

DRAFT

**OUTLINE FOR A SYLLABUS:
ART, ETHICS, & CLIMATE CHANGE**

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Edited by Dylan Taylor & Ralph Chapman

DRAFT

This conversation took place in late March 2014 at Fiona Connor's apartment in Los Angeles. While talking, we repainted her apartment. She had decided to see what it would be like if the inside of her living room was the same grayish blue as the building's exterior. A few days later, she painted the room back to white.

FIONA CONNOR

When you think ethics, what do you think of?

AMY HOWDEN-CHAPMAN

I think morality, and a system that exists in order to analyze the value of other systems. To ask 'Is something ethical?' is important—it's a philosophical test.

FC

So ethics is a practice?

AHC

There is a field of philosophy constantly engaged with questions concerning ethics. Is ethics assigned by society, is it outside of everyone? Or is it something we innately understand?

FC

Oh my god, thinking about it just made me make a terrible mess with this paint.

[laughs]

AHC

A shorthand for ethics is asking 'What is right?' Being ethical is doing the right thing. It's unethical to kill someone, it's not just illegal. It's beyond law; it's something more innate we as humans can understand. Or that is at least what the debate is over.

Ethics comes up in terms of climate change a lot because we can agree it's unethical to kill someone; but then, is it unethical to indirectly be limiting the lifespan of people in the future? Yes, we agree it's unethical to kill someone at any point, but we are in fact killing people—or at least diminishing the life spans of people in the future by emitting carbon dioxide. Who should be responsible for that? And this is the point where the field of philosophical ethics joins the climate change debate. [1]

[1] Dylan Taylor: It would seem the question of 'intention' is important here. Imagine your car had a fault you were unaware of, and could not be expected to be aware of, that led you to lose control and kill a pedestrian. I would argue you were not acting unethically at the time, even though your actions (driving a car) led to the death of another person. So the ethical dilemma, in relation to climate change, seems to be tied to the question of 'intent' and, by extension, of 'knowledge.' Once you know that your actions, in relation to carbon emissions, limit the lifespan of people in the future, then you are faced with an ethical dilemma—a dilemma that calls for you to modify your behaviour. Someone who has no knowledge of these issues, on the other hand, has not yet been posed the ethical question of 'what is right?' Perhaps the important conversation to be had here, then, concerns consciousness raising around the long-term effects of carbon emissions—society as a whole needs to be prompted, through the diffusion of relevant knowledge, to face the ethical questions relating to climate change.

And that type of discussion acknowledges that climate change is not a political issue in the narrow institutional sense of that term. It's an ethical issue, which is a way of saying it should be dealt with outside of any short-term political cycle. It should be an issue everyone's dealing with. Which may or may not be useful, because who wants to be accused of being unethical?

FC

And how do you think that crosses over into art making? Or maybe we should pull the focus out a little, take a broader view of the discussion and ask if we can attach ethics to art? Does Nonsensical have a stance on whether we can attach an ethics to art?

AHC

I'm not sure if it does; though in asking the contributors to this issue to consider the relationship between ethics and art, it might.

FC

As a way to talk about the relationship, let's plan a hypothetical course investigating ethics and art, so we can imagine a group of people discussing it.

AHC

So what would the introductory class be?

FC

I'd probably show artists who use ethics as a material.

AHC

So, ethical subject matter.

FC

Yeah, but I'd also show artists who promote the discussion of particular ethical issues they're interested in. Do you think there is a difference between the two?

AHC

Yeah, I think that one would be straight up political art, and the other would be more like an institutional critique.

FC

Why do you say ‘institutional critique’?

AHC

Was it Michael Asher who put the gallery office in the gallery space?

FC

Yeah.

AHC

There is certainly something with ethics in play with that work—with analyzing the system in which information is delivered. As through that analysis, you’re asking ‘Is this a good system? Is this system right? Should people be allowed to act like this behind closed doors, or is it important that those who are affected by that system have knowledge about the way it functions?’

FC

So you are saying, rather than being like ‘all dealer gallery offices must be exposed,’ his work questioned more generally what is revealed and what is hidden in that convention of presentation. Is there another example of an artist who you think talks about ethics in that way?

AHC

I mean, Hans Haacke and his work about the sources of money and power that fund The Metropolitan Museum of Art is an example. But I don’t know if that’s the same, it is the next category of just political art.

FC

Yeah, because he’s directly exposing the specific vested interests behind the museum.

AHC

But in some ways, it is a more loaded, pointed version of the Michael Asher. Asher is asking a meta-question by standing back and prompting thought, but not being direct.

FC

But I think the actual contents of the piece were really interesting. In the Claire Copley example you brought up, that was about exposing the office—

AHC

Claire Copley?

FC

That’s the name of the gallery where Michael Asher exposed the office through redisplaying it in the exhibition space.

AHC

I think in the very first class of our hypothetical course, we need to begin with a dictionary definition of what ethics is.

FC

That’s a great idea. Get the dictionary, look it up.

AHC

‘Ethics: [noun] moral principles that govern a group or people’s behavior; synonyms: moral code, moral, morality, values, rights and wrongs, principles, ideas, standards of behavior, value system, and virtue. Ethics is sometimes known as philosophical ethics, ethical theory, moral theory, and moral philosophy.’

So, ethics could be the exact same thing as moral philosophy. It is a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct—one that often addresses disputes concerning moral diversity.

FC

Ahhh, so, it’s the practice of figuring it out. It’s not just good ethics, bad ethics.

AHC

Ethics can be defined as a set of concepts and principles that guide us in determining what behavior helps or harms sentient creatures.

FC

It’s about social norms?

AHC

Yeah, it’s about if you have an ethical code. But norms can just be social habits, like doing what everyone else does. And ethics is more than that.

FC

But even within, say, this country [United States], we haven't come to a conclusion on what is morally right. Gay marriage, abortion—it's all still shifting.

AHC:

The word 'ethics' in English can mean several things. It can refer to philosophical ethics—a project that attempts to use reason in order to answer various kinds of ethical questions. It can also be used to describe a particular person's own idiosyncratic principles or habits. For example, 'Joe has good ethics.' It may also be used to characterize the questions of right-conduct in some specific sphere, even when such right-conduct is not examined philosophically. 'Business ethics,' or 'the ethics of child-rearing' may refer, but need not refer, to a philosophical examination of such issues.

FC

I took from that that ethics is a practice, it's a verb. It's a noun, but it's also a verb.

AHC

It's a shared thing. It evolves, and it has to be recognized by other people. If there are business ethics, I think we can argue that there's an art world ethics. When you think about the ethics of conceptual art, what do you think about?

FC

I think that there was a particular set of ethics that conceptual art was in conversation with, in alliance with, that have now been disassociated from the work, and now the strategies are often replicated without these.

AHC

Didn't we kind of decide the other night at dinner that rather than ethics, it was more a particular set of political views that were attached to that initial era of conceptual art?

FC

Yeah, yeah, that's right, that rather than it being attached to a particular set of ethics, it was part of a belief that progress could be made through

counter-culture. There was a shared attitude at the time that art could make a difference.

AHC

I think that's interesting because conceptual art came at a specific time in the '60s, when many things were reconsidered causing certain ethics or norms to be radically readjusted in response to cultural movements like civil rights and feminism. What had been normal, like, say, a woman looking after the children and men going to work and making money, was being fundamentally reconsidered.

FC

I think we will need to have a whole class that asks the question, 'What art doesn't consider ethics?'

AHC

I think any art that considers its audience in a new way is involved with issues concerning ethics. But I think in a painting, the relationship between audience and viewer is pretty defined. There is an agreed set of conditions. But if you're presenting an audience with an artwork, and they don't understand how they are supposed to understand it, you have to define the relationship between the artwork and the person. And then, it becomes a question of whether or not the viewer is a guinea pig, or being asked to think... Or, is the viewer being abused by the artwork?

FC

But a painting can still do that.

AHC

Yeah, but maybe it's not the primary concern of a painting to do that. Whereas, other forms of work put those concerns at the forefront. Maybe we should have a whole class dedicated to Relational Aesthetics?

FC

I hear what you're saying. Some art foregrounds ethics as content—whether it be a particular ethical question.

: : :

At this point, we felt we needed a little more perspective on the issue, so we listened to a podcast, a talk that Professor John Broome gave in October 2011, titled ‘The Ethics of Climate,’ in which he discusses the moral and ethical issues that coincide with the whole topic of climate change and challenges us as to how we should be acting:

“AS CITIZENS, OF COURSE, THEY NEED TO KNOW WHAT THEIR GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE DOING—THE LARGE SCALE QUESTIONS— BECAUSE IT’S OUR JOB TO TRY AND GET OUR MOVEMENT TO DO THE RIGHT THING. BUT THEY ARE ALSO INTERESTED IN WHAT THEY, AS INDIVIDUALS, SHOULD BE DOING IN THEIR PRIVATE LIVES ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE. PEOPLE ARE ALREADY TAKING ACTIONS. THEY’RE CHANGING THEIR HABITS, THEY’RE EATING LESS MEAT, THEY’RE TRAVELING LESS, THEY’RE INSULATING THEIR HOUSES, THEY’RE BUYING GREEN ENERGY, AND SO ON; AND THESE ARE ACTS THAT ARE CLEARLY BEING DONE WITH A MORAL PURPOSE—NEARLY ALWAYS. SO WHAT PRINCIPLES OF MORALITY DETERMINE HOW WE SHOULD ACT IN OUR PRIVATE LIVES? I [APPROACHED] THAT QUESTION, AND WHEN I DID I GOT A SURPRISE. WHEN I THOUGHT ABOUT IT, I CAME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT THE PRINCIPLES THAT UNDERLIE THE PRIVATE MORALITY OF CLIMATE CHANGE ARE QUITE DIFFERENT THAN THOSE THAT UNDERLIE THE PUBLIC MORALITY THAT I’VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT. [...]

PUBLIC MORALITY CAN BE TREATED AS A KIND OF COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS. WE WEIGH UP THE COST AND BENEFITS, AND THE AIM OF THAT SORT OF MORALITY IS TO TRY TO PROMOTE GOOD IN THE WORLD, TO TRY MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE, WE AIM TO MAKE THINGS AS GOOD AS WE CAN. WHAT UNDERLIES PUBLIC MORALITY IS BENEFICENCE, AS PHILOSOPHERS PUT IT IN A RATHER TECHNICAL WAY—**DOING GOOD**. WHAT ABOUT PRIVATE INDIVIDUALS THOUGH? SUPPOSE YOU, AS A PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL, HAVE THE AIM OF BENEFICENCE—YOU WANT TO IMPROVE THE WORLD. YOU MIGHT ASK FIRST OF ALL, DO YOU HELP TO ACHIEVE THAT AIM BY REDUCING YOUR OWN EMISSION OF GREENHOUSE GAS? I WANT TO EMPHASISE THAT THE ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION IS YES, YOU DO. THAT ANSWER NEEDS EMPHASIS BECAUSE THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM OF CLIMATE CHANGE INDUCES A SORT OF DESPAIR IN QUITE A LOT OF PEOPLE. THEY THINK, ‘THIS PROBLEM IS VAST, AND NOTHING CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT EXCEPT BY MEANS OF COOPERATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENTS ON THE VERY BIGGEST SCALE.’ SO, THEY THINK THAT THEY AS INDIVIDUAL CAN’T POSSIBLY DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT, CAN’T DO ANY GOOD BY THEIR OWN INDIVIDUAL ACTS. THAT’S THE SORT OF DESPAIR I’M THINKING OF. NOW, I THINK THEY’RE RIGHT,

TO THE EXTENT THAT **SOLVING** THE PROBLEM OF CLIMATE CHANGE CANNOT BE ACHIEVED BY ANYTHING EXCEPT INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ON A VERY LARGE SCALE, BUT IT DOESN’T FOLLOW THAT IF YOU REDUCE YOUR OWN EMISSIONS OF CARBON, YOU DON’T DO ANY GOOD. IN FACT, YOU DO GOOD BY REDUCING YOUR EMISSIONS. IT’S STRAIGHTFORWARD. YOUR EMISSIONS HARM PEOPLE. SO IF YOU EMIT LESS, THEN YOU CORRESPONDINGLY DO SOME GOOD.

I CAN GIVE YOU SOME IDEA OF HOW MUCH HARM YOUR EMISSIONS DO. I THINK IT’S GOOD TO HAVE SOME NOTION OF THE SCALE OF THESE THINGS. IF YOU FLEW BOTH WAYS ACROSS THE ATLANTIC, SAY, THAT ACCORDING TO THE CALCULATIONS WILL CAUSE THE EMISSIONS OF AROUND ABOUT. YOUR INDIVIDUAL TRIP WILL CAUSE THE EMISSION OF AROUND ABOUT 1.5 TONS OF CARBON DIOXIDE. SO, THAT’S THE QUANTITY OF GAS EMITTED. AND VARIOUS ECONOMISTS HAVE PUT A FIGURE ON THE HARM THAT SORT OF QUANTITY DOES. THEY HAVE GIVEN A MONETARY ESTIMATE TO THE AMOUNT OF HARM A TON AND A HALF OF CARBON DIOXIDE DOES. THERE ARE **HUGE** DIFFERENCES OF OPINIONS ABOUT THIS. THE RANGE OF ESTIMATES DIFFERS ENORMOUSLY FROM 5 DOLLARS TO 500 DOLLARS. BUT IF YOU TAKE THE FIGURE THAT COMES FROM THE STERN REVIEW, IF YOU TAKE THE TOP END OF THEIR FIGURE, IT’S 85 DOLLARS A TON. THAT MEANS THAT THE HARM OF YOU CROSSING THE ATLANTIC AND BACK IS AROUND AND ABOUT 130 DOLLARS WORTH OF HARM DONE TO PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD; AND IF YOU DECIDE NOT TO DO THAT TRIP, [...] THERE IS A REAL BENEFIT. YOU CAN LOOK AT THIS QUANTITY IN ANOTHER WAY. REMEMBER I SAID THAT CLIMATE CHANGE IS GOING TO KILL PEOPLE. THAT MAY WELL BE THE VERY WORST HARM THAT IT DOES, AND WITH THE HELP OF DAVE FRAME, A PHYSICIST HERE IN OXFORD, I FIGURED OUT A VERY, VERY—LET ME SAY—VERY, VERY, VERY, VERY ROUGH ESTIMATE OF HOW MUCH WE EACH SHORTEN PEOPLE’S LIVES BY OUR EMISSIONS OF GREENHOUSE GAS, BY CONTRIBUTING TO THE CLIMATE CHANGE WHICH KILLS PEOPLE.

THE LIFETIME EMISSIONS OF SOMEONE LIKE ME—BORN AROUND THE TIME I WAS BORN, THE LATE 40’S, LIVING IN A RICH COUNTRY LIKE THE UK—SOMEONE LIKE ME, ON AVERAGE, SHORTENS PEOPLES LIVES BY SOMEWHERE BETWEEN SIX MONTHS AND ONE YEAR. NOW, OF COURSE, WE DON’T DO IT TO ANY PARTICULAR PERSON. [...] THIS IS THE TOTAL REDUCTION IN THE LENGTHS OF LIVES THAT WE BRING ABOUT. AND I’M SURE NONE OF US WANT TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR DESTROYING THAT MUCH HUMAN LIFE; AND IF YOU REDUCE YOUR EMISSIONS, YOU WILL DESTROY LESS. YOU’LL DO SIGNIFICANT GOOD BY REDUCING EMISSIONS. AND I THINK WE SHOULD REDUCE EMISSIONS, BUT ACTUALLY I THINK THAT NOT BECAUSE I THINK IT WILL DO GOOD, BUT FOR A DIFFERENT REASON. NOT BECAUSE IT WILL DO GOOD BECAUSE

ACTUALLY WE HAVE LOT OF MORE EFFECTIVE WAYS TO DO GOOD THAN THAT. REDUCING EMISSIONS COSTS YOU SOMETHING IN SOME WAY. YOU HAVE TO SPEND MONEY ON INSULATING YOUR HOUSE AND SO ON, [...] AND I'VE GIVEN YOU SOME IDEA OF THE AMOUNT OF GOOD YOU CAN DO BY DOING THAT. DOING IT ABSOLUTELY COMPLETELY FOR A WHOLE LIFETIME WILL SAVE BETWEEN TO SIX MONTHS TO A YEAR OF HUMAN LIFE. BUT YOU CAN USE YOUR RESOURCES TO SAVE LIVES MUCH MUCH MORE EFFECTIVELY THAN THAT. GIVING TO A MEDICAL CHARITY, WHICH TREATS TUBERCULOSIS, [...] YOU CAN SAVE A WHOLE LIFE FOR A FEW HUNDRED DOLLARS. SO IF WHAT YOU WANT TO DO IS TO PROMOTE GOOD—DO THE BEST AMOUNT OF GOOD IN THE WORLD—WHAT YOU SHOULD DO IS **NOT** REDUCE YOUR EMISSIONS OF GREENHOUSE GAS. INSTEAD, YOU SHOULD USE [YOUR RESOURCES] INSTEAD IN THESE OTHER WAYS, WHICH ARE ALTOGETHER EFFECTIVE. BENEFICENCE, THE AIM OF DOING THE MOST GOOD, DOES **NOT** TELL YOU TO REDUCE YOUR EMISSIONS.

NEVERTHELESS, I THINK YOU **SHOULD** REDUCE YOUR EMISSIONS, AND THAT'S FOR A MORAL REASON OF A DIFFERENT SORT. WITHIN MORALITY, WE RECOGNIZE DIFFERENT VALUES AND DIFFERENT VIRTUES. ONE OF THEM IS BENEFICENCE. [...] BUT A DIFFERENT AIM OF MORALITY IS WHAT WE CALL JUSTICE, AND JUSTICE SOMETIMES CONFLICTS WITH BENEFICENCE. [...] I'M NOT DOING ANYTHING MORE THAN TALKING COMMON SENSE. COMMON SENSE TELLS YOU THAT SOMETIMES IT'S WRONG TO DO THINGS EVEN IF THEY'RE THE BEST WAY OF DOING GOOD. A CLASSIC CASE THAT MORAL PHILOSOPHERS USE IS TO IMAGINE A TRANSPLANT SURGEON IN A HOSPITAL WHO HAS FIVE PATIENTS. THEY EACH NEED A DIFFERENT ORGAN TO SAVE THEIR LIVES. ONE NEEDS A LIVER, ONE NEEDS A HEART, AND SO ON. SO, THE SURGEON TAKES ONE THE INNOCENT VISITORS THAT COMES TO THE HOSPITAL, KILLS HER, TAKES OUT HER ORGANS, USES ONE FOR EACH OF THE PEOPLE, THEREBY SAVING FIVE LIVES AT THE COST OF ONE LIFE. THAT'S BENEFICIAL. YOU'VE MADE A GAIN IN GOODNESS BY DOING THAT, BUT OBVIOUSLY, THE SURGEON ACTED WRONGLY. SHE ACTED AGAINST JUSTICE. THERE IS A RULE OF JUSTICE THAT SAYS YOU MAY NOT INFRINGE PEOPLE'S RIGHTS FOR THE SAKE OF DOING THE GREATER GOOD, IN MANY CASES.

WE RECOGNIZE THAT THERE IS A PRINCIPLE OF JUSTICE THAT SOMETIMES OVERRULES BENEFICENCE, AND IT'S THE PRINCIPLE OF JUSTICE.”

AHC

This is giving us something to think about, but what I want to do is analyze how, as artists, we might take that information and incorporate it into our practices.

FC

Can you say that one more time, please?

AHC

This is giving us lots of information right, but I think information doesn't necessarily create change.[2] So what I want to do is use that information and discuss how as artists we might change things or absorb this information into our practices. Or at least discuss how that information is going to affect our practices.

FC

Right, so you want to create a discursive context with this as subject matter.

AHC

Yep.

FC

But I mean something that you've done in the past is made... well, your practice seems to flip flop between delivering really straightforward information, like factual information, and dealing with how this same information is delivered or understood in a wider context—linguistics and things. Does that satisfy different parts of you? Why does that happen? Why not just deliver information in a really straight way?

[2] Ralph Chapman: Information, and by this I mean all sorts of information such as scientific knowledge, can only help so much. Gathering more relevant information is sometimes persuasive in bringing more people into the fold, for example providing more information about the effects of your own actions on other people. But it's remarkable actually how providing more information doesn't dent some people's perceptions. There's a theory in psychology called information deficit theory: It's the (apparently obvious) proposition that if you give people the right information, that information will change their behaviour. But the insight of work around information deficit theory is that while information works to some extent, in practice it doesn't work to a large extent for many people, so essentially, and this pervades economics too: if you just give people information it won't solve the problem. So if you provide information about climate change, many people will essentially shrug it off. You can provide all the information you want, but if that information is not consistent with the sort of daily experience people have, or their personal predilections, or mental frames, they will rationalize away that information: they either won't hear that information or they will distort it in some way, and that's closely connected with denial of course. That's one problem with information.]

AHC

I think because this information already exists—right—and it exists in quite a good form, listening to a podcast is quite a good way to absorb information.

FC

This guy, John Broome, is someone everyone already knows about?

AHC

Yeah, I would say so. He's well known among university types, philosophers, and environmentalists.

But I think one of the interesting things about climate change is that there is a gap between information and action. People know that climate change exists, but their behavior doesn't necessarily change, and that includes me too.

FC

But that's not—I find that not true.

AHC

Have you changed anything about the way you live because of your knowledge of climate change?

FC

Constantly.

AHC

Really?

FC

It's not maybe as black and white but—

AHC

I don't know if I have, I still fly. I have not chosen to stop flying, or to minimize the number of flights I take because of climate change. Although I feel much more guilty about them!

FC

I know this is awfully oblique, and potentially optimistic, but all the knowledge that I'm constantly coming to terms with changes who I am.

It influences my work and it affects my mission, my sense of family, my idea of progress, my sense of being in the world. And that's a complete picture, and that in effect changes my actions. But yeah maybe I still drive to the east side sometimes when I don't have to—

AHC

But you mean overall—I mean, changing your ambitions is an interesting one.

FC

Totally, I just think it's more of a holistic thing. I really think it's got to be a big picture thing you know, but maybe that's kind of beside the point.

AHC

No, I mean that's definitely the point. Which in an art context would ultimately come down to changing what people perceive as good art, right? (And for others, might be changing the way they get to work everyday...)

FC

Right!

AHC

If you're making what you think is good art, and your opinion is shaped by your knowledge of climate change...

FC

Exactly, exactly, which is what I find fascinating. This happens all the time. It's scary when it becomes a fashion and then subject to being out of fashion. Climate change is obviously a big topic in the '60s & '70s.

AHC

Woah woah woah...

FC

Well, like in the '70s, people were making eco—It was a different movement?

AHC

It was the environmental movement, rather than, say, the current environmental justice movement. It had nothing to do with climate change back then.

FC

Totally different movement, but I still think there is a hangover from that attached to a particular group of people, and it became uncool.

AHC

And now it's cool again?

FC

Well, now let's just divorce climate change from that group of people and go, 'This is a global issue that takes no prisoners.'

AHC

Takes no prisoners!

FC

Yeah, I mean that the weird thing that art could do is aestheticize it and turn it into a fashion.

AHC

So, you think that art could make climate change fashionable?

FC

Um, yeah.

AHC

In the same way that art made feminism fashionable, or rather helped to keep it fashionable for a while?

FC

Yeah.

AHC

What else did art make fashionable?

FC

The internet? No, the internet was fashionable before art.

AHC

I'm being the worst painter right now.

FC

It's cool, it's matte paint. It's so forgiving.

AHC

I think your thing about changing your values as an artist is key.

FC

I mean that.

AHC

I know.

FC

I mean, it changes my comfort zone and my focus. It's also a question of empathy: empathy for a cause. And maybe art can be a way of attaching imagery and something really corporal—something really seductive.

AHC

Back to ethics—

[Laughter]

FC

So, becoming more aware of the ethics of climate change will change art both in its production and meaning. And for our final class?