

Middle Way Thoughts: 1, Climate Change

Transcript of the video talk by Robert M. Ellis

Climate Change is perhaps the most important and urgent issue of our time. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, based on exhaustive research and international consensus, concluded that the world has already warmed around $\frac{3}{4}$ of a degree Celsius in the last century. A rise of between 2.4 and 6.4 degrees Celsius is likely by 2100 unless we act. This is highly likely to lead to more extreme weather events, a major flooding threat to coastal cities, and a reduction in our capacity to grow food, leading in turn to massive increases in migration and conflict.

There are two distinctive ways the Middle Way can be applied to Climate Change. Firstly, it can show that, despite the misleading term 'climate change sceptic', scepticism actually lends support to the recognition of climate change produced by humans. Secondly, it can offer a challenging but realistic moral response to Climate Change, which (unlike most approaches to ethics) takes into account human psychology.

The Middle Way navigates between extreme metaphysical positions – that is, positions that lie beyond experience, whether negative or positive. Instead of seeking perfect and impossible answers, it leads us to imperfect and approximate answers grounded on experience. It is not necessarily a matter of compromise. Compromise would particularly not be appropriate with those whose whole outlook involves avoiding facing up to an urgent set of conditions.

We do not *know* that Climate Change is the case, it is not a *reality* as some have rhetorically claimed, but nevertheless we can have highly justified beliefs based on a large weight of evidence that it is highly likely. A similar weight of evidence suggests that human activity is largely responsible for it. It is those who turn this strong but imperfect evidence into a negative position because it is uncertain that are the dogmatists here, not those who are willing to accept the weight and imperfection of the evidence.

Rigorous, even-handed scepticism is our friend, not our enemy, because it always reminds us of uncertainty, and this takes us back to the necessity to accept and act on imperfect evidence. The so-called scepticism of the climate change deniers is a travesty of scepticism, because it is selective: imperfect evidence for human-made climate change is scrutinised and rejected, but their own assumptions are subjected to no such scrutiny. The Middle Way can be distinctively applied here, because it involves recognising that denial positions based on this kind of selective scepticism are just as dogmatic as positive ones that over-interpret limited evidence.

So, the Middle Way can be applied to support a general acceptance of the weight of evidence for human-made climate change. However, it can also be applied to our moral and political response to the situation.

The tradition of ethics in the West has idealised itself into irrelevance by demanding the impossible. When people are asked to do things that they cannot feasibly do, ethics becomes greatly weakened, and is widely ignored even when people pay it lip-service in theory. Think of the Judaeo-Christian commandment “You shall not commit adultery” and the number of concubines and mistresses kings and nobles have had through history whilst theoretically supporting the ethics behind this commandment. The ethics of climate change is in danger of going the same way. People hear the message, and may theoretically agree with it, but the chances of them changing their behaviour are very low, because actual behaviour depends on a whole range of psychological conditions, not just our moral decision-making. Where ethics goes, politics is likely to follow. It’s hardly surprising that political leaders are unable to reach a strong agreement to tackle climate change when they are dependent on political support, and most people are at best equivocal in the support they will give to such measures. The underlying issues are moral and depend on our response.

So, we need a different approach to ethics – one that is justified by the need to address conditions, and *shapes* our understanding of how we ought to act rather than just plonking unrealistic demands into our complex lives. We need an ethics that doesn’t just ignore psychology and pretend that we are absolutely responsible for how we act. On the other hand, nor should we accept determinism with its opposite fallacy that we are not at all responsible for how we act. The Middle Way requires us to recognise what our experience tells us - that we are responsible for our actions *to some extent*. Our ethics need to be challenging, but also psychologically realistic, one step ahead of the current practical situation.

So we can do something about Climate Change, both personally and politically. We can make progress by gradually reducing our carbon emissions, without expecting to suddenly reduce them to an unrealistic extent. We can also give political support to the kind of strong moves that are needed to change the underlying conditions. We don’t need to take leave of self-interest, but we do need to shape it. Most of us can cut down our use of unnecessarily polluting forms of transport, and most of us can eat less meat and dairy products – an area that has been less emphasised in public discourse but makes just as much of a difference to carbon emissions. You don’t have to purchase new tropical hardwood furniture that has contributed to rainforest destruction, nor do you have to buy meat that has been fed on soya beans grown in areas of destroyed rainforest. These kinds of actions require relatively small modifications in anyone’s habits.

Of course, these kinds of actions may not turn out to be enough, even if everyone does them. There is so much uncertainty around the effects of climate change that it must be acknowledged as possible, as some claim, that we are done for anyway – that runaway climate change will effectively destroy human civilisation. But there is also plenty of room for doubt about such predictions. We do not need to accept the most gloomy predictions any more than we need to accept denial of climate change. Rather the Middle Way suggests that we need to act on the weight of evidence, in a realistic fashion, in the current situation.