

# 'Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change' envisions the good life in a harsher world

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Think like a planet - and reorganize society to reflect it, says Case Western Reserve University's environmental ethicist Jeremy Bendik-Keymer. That's a new way of thinking about reversing the tide of climate change.

"Don't obsess over your individual actions: counting [carbon emissions](#), changing [light bulbs](#) or even developing new technologies for personal use. The only international cure-all for [climate change](#) is societal, born of civic protest against the injustice we are visiting on future children," Bendik-Keymer says.

That's also the message from *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change: Human Virtues of the Future*'s editors Bendik-Keymer and Allen Thompson from Oregon State University.

Thompson and Bendik-Keymer met in Colorado in 2004 through Thompson's dissertation advisor at University of Washington, William Talbott. When the 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report on climate change appeared, both became anxious about the predictions and asked what they could do as philosophy professors to contribute to society on the issue.

The result was a conference, headlined by Martha Nussbaum in 2008, and it became the idea for their volume. Internationally respected environmental political theorist Andrew Dobson calls the book one of the "most original" works on climate change to appear in a while.

"The standard definition of adaptation is about coping to protect our business as usual model of development. We take that a step further and think adaptation requires ethics –a new frame for development. We should change our form of life to assume responsibility keyed to a planetary scale," said Bendik-Keymer, the Elmer G. Beimer-Hubert H. Schneider Professor in Ethics at Case Western Reserve.

The volume, aimed at both theorists and practitioners working on the emerging international architecture of climate regulation and climate philosophy, starts at the global level.

*Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change* (MIT Press) is a call for reorganizing both our conception of good character and our understanding of institutions to allow humans to flourish in the climate we have substantially affected for the next thousands of years.

High praise for the book as "a vision of human flourishing in a brave new world" came from Holmes Rolston, III, who is the Distinguished Professor of Philosophy from the Colorado State University and considered the father of environmental ethics.

This new world vision is described by environmental ethicists in 17 essays focused on four areas: adapting ecological restoration to new climates, integrating ecology into justice, changing human character to be responsible for our effects on the climate, and reorganizing a globally just world where people can act in virtuous ways, as opposed to remaining individually impotent.

Without these pathways for change, Bendik-Keymer sees future generations paying a dire price for inheriting our ecological mess.

"This book argues that we need to rethink ourselves and our characters to take account of the institutional and global nature of the problems to

be addressed," writes Susan Neiman, director of the Einstein Forum and author of the New York Times notable book, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grownup Idealists* (2008).

Several key words emerge in this conversation's vocabulary: human flourishing, ethical adaptation, responsibility, civic engagement, restoration, character and justice.

One of the first concepts explored is restoration by conservation biologists.

The idea is now archaic, according to the contributors. Climate changes have produced conditions that humans cannot restore those environments.

"They don't or won't exist because of climate change," Bendik-Keymer says.

Second, surviving is no longer just an egocentric or individual's race for valuable resources. Ethical adaptation is about collectively understanding ecology from a global perspective such that the conditions for human dignity and humane relationships with other species on Earth are maintained.

Third, at the heart of living a flourishing or "good" life requires humans to have character. The center of character is responsibility for our effects on the climate system as these affect future generations, the global poor and other species. Classic vices such as greed must be re-conceptualized at the global and intergenerational scales.

Worldwide governments must take responsibility for the climate and create a new Kyoto agreement that reflects justice in their grasp of human flourishing.

It's a new way of thinking. Reflecting on human history, no cultures have ever thought that they themselves ought to be responsible for the course of the sky. But we have to be now, since the course of the sky is within our power, Bendik-Keymer says.

"Talk about adaptation must take us beyond mere coping strategies to full human flourishing," he says and thus, the book's subtitle of "human virtues of the future."

Responsible and virtuous actions by individuals alone are no longer enough to divert climate change. "Only changes to the patterns in society can do it," Bendik-Keymer says. This change calls for corporate virtues and responses by communities through collective engagement, or the mass of us working together to change the system at the global level.

"There is no hail Mary pass at the end of the day," Bendik-Keymer says, "only sustained, civic engagement by people around the world to create a society that thinks like a planet."

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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