

How Much Should We Expect of Ourselves? with Marcus Hedahl and Kyle Fruh

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Single Still]

Christiane: Thinking about climate change, climate emergency and climate disaster often keeps me up at night. One of the most frustrating things about it is the fact that it's such a big problem, and even if I dedicated every minute of my life to fighting global warming, I'd barely make a dent. But does this mean I shouldn't try? To help me sort this out, I spoke with Kyle Fruh and Marcus Hedahl, who work on the philosophical problem known as "demandingness."

Kyle Fruh: And you can see why this pairing of a large-scale moral problem like climate change and individuals who feel compelled to respond is a recipe for generating demandingness. These problems are demandingness generators. And if you're going to take on that weight on your own, you're right. That's taking on a huge demand. And at the really far end of what that looks like, you subsume your entire life to that moral problem

Christiane: We'll discuss Mormons, surfing, carbon legacies and much more on this episode of Examining Ethics.

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[interview begins]

Christiane: Welcome to the show, Kyle Fruh...

Kyle Fruh: Hello Christiane. Thanks for having us.

Christiane Wisehart: ...and Marcus Hedahl?

Marcus Hedahl: Good morning. Thanks for having us. It's great to be here.

Christiane: And Marcus, you have a disclaimer.

Marcus Hedahl: The views expressed in this interview are the authors alone. They do not reflect the official position of the US Naval Academy or Duke Kunshan University, the department defense, or any other entity within the US government and the authors are not authorized to provide any such official position of said entities.

Christiane: Thanks for coming on the show again. We're here to talk about your article, "Coping with Climate Change: What Justice Demands of Surfers, Mormons, and the Rest of Us." Help us understand just briefly what your project is here.

Kyle Fruh: For this paper, the question we're trying to answer is what do we as individuals sort of take on in a response to something as big and complex as climate change? So the real crux of the issue is between this pairing of a really big complex moral problem like climate change, certainly it's not the only problem of that kind, but it's a pretty good example and it's the one we're most directly concerned with.

And individual people who are conscientious and reflective and motivated to try to live by their own lives would be a morally decent life, which we assume in at least moments is basically everybody. And so then the question is, so what am I supposed to do with this big problem that's out there and increasingly taking up space in media and my attention and possibly even intruding into the way I make decisions in my daily life?

And the idea is, well, it seems like we sort of get pushed into a kind of dilemma here where on the one hand you might feel like there's nothing to do but take it all on, like that whole moral problem just comes crashing down on you because it's not going away. Nobody's taking care of it day in, day out. It doesn't become less, it just persists. And there you are with lots of opportunities to try to make a difference in one way or another. So shouldn't you be doing that? And when the next opportunity comes, shouldn't you do that too? And so on and so on. And so finally you find your whole life is just completely swamped out by this moral problem that doesn't go away.

So that's one horn of a dilemma, on the other hand, you might think, "Well, that would be insane. So I guess it's not my problem and I'm just going to opt out. It must be that if I can't solve this problem and if it would take up my whole life and all of my energies and attention and efforts and I wouldn't even make a dent in it, then it's no longer the case that I have to worry about it. So I'm out." That's the starting point of the problem.

Marcus Hedahl: Part of that comes because we're talking specifically about issues of justice. So we talk about climate justice, environmental justice, intergenerational justice. So those seem to bring with them a certain moral weight. And it's in part because we haven't been kind of doled out each individual piece yet. And so the moral weight seems to come crashing down on us. I was out with a former student on Friday, and this is someone who works for an energy nonprofit, has been arrested for a climate sit-in Nancy Pelosi's office back in 2019, and feels that he should be doing more, as I think a lot of us do. Given the magnitude of the problem, it always seems like we should be doing more. And so how do we come to grips with that?

Christiane: I certainly feel the moral weight of all of this crashing down on me on an almost daily basis. I've had interns before who were college-aged students and they have the same problem, and it's so hard to watch them struggle with it, and it's so hard to struggle with it

yourself. And I think this is something that philosophers call demandingness, right? The demandingness of a duty. So we've already talked about the crushing weight of responsibility for climate change, but just in general, help us understand what demandingness is, just in case we end up saying that word a couple of times during the interview.

Kyle Fruh: Demandingness is an idea that was somehow absent, almost curiously in the history of ethical theory for a long time, but then really took off into mainstream discussion owing to the work of Bernard Williams in the second half of the 20th century. And the idea of the demandingness issue, you can call it the demandingness problem, or we sometimes might speak of people making demandingness complaints, is that in one way or another, it might seem in different moments that morality is too demanding, is excessively demanding as it makes claims on agents about what they may or may not do, or about what they must do or must not do.

And we go through a couple different ways of trying to understand the demandingness objection. The demandingness objection isn't something that there's a lot of consensus about at any particular level. Some philosophers don't think it's a particularly interesting or pressing objection to a moral theory, that it's very demanding. They just say, "No, morality can be very demanding. Stop complaining."

And then there are different ways of construing what demandingness actually amounts to. So we take a view on that in this paper. And the idea is, I think that a nice way to put it as we do in the paper is that we take it as both sort of in the adjectival sense and in the verbal sense, so when a moral duty is demanding and it asks a lot of an agent, it puts a lot on their plate, it foists burdens on them. And that's certainly relevant to every kind of demandingness objection that is worth hearing about. But of course, morality has to be demanding in order to be meaningful, it has to be able to direct us in ways that we would not otherwise go.

So we think that can't quite be the whole story. And so the way that we fill out the rest of it is that morality makes demands of us. That's the verb sense of the problem. Morality demands that we act this way or that way, or not this way or not that way. And when it does that, it's exerting a kind of authority. And we might think that it is in this sense, the way of putting of demandingness objection is to say it's overstepping its bounds or something. And we think it's possible that moral theories or particular moral obligations could rightly be pushed back against on these kinds of grounds when the moral obligation intrudes into a person's life to such an extent that it interferes with or entirely undercuts their ability to craft their own life as their own.

And so it's really about does morality insert itself between a person and their way of thinking about their own life and the activities and projects that they undertake that give meaning to their life? And preclude them from doing that on the terms that are acceptable to them. So that's the concern. And you can see why this pairing of a large-scale moral problem like climate change and individuals who feel compelled to respond is a recipe for generating demandingness. These problems are demandingness generators. And if you're going to take on that weight on your

own, you're right. That's taking on a huge demand. And at the really far end of what that looks like, then, you subsume your entire life to that moral problem and you no longer are otherwise to making your own free choice.

Marcus Hedahl: We interpreted the demandingness objection not to be that morality can't demand quite a lot of us. It certainly can, maybe even our lives at times, but it has to leave enough protected space for an agent to make their life their own. And so the military offers a really great example of this. We can order people into almost certain death, but we can't demand that they join a religion or not or get married or not, even if that would make them better soldiers, because we think even military members ought to craft a life, to make their life their own, that there ought to be some space, some things that are outside the kinds of dictates of what we can order them, where we can demand of them.

Christiane Wisheart: One of the really compelling examples that you give in this paper is Mormons, right? So it's been sort of scientifically proven that having less children is better for the environment. And in fact, there's a huge difference between having one child and having two children. And so the problem is that Mormons, it's literally part of their religion to procreate and have as many children as they possibly can. And so yeah, how does this problem cash out with Mormons?

Kyle Fruh: I just want to point out, on average, Marcus and I each have one child.

[laughter]

Marcus Hedahl: That is true.

Kyle Fruh: It's mathematically undeniable. And it's interesting, we chose the example of Mormons in this paper because that's features as a part of what it is for them to live in their religion. I'll just add that procreative choices in general, including for people who aren't Mormon, are still probably the kind of choice where normally we would want for morality to give people as much leeway as possible.

That doesn't mean that you know, you can't have moral obligations that bear on how or when or with whom and so on and so forth. But the choice of whether or not to procreate in particular is such a momentous choice in an individual human life that the idea is really something that morality should tread lightly on. And that is an area too, as just rightly as you say Christiane, that environmental questions are increasingly in that conversation about procreative choices.

In particular, with climate change, you might think, and I've had many interactions with students, college-aged people recently now, who profess that on their minds as they head into post-university adulthood, is the idea that actually having kids is probably not a good idea. Now, part of that surely is that, "Gosh, I don't feel certain about that right now. I'm young, I'm not really interested in procreating right now."

But part of that is also that they feel implicated in moral problems to which they would be contributing by having children. And they don't want, they can't accept that they would be exacerbating a problem in that way by making that choice. So it's a really stark way of seeing that people are taking on moral burdens there, feeling that moral weight.

Marcus Hedahl: The interesting thing about the number of kids Mormons are morally allowed to have is not as much what verdict one comes down on because it may well be the case that at some point one is morally required to limit the number of children that one has. But that issue doesn't imply that one can't be morally required to do all sorts of things with respect to how one deals with the climate, even if they have less contributions.

So because some of these decisions that we make are so central to how we make our lives our own, it may well be that one is required, for example, to travel less, to emit less, et cetera, even if one could make the world better and make climate change better by radically re-altering their life, for example, by engaging in a different profession. There's no doubt that I would have way more impact on climate change if I gave up my job at a university than in anything else that I do, except perhaps averaging one child with Kyle, in terms of our families averaging one child.

But we might think that those decisions have to be subject to certain moral factors, certain moral complications, and it can't be just a situation where we look at what one's carbon output is, so that there's just some line of carbon emissions and it's permitted above line and prohibited above the line that the moral story has to be much more complicated than that because of the way we have to have the ability to craft our lives as our own.

Christiane Wisheart: So the question that is just on my mind throughout the whole piece, and I'm sure is on people's mind right now as they're listening to this, is like, okay, then how the heck do we figure that out? How do we figure out what's too much for me, Christiane Wisheart with the way that I live my life and the values that I have, and what's too much for my neighbor who has different values than me? So I know you can't tell us how to figure that out, but how can we maybe start to figure that out or start to determine when something threatens our self-interest or not self-interest, our integrity as you put it?

Marcus Hedahl: So I think the first bit is to recognize simply that this is an issue and that those two pieces have to go into it. So if we think about the moral weight, if we think about the problem of the moral weight, you can think about two things that have happened recently in the last 20 years that give people great comfort. So the first is it was very popular maybe years ago for these articles, like "Five Ways That You Could Reduce Your Carbon Footprint," right? Change your light bulbs, change your car, et cetera, et cetera. More recently, there has been a move, well-founded to say, focus less on that. The problem is really these giant collectives, corporations, the richest among us, and that this concern about what we do as individuals is a distraction.

Why do both of these things resonate so well? Because they make us feel that moral weight isn't there. In the first case, we feel like, "If I just do these five things, okay, now I'm off the hook. I did my bit. I changed my light bulbs, I changed my car, I took one less trip," et cetera. In the second case, it transfers that more away to other actors. "It's not my fault, it's other people's and they have to do their part."

So we have to recognize that fundamentally, an essential part of living in the modern world is there will be this problem that there are these large systemic issues that we are immediately complicit in just through living in the modern world. And so then what we have to do is we have to recognize that what our duties come from is a balance between the impact and how essential it is to the lives as we lead it. And so lots of things that aren't essential to our lives are going to be moral duties to reduce our impact, even though the problem is much more with other people and other things may garner that protection, but we ought to be very cautious about that because we're more likely than not to give ourselves a pass than to give other people a pass.

Kyle Fruh: Possible connection there on that last point is this idea of moral corruption, which has been developed by Steven Gardner in connection with climate change, we're really good at sort of manufacturing ways in which we can see ourselves as living good lives, as making reasonable choices, as participating in defensible policy enactments and so on. And it is true that a view like ours, that defends an idea that no, no, no, even in the face of something as urgent and morally momentous as climate change, which both Marcus and I both totally believe in, there are nonetheless moral limits on how we're entitled to conduct our lives and how much can be asked of us.

Once a view like that is on the board, there is a kind of an invitation to this problem of self-indulgent sort of motivated reasoning. And so it is true that that's something to be wary of. Probably we have to build all kinds of accountability measures and stuff into our own plans for how we're going to live our lives and assess the choices that we're making. And probably those things are best done in context of community.

Marcus Hedahl: This kind of view that "it's not just what you do, but why?", forces us from a kind of view about carbon footprint or even carbon neutrality, which if you think about footprints, these are neutral or negative, we want them to disappear. They're essentially individual.

Even if you look at, let's say a company's carbon footprint, you look at their company's carbon footprint or their company's neutrality, and why are these so advantageous to companies? Because they want to say as soon as they've done their bit, "Well, I've done my bit. We can't be required to do anymore." As soon as we start taking into account this question of how to craft one's life and how that has to play into it, we're forced into this idea that's really powerful from Rachel Fredericks, which is we have to shift from carbon footprints to carbon legacies.

So notice a legacy is not just negative or neutral, it can be positive as well. It's enduring and it has hooks into aspirational elements, and it has hooks into the why? Why are you doing this as

opposed to just what are you doing? So a great contrast here in terms of contrasting carbon footprints from carbon legacy is think about if I went on a diet to lose weight for health reasons and contrast that when I open a wellness center to help others to do that.

When I lose weight for let's say my back issues, that does change my own footprints. But if I help others lose weight, then that doesn't change my footprint, it changes theirs. And so if we think about legacy, it necessarily transfers us ironically, by starting off with this individual problem of demandingness, from the individual to the ways that we integrate with other people and the way that we live together. And so by thinking about carbon legacy, by thinking about the way that we solve the problem, what are we doing? That's what that moral weight ought to be asking us to do, is to not think about our footprint, but to think about our carbon legacy.

Christiane Wisehart: That's helping me. Because I think something that I continue to worry about when I'm thinking about this is I'm not worried about extreme folks, extremely horrible people who care nothing for the environment or legacy or extremely scrupulous people who live off the grid. I'm thinking about people who are closer to the middle where it's like... What if you're a little bit too scrupulous? How do you figure out... I don't know if you're a little bit too scrupulous, how do you figure out how to make things less demanding? Or what if you're not quite doing enough and you need to talk yourself... I don't know where I'm going with this. Sorry. Aaahh!

Kyle Fruh: Well, I mean that's the nature of the thing.

Marcus Hedahl: That's the problem.

Kyle Fruh: It would be, of course, in many ways it would be nice if we had some kind of a formula or something. But it'll be something that everybody sort of continuously negotiates in their own life, and we should say, right, we're focusing on climate change because that's what we are focused on. But this is not the only sort of moral context in which this kind of problem arises. So it's worth bearing that in mind.

But I think part of what's attractive about that idea of a climate legacy is that what goes into the climate legacy isn't just like, "Look at all the carbon we stopped emitting because we saw this was a serious problem." I mean, that's hopeful already. Anyway, ultimately if things work out, that's not the only thing that goes into the legacy. Also going into what our carbon legacy would be all the things that we did emit carbon or what we were doing, why we've found it to be worthwhile to do that. And we think that set, that latter component of our carbon legacy isn't empty. There are things that are worth doing that we need to do, and we don't have other ways of doing those right now, and that'll be part of a legacy too. For better or worse, there are obviously better and worse legacies that we might leave.

Marcus Hedahl: And it's not like a carbon footprint is un-useful in recognizing what our own contributions are, but it's only a first step. And we think that that malaise we feel, that burden we

feel, that “I don't even know how to ask the questions here” that we feel, we can start moving towards it by shifting our attention and asking ourselves, what will our carbon legacy be? And while I agree with Kyle that there are lots of problems in which this applies to, this is one of those where given just the scope and the nature of the problem and the suffering is one where our legacy will be much more fundamental to how we ought to view ourselves and how others ought to view us.

Christiane Wisehart: I want to talk about this idea of banding together collectively. Is this something where we should think about banding together collectively, maybe more than we think about? We should spend more time thinking about how do I work with my neighbors to do this than how do I compost in my own backyard?

Kyle Fruh: This seems to be one promising kind of implication of looking at the problem this way is that, and this might also be something that climate legacy rather than carbon footprint is an invitation to think about. We think among the kinds of moral obligations that we might have in the face of things like climate change are not just sort of individual behavior modification. We might have lots of those too.

Those are worth thinking about, worth talking about. But that's one part of the story. Certainly it seems like an inevitable part of the story and part of what ramps up the potential demandingness of the duties associated with climate change is that it's not just about changing your behaviors, your choices, buying the right deodorant or whatever it is, it's also about how you relate to others and how you organize and the good you could be doing that way.

So a big part of what we ought to be trying to do is not just change what each of us individually is doing, but how we together organize and operate such that we give rise to this problem. And as I mentioned this idea of climate legacy, part of the appeal is that legacy is much more commonly going to be something that is shared among a community or a group of people rather than belonging to a single individual.

And even when it is a single individual's legacy, it's almost certainly going to be about the way that they interacted with people and effects they had on people rather than just about what they've did themselves for themselves. It seems like it's sort of inherent in a concept of legacy that it assesses the way that we're interacting with and relating to other people. I'll stop there, that it does seem like it's a big part of what we ought to be focusing on.

Marcus Hedahl: Once we get to balancing these reasons and we get to this notion of climate legacy, it pushes us away from this drive towards kind of an individual moral purity attached detached from society. And it drives us more into thinking about how we impact others, both in terms of other individuals and the spaces in which we live and the collectives in which we engage in.

Even if we think about individual duties, the content of those individual duties is often to do things like altering the underlying political and communal order, for instance. And so recognizing that fact is really helpful, that this isn't just about my individual contributions, it helps understand why my duties are often to drive or at least attempt to drive communal and social and political change.

Kyle Fruh: I would think too, in the context of recent American politics, at least setting aside international relations and domestic political situations elsewhere in the world, which may or may not share in these kinds of trends, some of these obligations have gotten harder to successfully navigate rather than easier. I think in some ways we have better access now to individual behavior modification and different kinds of programs of reducing our carbon footprint.

We have better access to producing energy in our own homes in different, more sustainable ways and so on and so forth. There's been some progress in that way, but if the political situation remains really difficult to navigate and move forward, and there have been some landmark developments, I suppose, in American politics recently, but it does to me anyway, it feels like the progress has been such as it is, has been more uneven on that end of things.

Christiane Wisehart: So we talked a little bit at the beginning about how sometimes people have this idea that, well, it's really corporations that are doing the most harm, so why should I be worried about my little corner of the world? And you said that that doesn't excuse us from our moral responsibility, but I'm still kind of stuck on that because corporations are the one who are the ones who push the idea of carbon footprint as something that we should be worried about. And I think they're doing that to be like, "Oh, no, look over there, do the stuff over there!" While they continue to do all of their emitting and plastic producing and stuff. So is there's a free rider problem here that corporations might be freely riding on our sense of individual urgency. So is that something we even need to worry about?

Marcus Hedahl: Well, I think it might be helpful to separate the question in into two separate stages. So there's a question about what would be a fair distribution of responsibilities if we had a kind of powerful international order or even national order with respect to climate change. Nonetheless, we are stuck in a world without justice where people are still being harmed. And so the question then becomes, "Well, what am I required to do in that world?" And it seems like the answer can't be nothing. And yes, we can certainly blame lots of bad actors, including lots of large actors and lots of rich bad actors.

However, that because the issue hasn't been solved in the same way, it just seems different than, for example, literal free riders on let's say the subway in Washington DC because there is a system in place already. So we can worry about trying to catch them, trying to stop them, trying to make them less likely, trying to understand why they might do it in response to other underlying systemic injustices that underlie this situation. But that's a different situation in terms of my responsibility as an individual.

I think it's much easier for me to say, "Well, that's our collective loose, city's local governance issue and not my issue as an individual." In that case, then in the case in which there just isn't that solution yet that could hold others to account, but that's not satisfying to me because I feel the same pull. But as Kyle was saying, I think there is this concern about letting ourselves off the hook too easy.

I think one of the things that ought to worry us is denying the moral weight that still exists and thinking that, "Well, I can look to the left and see all these awful emitters who aren't doing anything, and then I can recognize my own privilege. And then there's this kind of tendency to think that I'm in the Goldilocks golden middle, so I'm not as bad as these people. I might not be as good as these people, but I'm doing my part. I'm here in the creamy middle." And we would discourage people from feeling comfortable.

Christiane Wisheart: So yeah, what brings you both here? You've been here to talk about climate change before, but what brings you here to talk about this specific issue with regard to climate change?

Marcus Hedahl: I went down to the US Gulf of Mexico after Hurricane Katrina, and I came back with a shirt that was very popular at the time that said, "Repair, Rebuild, Renew Orleans." And a lot of people question that, and I think it's reasonable to question that given our changing world, is that something we should do? There's another thing that Kyle and I talked a lot about in kind of formulating the paper that didn't actually get specifically mentioned in the paper, and that is about kind of climate unfriendly, culturally significant festivals and rituals, particularly dealing with food, especially in those areas that contribute the least to climate change but are impacted the most.

And those don't seem to meet, neither one of those seem to meet this kind of distinction. That's probably the best place to start from shoe between basic substance emissions and kind of luxury admissions, because neither one of those kind of fit neatly into either one of those categories. These don't seem like necessarily luxuries. They seem central to a certain way of life, but they also don't just seem like things that we need to survive.

And coming to terms with those, right? And the kind of complex interplay between collective and individual actions and duties. And I think that those things really force us, coming to questions with those kinds of problems, force us to shift our thinking from just like, what is it that I do in terms of my actual empirical data of the impact I have, which is really important, but I also have to ask about why? And why I'm doing that and how it's significant and how it helps preserve the climate for future generations.

Kyle Fruh: The epigraph for the paper that we use is a quote from Yvon Chouinard who's the founder of the company, Patagonia and a fairly legendary environmentalist in his own right, and what he said, and this was from an interview quite a few years ago, was this is his quote, "We're an incredibly damaging species and we're pulling all these other beautiful species down with us,

and maybe we ought to just get out of here. You do what you can. Then at some point, even if you're burning gasoline to get there, you just have to say, fuck it, let's go surfing."

And to that to us really captured a sentiment that seemed important and sentiment isn't frivolity. It isn't that like... Party in the USA, I don't give a shit about anything. The sentiment is I'm living a life here that is valuable and meaningful to me, and I recognize that I'm not doing that in a context where all of my pursuits of that life are innocent and beyond moral doubt. But I do want to live this life. I do get to live my life, and so I'm going to head down to the break and catch a few waves.

Marcus Hedahl: And it would be, even though that's central to his life and it's central to his connection with the natural world that he fights so hard for, we might find something distasteful about thinking, well, it's indirectly justified that he only gets to do it because it makes him fight stronger or harder for the environment. At the very least, it would be odd if each of us in as individuals had to act on it that way, that my time with my family, my time with my friends, my time engaging in important cultural engagements, I only get to do because they help me. The same way I get to sleep because I'm a better fighter when I wake up.

We think that that kind of reasoning might be really problematic ways to think about ourselves and our lives, to think about people as nothing more than elements that churn out this better environmental issue because it's precisely that mindset, that mechanistic mindset that got us in this problem to begin with. And so we think there's got to be some sort of issue here, at least worth grappling with—this weight is something we have to keep grappling with.

[Interview ends]

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Capering]

Christiane: If you want to find more about our guest's other work, download a transcript, or learn about some of the things we mentioned in today's episode visit prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics.

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