

## Preface

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I first learned of global warming in the summer of 1992. As a rising high school junior from Boise, Idaho, I attended a policy debate preparation camp at Stanford University. The debate resolution under consideration for the 1992–93 school year was “Resolved: That the United States government should reduce worldwide pollution through its trade and/or aid policies.”<sup>1</sup> Students from all over the country attended camps like the one at Stanford to collect evidence both for and against this resolution.

Although global warming came up as an area of research concerning worldwide pollution, it was just one among a long list of more traditional environmental issues such as air and water pollution, overpopulation, and deforestation.<sup>2</sup> Only four years earlier, in 1988, the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organization created the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) “to prepare a comprehensive review and recommendations with respect to the state of knowledge of the

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1. “Past Policy Topics,” National Speech and Debate Association, <http://bit.ly/1jYLsNm>.

2. This text uses the terms *global warming* and *global climate change* interchangeably. Scientists have migrated to the latter because it emphasizes that the increase in the global average surface temperature (global warming) does not manifest itself evenly across the globe (climate change). Since *climate change* itself sounds rather neutral (not all change is bad), some have suggested that *global climate disruption* might be an even more accurate phrase. For more on this, see “Frequently Asked Questions about Global Warming and Global Climate Change: Back to Basics,” Environmental Protection Agency, [www.epa.gov/climatechange/Downloads/ghgemissions/Climate\\_Basics.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/Downloads/ghgemissions/Climate_Basics.pdf). A 2014 study by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, “What’s in a Name? Global Warming vs. Climate Change,” found that “the term ‘global warming’ is associated with greater public understanding, emotional engagement, and support for personal and national action than the term ‘climate change’” (<http://bit.ly/1wfarzH>).

science of climate change, social and economic impact of climate change, and possible response strategies and elements for inclusion in a possible future international convention on climate.”<sup>3</sup> The IPCC issued its first assessment report on climate change in 1990, concluding that “there is a natural greenhouse effect which already keeps the Earth warmer than it would otherwise be” and that “emissions resulting from human activities are substantially increasing concentrations of the greenhouse gases carbon dioxide, methane, chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and nitrous oxide. These increases will enhance the greenhouse effect, resulting on average in an additional warming of the Earth’s surface.”<sup>4</sup>

As I sat down to write this book some twenty summers later, I realized that in many ways, human-induced climate change is not just one among many environmental challenges. Whereas the identity of much of the twentieth century was defined by two world wars, the twenty-first century will increasingly be defined by long-festering ecological crises. The specter of tyranny’s march across Europe has been replaced by the inexorable rise of the oceans and the retreat of ice, as anthropogenic climate change threatens rising oceans, massive species extinction, and ecosystem collapse. These growing ecological crises will increasingly define this era. Human impact on the environment has now reached such a large magnitude that it threatens to disrupt much of the life on Earth.

After writing my first book, *The Ethics of Creativity: Beauty, Morality, and Nature in a Processive Cosmos*, which outlines a complex moral philosophy grounded in the work of Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), I set out to test its adequacy and applicability by considering how it might help people respond to a particular moral dilemma.<sup>5</sup> Having become interested in global warming, I decided I would research the topic more thoroughly. After five years of research, I realized that the threat of global climate change was too great to write a book aimed at a small audience of philosophers, as important as that work is. Having developed a course on the ethics

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3. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “History,” <http://bit.ly/1nxB7L>.

4. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “Policymakers Summary,” (1990), <http://bit.ly/1tLUE9C>.

5. Brian G. Henning, *The Ethics of Creativity: Beauty, Morality, and Nature in a Processive Cosmos* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).

of global climate change, I realized that although there were good texts by experts looking at the science, politics, economics, and ethics of global warming, there was no teaching text providing an introductory analysis of each of these areas in a single volume. From this realization came the idea for the present volume.<sup>6</sup>

Study of climate change is notoriously difficult. Complex and multifaceted, the challenge of global climate change is at once technological, scientific, economic, social, political, and moral. Indeed, to varying degrees, the study of global climate change involves nearly *every* branch of study. This presents a difficult challenge to scholars and the public alike. For scholars, there simply is no human who has sufficient expertise in all the relevant areas of study to write authoritatively about climate change. For the public, the scientific complexity and the spatial and temporal extendedness of climate change can make it difficult to comprehend. The problem of climate change is spatially and temporally extended in that it is a truly global problem (spatial) and it affects not only the present but many generations to come (temporal). Though the topic is global, to make the discussion more manageable and focused, I will largely, though not exclusively, draw on examples of responses to climate change from the United States (in chaps. 3–6).

Recognizing the fundamentally interdisciplinary nature of the challenge, this volume examines the basic scientific, political, economic, and moral dimensions of global climate change from an ethical perspective. Intended as an introduction to the topic, the initial chapters present in clear, accessible language the scientific understanding of climate change. Given this understanding, subsequent chapters consider the political, economic, and ethical responses to these scientific findings. In the end, this is a work of ethics.

As the philosopher Paul B. Thompson has noted, the term *ethics* is sometimes misunderstood in scientific contexts.<sup>7</sup> As a plural

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6. Indeed, I penned the outline for this project while attending a conference on the theme “Brave New Planet: Imagining Ecological Communities” in Claremont, California. Between attending sessions by luminaries such as John Cobb, Bill McKibben, and David Orr, I called Anselm Academic editor, Jerry Ruff, and pitched the project. “Brave New Planet: Imagining Ecological Communities,” Progressive Christians Uniting, October 28–29, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1tkc2Qw>.

7. Paul B. Thompson, “The Agricultural Ethics of Biofuels: The Food vs. Fuel Debate,” *Agriculture* 2 (2012): 340, doi:10.3390/agriculture2040339.

noun the term refers to codes of conduct, often within a professional field. In this context, to act ethically often means little more than to act in accordance with a professional code of conduct. However, when philosophers use the term as a singular noun it refers to fundamental conceptions of how moral agents ought to act within their world relative to competing conceptions of what is good or has value. Thus, as Thompson notes, “While philosophical ethics does not necessarily shy away from prescriptive statements that say what people should be doing, the point of a philosophical analysis is to illustrate and analyze the background assumptions and context in which the prescription is grounded.”<sup>8</sup> It is in this sense that the present analysis is ultimately a work of philosophical ethics.

I set out to write this book because I believe efforts to understand and respond to the challenge of global climate change will fall short unless and until humans begin the difficult work of reconceiving who they are and how they relate to the natural world. As the great cultural historian Thomas Berry (1914–2009) argued, bringing about this transformation is the “Great Work” of our age. What is needed are new ways of thinking and acting, grounded in new ways of understanding ourselves and our relationship to the world; ways of recognizing our fundamental interdependence and interconnection with everyone and everything in the cosmos, as well as the intrinsic beauty and value of every form of existence. We must not only pursue sustainability but also ask what it is that is worth sustaining? What does it mean to be a good steward on a planet that is 4.5 billion years old? Much hinges on whether our species can find meaningful answers to these questions; but first we must have the courage to confront them.

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8. Ibid.