

The moral issue of climate change



By **David Ignatius** Opinion writer November 18, 2014

The politics of selfishness was embraced enthusiastically last week by Sen. Mitch McConnell. In dismissing President Obama's deal with China to reduce carbon emissions, the incoming Senate majority leader said "carbon emission regulations are creating havoc in my state and other states around the country" by undermining economic interests.

For McConnell (Ky.) and other GOP critics, regulation of carbon emissions is a pocketbook issue where constituents' short-term interests must prevail. They reject or minimize the arguments of leading scientists that such emissions are directly linked to global warming and climate change and could have catastrophic long-term consequences. The doubters question the data, to be sure. But their basic argument is political: Action to protect the environment will hurt "my state."

But what if the climate change problem were instead treated as a moral issue — a matter like civil rights where the usual horse-trading logic of politics has been replaced by a debate about what's right and wrong?

The case for treating climate change as an ethical problem is made subtly in "The Bone Clocks," a new novel by David Mitchell. It portrays a dystopian future in which normal life has been shattered by environmental decay, rampant disease and global disorder. Mitchell's book is long and complex, but it might just become the "1984" of the climate change movement. It dramatizes the consequences of our improvident modern economy in the way George Orwell's novel awakened people to the "Big Brother" mentality of Soviet communism.

Mitchell imagines in the book's concluding section an economic crash in 2039 that brings on an era he describes as the "Endarkenment." Order breaks down as low-lying cities around the globe are flooded, communications networks collapse and transportation slows. The global economy declines as quickly as it rose during the past half-century. Chinese troops maintain control in a foreign outpost on the Irish coast, aided by a local government known simply as "Stability." Ebola and "ratflu" ravage populations that are scavenging for food.

This is a novel, mind you, and it paints an extreme and unscientific picture. But in exaggerating the implications of current trends, it's in the honorable tradition of similar works from Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" to Orwell's masterpiece. Mitchell's principal character, Holly Sykes, feels grief for what the world has become by 2043:

"It's grief for the regions we deadlanded, the ice caps we melted, the Gulf Stream we redirected, the rivers we drained, the coasts we flooded, the lakes we choked with crap, the seas we killed, the species we drove to extinction . . . the comforting

liars we voted into office — all so we didn't have to change our cozy lifestyles. . . . My generation were diners stuffing ourselves senseless at the Restaurant of the Earth's Riches knowing — while denying — that we'd be . . . leaving our grandchildren a tab that can never be repaid.”

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Is this terrifying future really ahead of us? The honest answer is that nobody knows. Prominent scientists have become increasingly convinced that the connection between carbon emissions and rising temperatures is real, but skeptics have whole truckloads of studies to demonstrate the opposite. One simple way to make your way through the thicket is to ask yourself: What is the price of being wrong? If the doubters are wrong and the climate-change thesis is correct, the price is potentially catastrophic. The safe (and conservative) course is to assume the worst.

Take a stroll through the news archives of the past several months to get a sense of the possible consequences of what climate scientists say is a likely increase of at least 2 degrees Celsius through the end of this century. A [Science magazine study](#) last week forecast a 50 percent increase in lightning strikes in America. A U.N. report this month argued that recent progress against global hunger and poverty could be halted or reversed. An [October Pentagon report](#) warned of an immediate threat to national security due to increased risks from terrorism, infectious disease, poverty and food shortages.

Piers J. Sellers, a former astronaut and now the acting director of earth sciences at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, [wrote last week in the New York Times](#) of what rapid temperature increase could mean by 2100: “The impacts over such a short period would be huge. The longer we put off corrective action, the more disruptive the outcome is likely to be.”

Is this a moral issue? After reading Mitchell's stark novel, and imagining the world of 2043, I am beginning to think the answer is yes. If the future quality of life around the world is at stake, people who resist action are not just misguided, they're wrong.

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David Ignatius writes a twice-a-week foreign affairs column and contributes to the PostPartisan blog.

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