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Climate Inaction as Discrimination Against Young People¹

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Abstract: As many young people are now making clear, they are being subjected to extraordinary risks of harms because of government inaction on climate change. In a previous paper, I argued that those who accept climate science have an obligation to join forces with others in pressing for adequate policies.² Given what is at stake, it is quite wrong for individuals go about their everyday lives while ignoring the problem. This is not a vague obligation to future generations, nor is it an obligation that is opaque to common-sense morality. This paper is a commentary on Greta Thunberg's brief but powerful speeches. I start with an exploration of the climate crisis as she depicts it. Next, I interpret her as arguing that complacency in the face of the risks that we are imposing on younger people is a form of systemic or structural discrimination comparable to racism and sexism. Our inaction on climate change does not treat young lives as if they mattered and equally. I conclude with some reflections on her explanation of why we have so far failed to act in ways that take climate change seriously.

Keywords: climate change, climate science, discrimination, Greta Thunberg, young people

We are sending our children to an unknown planet (picket's picket sign at a climate strike).

I have come to think of Greta Thunberg as the Rosa Parks of the climate movement. In describing Thunberg in this way, I mean that she is a member of a category of persons who, while victims of a form of systemic discrimination, have nevertheless been so successful in bringing attention to the injustice of their situation that they are identified with a movement aimed at ending their oppression. In my view, the climate crisis is centrally about the lives of young people and the responsibilities that decisions-makers have to them. I am not saying, of course, that this is the only issue raised by our collective inaction regarding climate change. I am saying that the relatively new emphasis on climate change by our children and grandchildren identifies them as major stakeholders in the development of climate policy. They are, of course, stakeholders who lack representation in the development of governmental and corporate policy.

In the first part of my paper, I will present my ideas in the form of a commentary on what Greta Thunberg has said in her recent presentations.

I: Greta Thunberg's Speeches

When I was about 8 years old, I first heard about something called 'climate change' or 'global warming.' Apparently, that was something humans had created by our way of living. I was told to turn off the lights to save energy and to recycle paper to save resources. (TED)³

Despite the fact that most people today would not identify as climate change skeptics, it seems that Thunberg's comments above reflect where most of us are when it comes to dealing with climate change. In fact, many of us have not even changed our habits regarding shutting off lights or unplugging TVs, so that a substantial part of the energy we 'use' is just wasted. (In North

America roughly two thirds of the energy we consume goes to waste according to the *New York Times*.⁴⁾ Carbon taxes that would raise the price of gasoline by a few cents are treated as anathema to our way of life. Being delayed by protests aimed at calling attention to the climate crises (e.g., the recent Extinction Rebellion “die in” on one of the Halifax commuter-bridges) gives rise to multiple complaints about inconvenience and wasted time (even by one of the city councillors).

There are signs of change. It is gratifying that 6.6 million people worldwide joined the Strike for the Climate on September 27, 2019, though there is the concern that many will have that they have done their bit, and now believe that the climate is someone’s else’s responsibility. (The explorer Robert Swan said, “The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it.”⁵⁾ Unfortunately, it seems that generating sufficient motivation to get governments to act will require continuous pressure for years. One can only hope that this will not be too late:

*[It was] as if there was a world war going on, but no one ever talked about it. (UN)*⁶⁾

Now that climate change makes the news on most days (or, at least it did prior to the pandemic), it may seem that we have gotten beyond this. Nevertheless, it is still possible to live one’s life while paying little or no attention to the problem, and perhaps most people do so. It is true that many governments, including Canada’s, have officially declared that there is an emergency. Again, however, there is the worry that this declaration will be treated as if it were itself sufficient action on the file:

If burning fossil fuels was so bad that it threatened our very existence, how could we just continue like before? Why were there no restrictions? Why wasn’t it made illegal? To me, that did not add up. It was too unreal. (TED)

In Canada there is now talk of ‘making the polluter pay’ by the current Liberal government. Far from imposing meaningful restrictions, nonetheless, our governments in Canada (both federal and provincial) continue to subsidize fossil fuel production. According to an Environmental Defense report, Canadian taxpayers’ subsidies to the fossil fuel industries amount to \$3.3 billion annually.⁷⁾ That means that we are actually paying companies \$19 per ton for the *production* of greenhouse gases (GHGs). To compound the situation, this figure does not even include recent expenditures on the Trans-Mountain Pipeline.⁸⁾

Why have we so far failed to take climate change seriously? In a previous paper,⁹⁾ I argued against Dale Jamieson’s view that common-sense morality is unequal to the challenges presented by climate change.¹⁰⁾ Common-sense morality certainly condemns policies that cause the sorts of harms, injustices, and dislocations that climate change is creating and will continue to bring about (at an increasing pace). It also condemns policies that appropriate benefits to us ourselves at the expense of people in the developing world or that favour our own generation while imposing huge burdens and perhaps leaving insuperable problems for our children and grandchildren. It seems to be evidence in favour of this defense of common-sense morality that young people, including Thunberg and the millions of school children who have joined in the protests that she has inspired,

easily recognize that inaction in the face of the threats and harms of climate change is dramatically wrong:

You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe. (UN)

In this comment, Thunberg reasons that policy makers (and perhaps people more generally) who failed to act while *really* understanding the situation would knowingly be doing what is dramatically wrong, that is, ‘evil’. It seems unlikely (to her, to me, and to most people), however, that policy makers actually intend to destroy the conditions that make life on earth possible. So, it must be the case that they don’t really understand. That means, in her view and mine, that the conclusions of the thousands of scientists studying the problem have not been adequately communicated.

I will return to the questions of belief and understanding in the final section of this paper. First, let us see what Thunberg picks out as salient in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports which are designed to communicate the results of climate science:

The popular idea of cutting our emissions in half in 10 years only gives us a 50% chance of staying below 1.5 degrees [Celsius], and the risk of setting off irreversible chain reactions beyond human control. (UN)

As someone who has read around in the IPCC reports, including the 2018 special report, and had no doubt read the relevant passage, I was surprised to find that I had missed the point that the scenarios under evaluation gave only a 50/50 chance of keeping the planet’s average temperature below the 1.5 degree ceiling that avoid some of the greatest damage. Unfortunately, these reports are very bad instruments for communicating with the general public. Here is the passage:

1.5°C emission pathways are defined as those that, given current knowledge of the climate response, provide a one-in-two to two-in-three chance of warming either remaining below 1.5°C or returning to 1.5°C by around 2100 following an overshoot.¹¹

The well-publicized bottom line of the 2018 IPCC special report is that staying at or below 1.5°C requires slashing global greenhouse gas emissions 45 percent below 2010 levels by 2030 and reaching net zero by 2050.¹² To be accurate, the pathways considered give at least an even chance (with none better than two chances out of three) of avoiding changes that may make it difficult or impossible to reverse catastrophic impacts -- such as the complete loss of the coral reefs on which 25 percent of the life in the oceans depends.

Would any of us knowingly fly on a plane that had a one in two (or even one in three) chance of crashing? Or more to the point, would anyone *put their children* on such a flight?¹³ The flight’s danger has an immediacy that climate change impacts do not, I suppose. Moreover, few people, perhaps not even the IPCC report’s authors, can fully quite bring themselves to believe what the

models predict. I will return to this. So far, however, the climate change models have fallen short only in the wrong direction.¹⁴ The predicted changes have been *greater* than the IPCC reports have anticipated.

Thunberg continues:

Fifty percent may be acceptable to you. But those numbers do not include tipping points, most feedback loops, additional warming hidden by toxic air pollution or the aspects of equity and climate justice. They also rely on my generation sucking hundreds of billions of tons of your CO₂ out of the air with technologies that barely exist. (UN, emphasis added.)¹⁵

The claim about the assumption of carbon capture technology is something I had stumbled on in perusing the IPCC report and found shocking myself.

All pathways¹⁶ that limit global warming to 1.5°C with limited or no overshoot project the use of carbon dioxide removal (CDR) on the order of 100–1000 GtCO₂ over the 21st century.¹⁷ CDR would be used to compensate for residual emissions and, in most cases, achieve net negative emissions to return global warming to 1.5°C following a peak (*high confidence*).¹⁸

So not only do we need to make a massive reduction in the use of fossil fuels, but in getting to net zero by 2050, we will also have to be heavily into carbon dioxide sequestration strategies. Some of these are not high-tech. They include such things as massive tree planting (three trillion new trees has been rumored to solve the problem). The very improbability of achieving this in a world where more and more space is being converted to agricultural use, does seem to suggest the need to rely on carbon capture technologies that have yet to be developed, as Thunberg says:

So, a 50 percent risk is simply not acceptable to u –we have to live with the consequences. (UN)

The main point of my quoting from these speeches lies right here – and in their general context. This is a young person addressing the United Nations. The scene is “all wrong,” as she says. Adults should normally caution and scold children about the risks of what they are doing. This clearly is the reverse. She has had to step up to fill the void, given the lack of genuine leadership, even in adequately warning people of the risks. The conditions of life on earth—already undermined for many species facing extinction (or recently extinct)—are at stake, and we adults are still fixated on such things as small increases in the price of gasoline (and “fairy tales of eternal economic growth,” as Thunberg puts it).

One part of the problem is that for many of us in the so-called ‘developed’ world, the high costs of inaction will not be directly experienced. As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁹ for many older people it is instrumentally (self-interestedly) rational to simply ignore the consequences of global warming. Many other things are much more likely to kill us (cancer or COVID-19) or maim us (Lyme disease) or render us miserable (losing one’s job). Well-to-do people can escape many of

the predicted climate change impacts by, for example, moving away from coastlines, if that particular impact puts them within harm's reach. In addition, even if one were killed or injured by a climate change enhanced storm, ignoring this possibility is still rational (in this sense) for many adults, since anything they could have done to mitigate climate change would only result in improvements that happen many years from now, often beyond their lifetime.

So, not only is it psychologically advantageous to ignore climate change (and be less worried and anxious), it is, from the perspective of narrow instrumental rationality, the only prudent thing to do. Of course, I don't really think that inaction in the face of the threats to civilization and life on the planet is *right*. Nor does anyone who judges the situation from the viewpoint of common-sense morality. On the contrary, such inaction is morally reckless. Also, to the extent that this moral viewpoint becomes a part of one's identity, policies that will harm others—and especially one's children—have a negative impact on one's own well-being. Narrow self-interest does not give an accurate account of the actual interests of anyone and is a completely inadequate account of human rationality.

Thunberg reminds us again and again in her speeches that, given the warnings that emerge from the scientific study of the climate, the consequences of inaction do not fall only on people who are remote in time, on abstract 'future generations.' As she says, "We have to live with the consequences." *We* in this case means young people who are already alive. I want now to explore this point that young people's voices should alert us to, i.e., that our policies (or lack of them) are actually a form of discrimination against youth, an injustice that we should not tolerate.

II. Discrimination Against Young People

The climate change issue can be seen at its core as centering on rich people appropriating more than their share of a global public good and, as a result, harming poor people by causally contributing to extreme climate events such as droughts, hurricanes, and heat waves, which can ramify, causing disease outbreaks, economic dislocations, and political instability. Much of this behavior is unnecessary, even for maintaining the profligate lifestyle of the rich.²⁰

If I live to be 100, I will be alive in the year 2103. When you think about the future today, you don't think beyond the year 2050. By then I will, in the best case, not even have lived half of my life. What happens next? (TED)

As Dale Jamieson argues above, major issues of climate justice arise out of the climate change situation. The relation between the well-developed economies of the North and the developing countries of the global South is a case in point. So far, the risks and harms of climate changes fall predominantly on those who benefit least from the fossil fuel economy. Writers have called these geographical and demographic aspects of climate injustice to our attention for decades. Here I will continue to focus on the temporal division between young people and the adults whose decisions have brought about and continue to exacerbate the climate crisis. I will argue that these decisions and policies discriminate against young people in a very serious way.

Sometimes we discriminate against people without intending to or realizing it. This is a commonplace. Discriminatory practices such as slavery, putting Indigenous children in Residential schools, racial segregation, and paying women less than men, arose and continued for years without people seriously questioning them. They are all cases of unequal treatment that cannot be justified; they are also cases of discrimination. While these practices went on for years without the injustice even being recognized, the discrimination that I want to call to people's attention, *does not* have a history, or rather, has only a short one. It is only quite recently that we have obtained sufficient knowledge of the climate crisis that our failure to take sufficient action has become discriminatory. Let us look at this a bit closer. Here is a plausible analysis of the concept of discrimination:

Discrimination consists of acts, practices, or policies that wrongfully (a) impose a relative disadvantage on persons based on their membership in a salient social group, and b) the wrongfulness rests (in part) on the fact that the imposition of the disadvantage is on account of the group membership of the victims.²¹

Do our lax climate policies qualify as discrimination on this account? Breaking this account down yields the following issues:

Do the current climate policies of our governments impose a relative disadvantage on young people? To me, and to many young people themselves, the answer to that question is obvious. Our current practices in the use of fossil fuels are warming the planet so that the crisis is escalating. Far from decreasing GHG emissions, we are actually increasing them. There has been, since the advent of the first of the IPCC reports (in 1990) one theme that dominates its policy recommendations: a failure to reduce the output of GHGs will make it more and more difficult to bring climate change under control, and this also means that more and more people will be harmed and harmed to a greater extent. Climate change will get dramatically worse as we move into the future without adequate plans and policies that succeed in reducing GHG production. Here is how one author sums it up:

[T]he over-lapping emergencies of ever-stronger superstorms and rising seas, more severe droughts and declining water supplies, increasingly larger dead-zones, massive noxious-insect outbreaks, and the daily disappearance of forests and species, are for most people not a good story.²²

Indeed it is not; and, clearly, young people are at a relative disadvantage when compared with adult decisions-makers -- the people in positions of political power, and those like you and me, whose votes and complacency keep them in power. A great deal more of the lives of young people will be led in a world that is deteriorating in these and other ways, and the above quote does not even mention the social and political deteriorations (such as wars and refugee crises brought on by rising seas and famine) that would likely result from these changes. As Thunberg says, "You have stolen our dreams... We have to live with the consequences" of failed policies, that today's decision-makers may never experience.

A comparison may be helpful here. When we (adults) listen to Thunberg's claim that we "have stolen our future," it probably sounds like hyperbole. But we should ask, what is it like, from the perspective of a young person, to learn of the warnings of the world's foremost climate experts? What is it like, especially, in this period when governments acknowledge the emergency, make promises to act, and continue with policies that exacerbate the crisis? Those who have received a diagnosis of a potentially fatal disease such as cancer understand what it is to have one's future thrown radically in doubt. It becomes hard to see why any of the things that have made one's life meaningful should continue to matter. I think most adults can understand what that sort of *gestalt* shift is like. But I do not think we generally hear what young people are telling us in this literal way. We are used to discounting as "childish" the worries of young people. In general, we don't hear the protest of young people from their own point of view. In this respect, the treatment of the interests of young people in our society is like our treatment of the victims of systemic sexism and racism. There is a certain normal way of seeing things, dictated by the rules of social interaction that preclude militate against our taking their perspective as seriously as the situation warrants.

Do young people form a salient group in the relevant sense? We can't discriminate against a group of people that we don't notice and categorize as such. However, it seems almost trivially true that young people stand out as a group that we do notice and categorize. Of course, this is not a group with sharply defined boundaries, but that is true of virtually all of the categories of discrimination which we easily recognize (such as racism and sexism). Again, young people as a whole do not belong to a single economic class. It is true that some kids ride about in expensive SUVs, fingering expensive cell phones, enjoying the benefits of fossil fuel exploitation, while others go hungry, cannot get clean water, and are denied education. Since the category of 'young people' is comprised of rich and poor, black and white, Native and non-native, and more generally, of both privileged and not, it may seem odd to say that young people as a class are victims of discrimination. Nevertheless, a moment's reflection on any of the types of discrimination we recognize reveals similar intersectionality, with big differences in class and fortune in all of the affected groups. This, too, therefore, is no objection to a finding of discrimination. Storm damage, power outages and other sources of middle-class insecurity obviously do not compare with a poor child's starvation. It is clearly correct to say that young lives from all classes are disadvantaged, however, relative to the adults whose policies of consumption and unwillingness to change are contributing to escalating climate deterioration.

Here I should clarify what I mean by "lives" in order to avoid an objection. In one of the ways that we commonly think of age-discrimination, the risk is the same for young and old. At any given time in the lives of adults and young people, the risks of harmful impacts from climate change are the same (at least if we exclude the question of relative vulnerability). Thus, the situation is not discriminatory in the sense that, for example, mandatory retirement is said to be a case of age-discrimination. Under mandatory retirement, two workers with the same level of skill and ability are treated differently, simply because of their age. As the debate over mandatory retirement revealed, however, there is another way of looking at the situation. Under some conditions, such as those where there is high unemployment, mandatory retirement can be a policy

of *equalization*. Older people who stay in their positions leave fewer opportunities for young people looking for work, fewer opportunities than they themselves had. This second view seeks equality of prospects across a lifetime. It is in this sense that I claim that climate inaction discriminates. It fails to address a relative disadvantage, a dramatic inequality of prospects for young people. Clearly, it is because young people belong to a group whose full lives will take them further into the future, that they are disadvantaged by policies that fail to limit the impacts of climate change. Again, as Thunberg has said, “we have to live with the consequences.”

Is the disadvantage experienced by young people imposed because they belong to this group? Paradigms of discrimination such as racism and sexism involve prejudice.²³ We love our children and often put their interests above our own. Is it not absurd to claim that we are prejudiced against them? Not necessarily. The women’s movement, as well as a host of psychological research, has taught us that bias may be structural and unconscious, i.e., fostered by our institutions and implicit in the way we respond to people, though it generally goes unnoticed. Under a patriarchal system, it seems clear that a man can, indeed, love his wife while at the same time having little respect for her autonomy and other interests that are important aspects of a good life. So, the answer to the above questions, it appears, is that it is not absurd to say that we human beings can love someone and still act in ways that reveal biases against them. Notoriously, studies show that people often (perhaps normally) operate with unconscious biases – making sexist decisions, for example, while publicly proclaiming feminist values.

Without the massive effort of scientists, we would know very little about our own or our children’s interests in relation to climate change. With this input, we can see that actions and policies which reflect our own interests (narrowly considered) can be at odds with the best interests of young people. The take-away here is this: It seems likely that adult perception of the interests of young people *is* affected by the fact that they belong to this category and are seen as too immature to understand their real interests. Often these interests are absent from policy considerations because of this. Of course, when the world is changing for the worse, the interests of younger people are different from those of adults.²⁴

III. Why Have We Failed?

If we accept the above arguments about discrimination against young people, where does this leave us? Like a school crossing guard at a dangerous intersection who doesn’t show up, we had better have a good excuse for our lack of action. Although in Thunberg’s speech at the United Nations she referred to the possibility that ‘evil’ leaders might be reluctant to act (something she did not want to believe), elsewhere she raises the larger question of why we have failed as human beings:

So why are we not reducing our emissions? Why are they in fact still increasing? Are we knowingly causing a mass extinction? Are we evil? (TED)

If one really understood the depth of the climate crisis, she says, one would have to be evil to support the policies that, far from reducing GHG emissions, have allowed them to continue to rise. Obviously, the appropriate answers and the question of blame may differ depending on *whose* actions we are considering. Here I will assume (as I have above) that the warnings of climate scientists are justified, and that for all of the reasons that have been given here and elsewhere, it is gravely wrong *not* to take actions that have a serious chance of limiting the impacts of climate change on young people and on the planet. Obviously, there are several possible explanations of such moral failures. Here are some of the most obvious:

A (some agent, a person or group) has failed to act because

1. Epistemic Failure: **A** does not believe the warnings of the climate science:
 - 1.1 **A** denies that there is anthropomorphic climate change;
 - 1.2 **A** does not understand the warnings that **A** claims to believe;
 - 1.3 **A** denies that anything can be done to prevent the harms in question;
 - 1.4 **A** does not believe
 - (a) that it is wrong to allow preventable harm and injustice, and/or,
 - (b) that **A** has any responsibility to do anything about these harms.
2. Evil: **A** sees the harms and injustice, knows that it is wrong to let this happen, but does nothing despite this or even acts deliberately to make the situation worse.
3. Akrasia: **A** sees the writing on the wall and believes that inaction is wrong but is not motivated to act because **A** is morally weak.

Arguably, there are human beings who belong to each of these categories. Many just do not know what is going on; some are aware of the consequences of inaction but believe it is not their moral responsibility; some are ‘evil’ in the sense that they are willing to pursue self-interest despite the cost (e.g., Exxon executives who were aware of the effect of CO² on the planet as far back as 1977 and chose to fund a campaign of doubt and denial)²⁵; and some are unable to motivate themselves to do what they believe is right. In the space remaining, however, I will concentrate on option 1.1.2 above, the account that Thunberg singles out: that, in general, people do not *understand* the situation we are in.

I will rely on an example given by Jonathan Safran Foer in his recent book *We Are the Weather* to convey what I think is a plausible interpretation of this failure to understand. Safran Foer, too, is trying to fathom our lack of action on climate change. He begins his discussion by looking at another case where inaction played a key role in deepening and extending the crisis, namely, the Holocaust. Foer relates the story of a Polish Catholic, Jan Karski, who became a member of the resistance during World War II. By interviewing members of resistance groups, he was able to pull together an accurate picture of the genocide that was being perpetrated. Karski recounts one of the many encounters with members of the Jewish resistance. One of those interviewed said the following:

[T]ell the Jewish leaders this is no case for politics or tactics. Tell them the earth must be shaken to its foundation, the world must be aroused. Perhaps then it will wake up, understand, perceive. Tell them that they must find the strength and courage to make sacrifices that no other statesmen have ever had to make, sacrifices as painful as the fate of my dying people and as unique. This is what they do not understand. German aims and methods are without precedent in history. The democracies must react in a way that is also without precedent, and choose unheard of methods as an answer...²⁶

Karski was able to escape Poland with this information about the concentration camps and travel to Washington in 1943. There he met with United States Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, who was indeed a prominent member of the Jewish community. This is how Safran Foer recounts their meeting.

After hearing Karski's account of the clearing of the Warsaw Ghetto and exterminations in the concentration camps, after asking him a series of increasingly specific questions... Frankfurter paced the room in silence and then took his seat and said, "Mr. Karski, a man like me talking to a man like you must be totally frank. So, I must say that I am unable to believe what you told me." When Karski's colleague pleaded with Frankfurter to accept Karski's account, Frankfurter responded, "I didn't say that this young man is lying. I said I am unable to believe him. My mind, my heart, they are made in such a way that I cannot accept it."²⁷

Safran Foer applies this thought to the problem at hand:

So-called climate change deniers reject the conclusion that 97 percent of climate scientists have reached: the planet is warming because of human activities. But what about those of us who say we accept the reality of human-caused climate change? We may not think the scientists are lying, but are we able to believe what they tell us? Such a belief would surely awaken us to the urgent ethical imperative attached to it, shake our collective conscience, and render us willing to make small sacrifices in the present to avoid cataclysmic ones in the future.

If we accept a factual reality (that we are destroying the planet) but are unable to *believe* it, we are no better than those who denied the existence of human caused climate change – just as Felix Frankfurter was no better than those who deny the existence of the Holocaust. And when the future distinguishes between these two kinds of denial, which will appear to be a grave error and which an unforgivable crime?²⁸

What are we to make of this claim of knowledge without belief? Though this combination is paradoxical, I think that virtually anyone reading these passages will see that they shed light on the situation of many of us regarding the climate crisis.

Although it is true that we live in a world highly fashioned by science and technology, a great deal of that scientific knowledge remains inaccessible to the average person. No ordinary person could possibly replicate the theory-driven research that grounds the science that made possible this world of cell phones, data projectors, air travel, heart transplants, gene splicing, and

so on. When we learn some of the basics of these ideas as part of general science, we learn how to answer test questions, thereby showing that we know some of the essential facts. For many of us, putting these answers down – or ticking the relevant boxes on the exam sheets – is the main way that this knowledge is translated into action.

Likewise, many of us have learned a small part of what the scientists have discovered about the climate. We have learned enough to be able to say that it is getting warmer, that average global temperature has increased by 1°C already, that polar ice is melting at a rate not seen before in human history. We, the ‘scientific majority’, are not climate deniers—we can give approximately correct answers to a few questions about what scientists have learned about climate change. The deeper story that information relates is, from the perspective of our ordinary lives, a nightmare, however. If we really accept the science at a detailed level, then, as Naomi Klein puts it, “this changes everything.” Our everyday lives are so bound up with the use of fossil fuel energy, that virtually everything we do runs head-long into the things that we value and jeopardizes even the lives of our children. If we accept the science, then we would have to go way beyond answering a few questions about climate change in translating our knowledge into action, in order to preserve what we value.

So, when asked, we agree with the scientific consensus regarding anthropomorphic climate change. But the occasions on which we even think about our climate may be relatively few. The bad news has no time to register, to take up life in the system of beliefs that ordinarily move us. We are busy people. There are calls waiting and emails demanding our attention. There are meals to prepare and work to be done if one is to keep a job. One thinks, “I need exercise, I need to focus on the things that make me successful as the sort of person that I am.” In the midst of all this, one does not have the time or stamina to deal with a global catastrophe. It must be fenced off and kept from bleeding into everything of concern to us. It must not be allowed an uptake that would “change everything”.

Unlike the coronavirus pandemic (in many respects), climate change accommodates this nicely. Most of the time for most people, everything appears just as it did before James Hansen, Al Gore, the IPCC, and others started bringing global warming to our attention. Most of the time, the weather continues to accommodate our everyday lives. We revel in the beauty of a clear day after a storm; we hope for a warmer day, wish it was not raining, find a winter unusually mild or cold, and so on. There have always been storms. We have always had these joys and frustrations with the weather. And most of the time we make our way as ‘Humean beings’, in a world put together by constant conjunctions, acting within the regularities of weather that generally accommodate our well-established habits. At the level of ordinary intuitive-based thinking, climate change does not register. We do not believe it. It is only at the level of highly reflective theory-based and probabilistic thinking that we come to see weather events differently and interpret them as involving a threatening change in the climate.

Beliefs are important to us (and to this discussion) because they bear importantly on what we do. We are not all climate change deniers, as has been claimed in a *Time* magazine article.²⁹ But we have not taken the climate crisis seriously either. We know about the injustice of

submerging the lands which other people call home; we can perhaps see, as well, that our inaction and procrastination is wrong, though we might not even be moved to lower the thermostat. Most importantly, we have not seen the future through the eyes of young people who much contend with a bleak future. In the language that Thunberg has chosen, we have not really “understood” the urgency of our situation. It may be that her being young and therefore not yet swallowed up by the business of everyday life, together with the uniqueness of her autistic mind, enable a sharpness of focus that most of us lack. She can speak with conviction because she *does* believe, does understand, what she is saying. She can fashion a life around that reality while for many of us, it is still merely theoretical. It is greatly to be hoped that the conviction with which she speaks continues to be contagious.³⁰

V. Conclusion

I started by saying that we had better have a good excuse for our inaction. I argued that this lack of meaningful action is partly explained by our failure to really believe, or in Thunberg’s words, “understand” the situation we are in. Does this failure constitute a good excuse for our continued discriminatory behavior against young people? On the contrary, the situation is like that of systemic racial discrimination, for example, where unconscious patterns of belief give us a special responsibility to be vigilant. In North America, police operate within a system that promotes discrimination against Black and Indigenous people by perpetuating unconscious bias. Our reflective morality allows us to recognize the results and censure their behavior as unjust. Likewise, the system of perceptions and beliefs with which we ordinarily approach the world encourages in us a complacency regarding the warnings of climate science about actions and policies that are bringing about changes in the atmospheric conditions upon which our lives depend.

The science provides incontrovertible proof that the climate crisis is escalating. As more time passes without significant reduction of GHGs, we face more – and more intense – storms, flood and fires. As the risks of harm grow higher, the chances of mitigating these risks and reducing the harms become lower. Who benefits from this inaction, and at whose expense? One thing is clear: when we compare young lives with older ones, the greatest harms are imposed on those whose lives still lie mainly ahead of them. Many older people may well live out the rest of their lives without ever being seriously inconvenienced by the warming of the planet. This, too, fosters complacency and inaction. But this inaction is not justifiable or right. As Thunberg said to the United Nations General Assembly in 2019, “This is all wrong ... You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words.” This is clearly a form of discrimination: treating young people unequally, as if their lives do not matter in the way ours do. It is, as Thunberg says, a strange world when young people must warn adults of the risks and harms that they are imposing on their children by failing to heed the clear warnings of our best science.

Notes

¹ This paper is a revision of “Taking Climate Change Seriously,” presented at the May 31, 2020 on-line meeting of the Canadian Section of the International Association for the Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy. I am grateful for the feedback I received from commentators at that meeting.

² Nathan Brett, “Collective Action, Individual Responsibility, and Climate Change,” presented at the Canadian section of the International Association for Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy (IVR) on May 31, 2019.

³ Greta Thunberg, “School Strike for Climate -- Save the World by Changing the Rules,” filmed November 24, 2018 in Stockholm, Sweden, 11:11, https://www.ted.com/talks/greta_thunberg_school_strike_for_climate_save_the_world_by_changing_the_rules/transcript?language=en. Subsequently referenced as ‘TED’. All direct quotes from Thunberg are in italics.

⁴ Terry Sobolewski and Ralph Cavanagh, “Why is America Wasting So Much Energy?,” *New York Times*. November 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/opinion/bipartisan-energy-efficiency.html>.

⁵ Aiko Stevenson, “Robert Swan OBE: ‘The Greatest Threat to Our Planet Is the Belief That Someone Else Will Save It’,” *HuffPost*, May 1, 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/robert-swan-antarctica_b_1315047.

⁶ Greta Thunberg, “Text of Full Speech at the United Nations Climate Action Summit,” *NBC News*, September 23, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/read-greta-thunberg-s-full-speech-united-nations-climate-action-n1057861>. Subsequently referenced as ‘UN’.

⁷ Alex Doukas, “The Elephant in the Room: Canada’s Fossil Fuel Subsidies Undermine Carbon Pricing Efforts,” *Oil Change International*, November 16, 2016, <http://priceofoil.org/2016/11/16/canadas-fossil-fuel-subsidies/>

⁸ Vassy Kalepos and John Paul Tasker, “Cost of Trans Mountain Expansion Soars to \$12.6B,” *CBC News*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/vassy-trans-mountain-pipeline-1.5455387>. The pipeline was initially estimated to cost \$4.5B (CDN).

⁹ Nathan Brett, “Climate Change and Common-Sense Morality,” presented at the Canadian Philosophical Association Annual Conference on June 4, 2018.

¹⁰ Dale Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed—And What It Means for Our Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 147. On page 144, Jamieson observes, “Just as the problems of climate change overwhelm our cognitive and affective systems, as well as our ability to do economic calculations, so they also swamp the machinery of morality, at least as it manifests in our moral consciousness.”

¹¹ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C Above Pre-Industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to*

Eradicate Poverty, October 2018, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>. See the Glossary, p. 555 for this definition.

¹² Umair Irfan, “Report: We Have Just 12 Years to Limit Devastating Global Warming,” *Vox*, October 8, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/8/17948832/climate-change-global-warming-un-ipcc-report>

¹³ As one of the editors suggests, the climate change problem is more analogous to already being on a plane where we are at the mercy of a pilot and crew, who seem unable to take seriously the risk posed by, say, a fire on board.

¹⁴ Naomi Oreskes, Michael Oppenheimer and Dale Jamieson, “Scientists Have Been Underestimating the Pace of Climate Change,” *Scientific American*, August 19, 2019, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/scientists-have-been-underestimating-the-pace-of-climate-change/>

¹⁵ In this short quote, Thunberg states that “tipping points” and most “feedback loops” have not been brought into consideration in arriving at the 50 percent figure. The 2018 IPCC special report discusses tipping points in two main ways: first, in relation to the *global* climate system (e.g., the slowing of major ocean/wind currents) and second, at a *local* level (e.g. the possibility that dryer conditions could lead to fire and slowed regrowth conditions that would destroy the Amazon rain forests). The IPCC report does say that even at 1°C there is a “moderate” risk of such events.

¹⁶ The 2018 IPCC report considers *ninety* different “pathways” – complex scenarios aiming at a 45 percent reduction by 2030 and net-zero by 2050.

¹⁷ Removing 100 to 1000 GtCO₂ (Gt = gigatons) is roughly equivalent to taking back 2.7 to 27 times current *annual global* output of carbon dioxide (37 Gt).

¹⁸ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C Above Pre-Industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty*, October 2018, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>. See the Summary for Policymakers, p.17.

¹⁹ Nathan Brett, “Collective Action, Individual Responsibility, and Climate Change,” presented at the Canadian section of the International Association for Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy (IVR) on May 31, 2019.

²⁰ Dale Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed--And What It Means for Our Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 148.

²¹ Andrew Altman, “Discrimination,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition, forthcoming), edited by Edward N. Zalta, entry dated April 20, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/discrimination/>. I have altered the quote grammatically in removing it from a longer sentence.

²² Jonathan Safran Foer, *We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast* (Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2019), 12.

²³ We tend to associate discrimination with *expressions* of prejudice. We don't generally hear such speech directed against children and adolescents. That may be changing due to statements made by Donald Trump. Thunberg now is perceived as a threat by some, who have referred to her, for example, as "an annoying little brat" and "the maypole around which all the eco-loonies now dance," to cite two carefully filtered examples. In response to some hate-Tweets, she said: "I honestly don't understand why adults would choose to spend their time mocking and threatening teenagers and children for promoting science, when they could do something good instead."

²⁴ There are many legal cases in which young people are suing their governments for inadequate policies against climate change. See, for example, *La Rose v Her Majesty the Queen* (2019), a British Columbia case in which fifteen young people are suing the government of Canada. Charter rights under Sections 7 and 15 are invoked in the suit. The claim of Section 15-Charter Rights Violations (Equality), are particularly relevant here. There is a similar case in Ontario and many more in the U.S. See Rhianna Schmunk, "Young Canadians File Lawsuit Against Government Over Climate Change," *CBC News*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/canadian-teens-lawsuit-federal-government-over-climate-change-1.5335349>.

²⁵ See, for example, Shannon Hall, "Exxon Knew About Climate Change Almost 40 Years Ago," *Scientific American*, October 26, 2015, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/exxon-knew-about-climate-change-almost-40-years-ago/>.

²⁶ Safran Foer, *We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast*, 17-19. Safran evidently adapted this via other sources from Jan Karski's account, *Story of a Secret State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1944).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

²⁹ Mary Pipher, "We are all Climate Change Deniers," *Time*, November 15, 2013, <https://ideas.time.com/2013/07/15/we-are-all-climate-change-deniers/>. Of course, Pipher does not take 'denial' literally. Her view is much like the one I am defending here.

³⁰ In thinking about Thunberg's speeches, I am reminded of the passage in Nietzsche in which the madman announces the death of god. The madman soon realizes that he has come too soon, and says: "This deed is still more distant from them than the distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves." I do hope that, for the sake of the planet, Thunberg has not come too soon (and worry that she has come too late). For the source of the quote, see Friedrich Nietzsche, "Fordham University Modern History Sourcebook. Nietzsche: Parable of the Madman," <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/nietzsche-madman.asp>.

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