

# The Introductory Ethics Behind the ‘Why’ concerning our Responsibility to the Future

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*Climate Change, Climate Ethics, Importance of Humanities, Global Urgency, Responsibility*



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## Information YCST

*Climate change will be one of the largest security threats in the (near) future. Yet, in recent years, little to no attention was paid towards climate change in the security domain. We understand the importance of supplying future decision makers with knowledge and skills to understand climate change and negate the challenges which it will bring. Hence, YCST was created in November 2021. The YCS Research Team was founded in September 2023, to further build upon this project. The Research Team gives young professionals and students the opportunity to write about climate security related topics, and put their articles into public discourse.*

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Science, politics and economics dominate the discourse regarding the climate and secure futures. But we do not seem to be getting far with these as our only motivations, what is missing is the humanities. British economist turned moral philosopher John Broome argues for the maximisation of wellbeing in the future by focusing on ‘weighing’ current lives versus future ones (Broome, 2004). This is just one example of how, by applying philosophical, historical and social science discourse to the problem of climate change, there is huge potential for growth in support for the cause.

There is a lot of talk about what we should be doing to create a better future, and who should be doing it. But the discourse on ‘why?’ does not garner nearly enough attention. Understanding why, and *believing* it, is how we are going to create strong foundations on which to persuade governments, countries, companies and individuals to seriously commit to securing the safety of their future within a warming climate.

### **Why is it important to *understand* the problem?**

*‘Sometimes the best way to make progress in solving a problem is to clarify what the problem is.’ – (Gardiner, 2011).*

There is more than enough material and facts to back up the claim that the world is warming irreparably, as there has been for quite some time. Dr Stephen Gardiner of the University of Washington points out that in the 1990s, the international objective for industrialised countries to stabilise their emissions at a specific level by 2000 was put in place, but not carried through, and most in fact increased (2011).

It is not a lack of knowledge that is preventing action, it is lack of care. Similar attitudes of indifference and neglect are still prevalent in governments’ contemporary public discourse. I spoke to Richard Youngman, CEO of Cleantech Group, in order to understand the perspective of someone senior involved with trying to be part of the solution to climate change. Cleantech Group is a research based company that facilitates the engagement of organisations with new and emerging startups specialising in sustainable technology.



During our conversation I asked how he feels about the trajectory of the climate crisis as it sits, he was not positive. Although enthusiastic about the volume of solutions and interest, he shares Gardiner’s view that there is simply a lack of collective urgency. To put it financially, Youngman noted that we (globally) are roughly 4-6 times behind the amount we should be investing per annum to be compliant with the Paris Climate Accords.

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The UNFCCC likewise notes, ‘climate change action needs to be massively increased to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement’. Climate change is not a priority!

Dr Rob Lawlor of the University of Leeds (my own university), who specialises in Applied Ethics, verbalised his opinions to me about the effectiveness of global commitments. He shares Richard Youngman’s cautious perspective. They both note the current inadequacy of governmental and global approaches to so-called climate commitments, but are hopeful of the significance of formal recognition of the problem.

If the facts, the COPs, the legally binding treaty of the Paris Agreement, and countless research is not enough to spark effective action, it appears there needs to be another approach. There needs to be the conviction that it is a real problem that will destabilise our planet in its entirety and the gravity of the situation must be understood before it becomes too late.

### **Why is the climate crisis a problem for now?**

I am going to attempt to provide some general answers to these questions by alluding to basic principles within the study of ethics. Others in our YCSRT have and will provide knowledge and guidance based on empirical data, science and actionable ideas however my thoughts will take more of a philosophical tone, encouraging everyone simply to really *think* about the problem, take a moment to consider the bigger picture, and go from there.

The climate crisis is a problem for now because the repercussions of today’s decisions will be in effect in 1, 15 and 99 years time. As Richard Youngman advised me, considering the goal of a net zero 2050, a shipping vessel built today will still be on the sea in 2050, but they are not currently being manufactured to run on a lower carbon fuel. Hence, there is somewhat of a lag between policy and action. 2050 cannot be the year we start to implement effective climate action, it has to be now. In fact realistically, it had to be years ago.

### **Why ethics? How will this help to solve the delay in action?**

Action is most often assumed to be influenced by empirical data from economists and politicians. It is inevitable that two concepts, primarily concerned with the present, will not worry themselves about future events: politics is about the next election, economics is about optimising current resources.

The reason I believe ethics and philosophy is given little status in the climate conversation is because an ethical approach, naturally, means that everybody has a different opinion. With science and empirical data, you cannot dispute fact, whereas you can dispute an argument. But to neglect the role of ethics in decisions that affect not just everyone alive today, but everyone in the future too, would be a considerable mistake. The decisions we make now are quite literally life or death.

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In short, I believe that the current population has a responsibility for the outcome of the future, and to make this outcome as flourishing as possible for future generations. Concerning the climate, this means we are morally obligated to reasonably do what we can to ensure a safe environment and plan for the inevitable dangerous events due to global warming.

Where politics and economics fail in their urgency to respond to the climate crisis, we can use ethics to justify long term decisions and solutions about the future. Ethics gives us moral reason to care and moral reason to act. Admittedly, there are ethical arguments in academia claiming we are not responsible for the future; nihilism for example, is famously synonymous with the total meaninglessness of our world (Church, 2013). However, these arguments mostly rely on the assumption that humanity is selfish and uncaring. I do not believe this is the case.

History is full of misleading ‘facts’ that have resulted in many of us assuming the worst of one another. Dutch historian, Rutger Bregman, rights these by presenting an accurate representation of numerous examples of human goodness (2019).

*‘To stand up for human goodness is to stand up against a hydra.’*  
– (Bregman, 2019)

This relates closely to the climate conversation. It is important to recognise that the average human *does* care, and *will* act, when given the opportunity and resources. There is no shortage of solutions and ideas and commitment to the cause at the moment, it simply needs to be understood by everyone.

### **So, why *are* we responsible for the future?**

My favourite case for why we are responsible for the future is presented by philosopher William MacAskill. He proposes an extremely persuasive case for *longtermism* in his recent book *What We Owe the Future*. MacAskill cleverly appeals to empathy by basically adopting the notion that we have all heard before: ‘put yourself in their shoes’.

The part of the book that stands out most is MacAskill’s comparison of the climate crisis with slavery. As I mentioned above, when economics, politics and science fail us, ethics can provide the reason for change. With slavery, it was neither economics, politics or science that led to its success in abolition. It was empathy, social justice and honourable individuals that convinced others of the moral wrongness of slavery (Tasoff, 2023).

Dr Rob Lawlor also highlighted to me that ethics was largely responsible for this huge transformation in society’s moral perception. We owe the future a good one because it is the morally right thing to do.

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## Conclusion

‘Solutions’ to the climate crisis within the economy and politics are too short-term. Whilst there is a lot that can be said and argued over how much we should be doing, I have not addressed this here; instead I simply claim that we should collectively be more focused on the moral debate surrounding climate change. It is our (and by ‘our’ I mean global, national, regional and individual) responsibility to ensure a secure, safe, and prosperous future for everyone ahead of us.

### **Perspectives of other members of the Research Team**

#### **Marieke Jacobs (27)**

MSc Earth Science & MSc Energy Science at Utrecht University, working-student at Defensity College

*The ethics behind climate change is a topic that absolutely needs more attention. The topic is not known enough at the moment, although I remark, and so do older generations, that young people have such a high motivation to contribute as a result of the moral drive they obtain. It is refreshing to see humanities and ethics being aligned next to science, politics and economics. The power of an ethical view, how this can make much more and stronger impact on the long term than any other, and how this affected the end of slavery, became very clear to me. Also the difference between ethics-based arguments and empirical data, and the risk that lies within the usage of only empirical data gave me a critical look on my own (empirical) perspective.*

#### **Jurre Kok (22)**

MA European Policy student at the University of Amsterdam

*This paper’s call for shifting the debate on climate change to implement an ethical perspective is necessary to guarantee a safe and sustainably future for the next generations is a bold, but accurate one to make. Instead of prioritizing discourse on contemporary problems – such as the damage to the current economy – are almost irrelevant in the future if the discourse and actions do not keep in mind the next 10, 20 or even 50 years. This shift in discourse should go hand-in-hand with a shift concerning the level of policy-making. Climate change is border-crossing problem, thus if we want to guarantee a sustainable and prosperous future for our children and even ourselves(!), we have to prioritize a long-term ethical perspective more and shift towards an effective global decision making process.*

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