Individual Responsibility (Broome)

The United States is one of the biggest culprits regarding the emission of greenhouse gases. The average American emits about 25 tons of GHG's per year, or almost 2000 tons in a lifetime. Compared to some other countries, we each emit, on average:

- 5 times more than someone in China
- 12 times more than someone in Brazil
- 20 times more than someone in India
- 120 times more than someone in Haiti
- 800+ times more than someone in Afghanistan

The emissions of affluent nations are harming others—mostly those who live in poor 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 Broome is clearly rejecting Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument, and must be doing so in one of 2 ways: (1) He is rejecting the claim that our emissions are not sufficient causes of harm. Perhaps our bit of emissions DO increase the total amount of harm by a little bit. (2) He is appealing to something like the group argument, and claiming that a portion of the moral blame of a group DOES trickle down to each individual (i.e., by taking the TOTAL harm and dividing it equally among its contributors). [Is this right?]
Broome claims that there are two sorts of moral duties:

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

In a sense, Utilitarianism accepts only the first duty, Absolute (Kantian) Deontology accepts only the second, and Moderate Deontology accepts them both.

Sometimes, these duties conflict (e.g., in Organ Harvest, where killing the one innocent patient makes the world better, but fails to respect his rights). As it turns out, reducing emissions would reduce injustice AND make the world better. Ultimately, Broome thinks that governments are obligated to mitigate climate change primarily for reasons of Goodness, while individuals are similarly obligated, but for reasons of Justice.

And it seems that there can at least SOMETIMES be instances where we have a moral duty of justice even in a situation where the consequences will be the same either way. Consider this case:

- **Execution**: You are in a foreign land, and 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”. 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 also our “Human-Skin Coat” example) So, perhaps we can have a duty not to commit an injustice by emitting GHG’s, even if doing so has no direct causal impact on the world? Broome seems to think so. Here is the 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. Doing harm to people is normally an injustice (note that there can be exceptions; e.g., self-defense, punishment, a just war, etc.).
4. Therefore, emitting many tons of GHG’s is (normally) an injustice.
5. Doing people harm is a MAJOR injustice when the 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 listed above 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).

6. But, our emission of GHG’s meets ALL of these criteria.

7. Therefore, our emissions are a MAJOR injustice.

So, what should we DO about it? 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. Rather, you reduce EVERYONE’s by a tiny fraction of a second.

Broome does not prefer (b), because 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 to this question.

Broome suggests that (c) is the best solution. First, we ought to simply reduce our emissions. But, everyone must use SOME resources. He suggests that we can “offset” the rest of these 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 out the CO$_2$. But, trees only temporarily store it. When they die, their bodies decay and all of that CO$_2$ goes back into the atmosphere. So, you’ll want to make sure that the forest you plant will permanently remain a forest.

- Physically suck CO$_2$ out of the atmosphere and store it somewhere (maybe underground, forever). But, presently, doing this is incredibly expensive and costs too many resources to be effective.

- 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. The problem is, if we contribute to these programs, we have to be sure that they make 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 THIS forest to be preserved, the loggers just go somewhere else and cut down THAT forest instead, so ultimately I have made no difference).

In addition to these difficulties, there are some serious objections to offsetting as a means of correcting for the injustice caused by GHG emissions:

1. **It is too easy**: Companies offer offsetting for as little as $10 per ton of GHG’s. So, the average American could offset ALL of their emissions by paying only $250 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 their $1000 per year (or whatever) and go on living “guilt-free” riding around in a private jet or yacht every day.

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 a poor country do it instead is exploitative.

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.
Respect for Nature

Dale Jamieson takes a different approach to individual responsibility toward climate change. Though 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 moral obligations to not bring harm to species, or ecosystems, or future generations, and so on), there may be another kind of reason as well: Virtue.

Jamieson is a virtue ethicist. He suggests 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 live in such a way that we will have a “flourishing life”. So, if there is some way to live a richer life—mentally, physically, experientially, via our moral character, etc.—then we have a moral reason to try to live that way. In light of this, Jamieson cites several reasons that we ought to preserve nature:

(a) 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, even, how the Flatirons define the city of Boulder. As such, 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 lacks certain virtues that one ought to have in order to live the “good” or “flourishing” life. For instance:

(b) Humility: It is virtuous to be humble about one’s place in the world, one’s own worth, and what one is entitled to. One who has no respect for nature likely displays some sense of self-importance, or narcissism, clearly placing their own interests above that of nature.
(c) **Temperance:** Temperance is the ability to take things in moderation. One who spends resources needlessly, or in excess, engages in overconsumption, and lacks the virtue of temperance.

(d) **Mindfulness:** It is virtuous to be conscientious, or mindful of the consequences and repercussions of one’s actions. It is good to be the sort of person who is aware of what they are doing, and how it will affect others. As such, one who consumes resources without a second thought to others in the world, or to future generations, lacks this virtue.

Ultimately, being virtuous is about being a GOOD PERSON. So, Jamieson’s claim is that, in addition to acting to preserve the environment by mitigating climate change for reasons of self-interest, and for ethical reasons of not bringing harm to others, there is ALSO a reason to do so because that is what a GOOD PERSON does. And we ought to be good people. We ought to be virtuous.

**Objection:** Virtue ethics is often criticized for not telling us WHY we ought to be virtuous. By making no appeal to universal moral principles, we are left only with a vague list of what a “good person” would do, without being given anything more specific than that. [Is this a good criticism of Jamieson, and virtue ethics in general?]