

Review of: "[Commentary] Climate Change, Health, Ethics and the Sustainability of Civilization"

Thomas L. Daniels¹

¹ University of Pennsylvania

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Review of Climate Change, Health, Ethics and the Sustainability of Civilization by Colin D. Butler

The ethical dimensions of dealing with climate change are varied and profound, as Professor Butler lays out in this essay. The intergenerational equity issue is stark. The classic definition of sustainability from the 1987 Brundtland Report states that “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Climate change simply violates this basic principle of sustainable development. The uneven impacts of climate change around the world tend to fall heaviest on those countries in the Global South that have produced much less greenhouse gas emissions than the industrialized countries of the Global North. The Global North has struggled with climate denial, doomism, greed, and complacency. Climate denial is often intentional, given the power of the fossil fuel industry, which has much to lose as the consumption of fossil fuels declines. The US is the world’s leading producer of oil and gas. Several petrostates exist in the Middle East.

The possibility of a collapse of civilization related to climate change often leads to an individual and collective sense of inevitable doom and helplessness. As a cautionary tale, Professor Butler could mention Jared Diamond’s book, *Collapse*, which includes the stories of the disappearance of the Viking settlement in Greenland because of climate change (greater cold in this case) and the demise of the Mayan Empire (likely because of climate-induced drought).

Complacency relies in part on a belief that technology will solve the climate crisis, and Professor Butler attempts to shake readers out of any complacency by inferring that climate change, like nuclear war, could bring an end to civilization as we know it.

I find this discussion of the threat of nuclear destruction along with climate change a stretch, however. Nuclear annihilation can take place in a matter of hours. Climate change is much slower moving, and the limits of climate change are currently put at a rise of 2.7 C over the start of the Industrial Revolution by 2100. Also, the rising threat that climate poses to a person’s way of life is more real than the possibility of a collapse of civilization: more rain events or droughts, more flooding (sea level rise) – threats to property, threats to water supplies, heat waves, rising property insurance rates (if you can get insurance). The cost of disasters and the cost of insurance are rising at an alarming rate.

Professor Butler would benefit from reading Dr. Michael Mann’s recent book, *Our Fragile Moment*, in which Mann summarizes the historical trajectory of climate change. Mann’s message of personal agency in making change and the urgency to act based on the science is essential to combatting climate denial and doomism.

A combination of ethics and action in addressing the challenge of climate change is William James's *The Moral Equivalent of War*. If climate change, like war, does indeed pose an existential threat, then mitigating and adapting to climate change should be done at all costs, not based on a cost/benefit analysis approach. But the public has not perceived climate change as an immediate threat and believes that it can be dealt with gradually over time, such as by reaching net zero emissions by 2050. Also, the public does not want to give up its standard of living or bear the burden of increasing costs. For instance, the challenge to renewable energy is to produce more electricity and at a lower cost than what fossil fuels and nuclear power can deliver.

Finally, Professor Butler brings up the issue of population growth in part to bolster his valid point about limits to growth imposed by finite natural resources on planet Earth. Population growth and international migration, driven in part by climate change, are affecting the Global North and will continue to do so. Shifts within countries are also likely as temperatures rise. And the impacts on wildlife will be devastating. The urgency is clear, as are the ethics. The action, so far, especially at the international level, has not been equal to the challenge.