience, serenity, benevolence, love, justice, and courage.⁶

I find it rather hard to imagine how people who really exhibit these character traits would be able to stay idle about an issue like global warming. As a corollary, I also find it rather hard to imagine how we can act to halt or even reverse global warming without these traits. Respect and receptivity imply an attitude of care and concern for how fellow creatures are affected by climate change. Requires fair consideration of fellow humans affected by our actions. Frugality and self-restraint are needed to change our lifestyles to impact the environment less harshly. Humility reminds us of our own finitude and limitation, and honesty suggests that we cannot ignore the truth about global warming. Wisdom is needed to propose sustainable solutions and hope helps us in the face of the gravity of the situation. Patience and serenity help sustain us

⁵ Bouma-Prediger, Steven, *For the Beauty of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001) p. 138.

⁶ Ibid, chapter 6.

through the complex and lengthy process of responding to global warming. Benevolence and love motivate us to care for those in need and prevent us from malice, hate, and bitterness toward those who contribute to the problem of global warming. And finally, courage provides “moral strength in the face of danger.”⁷

I hope that my direction in this talk has not implied immediate action at the social and political level is unnecessary. I strongly believe that global warming is the result of structural problems, as well as personal irresponsibility, so structural solutions are going to be crucial to addressing this crisis. I do believe, however, that we need to think long-term about our ethical obligations regarding global warming as well as other environmental issues. Considering the narrative in which we are situated, our relationship as caretakers of fellow creatures, and the character traits needed to do the job of caretaking well provide long-term solutions. If we understand these three concepts, then we should find ourselves motivated to ethically respond to global warming as well as prepared to know what we ought to do in the next crisis, and even become the sorts of people who will not create future environmental crises.

⁷ Ibid., p. 158.