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Understanding Climate Change as an Existential Threat: Confronting Climate Denial as a Challenge to Climate Ethics

Tim Christion Myers

Climate change cannot be managed by experts and politicians alone. Consequently, climate ethics must take up the challenge of inviting public responsibility on this issue. New sociological research on climate denial by Kari Norgaard, however, suggests that most citizens of industrialized countries are ill-prepared to cope with the ethical significance of climate change. I draw upon Martin Heidegger to offer a new reading of climate denial that suggests viable responses to this problem. I argue that the implications of climate change are largely received as an 'existential threat' to the extent that they endanger the integrity of everyday existence. In other words, the implications of climate change for everyday life unsettle what phenomenologists call the 'lifeworld'. Should basic lifeworld assumptions, which cultures rely on to makes sense of the world and their purposes in it, come under serious question, anxieties surface that most people are profoundly motivated to avoid. Hence, the ethical obligations entailed by climate change are 'denied' in the form of protecting lifeworld integrity for the sake of containing anxieties that would otherwise overwhelm people. Finally, I submit that existential approaches to climate denial can empower a confrontation with 'climate anxiety' in ways that open up ethical reflection.

Introduction: Climate Ethics from the Bottom Up

In 1992, the year the United Nations introduced the Framework Convention on Climate Change that laid the groundwork for the Kyoto Protocol, Dale Jamieson made a seminal case for climate ethics.[1] He argued that scientific knowledge, although indispensable, doesn't translate into appropriate action. Moreover, climate change cannot be managed as a technical problem by experts and politicians. Instead, Jamieson argued, this issue

[1] Dale Jamieson, 'Ethics, Public Policy, and Global Warming' [1992], in *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*, edited by Stephan M. Gardiner, Simon Caney, Dale Jamieson, and Henry Shue (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 77-86.

confronts us with questions about how we relate to each other and to nature, as well as questions about who we are and how we ought to live. Hence, climate change is fundamentally an ethical issue.

In the past two decades, experts, politicians, and an increasingly professionalized environmental movement have taken on climate change only to prove Jamieson right. Despite over two decades of overwhelming scientific consensus regarding the enormity of climate change, and several ambitious international conventions attempting to address it, emissions have dramatically increased during this time, not decreased. Arguably, the Kyoto Protocol and market-based solutions like the European Union's venture into cap-and-trade have failed. Economist Nicolas Stern famously proclaimed climate change 'the greatest market failure the world has ever seen,'[2] and some notables like James Gustave Speth are having serious doubts about capitalism's ability to address this problem at all.[3] Faith in green technologies is also problematic. Energy-efficiency improvements have been met with higher emissions because lower utility costs have translated into warmer buildings and bigger refrigerators, while better fuel economy has been outpaced by more cars on the road, longer commuting distances, and a sports utility vehicle fad. In *Green Illusions*, Ozzie Zehner deconstructs the techno-optimism behind solar, wind, biofuels, and other hopefuls to conclude that we don't have an energy crisis: we have a consumption crisis.[4]

My point isn't simply that large-scale solutions are useless. Indeed, one could scarcely imagine mitigating global emissions without them. However, political realism demands that policies and basic institutional reforms commensurate with the magnitude of this issue be met with widespread public support and involvement. In fact, given the global track record of the past two decades, it's become clear that such changes have to be instigated and enforced by a politically organized populous willing to keep powerful interests in check. The totalizing nature of climate change necessitates empowered and clear-sighted democracies like never before, and this in turn requires the kind of moral force that underlies all mass movements later generations recognize as historical in scope. Unfortunately, ethical responses to climate change by the public have proven equally discouraging. Growing awareness over the past two decades has not translated into the widespread normative changes demanded by this issue.

What accounts for this? Climate ethicists offer a range of ideas that include conceptual clarity, political inertia, worldviews, character vices, and other barriers to action. It's important to note in this regard that the way one understands the major barrier(s) to normativity has a strong influence on one's theoretical approach to climate ethics. If the problem of normativity boils down to muddled concepts, clarity will bring home the ethical implications of climate change to compel appropriate action. If, instead, motivation to act is inhibited by worldview perceptions blind to the moral urgency of climate change, a paradigm shift is needed. Or perhaps ethical responses are obstructed by bad habits or ill-adapted character traits. If so, new virtues are called for.

[2] Nicholas Stern, 'The Economics of Climate Change' [2008], in *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*, edited by Stephan M. Gardiner, Simon Caney, Dale Jamieson, and Henry Shue (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 39-76, at p. 39.

[3] James Gustave Speth, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

[4] Ozzie Zehner, *Green Illusions: The Dirty Secrets of Clean Energy and the Future of Environmentalism* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

These and other approaches to the problem of normativity are found throughout the climate ethics literature. New ethnographic research on climate denial by sociologist Kari Norgaard, however, complicates these views. Her observations suggest that climate denial is a defensive reaction to emotional disturbances triggered by the unsettling implications of climate change. Moreover, denial of this sort is intersubjective, meaning that it has to be understood in terms of collective socio-cultural experience. Ultimately, she argues, what is often denied in climate change is not the reality or even the seriousness of this issue, but precisely its *normative* significance for everyday life. This makes her work centrally relevant to climate ethics. And as I argue in this paper, Norgaard's research lends itself to an existentialist way of understanding the normativity problem at the center of climate ethics, and in the process provides a new perspective from which to approach the field.

Even if Norgaard's ethnographic findings accurately capture the phenomenon of climate denial, however, it still leaves the ethicist wondering how to philosophically address this central barrier to normativity. My own approach draws on Martin Heidegger to thematize climate denial more comprehensively and in ways that suggest viable ethical avenues. Specifically, I argue that climate change is received primarily as an existential threat that shuts down ethical reflection, and that the emotional disturbances observed by Norgaard are largely secondary to this more basic condition. By existential threat, I don't mean a physical danger. I mean a threat to the structures of meaning that constitute community or intersubjective identity.[5] By calling into question our most basic assumptions about how we ought to live, how we ought to relate to others and to nature going into the future, the *continuity of social existence* is threatened at a collective level. In other words, the ethical implications of climate change pose an existential threat insofar as they call into question the intersubjective structures of what phenomenologists call the lifeworld. The sign of such a threat is a creeping anxiety that compels us to engage in the forms of denial analyzed by Norgaard. Hence, a Heideggerian interpretation of this research would understand climate denial as an anxious attempt to work with others in order to keep the ethical significance of climate change at a safe remove.

If climate change is indeed received as an existential threat, those interested in empowering public responsibility might want to consider an existentialist approach to climate ethics. To this end, I conclude that *some* measure of anxiety is appropriate as a signal that basic existential changes are needed, as long as bottom-up ways of responding to anxiety are put forward that truly open people up to this daunting issue.

The Existential Problem

In a recent interview, Bill McKibben remarked that addressing climate change is like building a movement against ourselves—as if the abolition movement depended on slave owners.[6] Although we can draw powerful examples of collective mobilization from

[5] By 'community' or 'intersubjective identity' I mean traditions (religious, political, professional, etc.) that connote common ways of thinking, speaking, feeling, perceiving, and being.

[6] Bill McKibben, 'Global Warming's Terrifying New Math', *Rolling Stones Magazine,* July 19 (2012), online at http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-20120719 (accessed 2013-11-11).

history, as with World War II, what most of them have in common is a felt need to react against an external threat like fascism. Climate change, however, complicates this line between external and internal. Of course, McKibben doesn't believe that 'external enemies' are absent. In a world marked by widening gaps of wealth and power, it's not the consumers that have been controlling the fate of climate policy over the past two decades. One must look instead to producers like Exxon Mobil. McKibben's point, however, is that most people in affluent societies tend to identify with the very industrial world order that Exxon Mobil represents. Social identity, after all, is constituted by socio-cultural experience, and the latter has long been infused with the ethos and mores of industrialization, including its scientific, technological, and economic power. There's a sense in which we *see ourselves*—our past and future—in the very world responsible for climate change, and so cannot easily imagine carbon-healthy alternatives to it. I call this the existential problem.

For Herbert Marcuse, we see ourselves in a world that is nevertheless alien to us—just as medieval Christians saw themselves in a supernatural God beyond their experience and power to influence. For him, however, the 'external world' most identify with today belongs, not to the supernatural, but rather to the material order that governs everyday existence. The result, for Marcuse, is a 'one-dimensional' *internalization* of the industrial order itself to the extent that it has become self-evident and beyond question. With the introduction of mass communications, social experience has become standardized to such an extent that our ability to think, speak, feel, perceive, and behave *beyond* the industrial order of immediate existence has been severely compromised. Thus, Marcuse explains, the genuine development of meaningful concepts to mediate self and world is precluded.

> The concepts which comprehend the facts and thereby transcend the facts are losing their authentic linguistic representation. Without these mediations, language tends to express and promote the immediate identification of reason and fact, truth and established truth, essence and existence, the thing and its function.[7]

If we add to this list the immediate identification of what *is* (reality) and what *ought to be* (possibility), mediating *ethical* concepts also seem unlikely to develop. Future possibilities are already encapsulated in present realities. Yet, for Marcuse, the function of a viable culture (or lifeworld) is to mediate existence by distinguishing real needs and problems from false ones in light of higher ideals. If the industrial order is received as self-evident, however, any basic problems intrinsic to it are concealed. Hence, the existential problem is born from the recognition that truly ethical responses to climate change require shifts in identity that are significantly distinct from the industrial order responsible for climate change.

Allen Thompson and Jeremy Bendik-Keymer come close to this problem in the climate ethics literature with their recent anthology *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change*. Here, they attempt to broaden the focus from prescriptions to virtues in an effort to ground action in a new understanding of human excellence. A new vision of the good life is called for to facilitate new ways of being human in a world where adapting to climate

[7] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston Mass.: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 85.

change will become the prime directive. '*Who we are* today' they explain, 'is not ready for this and *who we have been* got us into this mess.'[8] Thus, we are invited to transform ourselves in the context of 'well-worked-out relationships between our lives, our institutions, and the extrahuman world'.[9]

What remains to be seen, however, is whether or not communities are open to accepting this invitation to self-transform in the first place. If we do in fact internalize a world of social forces largely beyond our grasp and influence, self-transformation in the name of climate ethics must seem like pure fantasy—a request to create something *ex nihilo*.

The existential problem, however, runs deeper still. Insofar as self-identity is fundamentally implicated in the same world order of production and consumption causing climate change, asking for fundamental ethical changes that *conflict* with that world must seem tantamount to a kind of identity crisis. Reforming one's identity risks endangering the collective sense of order, stability, and continuity in life required to live with integrity and confidence. It is in this sense, I argue, that the ethical implications of climate change are received largely as an existential threat. What would happen, for example, if we were to fully take in the fact that carbon levels now exceed 400ppm—a level the biosphere hasn't been adapted to for countless millennia? And what happens when we begin to realize that climate change is inextricably bound to a plethora of other global dangers like ocean acidification and the sixth mass extinction in Earth's history? All things considered, the ethical implications of climate change suggest that we humans need to adapt to the nonhuman world, rather than forcing nature to adapt to us. But this points to a profound and disturbing reversal in the Western psyche that contradicts centuries of socio-cultural momentum. Indeed, if one accepts Lynn White Jr.'s thesis, the Western relationship to nature is religiously founded on an anthropocentric worldview dating back to *Genesis* that entitles human dominion over Creation.[10] Carolyn Merchant, furthermore, analyzes the Scientific Revolution to argue that the metaphor of a mechanistic universe synthesized modern science, technology, and capitalism by way of justifying a view of technical human control over nature.[11] Can news of climate change confront such cultural inertia? And should one go further to examine the systemic relationship between the anthropocentric institutions driving climate change and the systemic social injustices organized by these same institutions, how does one cope with such a totalizing condition?

Drawing on Norgaard, I argue that the signature of the existential problem inhibiting ethical normativity in the face of climate change has to be understood as a kind of denial in the face of such disturbing questions. In an effort to more fully grasp the existential problem, therefore, we turn now to her theory of climate denial.

[8] Allen Thompson and Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, 'Introduction: Adapting Humanity', in *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change: Human Virtues of the Future*, edited by Allen Thompson and Jeremy Bendik-Keymer (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 2012), pp. 1-23, at p. 15.

[9] *Ibid*., p. 2.

[10] Lynn White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 155:3767 (1967), pp. 1203-1207.

[11] Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980).

Norgaard's Theory of Climate Denial

As Norgaard explains, climate denial takes multiple forms.[12] The most well-known in the United States is the 'literal denial' that dismisses the science of climate change. Even in the US, however, literal denial only accounts for a minority of the population. A more prevalent form is 'interpretive denial,' where climate change is accepted as factual, but the facts are interpreted in ways that dismiss it as a serious threat. For example, a faith in historical 'progress' can bring comfortable interpretations of climate change as a problem that will eventually be solved by the experts.

The third form of denial, however, is the most subtle and perhaps most widespread. In what is called 'implicatory denial', climate change is acknowledged as real and it's interpreted as a serious threat, but the moral implications of this issue are consistently minimized. As Norgaard puts it, implicatory denial reflects 'a failure to integrate…knowledge [of climate change] into everyday life or transform it into social action.'[13] Thus, this third form of denial has insidious consequences for climate ethics as a field of inquiry.

Norgaard's ethnographic research was conducted in Norway, a country she selected because of its largely educated and politically-involved citizenry with an impressive record of environmental action. Consequently, she believed, the more subtle aspects of climate denial could be investigated more clearly in this setting. In Norway, one can see that the dominant theories of climate denial (focusing on ignorance, ideology, apathy, or greed) miss the mark. Accounts of inaction that center on such phenomena tend to rely on problematic assumptions about human nature that stress either rational actor theories of behavior or see denial as a kind of passive impotence or indifference. The most widespread example of this is what is known as the 'information deficit model,' where the so-called failure to respond to climate change is understood in terms of ignorance or misinformation—assuming, as it does, that if people only 'knew' the science, they would take climate change seriously and act differently. The hope here is that educating the public or countering political ideologies and media reporting that cast doubt on climate change will be enough to motivate collective action. Other approaches assume that overcoming greed, apathy, and other vices will be sufficient to generate a response. Again, however, these conditions aren't especially salient in Norway.[14]

Her observations suggest, on the contrary, that climate denial is more indirect than is commonly believed. For one thing, climate denial is 'socially organized'—meaning that it is intersubjective before it's subjective. In her own words, implicatory denial is 'generated and maintained in response to social circumstances and carried out through a process of interaction.'[15] Unconsciously motivated by disturbing feelings prompted by the implications of climate change, such as fear, guilt, and powerlessness, denial occurs when people employ certain norms of conversation and other social behaviors as a way of keeping the troubling implications of this ominous problem from

[12] See Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Malden: Blackwell, 2001).
[13] Kari Marie Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 2011), p. 11.
[14] *Ibid*., Ch. 1.
[15] *Ibid*., p. 9.

surfacing. This involves any number of intersubjective strategies, most of which aim to micro-manage perception and ways of thinking in order to manage these feelings.

Hence, we work with others to protect ourselves by keeping climate change out of the sphere of everyday reality. Examples of this include pressures to remain optimistic, keeping conversations light (and changing topics or using humor when this is violated), sticking to the technical facts of the matter as opposed to its deeper meaning, and focusing on the past or the present rather than the future, or on local problems rather than global ones. Norgaard also noticed denial at work in the form of an appropriation of various narratives, metaphors, and other cultural resources to help communities avoid taking in the troubling implications of this daunting issue. These collective strategies—at work as long as climate change disturbs and unsettles—may seem insignificant when considered in isolation. But if Norgaard is right, the intentional, if unconscious, product is a collective safeguarding that helps people live with something that would otherwise overwhelm them.

> Questions about how people 'create distance' from information on climate change and 'hold information at arm's length' seem absurd if we take the everyday world at face value. But collectively constructing a sense of time and place, a sense of what is and is not appropriate to pay attention to or feel, is an important social and political process. In such constructions, we see the intersection of private emotions and the macrolevel reproduction of ideology and power.[16]

Again, implicatory climate denial is a collective accomplishment in response to concrete situations experienced in common, not just a psychological condition. We need to convince *each other*, not simply ourselves, that climate change doesn't personally implicate us in any meaningful way. Given the epistemological authority of science in Western societies, and the wide availability of information about climate change today, covering up the deeper implications of this issue takes work. And apparently, the threat of climate change is enough to motivate this kind of work. Of course, to the extent that even outspoken believers in the science of climate change successfully convince each other that they aren't *really* implicated in this issue, or that the experts will eventually solve it, the question of ethics never comes up.

An Existential Phenomenology of Climate Denial

Ultimately, Norgaard's work suggests that it is a mistake to understand climate denial as a lack of response. Denial is indeed a response—but of a certain kind. And until we get clear about how climate change is experienced as a public issue, grasping the full scope of climate denial will continue to elude us. Yet putting the matter in terms of 'experience' is also misleading. Because what has to be understood about climate change is that it doesn't speak to one's concrete experience of the world, but rather to the background *against which* one experiences things—what I referred to earlier as the lifeworld. This is what makes climate denial amenable to phenomenological analysis. Norgaard's ethnographic research, moreover, suggests that this issue is received as a disturbance to this background, and this is what recommends climate denial to the existentialist.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

In an attempt to offer a phenomenology of the existential problem in light of Norgaard's work, it would be helpful to clarify what we mean by the lifeworld. The Husserlian term denotes the 'pre-given' world people perceive in common to the extent that they have a shared history. It is also the experiential context we share with others to help us make sense of things as properly situated. Ultimately, however, it is the 'horizon' of all possible experience, the shared medium informing a culture's basic relationship to the world of its experience. It is because of the lifeworld that things appear self-evident or obvious, as opposed to the products of interpretation. This, for Husserl, is what enables subjects to communicate and live together in a world of real things, but things that are meaningfully articulated according to historical institutions, present concerns, and future projects.

Lifeworlds make experience reliable by offering a coherence and continuity to our basic intuitions. Yet they are also heterogeneous and open to the material world beyond them, which allows them to constantly develop and change over time. As collective sensibilities develop in response to concrete problems, moreover, they both cohere and conflict with other ways of making sense of things at various levels of generality and specificity. *Specific* forms of meaning, for instance, enable a given culture to make sense of particular things of significance like chairs, magpies, edible plants, and Coke bottles, while the more *general* constellations of meaning embody answers to the existential questions in life that concern *all* cultures—those that articulate, for example, the basic relationship between self, society, and nature.

To the extent that specific and general forms of meaning cohere with one another as comprehensive gestalts and survive the test of time by enabling a society to successfully cope with life's challenges, they become institutionalized or backgrounded. Hence, the experiential world they contextualize is largely beyond question. A linear conception of time—and hence historical intuitions of progress *versus* decline—is probably a good example of a general lifeworld assumption in Western cultures that is difficult to question.

Lifeworlds cannot be understood in the abstract as, for example, inherently conservative or radical. A given lifeworld might privilege cultural identity or security, while another privileges transformation and creativity. It all depends on the meaning structures inherited from the past and the concrete problems confronting the community as it works to realize its future. But like ecosystems, rapid systemic changes to a people's lifeworld can make viable adjustments difficult, if not impossible. In enabling people to make sense of things in meaningful ways, their lifeworld affords them the identity and security necessary to live with purpose and confidence. Accordingly, we rely strongly on a shared background to give our lives continuity and integrity. For this reason, when the lifeworld we share with others is threatened at a general level, we are compelled to work with others to safely address this threat. This is precisely what Norgaard observed conducting her ethnographic research on climate denial.

Martin Heidegger's synthesis of Husserl's phenomenology and Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism in *Being and Time* explains this more concretely by carefully distinguishing secure from insecure ways of being in the world.[17] First, notice that when life's routines are running smoothly, people tend to take things for granted. Thanks to the

[17] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), Ch. 3.

skills, habits, and sensibilities integrated by the lifeworld, we know intuitively that what worked last time will probably work next time as well. Hence, there's no need to constantly notice things we're already familiar with and reflect on them. For this reason, unless we're dissatisfied with something or think we can improve it, we're often not conscious of the *particularities* of experience so long as everything is happening as expected. To take Heidegger's famous example, when hammering, the hammer itself isn't experienced as a thing of wood and metal. Rather, we simply take up the hammer unreflectively and relate to it almost as if it were an extension of our own bodies. Similarly, it's revealing that when we experience a fender-bender, we usually say '*I* got hit'—not 'my *car* got hit while I was in it'. If the car or hammer is an integral part of the lifeworld that makes us feel at home in the world, we naturally experience it as *part of us*.

As long as things make sense and our expectations in life are largely met, we usually identify with the world we belong to. So what distinguishes secure from insecure ways of being in the world? This can be discerned, among other ways, by how people cope with the unexpected in life. Consider first, Heidegger says, that it's often not until some disruption occurs that 'stands in the way of our concern', as when the hammer breaks, that we become fully conscious of it.[18] Usually, it's only when the flow of our projects get interrupted by something unexpected that we experience the hammer as indeed *separate* from us—as a thing of wood and metal, for instance, that needs repair. Yet, breakdowns occur at different levels in life and require different responses. And this is the point I want to drive home with regards to climate change. Just as we have to make a distinction between 'climate' as a background condition and 'weather' as a foreground expression of it, so too we need to make a distinction between the *general* structures of the lifeworld that order experience and the *particular* things that make sense to us against this larger background. For example, when particular things like hammers or cars break, we can simply fix them or get new ones. *Specific* problems at this foreground level can be *handled consciously by the individual*. But what happens when the hammer works fine, but using it to *add on to the house* becomes an issue because a larger house—requiring more energy to heat—will increase carbon emissions? This is a different problem, requiring a different kind of response. Or what happens when the car works but *the everyday act of driving* becomes an issue because it contributes to climate change? Connect enough dots and you will discover that these more general problems *cannot* be handled by individuals alone because here it is the *lifeworld practices we share with others* that are questionable—not the *particular* things that stand out against this larger background.

Because the normative implications of climate change challenge our most basic background assumptions, we cannot simply treat this deeply systemic issue as a problem to be handled consciously and deliberately, if only people had sufficient knowledge and will-power. Unlike broken hammers and cars, we don't simply become conscious of existential problems affecting the lifeworld in order to fix them. Instead, as Heidegger explains, we become insecure and anxious—often without knowing why or even noticing.

As Norgaard's ethnographic findings suggest, this is why we have to work together to deal with the disturbing implications of a comprehensive issue like climate change. If these implications do indeed threaten the continuity of life by disrupting lifeworld integrity, the anxiety that signals this existential insecurity isn't something we

[18] *Ibid*., p. 103.

can cope with by ourselves. Precisely because the lifeworld is intersubjective, problems that affect it cannot be addressed in direct, unmediated ways.

Climate change is an intersubjective issue to the extent that it uproots existential assumptions shared in common. Consequently, any viable ethical responses to it must likewise be intersubjective. Bottom-up community dialogue, rather than the top-down monologue issued by experts and politicians, is the appropriate response to a problem like this. Dialogue is not a substitute for action. It's the wisest path to it.

Responding to Climate Anxiety

In comparison to other issues, the notion of climate change appears especially conducive to anxiety. What could be more all-encompassing, more God-like in nature, than the climate? Climate affects *the* most basic character of the places we live in, and the thought of an unstable climate seems to portend an uncanny or perhaps disorderly world that throws our future into doubt. Or perhaps climate change signifies for some a power of nature somehow *against* us with a mind of its own. In any case, what issue could make us feel smaller, more lost and more powerless? Mike Hulme makes this point quoting Lucian Boial:

> Indeed, throughout the human experience of realised climate and portended climates, there runs a thread of anxiety and fear. 'The history of humanity is characterised by an endemic anxiety…it is as if something or someone is remorselessly trying to sabotage the world's driving force—and particularly its climate.' The persistent use of visual icons of glaciers…as signifiers of climate danger reveals such anxiety.[19]

According to sociologist Anthony Giddens, moreover, anxiety is endemic today. The globalized, post-traditional institutions that constitute modern social existence, he explains, perpetually challenge our basic trust in the world we share with others, and this threatens 'ontological security'.

> To be ontologically secure is to possess…'answers' to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses…The prime existential question…concerns *existence itself*, the discovery of an ontological framework of 'external reality'.[20]

To the extent that traditional answers to existential questions are repeatedly undermined by rapid social change, however, the continuity of our existence—and hence our very identity—is in constant danger of destabilizing.

Citing psychological experiments in which subjects react in 'dramatic and immediate' fashion when deep social conventions are breached, Giddens explains how disturbances in our 'emotive-cognitive orientation towards others, the object-world, and

[19] Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction, and Opportunity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 13, quoting Boial, *The Weather in the Imagination*.

[20] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 47.

self-identity' produce anxieties that we're profoundly motivated to avoid.[21] As psychologist Helen Lynd put it:

> We experience anxiety in becoming aware that we cannot trust our answers to the questions, 'Who am I?' 'Where do I belong?'…with every recurrent violation of trust we become again children unsure of ourselves in an alien world.[22]

Anxiety can paralyze our ability to comport ourselves with integrity, think creatively and consistently, and act with purpose in anticipation of future possibilities. For psychologists Immo Fritsche and Katrin Häfner, perceived existential threats implicated in issues like climate change often compel people to reinforce their cultural worldview and even deny that humans are part of nature. 'This symbolically releases humans from the realm of mortal nature and may thus induce a sense of immortality and thereby buffer existential anxiety.'[23] Even in less extreme forms, anxiety seems a likely prompt for denial.

Despite all of this, however, some communities *do* seem empowered to address climate change ethically. The 'transition towns' movement is a particularly salient example of empowered, bottom-up change in the face of climate change.[24] The city of Freiburg, where Heidegger taught, is a prominent example, but there are hundreds of others emerging worldwide. Apparently, some communities have indeed learned to work through the disturbing implications of climate change. Understanding how, I suggest, points the way towards an existentialist climate ethics.

Here we return to the question of what distinguishes existential security from insecurity. For Heidegger, there are two ways of dealing with anxiety. The first can be described as *reactive*, the second as *responsive*. The reactive approach shows itself as a willful clinging to the social norms that brought lifeworld (ontological) security in the past. This defensive reaction is defined by its attempt to keep one's world intact by any means. This takes place in various ways depending on the community—including traditions that place all faith in some external power like God, the government, the free market, or Gaia to work out our biggest problems. Social privilege is also relevant. Psychologists Irina Feygina *et al* draw on 'system-justification theory' to explain climate denial as a defensive reaction against perceived threats to 'the very foundations of our socioeconomic system', which privileged groups tend to identify with as beneficiaries of the status quo.[25] As seen in Norgaard's analysis, all such tendencies offload ethical responsibility by abstracting problems like climate change in order to dissociate them from the moral fabric of everyday life.

But what do we do with our anxiety if we don't have an external source to cling to? For example, what happens to someone who identifies with a community that accepts

[21] *Ibid*., p. 38.

[22] *Ibid*., p. 66.

[23] Immo Fritsche and Katrin Häfner, 'The Malicious Effects of Existential Threat on Motivation to Protect the Natural Environment and the Role of Environmental Identity as Moderator', *Environment and Behavior* 44:4 (2012), pp. 570-590, at p. 572.

[24] See Isis Brook, 'Turning Up the Heat on Climate Change: Are Transition Towns an Answer?', *Environmental Values* 18:2 (2009), pp. 125-128.

[25] Irina Feygina, John T. Jost, and Rachel E. Goldsmith, 'System Justification, the Denial of Global Warming, and the Possibility of "System-Sanctioned Change"', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36:3 (2010), pp. 326-338, at p. 327.

the science of climate change, and yet is distrustful of big corporations and big government to solve this problem? Or how might a community cope if they're already suspicious of the mechanistic logic and technological optimism defining mainstream climate discourses? In communities that hold to these lifeworld assumptions, the fundamentalisms that enable others to keep anxiety at bay may not be compelling options.

In any case, should we find ourselves without recourse to the easy comfort of traditional lifeworld norms and sensibilities, we have the opportunity to prepare for the *second* way of dealing with anxiety—what Heidegger calls the 'authentic' response. Once intuition tells us that the background assumptions we counted on in the past fail to serve us going into the future, the search for a new identity begins with the hope that more secure ways of being in the world can be developed.

Although authenticity as an ethical concept has rightly come under fire, it is nevertheless instructive in this context. For Heidegger, authenticity requires one to step back from the comforting world of social norms in order to see them for what they are—as expressing just one way of life amongst possible others. Once communities develop the ability to learn from their anxiety and ultimately *accept* it—rather than engage in strategies of denial to contain it—people can experience an empowering liberation from fear that allows them to, once again, take a stand in life. This time, however, they address a world that they have, in a sense, owned up to and earned with the insight that meaning is created rather than simply given. As previously invisible background assumptions become foregrounded, communities can begin to recognize general lifeworld structures for what they are—historical guidelines and nothing more. Although it takes vigilance, confronting anxiety by accepting it (i.e. working through it with others) allows one to resist the gravitational pull of falling into the traditional security of mainstream everydayness.

A good example of this is found in the climate activism of Tim DeChristopher. He was sentenced to two years in prison after disrupting an oil and gas lease auction by falsely bidding on 116 parcels of public land. But what is significant here is the existential crisis that brought DeChristopher to this decisive moment of action in the first place. In an interview with Terry Tempest Williams, he speaks of an anxious mourning-for-the-future period after talking at length with one of the lead authors of the fourth report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It's worth quoting at length.

> **TIM:** I said [to the scientist]: 'So, what am I missing? It seems like you guys are saying there's no way we can make it.' And she said, 'You're not missing anything. There are things we could have done in the '80s, there are some things we could have done in the '90s—but it's probably too late to avoid any of the worst-case scenarios that we're talking about.' And she literally put her hand on my shoulder and said, 'I'm sorry my generation failed yours.' That was shattering to me.
>
> **TERRY:** When was this?
>
> **TIM:** This was in March of 2008. And I said, 'You just gave a speech to four hundred people and you didn't say anything like that. Why aren't you telling people this?' And she said, 'Oh, I don't want to scare people into paralysis. I feel like if I told people the truth, people would just give up.' …But with me, it did the exact opposite. Once I realized that there was no hope in any sort of normal future, there's no hope for me to

> have anything my parents or grandparents would have considered a normal future—of a career and a retirement and all that stuff—I realized that I have absolutely nothing to lose by fighting back. Because it was all going to be lost anyway.
>
> **TERRY:** So, in other words, at that moment, it was like, 'I have no expectations.'
>
> **TIM:** Yeah. And it did push me into this deep period of despair.
>
> **TERRY:** And what did you do with it?
>
> **TIM:** Nothing. I was rather paralyzed, and it really felt like a period of mourning. I really felt like I was grieving my own future, and grieving the futures of everyone I care about.
>
> **TERRY:** Did you talk to your friends about this?
>
> **TIM:** Yeah, I had friends who were coming to similar conclusions. And I was able to kind of work through it, and get to a point of action. But I think it's that period of grieving that's missing from the climate movement.
>
> **TERRY:** I would say the environmental movement.
>
> **TIM:** Yeah. That denies the severity of the situation, because that grieving process is really hard. I struggle with pushing people into that period of grieving. I mean, I find myself pulling back. I see people who still have that kind of buoyancy and hopefulness. And I don't want to shatter that, you know?
>
> **TERRY:** But I think that what no one tells you is, if you go into that dark place, you do come out the other side, you know? If you can go into that darkest place, you can emerge with a sense of empathy and empowerment.[26]

As DeChristopher's story suggests, the difference between reacting to ontological insecurity and authentically responding to it is the difference between covering up anxiety via denial and accepting it as a signal that we need to seriously re-evaluate things. Just as pain teaches us what is physically harmful in the world, anxiety should teach us what is existentially harmful about our relationship to it. Should a community find itself with some meaningful purchase on the normative implications of climate change, it probably has a better chance of truly responding to anxiety than a community whose lifeworld is under-prepared to make sense of this problem for what it is.

We should be clear that the authentic response doesn't involve the 'authentic' freedom of Jean-Paul Sartre's egocentric brand of existentialism. Cultivating an authentic stance requires collective projects of meaning-making just as much as the forms of denial analyzed by Norgaard. On Hubert Dreyfus's reading, the moment of transformation from the anxious cover-up of denial to the resolve of authenticity does not involve a

[26] Terry Tempest Williams, 'What Love Looks Like', *Orion Magazine*, January/February (2012), online at www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/6598 (accessed 2013-11-11).

willful choice, but happens to one rather as if by a gestalt switch. Suddenly, new possibilities open up as structures of meaning instituted in the past (for the sake of realizing a certain future) lose their invisible grip.

> [One] must arrive at a way of dealing with things and people that incorporates the insights gained in anxiety that no possibilities [for us] have *intrinsic* meaning…yet makes that insight the basis for an active life. Precisely because [one] is clear that [one] can have no final meaning or settled identity, [one] is clear-sighted about what is actually possible.[27]

The existential clarity articulated here appears to parallel DeChristopher's emergence from shattered expectations. Learning to be at home in a world we have owned up to and earned, we become secure and hence receptive in the face of possibility, rather than willful in the face of alienation. If this reading of Heidegger is sound, the authentic response to anxiety should enable us to openly respond to the unique situation for what it is—as in the historically unique situation we call climate change.

Conclusion: Prolegomena to an Existential Climate Ethics

Does an existential rendering of Norgaard's research suggest new approaches to climate ethics? If anxious denial keeps us from recognizing the ways in which our everyday lives are implicated in climate change, we need ethical approaches that address this background condition for what it is.

Moreover, if the existential problem signaled by climate denial is indeed a fundamental barrier to action, we cannot simply reason our way to normativity. In this respect, perhaps we should take pains to avoid overly abstracting climate change if this means ignoring how it actually affects the public. For example, a de-historicized focus on ethical clarity in the form of universal principles risks leaving lifeworld conditions unquestioned and unattended to. Likewise, hopes of individual responsibility might fall flat if ethical reflections concerning climate change occur against the background of intersubjective sensibilities.

In contrast to rationalistic ethical traditions like consequentialism where normativity takes the form of calculating moral results in the external world, or those like deontology where normativity expresses the autonomous will within, the existential problem recommends that we tend to the intersubjective *relationship* people have to the world of their experience. In this respect, it has a common orientation with care ethics and the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) basic to virtue ethics, but fortified with phenomenological and existential insights. In these traditions, ethical decisions are driven by the contingent—and sometimes ambiguous—*situation* given past experience and goals worthy of realization. What existential phenomenology adds to this focus on relationality (and here Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are more edifying than Heidegger) is an ability to mediate micro-level situations involving individual agents and macro-level structures. The latter include historical sensibilities and tendencies, as well as institutional forms of power. Hence, 'the situation' calling for decisive ethical action can

[27] Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's* Being and Time, *Division I* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 320.

be interpersonal or it can be socio-cultural and historical in scope. Either way, the lifeworld structures constituting the background of experience play a significant role in the collective decision-making process. In this way, I submit, an existentialist approach can help us grasp the 'collective action' problem confounding climate ethicists. Ultimately, creative forms of collective meaning-making are needed in the context of the lifestyles and power structures perpetuating climate change and obstructing progress—forms of meaning that promise new answers to old existential questions in an effort to open communities up to an uncertain world.

An existential ethics of this kind, however, requires a receptivity to change that is in short supply today. Two opposing strategies seem available to address this, both of which have merit but remain problematic. The first seeks to motivate public responsibility by presenting the grave implications of climate change as 'hard medicine' that needs to be injected directly into the veins of a society that otherwise refuses to swallow it. Perhaps the case of Tim DeChristopher lends credibility to this approach. If one is ill-prepared to receive this news, however, this strategy risks threatening ontological security—thus inviting forms of denial bent on containing the anxiety that results. Those sensitive to this problem, therefore, typically opt for a 'positive vision' message to motivate action. Perhaps rhetorical frames, narratives, and symbols that make ethical change more palatable should be encouraged instead. Giddens, for example, agrees with Michael Shellenberger and Ted Norhaus who remind gloom-and-doom environmentalists that Martin Luther King Jr. inspired the American civil rights movement with an 'I have a dream' speech, not an 'I have a nightmare' speech.[28]

A full defense of the positive vision approach is found in climate scientist Mike Hulme. He argues that we need to find ways of mediating the *idea* of climate change to empower new ways forward. For one thing, we cannot successfully address climate change if we continue to approach it scientifically as a physical problem in need of policy solutions. Technical thinking that jumps from problems to solutions, he says, limits our imaginations by effectively hollowing out cultural forms of meaning that could help us confront this condition more comprehensively. At the same time, however, he also believes that using cultural symbols—the 'dominant trope [of which] has been one of climate change as a threat'—to motivate individuals by fear is equally unproductive.[29]

Common to both approaches, Hulme explains, is a dualism that ignores socio-cultural experience as the middle ground of ethical reflection. Hence, instead of relying on reason or fear as the lynchpins of social change by presenting this issue as an ominous threat to be averted, he suggests that we creatively mobilize the idea of climate change to redefine the human project itself by asking what climate change 'can do for us'. Such a reversal in logic, he maintains, would treat climate change as 'a stimulus *for* societal adaptation, a stimulus that—rather than threatening a civilization—can accelerate the development of new complex civil and social structures.'[30]

Despite important insights, Hulme's positive vision approach remains problematic from an existentialist perspective. By turning the implications of climate change around so that this issue 'works for us', the anxiety stage risks being comfortably

[28] Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), p. 2.
[29] Hulme, p. 33.
[30] *Ibid*., p. 31.

bypassed. To the extent that climate change is indeed a crisis that our culture is *not* prepared for, a certain measure of anxiety is appropriate as sign that we are indeed in a bad situation that calls for courageous change. We need this signal. So in contrast to those who encourage us to present climate change in a positive light, we might agree with Speth's hard medicine rejoinder to Shellenberger and Norhaus that sometimes we need to be 'reminded of the nightmare ahead'. As Speth remarks, African Americans during the civil rights movement were already living in a nightmare—they needed the dream to pull them forward. Many of us comfortable in denial, by contrast, are simply living a dream.

My own view is that adequate ethical reform for an issue like climate change requires a lifeworld shift in values and perception that will compel us to own up to the various mitigation and adaptation efforts demanded by this issue in authentic ways. If positive visions for the future end up softening the implications of climate change too much, they could undermine the need to reform lifeworld sensibilities and norms in more responsible directions. And yet it's also true that clear and compelling visions are needed to collectivize action towards lifeworld futures worthy of realization. The historic challenge of climate change, as inextricably bound to innumerable other pressing social and ecological issues today, calls for new narratives. This tension between the hard medicine and positive future approaches, it's worth adding, is precisely the kind of problem that demands practical wisdom and care over uniform prescriptions.

Ultimately, ethical discourses have to walk a tightrope in which background assumptions that preserve lifestyles inimical to a healthy climate are squarely challenged, yet without triggering an avalanche of anxiety impossible to cope with. Hence, the challenge of an existential climate ethics is to approach the 'the nightmare ahead', but without getting *stuck* in it as a paralyzing situation with no meaningful alternatives.[31] If done well, perhaps ethical discourses can invite communities to confront, work through, and ultimately accept the anxiety appropriate to the situation they find themselves in. What this largely comes down to is collectively cultivating the lifeworld wisdom needed to confidently *respond* to anxiety in ways that lead to consistently good decisions.

An ethical approach to climate change that took the existential problem seriously would commit itself to working through anxious reactions that shut us down in denial, while cultivating responsive relationships to anxiety that open us up to ethical horizons of possibility. The difference between the reactions we call denial and the responses we call responsibility is an existential one. If the big questions in life conjured up by the implications of climate change are answered defensively, ethical considerations will never surface. However, if meaningful relationships to the socio-ecological world are actively cultivated and earned by communities themselves, perhaps the ethical implications of an issue as totalizing as climate change can be taken up and responded to with purpose.

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[31] Speth, p. 234.

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