

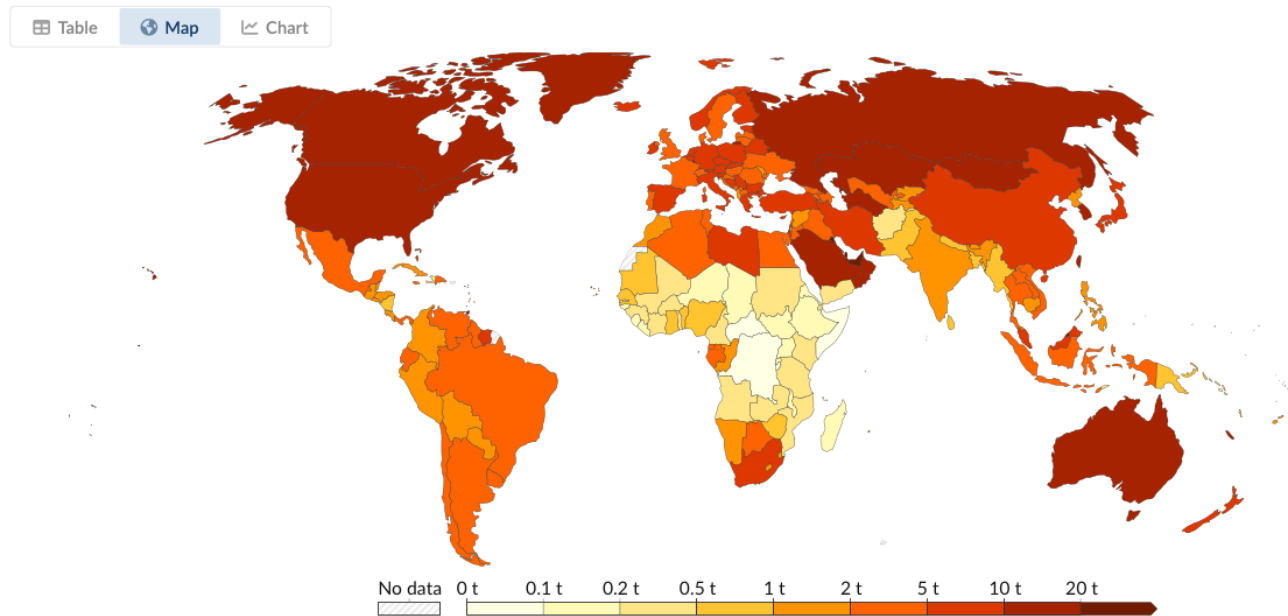
Individual Responsibility (Broome)

1. We Emit a Lot: The United States is one of the biggest culprits regarding the emission of greenhouse gases. As of 2022 (the most recent data I could find), the average American emits about 14.95 tons of CO₂ per year, or about 1,155 tons in an average lifetime. Compared to some other countries, on average, each American emits roughly:

- Nearly twice as much as average person in China (7.99 tons CO₂, per person, per year)
- Over 3 times more than someone in the UK (4.72 tons CO₂, per person, per year)
- ~4 times more than someone in Mexico (4.02 tons CO₂, per person, per year)
- ~7 times more than someone in India (2 tons CO₂, per person, per year)
- ~15 times more than someone in Tuvalu (1 ton CO₂, per person, per year)
- ~50 times more than someone in Afghanistan (0.3 tons CO₂, per person, per year)

Per capita CO₂ emissions, 2022

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from fossil fuels and industry. Land-use change is not included.



The emissions of affluent nations are harming others—mostly those who live in less-developed countries, where small environmental changes can entail disastrous consequences (e.g., crop failure, damaging storms, and so on). Based on the number of deaths attributed to these factors, Broome estimates that each of us is personally responsible for taking about 6 months of someone’s life away—and that is just in tangible harms (loss of life). There are many other less quantifiable harms caused by climate change; for instance, displacement from one’s home, lower quality of life, emotional harm, economic loss, malnourishment, and so on.

(Note that this estimate is extremely conservative. For instance, philosopher John Nolt estimates that each American’s emissions are responsible for the deaths of two people!)

2. Our Emissions Are Unjust: Broome claims that there are two main types of moral duties:

- **Goodness:** This is the duty to make the world BETTER.
- **Justice:** This is the duty to respect the rights of others.

[Sometimes, these duties conflict. For instance, recall Organ Harvest, where killing the one innocent patient makes the world better, but fails to respect his rights. So, when they conflict, Broome says, it seems that justice wins. Does it sort of seem like Utilitarianism accepts only the first duty, while Absolute (Kantian) Deontology accepts only the second, and Moderate Deontology accepts them both?]

As Broome points out, we could fulfill BOTH of these duties by reducing our emissions. Doing so fulfills the **duty of goodness** because reducing the harmful effects of climate change makes the world better. It fulfills the **duty of justice** because, he argues, what we do to our victims when we emit is unjust. Why does he think this? Here is his argument:

1. Each of us emits many tons of greenhouse gases over our lifetimes.
2. Our individual emissions will cause significant harm to others, over the course of our lifetimes and after our deaths.
3. Harming others is an injustice when that harm:
 - (a) is a product of something you **do**, rather than **allow** (and you DO something to emit GHG's; for instance, drive a car around, etc.).
 - (b) is **serious** (and all of the harms we've discussed are serious).
 - (c) is **not accidental** (you do not "accidentally" drive a car, for instance).
 - (d) is **not compensated** (an injustice is worse if someone does not try to compensate for the injuries; but, with climate-change related death, it seems that it is not even POSSIBLE to compensate. First, you cannot compensate a dead victim; second, even if someone doesn't die, it's unclear who I owe compensation TO.)
 - (e) is **for our own benefit**, rather than the benefit of others (i.e., a harm done for personal gain is a worse injustice than a harm done for altruistic reasons).
 - (f) is **not reciprocated** (if I've punched you and you've punched me, we might be more "even" than if I had just punched you; but, regarding GHG's, the rich harm the poor disproportionately, since the ones who suffer most are the poorest nations, who are contributing to the problem the least. In short, our emissions are a greater injustice, due to the fact that we cause the most harm to those who cause us the least harm).
 - (g) is **easily avoided** (if I harm you, but could not have done otherwise, we might not consider it an injustice. The easier it is to avoid, the greater an injustice the harm is).
4. But, our individual GHG emissions meet ALL of these criteria.
5. Therefore, our emissions are unjust.

3. What Should We Do? So, what should we DO about this? Broome considers three options:

- (a) Compensate the victims.
- (b) Donate to an organization that compensates/helps victims of climate change.
- (c) Reduce and/or offset your emissions to reduce your carbon footprint to zero.

But (a) is impossible, because there IS NO particular victim. There is no SINGLE person whose life you shorten by 6 months. This is really the aggregate of many, many imperceptible harms.

Broome does not prefer (b), because (i) It is difficult to convert the harm you have caused into a monetary value. How much money is six months of someone's life worth? There is no simple answer. (ii) You cannot guarantee that those harmed by your actions will be compensated. It is likely that many of your victims will remain uncompensated.

Broome prefers solution (c). We ought to focus on simply reducing our emissions of course. But, everyone must use SOME resources. He proposes that we "offset" our remaining emissions.

Offsetting: For every unit of GHG's you put INTO the atmosphere, you do something else that causes 1 unit to be taken OUT of the atmosphere (or else, leads to 1 unit FEWER of GHG's to be emitted somewhere else).

How could we offset our emissions? The answer is a bit tricky. We could:

- Plant trees to suck CO₂ out of the atmosphere.

Problem: But, trees only temporarily store it. When they die, their bodies decay and all of that CO₂ goes back into the atmosphere. So, you'll want to make sure that the forest you plant will permanently remain a forest.

- Take CO₂ out of the atmosphere directly using "carbon capture" technology, and store it somewhere (maybe underground, forever).

Problem: But, presently, doing this is expensive and costs too many resources to be effective. (*Though that may soon change – for instance, [Microsoft has vowed to invest a billion dollars in this technology in an attempt to become carbon neutral by 2030.](#)*)

- Contribute to offsetting programs. For instance, there are programs that will replace power plants or power-using devices with more fuel-efficient versions (e.g., by installing wind or water power, or by replacing stoves with more efficient ones, etc.). There are also programs that will pay to have acres of forest slated for cutting to be preserved instead. These days, airlines often offer carbon offsetting as a ticket add-on during checkout (e.g., [United](#)). Some examples of offsetting projects can be found [here](#).

Problem: If we donate, we need to be sure that it makes a DIFFERENCE. To be sure of that, we'd have to know what would have happened if we had NOT donated (for instance, maybe that village would have put in a windmill no matter what), and that the donations actually PREVENT GHG emissions (for instance, maybe when I pay for an acre of forest #1 to be preserved, the loggers just go somewhere else and cut down forest #2 instead, so ultimately I have made no difference).

Objections: In addition to the practical worries above, some further criticisms of offsetting:

- (1) **It is too easy:** Offsetting costs under \$10 per ton of CO₂. So, the average American could offset ALL of their emissions by paying just \$150 a year to these companies.
- (2) **It fails to discourage emissions:** Because offsetting is so easy, it would not discourage emissions. An excessive American way over the average could pay to offset a super excessive lifetime's worth of emissions (say, \$50,000) and go on living "guilt-free" riding around in a private jet or yacht every day for the rest of their lives.
- (3) **It delays progress:** This in turn could slow down progress toward sustainability. If our emissions are "absolved" of their guilt, then we lack any further motivation for finding ways to reduce our country's emissions.
- (4) **It is exploitation:** We might worry that the project of a first-world country trying to reduce its emissions by having those in poorer countries do it instead is exploitative.

(Something here seems super fishy, doesn't it? I can just donate \$12,000 to an offsetting project and fulfil my entire lifetime's worth of climate-related duties?? It is reminiscent of the "[indulgences](#)" of the Catholic Church which had Martin Luther so upset—i.e., where you could just pay a fine to be cleansed of all sins. The concept of offsetting is certainly absurd in other contexts. For instance, in [this video](#), two guys ask others to pay them to remain celibate in order to offset the wrongness of the payer's cheating on their significant others—an absurd proposal.)

Broome denies (4), claiming that bringing money INTO poor countries actually reduces inequalities and so is not unjust. He does admit that (1) – (3) are worries, and concludes that we should focus on reduction first, and offsets second.

[What if our emissions actually make no difference? (Some say our emissions are 'causally impotent'.) In this case, Broome says, we'd STILL have a duty of justice to offset. He gives a case where, no matter what you do, the result is the same (i.e., your action makes no difference).

Execution: *In a faraway land, you happen across a soldier about to shoot an innocent person. The soldier offers you \$50 if you would do the honor of shooting the prisoner instead. There is no way to prevent the execution, as there are soldiers everywhere.*

Is it morally permissible to accept the \$50 in this case? Most would say "no". In this case, you STILL have a duty of justice to refrain from acting. So, at least sometimes, perhaps we have moral duties to refrain from certain behavior even though that behavior would make absolutely no difference to the consequences. (Recall the Human Coat and Mouse a la Bama examples.)

Respect for Nature

Dale Jamieson takes a different approach to individual responsibility toward climate change. Sure, there may be pragmatic reasons to preserve the planet (e.g., if we don't, it may cause harm to US in the end), or ethical reasons (e.g., we have a duty of justice to reduce emissions), there may be another kind of reason as well: Virtue.

Jamieson suggest that we have a **duty to respect nature**, because that is what someone with a *virtuous character* would do. Our treatment of the planet—altering its landscapes, polluting its air and water and land, destroying its species, taking all of its resources, and so on—has been disrespectful. He writes,

It is not too much to say that as a civilization we treat the Earth and its fundamental systems as if they were toys that we can treat carelessly, as if their functions could easily be replaced by a minor exercise of human ingenuity. It is as if we have scaled up slash-and-burn agriculture to a planetary scale. Seen in this way, our collective behaviour towards nature seems to be a paradigm of disrespect.

Virtue ethicists believe that we have moral reasons to develop within ourselves a certain kind of moral CHARACTER. One element of the character of a virtuous person is RESPECT. (This is the 'What sort of person would do that?' style of ethics. What sort of person would fail to respect nature? Answer: Someone whose character is morally stunted in a way.)

Consider: **Nature gives our life meaning**. Nature is the backdrop of our lives; the setting in which we live; the thing that SUSTAINS our existence. As such, it helps to DEFINE who we are to some extent. Consider, for instance, the way that the forest defines certain indigenous peoples; the desert defines others; or certain crops define the lives of some; or how the Flatirons define the city of Boulder. Our environment helps to supply our lives with context and meaning.

So, failing to respect our planet—the place where our entire lives take place, and the place from whence ALL of the things that keep us alive are derived (air, food, water, clothing, shelter)—is an indication that one's character is morally stunted. Some other virtues:

- (a) **Humility:** We ought to have a sense of humility about our place in the world, our own worth, and what we are entitled to. One who is indifferent to nature, is guilty of an over-developed sense of self-importance, or narcissism, and lacks humility.
- (b) **Temperance:** We ought to practice self-restraint, and take things in moderation. One who spends resources needlessly, or in excess, is gluttonous, and lacks temperance.
- (c) **Mindfulness:** We ought to be conscientious, or mindful of the consequences and repercussions of our actions. It is good to be the sort of person who is aware of what they are doing, and how it affects others. As such, one who consumes resources without a second thought to others in the world, or to future generations, lacks this virtue.

Objection: Virtue ethics is often criticized for not telling us WHY we ought to be virtuous. Jamieson has given us a list of the sorts of traits that a person ought to develop—but WHY is it the case that we ought to develop them? What moral principles support these claims? [*What do you think? Are further reasons required, or are Jamieson's claims just self-evident?*]