



# Moral entanglements with a changing climate

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## Abstract

This essay explores the theorization of moral valuation outlined in Stefan Bargheer’s *Moral Entanglements: Conserving Birds in Britain and Germany* when extended to the climate crisis. It considers, first, how ‘nature’ is valued when it confronts people and societies as a source of threat, rather than of recreation or resources. Second, the essay critically examines the role of moral discourse in the collective work of addressing climate change and its relationship to practice.

**Keywords** Catastrophe · Climate change · Moral discourse · Moral valuation · Nature · Practice

In September 2019 I took my five-month-old daughter to her first Climate Strike at my local town hall in north London. She was perhaps the youngest striker there, but she was by no means the only child. That strike was part of the Global Week for Future, one protest of many thousands taking place in 150 countries. The strikes had been inspired by Greta Thunberg, the sixteen-year-old Swedish climate activist, whose moral clarity and authority regarding what is at stake and what must be done has everything to do with her being a child herself, and the movement of children she has inspired. At my strike, the pavement in front of the town hall was full of children of every age, many of them with their parents and grandparents, and many of them students accompanied by their teachers. As a teenage girl addressed the assembled crowd, herself on the verge of tears, a little boy standing in front of me—I would guess he was around six years old—tugged hard on his mother’s jacket. She took her eyes off the speaker and looked down at her son.

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Mummy! If the sea is going up, will I swim fast enough so the sharks can't get me?

His question landed like a punch to my chest (or maybe that's what it feels like when your heart breaks). I have to imagine his mother felt the same way. I can't remember what she said to him, and whether it gave him any comfort, but I wish I could, because in that moment I also realized my daughter will probably ask me similar questions, about her safety and survival, as she grows up. I think about it all the time.

I thought about it as I read Stefan Bargheer's remarkable book, *Moral Entanglements: Conserving Birds in Britain and Germany*, even as the worlds he describes feel remote from a north London climate strike. The book traces the development of bird conservation in these two countries from the late eighteenth century to the early twenty-first. We learn about bird collecting and museums in Britain, agriculture and pest-control in Germany; the spread of binoculars, cameras, bird tables, and nest boxes; and the emerging science of field ornithology. Bargheer carefully connects this history, which will likely be new to readers outside the world of bird watching, to features of more contemporary forms of conservation and environmentalism that are broadly recognizable today: the creation of nature reserves; public outreach and awareness raising campaigns; habitat protection and species monitoring. In a world of biodiversity loss, where birds and bumblebees and apes (and many other animals that are common protagonists in children's books) are declining in number, the need to understand what makes conservation "happen" is perhaps more urgent than ever.

It's Bargheer's account of what makes conservation happen that establishes the book's broader theoretical contributions, to the sociology of morality. One conventional, and plausible, understanding of conservation would hold that, to the extent that conservation takes place, this marks the success of actors in articulating and making broadly resonant a moral discourse about the value of birds (or any other element of "nature") that justifies their protection. Action is the outcome, motivated by existing moral justifications that have to do with the symbolic importance of birds. But from the long history recounted here Bargheer excavates a different temporal sequence. Bargheer argues that the motivation for conservation should be looked at "not as something that springs from internalized moral ideals or abstract ethical principles but as something that is embedded in concrete practices and their larger institutional settings" (p. 9). People experience nature, through different social forms, and this generates the moral commitments; they are the outcome, not the cause. Bargheer convincingly shows this through his painstaking work of investigating and cross-nationally comparing the different practices and institutions that influenced the valuation of birds over time in Britain and Germany. In Britain, "birds are good to play with." Whether collecting them by hunting or by taking photographs, birds are "toys" in a "game" of bird watching—as a result, diversity and rarity are valued. In Germany, until a few decades ago, birds were sources of food ("units of consumption") and later "tools" in the "work" of agriculture and pest control ("units of production"). Some species were more "useful" than others in a world of economic ornithology—as a result, utility and abundance were valued. For these reasons, conservation comes to look quite different in the two places, until the British model becomes the European model beginning in the late 1970s. Offering a pragmatist theory of morality,

and deeply engaging with John Dewey's theory of valuation and its elaboration by scholars since, Bargheer stresses that "action itself generates valuations and attachments" (p. 261). Bird conservationists might use moral justifications to communicate "why conservation matters," but these justifications don't cause them to do what they do; the justifications are "chosen post hoc" (p. 256).

Bringing my own unavoidable "entanglements" to bear, I confronted a number of questions as I read. Bargheer's story unfolds in a benign nature, there to be enjoyed as a "playground" in Britain and harnessed to economic projects in Germany's "world of work" (p. 6). In either case, this is not a nature where children feel scared for their lives. How can we think about emergent and potential trajectories of moral valuation if and as worsening effects of climate change become an experiential reality for more and more people? The sharks may actually fare worse than us when this happens (they are already having a harder time hunting and reproducing as oceans warm), but the question is: what do we make of nature, how do we value it, and how do we consequently interact with it, when it brings forth not games or life-sustaining material, but danger? Indeed, for most of human history and for many people around the world today, nature is not so reliable—for either recreation or resources—as it was in modern Britain and Germany, where practices and institutions of bird conservation unfolded.

Bargheer's bird conservationists focus on "drawing people into action" (p. 261) when they try to create emotional attachments to birds in others. But so does Greta Thunberg when she says to the world's economic and political leaders, "our house is on fire," when she calls them liars, when she knits her brow and talks frankly about the panic and fear that children feel. Moral discourse here seems quite connected to "the real action" (p. 259) as a motive force for getting millions of people to take to the streets. But is it? Bargheer invites reconsideration. What *is* the role of moral discourse in the collective work of addressing climate change, and what is its relationship to practice?

## Swimming with sharks

Bargheer writes evocatively of experiences with birds in Britain and Germany. We are taken to expanses of countryside, home gardens, and farmlands, where birds can be discovered, counted, and catalogued. Whether they are arenas of play or of work, these are pacified landscapes, places over which humans can and do exert effective control. In Britain, they are places where birds appear and delight people. In Germany, the expectation may not have been delight for much of the period studied here (though there was an ornithological field club with the name Verein vergnügter Vogelliebhaber – "Blissful Birdlovers' Brotherhood" in the 1930s, p. 127), but the exercise of identifying, observing, and documenting birds nevertheless expresses the presumption that human activities can shape nature in ways that serve our economic aims. Nature is there to be enjoyed or exploited.

This is, of course, a geographically specific experience and understanding of nature and, in the broader sweep of human history, more the exception than the rule. As Ghosh (2016) observes in *The Great Derangement*, an enduring Western con-

fidence in the planet's limitless pliability is an expression of interwoven histories of capitalism and colonialism. This confidence is a fantasy, with a kernel of truth. The fantastical part is that we imagine ecologies, animal populations, and climatic systems as stable—or stabilizable—that have in fact always been fluctuating and variable (Clark, 2010; Baker 2018; Hulme, 2010b). The truthful part is that human societies all over the world have indeed energetically reengineered and disciplined nature, draining wetlands to create land where there was none, fortifying settlements to keep the elements at bay, destroying “pests,” introducing non-native plant species and making them grow in predictable cycles. Many of these strategies have been exported from the Global North to South through projects of imperialism and economic development. We have created a world in which “the experience of nature” for people (but only some people, more on this below) is the quiet back garden, and “the meanings and valuations attributed to it” (p. 6) can be formed through the privilege of sitting quietly, maybe for hours at a time, and waiting for a songbird to alight on the top of a manicured hedge.

We might describe the whole enterprise of bird conservation as an expression of what Ghosh characterizes as “the bourgeois belief in the regularity of the world” (2016, p. 36). Whether we love them or need them, the underlying sensibility seems to be that birds are ours to know and, should we choose, to protect, through human activities that keep them in the number and diversity that we deem desirable. But it is this belief in regularity, Ghosh writes, that “has been carried to the point of derangement” through the culmination of the carbon-intensive and contradiction-laden practices that have produced what we now recognize as climate change (2016, p. 36). Nature seems to intrude upon us—“us” being the lucky ones who have been able to enjoy daily lives of relative calm—in violent, destructive, and “unthinkable” ways, like a hurricane razing a city, or in more slowly unfolding disasters, like insect colonies collapsing. Perhaps more accurately what we are confronting is the folly of having ever lived with any conceptual or political separation of nature from society (as the contested notion of “the Anthropocene” implies; Haraway 2016), or even the obsolescence of the very notion of nature as something that can exist or be experienced as separate from us (Latour, 2017; Hulme, 2010b). But at the level of experience, the level that matters to Bargheer and that he helps us to think about, what we face now is a world where children may not experience nature as so benign, a world in which they might develop emotional attachments to birds while at the same time worrying about having to swim with sharks.

How can Bargheer's analysis and argument help us to make sense of this? It seems that the first exercise in extending his approach should be to identify some of the “social forms of practices and institutions” (p. 6) that might guide the experience of a more hostile nature. Here I suggest that we think of the worlds of play and the worlds of work as co-existing with a *world of catastrophe*. This perhaps seems odd on its face. It may seem more logical to understand catastrophes as a source of external problems to existing social forms, institutions, and practices. Catastrophes *disrupt* institutions, which are by definition more enduring and stable “arrangements of rules and resources that organize action” (p. 26; also Giddens 1984). If institutions produce order, then catastrophes are the undoing of institutions. The same seems true of practices in this context. If practices are meaningful in large part because they are

patterned (like the “streams of action” in a game, p. 29), then catastrophes break the pattern.

Catastrophes are of course not historically new, and they have been experienced through the prism of various social institutions, notably religion (“the act of God”). However, in a world in which people regularly experience not only intensifying natural disasters—hurricanes, floods, droughts, wildfires—but also mass gun violence (particularly in the U.S.), pandemics, market crashes, air strikes and suicide bombings, and ecological collapse, we can productively think of catastrophes not just as external threats to institutions and practices, but as having their own constituent institutions and practices that organize action.<sup>1</sup> Even if you are fortunate enough never to experience a catastrophe yourself, awareness of them fostered through mass and social media teaches you their particular logic. Indeed, being in the world of catastrophe does not require experiencing the disastrous event itself, but rather being enrolled, in some way, in the anticipation of and preparation for it. For instance, elementary school teachers and students participate in the world of catastrophe when they have to do active shooter drills; we feel compelled to wash our hands more frequently and to practice social distancing to avoid harm from a contagious virus.

As it guides the experience of nature, more specifically, what are some of the constituent institutions and practices that compose the world of catastrophe? In a flood or a wildfire or a hurricane, we don’t play with nature, or work with nature; we try to survive nature. The ends of action are the achievement or maintenance of the conditions of security that prevailed before the disaster—put more plainly, to “get back to normal” (the ability to actually do this is of course unevenly socially distributed). The means are various activities of harm reduction and loss avoidance (evacuation, fortifying a home, stockpiling supplies) and recovery (rebuilding, repairing, replacing, recuperating). Institutions of varying levels of formalization populate this world and organize action within it, from organizations like government and charitable disaster response agencies (FEMA, the Red Cross), which have written rules and material resources, to the institution of the family and the neighborhood, with norms of care that guide action. Like the worlds of play and of work, the world of catastrophe specifies certain roles: of victim, of helper, of villain.

When birds are toys in a game, it’s their pattern of diversity and distribution that gives them meaning. When nature is a threat in a catastrophe, what is it that gives it its meaning? This is an empirical question Bargheer’s pragmatic theory of valuation leads us to. Chroniclers of disaster, not only academics but also writers, journalists, and activists, give us some possibilities. The devastating first sentence of Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek’s *Children of Katrina* is: “For Cierra, the sound of Katrina is the sound of ‘people screaming’” (p. 1). This the grim flip-side of Bargheer’s bird watchers “falling in love” through “transformative experiences” with birds, mostly in childhood (p. 188). In my own interviews with New York City families recovering from flooding due to Hurricane Sandy, people described shifting valuations of water. One woman traced her own love of being on the water to the Greek island village

<sup>1</sup> The ambition of this claim is not to imply, following Beck, a kind of epochal shift to “risk society” (or anything else); rather, I’m offering the world of catastrophe as a social form that can and does coexist with the world of play and the world of work.

where her father was from. She visited there as a teenager and knew then that she always wanted to live on the water. But after the flood, which “blew out” the walls of her first floor and shifted the entire house “off-kilter,” she described a sense almost of having been betrayed by a former love. In the midst of the California wildfires in late 2019, Sam Levin of *The Guardian* called life in L.A. “a special kind of hell.”

Here, I acknowledge, the analogizing gets a bit tenuous. In Bargheer’s book, birds are a kind of metonym for nature; for me, nature is a kind of metonym for “the forces of nature,” or: weather. Bargheer is talking about wildlife, which we then want to conserve; I am talking about extremes of wind, water, and fire, which we then strive to endure, tame, and counteract. Bargheer notes that concerns for *nature* and concerns for *the environment* “are worlds apart if viewed from the point of view of the practices and institutions in which they are embedded” (p. 12). But different as they are, they both amount to what a person might characterize as their “experience of nature,” and may be linked in the individual moral commitments to which those experiences give rise. There is, I think, still a sense that people ought to “protect” nature—for instance, by maintaining wetlands that provide natural protection from floods—but the impulse doesn’t come from affection for wetlands, or the flora and fauna that live there, so much as from a grasping for measures that will keep people safer.

Extending Bargheer in this way and striking upon this difference reveals that when people experience the world of catastrophe, perhaps what is being given meaning, through experience, is not so much “nature” as it is “recreated climates,” as Hulme (2010b) calls them: novel climates that are “co-productions between ourselves and the forces of Nature” (p. 120). Like Bargheer, Hulme emphasizes the importance of sensory encounters for making meaning, especially for something abstract like “climate change”: “irrepressible personal experiences of local weather, whether these be traditionally proximate and sensuous experiences or newly vicarious and manufactured ones... re-invent localized narratives of warming and change to which we have greater psychological attachment” Hulme 2010a, p. 273). As a result, “climate change takes on a multiplicity of meanings and evokes an irrepressible variety of emotions” Hulme 2010a, p. 273). I think Bargheer would agree with Hulme that “climate change is convincing us – in case we believed otherwise – that our identities and our interpretations of the world around us can never fully escape encounters with place and materiality” Hulme 2010a, p. 274). These encounters are, fundamentally, practical. Hulme wants us to face such novel climates without fear, to give them value and utility. Bargheer’s work suggests this will be a feat not so much of imagination, but of practice.

Here we may learn something from Bargheer’s British and German bird lovers. In offering games for people to play, with their “Bird of the Year” and “Garden Bird Hour” and “Big Garden Birdwatch,” they draw people into conservationist practices with “positive appeals” rather than with news that “the world is going to pieces,” as one German conservationist put it in an interview with Bargheer (p. 204). Narratives about climate change that lapse into catastrophism may indeed convey the urgency of some of the threats we face, but they can also be analytically, politically, and emotionally paralyzing (Paprocki et al., 2019). The bird enthusiasts know this and respond by leveraging the “good stuff” and not “bad news,” which has, Bargheer shows, made British and German bird conservation organizations successful in meeting their aims.

The lesson, Bargheer concludes, is that: “The task is not to shock people with horror stories about environmental hazards—the trick is to make them see and love what it is these hazards could destroy” (p. 216). Or, if we’re now thinking about recreated climates rather than recapturing some Edenic prior state: making people see, love, and engage in practices that care for a “nature” that is not a kind of service provider (of play, of resources) to us, but something we shape through the ways we live, work, and consume. Can today’s environmentalists, learning from Bargheer’s bird conservationists, draw people into practices of living better in a climate-changed world, through breaking cycles of living to work, working to earn, earning to consume, and consuming to throw away and consume more?

It is important to bear in mind that the “transformative experiences” that people have in the face of recreated climates, and the practices that both constitute and result from those experiences, will be socially patterned and therefore a matter of social justice. For the little boy at the climate strike, and for my daughter, the possibility of swimming with sharks is a problem of the future. But many already face conditions of extreme environmental precarity and deprivation, and long have—the horrors are not “stories,” but realities—and those conditions can and have given rise to a very different kind of environmental politics from the kind practiced by Bargheer’s bird enthusiasts. The biographies of those enthusiasts seem both to matter and not matter in this book. They matter in the sense that attachments to birds develop in the course of life experience: “The values attached to birds were virtually inseparable from whom they are as persons” (p. 256). They don’t matter in the sense that not much is made of the fact that to play with birds, you do need some measure of disposable time and resources (guns at one time, now cameras and binoculars). Bargheer describes the contours of “the most common narrative of becoming a bird watcher” as interest developing between the ages of six and ten, “when children are first able and allowed to roam and ramble on their own in the countryside. Most grew up in a family that was supportive of the hobby” (p. 186). It is these particular experiences, which may have a social class character, which shaped bird conservation and, later, environmental organizations and environmental policy across Europe. It is not particularly surprising that these people could, in the 1990s, think that the issue of climate change “had nothing to do with” their birdwatching organizations, or that “People who are passionate about birds do not necessarily care about the environment in general” (p. 214). They are, at least for now, still relatively secure from its worst impacts.

It just so happens that the German bird conservation organization *Naturschutzbund* (NABU) extended their conservation to sharks in the 21st century, launching a “Shark Tracker” to recruit kids to the organization. But environmentalism-as-animal-conservation may miss the mark of what kids (and many adults) face, what they worry about, and what they do about it. Bargheer writes that “there are no pollution watchers that would give environmentalism a base in amateur science comparable to the role played by bird watching in conservation” (p. 12). But there are. In the United States, the Louisiana Bucket Brigade has enrolled ordinary people, living near oil refineries and chemical plants, in monitoring their local air pollution since 2000 (Hochschild, 2016). Friends of the Earth UK has distributed Clean Air Kits to enable people to test air quality where they live. In China, environmental activists have gotten their social media followers to post photographs of polluted rivers and lakes

where they live (Hook, 2013). If the practices of these “citizen scientists” matter less to influencing the shape that policymaking takes, this may have more to do with who they are—often poor and marginalized—and how *they* are valued as citizens, than it does with the valuations of nature embedded in their practices.

An environmentalism premised on the enthusiasms of a particular segment of society is also a feeble one, in the world of catastrophe—something the younger generation of German conservationists seemed to appreciate, as they moved the NABU to focus on a broader array of environmental issues. Justin Farrell’s ethnographic study of the environmentalism of the ultra-wealthy in Teton County, Wyoming, *Billionaire Wilderness* (2020) shows that the practices of the super-rich involve buying up the land, exacerbating conditions of rural poverty that they also romanticize. Even if such practices give rise to an earnest enthusiasm for the wilderness and moral commitments to its protection, this is not a satisfying model for environmental stewardship. The ultra-wealthy may be conservationists, but they are conservationists trying to solve their particular social, moral, and financial dilemmas. Conservation can also pursue more insidious political projects, as Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David N. Pellow document in *Slums of Aspen* (2013); in the elite ski town of Aspen, Colorado, racist anti-immigration resolutions passed under the guise of environmental protection. In these contexts, empowered actors may well derive moral commitments from their experiences of hiking, fly-fishing, skiing, and bird-watching, but any efforts they make to conserve the wilderness they value unfold simultaneously with their more general practices of consuming the planet to oblivion, as they take their private planes and helicopters to spend time in the outdoors, which they attempt to exclusively own.

Bargheer’s agenda is not one of tracing out these kinds of political consequences of the trajectories he chronicles in *Moral Entanglements*. But for this reader, part of the power of the central argument, about how moral commitments come about and how they are sustained, lies in the way it helps to make sense of where regulations and other environmentalist imperatives ultimately come from—and how and why those have necessarily been so far limited in addressing certain kinds of problems, for certain kinds of people. If such measures are ultimately rooted in existing practices, then part of the reason we may not have much in the way of meaningful or sufficiently ambitious and transformative climate policy may owe to the fact that we lack the practices for fighting for, and living well in, a climate-changed world. But perhaps it is this gap that moral discourse can fill.

## Our house is on fire

Bargheer concludes *Moral Entanglements* with strong claims about environmental ethics and moral discourse. We learn from his study that moral justifications, when they appear, are not the *source* of action. People do not engage in bird conservation because it is the ethical thing to do, to protect an animal with some intrinsic value. Rather, the relevant practices lead actors to produce a discourse, which differs depending on whether birds are encountered as play or work. As a result, Bargheer argues, “Moral discourse is accordingly not a privileged site when it comes to studying morality, and in some cases it is even the worst place to do so” (p. 256).

People may use moral discourses—speak in a language about good and evil acts, how we ought to behave, what is praiseworthy and what is unacceptable—but this does not necessarily explain their actual behavior, even though those discourses contain accounts of practices. In fact, as the German case shows, where moral discourses are most “pronounced,” it may reflect that they have *no* grip on action, rather than a particularly strong one. Objecting to instrumental arguments that justified the destruction of economically worthless or harmful species, German bird lovers had to make strong moral claims to explain why birds generally ought to be protected. But they “failed to formulate practical guidelines for action.” As a result, “Conservationists talked about morality, but they acted economically” (p. 260).

Bargheer is careful to say that his study “does not rest on the denial of moral commitments,” but rather advances “a different explanation of how these commitments come about and how they are sustained” (p. 260). The commitments are outputs of action, rather than inputs. The upshot for those who would study morality is that we shouldn’t try to find “the first mention of a moral ideal or concept” (p. 260). Rather, moral discourses must instead be studied empirically in their relation to existing practices; practices must be studied in relation to a wider institutional context; and the development of these practices and institutions must be tracked over time. Bargheer provides an instructive example of the moral discourse of endangerment, which arose out of a transformation of practices from hunting and collecting bird bodies to collecting records of living birds. If the practices had never transformed—if bodies constituted the collectibles—rare birds were not endangered, because those bodies would be preserved in museums. But when the practices, made possible by binoculars and cameras, shifted to ones of sighting and cataloguing living animals, then hunting them to extinction, or imperiling their habitats, would indeed endanger them. Bargheer concludes: “It was thus not a moral discourse of endangerment that drove actors into the field to collect data on such species but the already existing practice of field-ornithological data collecting that gave rise to the notion of endangerment” (p. 260).

This finding leads Bargheer to reassess the rise of environmental activism from the 1960s to the 1980s. In our conventional understandings of this time, the heroism of Rachel Carson, the author of *Silent Spring*, looms large. She has a kind of mythic status as a seer, in two senses. She could clearly render the true scope and impacts of environmentally destructive practices, which we presumably otherwise would not have seen. And she was a kind of moral visionary, imagined as having launched a new moral discourse of environmental protection and, in doing so, animated a movement that would see it through. But Bargheer observes that, in many respects, she resembled the legions of other bird lovers (for this was the origin of her interest) who were her peers and who were already busy with the work of protecting birds. Carson, Bargheer argues, did not awaken a new sensibility so much as marshal and publicize the existing and well-institutionalized practices of people who had collected the data underpinning her analysis and who had already taken steps to ban the use of pesticides when her book was published. Regulations grew from these practices. To bring others to the cause, bird conservationists didn’t need Carson to teach abstract moral lessons about birds; they needed strategies for “drawing people into action and inducing in them the same kind of experiences that proved vital in their own case” (p. 261).

Ultimately, the bold final claim is that “there is no such thing as a spirit of environmentalism, a Green collective consciousness, or a conservationist creed at the root of the matter. Morality, in this sense, is not deep but a surface phenomenon” (p. 263).

Today, we have our own seer in Greta Thunberg—like Carson, designated by *Time* magazine as one of the world’s most influential people. She has become an icon of contemporary climate politics, through mobilizing and subverting norms and expectations of childhood. She mirrors the failures of older generations back at us; in her resolute gaze parents can feel, viscerally, the profound distress of realizing that they have come up short in the eyes of their children, that they have not made things OK in the way that parents always promise they will. She has that childlike inability to bullshit—a characteristic she attributes in part also to her Asperger’s syndrome, which she has called a “superpower”—and part of what has made her so compelling is her hostility to claims that climate change is really so complicated an issue. There are good actors and bad actors; there is right and wrong. She feels deeply but, quite unlike a child, she refuses to be consoled, to take comfort in massaged messaging or softened views of what the future really holds. She refuses to be a sigil of hope the way children often are. “You all come to me for hope?” she asked world leaders at the UN Climate Action Summit in September 2019. “How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words.” Thunberg has seemingly given license to children—and adults—the world over to be much more confrontational, much angrier about climate change than we perhaps have ever been before.

Of course, as sociologists we are rightfully suspicious of attributing too much to “great [people] of history.” You don’t have to agree with Bargheer entirely to appreciate that many other actors and conditions combined to make Greta Thunberg possible—significantly, the longstanding (and far less celebrated) climate activism of activists of color and from the Global South—and to share his skepticism of narratives that give so much power to Rachel Carson. The issue that Bargheer’s argument pushes us to address, however, is whether the presence of Thunberg’s stark and overtly moral discourse on climate change can help us study or explain the actual behavior of other people. Did her words, her blunt appraisal of collective failures, her naming and shaming, get schoolchildren out of the classroom and into the streets? Or should we indeed look instead to the institutionalization of particular practices, from which this moral discourse resulted (i.e. as the conclusion of a temporal process, rather than its start)?

These are empirical questions that I can’t conclusively answer in this essay. But if bird watching and field ornithology buttressed Carson, have there been existing practices of protesting and striking that Thunberg has amplified? Of course, we can look to the long history of student protest (for civil rights, against the Vietnam War and South African apartheid, and more recently against university tuition and fee increases and for labor rights for graduate students) as an antecedent to Thunberg’s “Fridays for Future.” But are these *practical* antecedents, for today’s school strikers, who are too young to have participated themselves? Bargheer’s bird conservationists had their own personal, practical experiences with birds, and with collecting data about them, which led them to value and protect those birds. Many of today’s climate strikers, particularly in the rich world, may have had personal experience with the waves of protest that followed the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (Fisher, 2019).

Or perhaps it is not protest, but rather radicalizing experiences with ecological degradation, extreme weather, or other impacts of climate change, that are at the root of the phenomenon here. Again, the unevenness of climate change, and capacities to respond to or adapt to it, means not everyone who strikes will have had their own first-hand experiences of it. But solidarities emerge that seem to cross that boundary. Perhaps, as Hulme suggests, what it means to “experience” here can encompass what we see happening around the world in the news and on social media.

Under such conditions, I confess to having a hard time placing moral discourse in temporal sequence, or adjudicating whether it is “just” discourse, with the “real action” taking place “somewhere else” (p. 259). As Knight (2019) observed in her own review of *Moral Entanglements*, the justificatory role of discourse, however “post hoc” it may be, is socially significant, particularly “in conditions of contention, when we need to justify our positions to others or spur them to action because collective moral projects require coordination.” Thunberg’s moral discourse provides a way for children (and their allies) to explain the extremity of the action required, to articulate a common goal and shared enemies, even in the face of diverse experiences of nature and of political action. It sanctions a set of confrontational practices. Here, though, I think we can pick up Bargheer again. Undoubtedly, many of these children were not radical climate actors before their first strike. Being drawn into the practice of protesting may well have been the source of some new moral commitments vis-à-vis climate change; this also aligns somewhat with what we know about the “politicizing” effects that social movement participation can have on individuals (McAdam, 1988, 1989; Sherkat & Blocker, 1997; Crossley, 2003; Searle-Chatterjee, 1999).

In the end then, from the point of view of politics, the strategic takeaway may be the same. Bargheer observes that bird conservation would be much less widespread and successful if it only relied on people with deep moral commitments to birds. The larger impact of the work of those deeply committed people depends on the activities of those with less intense (or no) commitments. Perhaps we can’t expect, nor should we ask for, transformations of sinners into saints in any great number. We can’t scale Greta Thunberg. Maybe Dr. Seuss didn’t have it quite right when he wrote in *The Lorax*, his environmentalist fable for children, “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.” Rather than insist on the sincerity and depth of feeling, we might instead enroll people into the practices not only of protest, but also of care, that make the meaningful difference in how we live with nature, recreated climates, and each other.

## Playing with Moral Entanglements

Bargheer’s book transports us and immerses us, with its richly detailed account of centuries of developing practices and institutions involving birds. But like the best works of sociological theory, *Moral Entanglements* also invites us to transport what we learn in the world of the book to the other questions and topics in which we are otherwise immersed and that we pursue empirically and analytically. In this essay, I’ve brought Bargheer’s tools and insights to help think through action and valuation in a catastrophic world, as well as the relevance of clarion calls to fight for a world

in which there are still birds to play with and our children can track sharks rather than worry about having to swim with them. Bargheer's bird lovers want to help the uninitiated go from seeing birds to *looking at* them: to actually paying attention and engaging with them. And like those bird lovers, Bargheer's analysis helps us to go from seeing, and taking for granted, conventional understandings of action and belief, to really looking at them: to reconsider what's actually taking place, when, and with what effects. In this way, *Moral Entanglements* is a good book to play with, even in very serious times.

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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