

We Need Ideas Like Kant's for the Climate Crisis

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The thing about Kantians is that they work to make the world better. Reason makes demands on the world, that it should make sense, and Kantians act out of a sense of duty to that charge. This reason is moralized. Humans have a conscience and should choose to make the world a place where virtue and happiness coincide.

The planetary environmental crisis undermines meeting that demand. Precipitated by human, socially caused climate change, wanton land use, total toxicity, industrial production, population growth, and the omnicide of the Sixth Mass Extinction, the phase shift underway around the planet's biophysical processes is disintegrating the order of life on Earth. In other words, the unintentional, although foreseeable, consequences of aggregate human decisions shaped by political economic patterns are leaving everyone a world where morality and happiness cannot align.

The most well-known part of this problem today is the climate crisis. Zachary Vereb's unparalleled, thorough, and timely book wishes to speak directly to this crisis. He includes the Sixth Mass Extinction as part of it.¹ Vereb's book seeks to find in Kant's work an ally with philosophical resources to support climate responsibility and sustainability. The study is defensive and pragmatic. Vereb wishes to parry the blows of decades of environmental thinkers critical of Kant and to add Kant to an overlapping-consensus pragmatism that brings Kantians to the same conclusions as more radical environmentalists with respect to practice (pp. 9-10).

This means that Vereb is not advancing a single Kantian philosophy on climate change but rather showing what resources Kant has to support climate responsibility and environmental concern in various ways. Vereb chips away at objections and digs up surprises in Kant that suggest Kant's usefulness for (or at least alliance with) environmental causes. In this way, Vereb's book, modest in approach while extensive in reach, comes to reasonable conclusions quite often. The Kant that emerges is not an anti-environmental monster in the lineage of Descartes but a time-bound human of sometimes disturbing prejudices (chapter 6.3) who nonetheless has much to offer planetary thinking and aspects of sustainability as a systematic thinker. Vereb points to Kant's helpful ideas, not to his obvious philosophical mistakes.

The early tactic of the book is to set up the main objections to Kant's work coming from what Vereb calls "environmental philosophy." These are Kant's anthropocentrism (a term not well analyzed), moral individualism, hard deontology, and Kant's metaphysical dualism (p. 4). Vereb then loosens the traction of each of these worries by engaging with the best Kant scholarship on the matter (chapters 1-2).

As the book progresses, Vereb turns to a second tactic: to find in Kant's early (pre-critical) and late work (post-*First Critique* and *Groundwork*) surprisingly environmental ideas, such as planetary thinking (chapter 3), the unfolding of all life (chapter 3), aesthetic appreciation for or awe at nature (chapter 4), appreciation of the unity of nature as a system (chapter 4), robust sustainability and its attendant duties (chapter 5), responsibilities to perfect humankind over history and sustain human life in collective, intergenerational structures (chapter 6), and support for sustainability goals through the apparatus of the state, with a concern for the question of revolution and historical progress (chapter 7). The ideas combine into Vereb's argument for a Kantian understanding of Earth stewardship. Such "critical stewardship" calls for "encouraging cultivation and growth" (p. 174, footnote 54) involving "humaneness" and "love" for Earth's nature as well as political advocacy for laws that sustain the order of life on Earth.

¹ The inclusion is accurate if global warming is seen as a driver of the Sixth Extinction. However, the Sixth Extinction is caused by many other drivers, too, including social processes predating fossil fuel use such as deforestation patterns dating back thousands of years and even early Holocene inventions like the capacity to kill at a distance with javelins, atlatls, and spears.

I appreciated Vereb's judgment pointing out which scholars pursue the best answers to environmental philosophical objections. On Vereb's recounting, Onora O'Neill stood out especially to me from her late '90s work, although Vereb's inspirations clearly come from his late advisor Martin Schönfeld, his contemporaries Toby Svoboda and David Baumeister, and the work of Matthew Altman, Paul Guyer, Holly Wilson, and others, including Kant's pathbreaking opponent in environmental ethics, Christina Hoff. As someone who read Kant ardently in my formation with scholars such as Susan Neiman, Karsten Harries, Henry Allison, Michael Forster, and Robert Pippen, I gained a new perspective on Kant's writings from Vereb's work. Vereb's exploration of texts for their unseen potential is inventive, and his engagement with the Kant scholarship of the past fifty years is excellent.

Concerns

At the same time, the framing of environmental philosophy was underwhelming, and the answers to the four challenges against Kant that Vereb finds in the field were, too. Environmental philosophy is a wide field that now is a vital part of the explosively growing environmental humanities and social sciences. That Cambridge University Press wanted the book to be titled *Kant and Environmental Philosophy*, while typically "CUP" as an approach (!), sets up an unsupportable burden on the book. It cannot conceivably address Kant *and* environmental philosophy in any way that would grasp the second part of that conjunction. For starters, there is no *analysis* of environmental philosophy in the book as a backdrop for the investigation. We don't know what we are working with.

The book is, rather, a book on the climate crisis. The subtitle of the book is closest to what it can take on. But even here, the core of the book is not an analysis of the climate crisis and the conceptual challenges we face such as found in the seminal works of Dale Jamieson and Stephen M. Gardiner (notwithstanding that they are discussed in chapter 6.2). Nor is the book a sustained analysis of the "imperative of sustainability" in dialogue with Hans Jonas's work, despite an extensive set of subsections considering Jonas's position (chapter 5.1). The book would be more accurately called, *Prolegomena to a Kantian Environmental Philosophy by Way of Some Objections, Esoteric and Understudied Kantian Texts, and the Demand to Begin Facing Up to the Climate Crisis*.

The handling of the four objections from the first two chapters of the book serving as a foil for the rest of the book was frustrating, too. Anthropocentrism is a vague and equivocal concept. There is a lot of debate about it. But Vereb's book does not engage with that debate. As a result, he misses things in his reading. For instance, he cites a 2022 paper of mine as focusing on Kant's anthropocentrism in a *negative* way, whereas my entire project is to *promote* anthropocentrism freed of social alienation (I will return to this issue in the penultimate section of the review). I do this by reorienting Kant's aesthetic conclusions according to what conscience demands, Kant against Kant. That is what it takes to stay human.²

Similarly, Vereb's problematizing of moral individualism and non-consequentialist deontology in environmental ethics is perplexing. Kant's *personalism* involves a form of the will that is generalized to how *one* must or must not act. That is, it speaks to a form that is to be *patterned* across agents. But that is exactly what is called for in work addressing planetary environmental crisis. The moral conclusion is not individualistic! Moreover, the idea of the *pattern of action across agents* is what can or cannot deal with consequences. It is what *could* internalize them - or not - within human responsibility intergenerationally and globally.³ The "*one* must or must not act" speaks to agents everywhere and anytime, so to speak, while the deontology establishes the pattern across agents. But that is what critics of individualism and deontology like Jamieson and Gardiner want done!

Finally, the metaphysical dualisms implied by transcendental idealism, the Third Antinomy, and even the *Groundwork's* conception of people as ends in themselves are not analyzed in detail. Vereb deliberately circumvents the *Critique of Pure Reason*. But when developed against environmental philosophical worries about estrangement from close attention to nature, we should see how powerful Kant's skeptical understanding of what reason demands is (I return to this point immediately below to clarify it). I wanted Vereb to go to town on the straw-man characterizations of Kant and really run with Kant's underlying ideas.

Needed ideas

One of Vereb's sympathetic foils in *Kant and Environmental Philosophy* is Steven Vogel's *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature* (MIT Press, 2015). He rightly points out that Vogel had not studied Kant's early work, and he is concerned with Vogel's claims that Kant's metaphysical dualism between nature and freedom, things in themselves and mind, set up a Romantic view of the environment as "out there" and humans as "in here." As I have argued elsewhere,⁴ there is misanthropy in the wings of this vague and impressionistic view found in much environmental philosophy in the last part of the twentieth century. For Vogel, there is also the worry that collective, political responsibility for our environment will be hidden by a nature that is "out there" and should not be controlled.

² "The Planetary Sublime (part II of *The Problem of an Unloving World*)," in J. Bendik-Keymer, ed., *A Planetary Imagination: Responses to Chakrabarty's Social-Natural Historiography*, *Environmental Philosophy*, 19:2 (2022), pp. 241-68.

³ Anyone remember the law of nature formulation of the Categorical Imperative?

⁴ See my *The Ecological Life: Discovering Citizenship and a Sense of Humanity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), open access version available on the publisher's website.

But such (highly impressionistic and vague) stage setting crumbles once one goes to the heart of the transcendental idealism of Kant. The idealism rests on skeptical grounds. Our fallibility across history, including as shown by scientific revolution, shows us that we must internalize the possibility of error in our thinking and its systems. To articulate the world accurately is a work in progress and cannot rest on absolute certainty. Moreover, from the standpoints of other conscious beings, we must postulate a pluriverse of environments. The "X" of the "things in themselves" is a skeptical necessity that drives attention and awareness of the pluriverse.

This is not dualism in any pernicious sense. It is rather the *limit* to truth-owning monism, the spur to strive and make sense of the world over and over from out of systematic and careful attention. Environmentalists just haven't thought through Kant's ideas when they charge Kant with separating us off from nature. Kant's analysis *relates* us to nature as far as we know it (empirically) with awareness that we must be responsible *for* our errors. This is a hyper-relational frame for coming to be attentive to the Other (to echo the late environmental hermeneutician Forrest Clingerman).

Moreover, *pace* Vereb's at times shallow reading of Vogel, and as Vogel has himself avowed often, how we conceptualize nature *and become responsible for our conceptualization* is a matter of social practice, just as science is. The core of this idea depends on something like transcendental idealism realized through a "metaphysics of practice."⁵ This is shading *within* a Kantian space, not outside of it.

The point is, collective responsibility for our planetary environment *depends* on understanding how the meaning of the environment is socially constructed, internally contradictory, culturally various, and so on. Understanding ourselves *in relation to* Earth's environment does too, for our practices *project* meanings of nature and of Earth. Is Earth *the resource*? Is Earth *expendable*? Is Earth *precious*? Is our planet *home*? I fail to see how environmental philosophy grappling with the climate crisis can responsibly be anything other than Kantian-adjacent or Kantian.

I have mentioned how Kant's deontology is obviously global and intergenerational, able to handle the internalization of aggregate effects in its focus on patterns of how one (the agent) must act. That is *why anthroponomy* is such an important and obvious Kantian answer to the Anthropocene.⁶ To be consistent with the human autonomy of persons, humankind must become responsible for itself in its actions that shape a global, intergenerational environment. This responsibility depends on people having a conscience. So, the demand is that the planet's meaning to human people must become morally consistent. Humankind's coming to collective responsibility for itself as an initially dispersed and uncoordinated aggregate collective is thus bound up with the meaning of the Earth *to us*, to echo Nietzsche from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

This is a point that Vereb comes close to stating in his reading of Kant's essays on history (chapter 6.2.3), although his lack of engagement with the idea of anthroponomy is striking. Yet *becoming anthroponomous* is part of what it would be for us to be worthy of happiness. That worthiness involves whether we act to shape a moral, intergenerational, and global collective that does not wantonly destroy the order of life on Earth. The practical condition here is necessary. We are talking of a core, planetary duty.

At the same time, Kant's concepts themselves have some phenomenological problems within this terrain, despite their skeptical framing with respect to [X] as an Other. Vereb's book begins (chapter 1) with the challenge animal ethicists and environmental ethicists of the 1980s threw against Kant for his purported incapacity to encompass direct, moral relations with non-human ("other") animals. Kant does not think we can directly owe non-rational animals anything. Vogel agrees, consistent with his Habermasianism (which could just as well be Scanlonian on this point). The issue is how obligation makes sense.

Vereb does strong work piecing together the arguments for indirect duties regarding other animals (chapter 1.2.9). I owe it to my wife and kids to take good care of our dog. But when I face Phoebe (our family dog), I see her, and I care for her. The source of normativity should not be confused with the phenomenology of moral attention. But can it be thus disambiguated from duties to other animals?

It would be better if Kant were more of a dualist of a different sort. How one must act cannot preclude that in being reasonable I have to face you. There is a personal relationship in morality, not simply conformity to a general form. The presence of intersubjectivity is muted in Kant, despite his love of Rousseau and the advent of Hegel from German idealistic roots in Kant. The other idea we need when facing the climate crisis is the idea of duties to non-human others, because that is what it is to relate to them. Relating-to, what odd neo-Kantian Martin Buber understood as a primary structure of address from *Ich* to *Du*, is needed to bring about a world where conscience shapes the world non-narcissistically. It is needed for a world that makes sense. Reason is *interpersonal*.

According to my 2022 reading of the Kantian dynamical sublime, narcissistic formations do reveal themselves as times in Kant's work, despite what I think is the broad frame anti-narcissism of transcendental idealism. Kant's inability to countenance duties to other animals is a case in point. The animal gives me a reason to owe her respect, that reason shown in her having a life of her own. She is not simply a patient, but an agent of her own kind; that much is obvious from her striving and deciding. Perhaps she cannot hold me

⁵ Steven Vogel and Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, "What Do We Want the Environment to Be? An Interview with Steven Vogel on the Metaphysics of Practice," in J. Bendik-Keymer, J. Maskit, and R. Sandler eds., in *What Do We Want the Environment to Be? Critical Developments of Steven Vogel's Philosophy, Environmental Ethics*, 46:4 (2024), pp. 363-77.

⁶ Compare my *Involving Anthroponomy in the Anthropocene: On Decoloniality* (Routledge, 2020), an open-access book in several repositories such as OAPEN. See also "Goodness Itself Must Change: Anthroponomy in an Age of Socially Caused, Planetary Environmental Change," *Ethics and Bioethics (in Central Europe)*, 6:3-4 (2016), pp. 187-202, also open-access.

accountable (especially some other kind of animal than a dog, which does hold her familiars accountable!), but to not relate to her as a source of respect is simply to become inattentive and narcissistic.

This is the worry about social alienation in Kant seen from another angle and on another point than I wrote about in 2022. Personal relationship with Earth others is central to human culture from prehistory, hundreds of thousands of years ago. Kant misses something in human nature that is important for moral systems that make sense to people. He fails to analyze this common moral sense. It would have been good if Vereb's book engaged with the problem of whether one can have a moral *relationship* to other forms of life, not just regarding them. But then one would need duties *to* them, with obvious reasons that they provide, although they cannot hold us accountable to them.

Envoi

Despite my concerns, *Kant and Environmental Philosophy* is an excellent book. A book can't do everything. Vereb's scholarship sets a modest task and handles it well. For anyone wanting to know how a straightforward reading of Kant's texts could put his work on the side of climate justice and nature conservation, Vereb's book should be core reading. Moreover, Vereb's use of pre-critical texts in Kant and his attention to *The Metaphysics of Morals* (especially the *Doctrine of Right*) and the entirety of *Critique of Judgment* are eye-opening. The essays on history and international relations have a place in Vereb's reading too. His book lays to rest the view that Kant is irrelevant for developing environmental responsibility. Finally, as is both moving and fitting, the book realizes to a significant extent the unrealized Kantian environmental thought of the late Martin Schönfeld, Vereb's teacher and inspiration. These folks have tried to make the world better despite the profound moral failure in the political economic systems behind the climate crisis.

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