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# Roundtable: Climate Change Is a Feminist Issue

AT THE LAST WELL ON EARTH: CLIMATE CHANGE IS A FEMINIST ISSUE  
*Laurie Zoloth*

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**Keywords:** climate change, ethics, Emmanuel Levinas, water, women

## Finitude and Feminist Thought

There will be a time, in most of the world, when the last well goes dry. And this is because so much of the world lives already on the brink of a dreadful thirst, a life only made tolerable because women travel great distances to find the wells or the rivers or the ditches, scoop up the water, and bring it home. They carry it on their backs, or their heads, or on their hips, like a child. In Africa alone, women walk forty billion hours a year to bring this water home.<sup>1</sup>

In sub-Saharan Africa, women and girls are responsible for 72 percent of all the water collected. This means that women spend a significant proportion of their lives simply carrying water. And as the climate steadily gets warmer, droughts will become more frequent and water will become more salinized, harder to find, and farther away from habitation. As it now stands, clean water is already unavailable to over 633 million people—one in ten of the people of the earth. Diseases from contaminated water kill on the aggregate more people than any form of violence, including wars and acts of terror. Forty-three percent of these people are children under age five.<sup>2</sup> Water is a large part of the embodied life of women who bear these infants. Without abundant water, it is hard to carry a pregnancy safely to term, to give birth, nurse, or bathe children, or to

<sup>1</sup> CharityWater, "Why Water?," accessed June 20, 2017, <http://www.charitywater.org/whywater/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

launder clothes and diapers—all details for which women, and women alone, are largely responsible.

According to a 2002 report, “gender-related inequalities are pervasive in the developing world. Although women account for almost 80 per cent of the agricultural sector in Africa, they remain vulnerable and poor. Seventy per cent of the 1.3 billion people in the developing world living below the threshold of poverty are women.”<sup>3</sup> Consider the scenario in the eastern Mediterranean region in 2009 when the UN Intergovernmental Agency on Climate Change was gathering its findings for its next report. The project director on the study, Dr. Yousef Meslmani, was known to be a loyal government official, a scientist charged with studying his country’s climate. It took him five years to write and submit his report, and his careful account described the northern portion of Syria, where unprecedented declines in the water table had left the wells all dry. Entire villages had been abandoned; fields of peppers seemed to have vanished; and the rice croplands were shifting under the yellow winds. In the 164-page document with a picture of the country’s most ancient and beautiful city on the front, Meslmani explained that thousands of families had left the dying farms, which had once provided 30 percent of the entire gross domestic product, and were streaming into cities. These people needed water, sanitation, health care, schools, and jobs. The report described a region staggering under a drought that had lasted for four years, the worst drought ever recorded in the history of the country, one of the world’s most fertile areas, the cradle of human civilization.<sup>4</sup>

But the president in question was not responsive and the country in question is Syria. And as a million and half internal refugees crowded outside of Aleppo and Damascus, the protests grew, as the displaced demanded water. Two years later, thousands of frustrated, landless farmers—a full quarter of the country’s population—staged protests in the Arab Spring of 2011. But unlike other states of the region—Libya, Egypt, or Tunisia—President Bashar al-Assad refused to meet with the protestors and bombed their neighborhoods. And thus began the civil war. Meslmani’s report was the last that Syria sent as a part of the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. After its publication, Meslmani joined the five million refugees who left the country. Syrians may have been the first climate refugees of the current era, but they were not the last.

Consider Tenger, China, where the Gobi Desert has overtaken the historic territories of the farmers and traders and forced the relocation of tens of thousands by the Chinese government, or Maghreb, where combined forces of

<sup>3</sup> Fatma Denton, “Climate Change Vulnerability, Impacts, and Adaptation: Why Does Gender Matter?,” *Gender and Development* 10, no. 2 (July 2002): 10–20.

<sup>4</sup> Yousef Meslmani, “Syrian Arab Republic Report to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change,” April 2010, 1–164, <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/natc/symc1.pdf>.

overgrazing, lack of crop rotation, and increasing heat and drought have rendered large land areas infertile.<sup>5</sup>

When the land becomes inhospitable, when growing crops or watering ocks (the oldest of human activities) becomes impossible, entire families must take to the road. And herein lies the paradox of modernity: the return to mass migration. Indeed, in 2017, there are more refugee families than at any time since the end of World War II.

All of this supports my argument that climate change is a feminist issue. If paying attention to the lives and fate of women, concern about women's bodies, or women's reproductive rights, or women's equal opportunities are central tenets of feminist ethics, then we must attend to the crisis that is climate change, which is beginning to throw these rights, bodies, and fates into chaos. In the impending environmental crisis, women and children will be the first to be harmed. All the freedoms we have obtained in the West—all the capacities for voice and leadership—will mean little if feminists stand by and watch the world warm, the seas rise, the climate change, the refugees struggle, and the world we share disappear. Unless we turn our scholarly attention (which is, after all, the only sort of public voice we have) toward this crisis, there will be a time when the last well is dry. And then it will be too late.

Even as the quality of available water is constantly diminishing, in some places there is a growing tendency, despite its scarcity, to privatize this resource, turning it into a commodity subject to the laws of the market. *Yet access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights.* Our world has a grave social debt toward the poor who lack access to drinking water, because *they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity.* This debt can be paid partly by an increase in funding to provide clean water and sanitary services among the poor. But water continues to be wasted, not only in the developed world but also in developing countries which possess it in abundance.<sup>6</sup>

As the above quotation from Pope Francis's encyclical reminds us, the relationship between water scarcity and Western life is bound up with issues of justice and relative privilege. In a world of finitude, every relationship is not only fraught with issues of power and inevitably, gender, but also represents a moral choice against a limited terrain. Human life is limited, both in its gesture and its particular personal narrative, something about which feminists need to reflect, given that women are so often responsible for tending the bodies of the

<sup>5</sup> H. E. Dregne, "Desertification of Arid Lands," in *Physics of Desertification*, ed. F. El-Baz and M. H. A. Hassan (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus, Nijhoff, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 36. <http://catholicclimatemovement.global/text-of-encyclical-laudato-si-by-pope-francis/>.

vulnerable at both ends of that span. But it is also played out within the particular plight of modernity, which is that every single entity, living, embodied, creaturely, or xity, is also now revealed as limited, in short supply. Every animal, source of water, mineral, forest, and wetland is mutable, fragile, diminishing, and used up—all are commodified and going fast. Unlike the conditions under which most of Western philosophy was historically performed, in which a sense of an infinite horizon—the Americas or the ocean, for example—was newly discovered, every place is vulnerable within its instrumentality, its capacity to come “to hand,” as phenomenologists say. And while the ethical is infinite, preexisting, and endless, the political is not.

As feminist scholars, we draw attention not only to the specifics of the embodied plight of women at the margins but also to systemic issues of allegiance, histories of distributive justice and injustice, and power that creates structural and organizational relationships of oppression. The reasons climate change affects women more dramatically than men are not only actuarial (numbers of buckets carried and numbers of miles walked) but also ontological, a matter of emplacement in a political economy that values the lives and work of women so substantially differently that solutions to climate change would require rethinking value systems themselves. I contend that feminism must also draw attention to the aspect of modernity that is its finitude. Only with this realization can accurate understanding of justice, discernment, and distribution—all that we know as “political”—be held.

I further argue that responding to climate change as feminists requires not only acts we can understand as ethical (for example, changing our behaviors around individual consumption) but also acts that are political (as citizens within democratic states).

Of course, the problem of drought in a changing climate is only one of many. A changed climate will occur in a world where the seas on which so many depend will be more acidic, which will in turn threaten the fish supplies that feed millions.<sup>7</sup> In a warming world, diseases expand their ranges, for example, dengue fever, chikungunya, yellow fever, and the newly emerged Zika. Because it targets pregnant women and their unborn children, Zika reveals a particularly gendered aspect of the tragedy, sickening fetuses when they are inside their mothers’ bodies so that the full burden of guilt as well as the lifelong responsibility for care of children with untreatable and severe brain damage falls nearly entirely on mothers.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Brewer and James Barry, “Rising Acidity in the Ocean: The *Other* CO<sub>2</sub> Problem,” *Scientific American* (September 2008), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/rising-acidity-in-the-ocean/>. Brewer and Barry note “the planet’s seas quickly absorb 25 to 30 percent of human-kind’s CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and about 85 percent in the long run, as water and air mix at the ocean’s surface. We have ‘disposed’ of 530 billion tons of the gas in this way, and the rate worldwide is now one million tons per hour, faster than experienced on earth for tens of millions of years.”

A warming world is also one of food shortages, as crops fail and distribution networks falter. And finally, as we have seen in Syria, when the worst drought in recorded history occurred, it precipitated a catastrophe that has changed the demographics of Europe.

### The Turn to the Texts

In the Middle East and Northern Africa, the geographical setting of the texts of Western scripture, the loss of water sources and subsequent emigration have been particularly intense. In astonishing replications of core scenes within Hebrew scripture, the New Testament, and the Qur'an, families huddled against the wind, women desperate at closed wells, yet all in an age of cell phones and chain stores, their desperation visible to all on social media. Wells are central because water is the site of contention. I am interested in the problem of the dry well metaphorically, for of course, as a reader of scripture, the description of the women walking hours for water is textually familiar. In the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Qur'an, the drama of scarcity and hospitality is played out by women gathering at desert wells.

#### *Genesis 24:15*

First turn to Hebrew scripture. Here, Abraham has sent his servant Eliezer east to find a wife for his son Isaac in a tribe of cousins that had settled in the valley.

15 And it came to pass, before he had done speaking, that, behold, Rebekah came out, who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, with her pitcher upon her shoulder. 16 And the damsel was very fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known her; and she went down to the fountain, and filled her pitcher; and came up. 17 And the servant ran to meet her; and said: "Give me to drink, I pray thee, a little water of thy pitcher." 18 And she said: "Drink, my lord"; and she hastened, and let down her pitcher upon her hand, and gave him drink. 19 And when she had done giving him drink, she said: "I will draw for thy camels also, until they have done drinking." 20 And she hastened, and emptied her pitcher into the trough, and ran again unto the well to draw, and drew for all his camels.

What is happening here? The instructions about how to find the correct person are underdetermined, so the servant prays, asking God to send a woman "with a pitcher," her water to be a sign so he will know the right woman approaches. He is interrupted in his "speaking" to God, and sees Rebekah, the proper cousin, "come out" and she is carrying a pitcher, literally the answer to the prayer. He runs toward her and she runs back and forth to the well. The water is abundant, even in the desert, but it needs a moral agent to move it from the dark earth to the mouth of the thirsty.

The young woman is that moral agent, chosen because of her capacity to draw water and organize repair. And while this may seem surprising—one teenager with an entire caravan of men and camels as subjects of her concern—it is not, for in the biblical world, as now, women were the ones who carried the water. Note that the hospitality is only possible because of women's agency. Man's role is merely evocative not physical, in that it looks like the speech act (of prayer) moves the story forward.

A few chapters later, Jacob (Isaac and Rebekah's son), again seeing east to the same cousins, finds himself once again by a well. This time, the well is capped firmly, and the men gather around, waiting, once again, for agency and hospitality.

*Genesis 29:8*

And he said, Lo, *it is* yet high day, neither *is it* time that the cattle should be gathered together: water ye the sheep, and go *and feed them*. 8 And they said, We cannot, until all the yokes be gathered together, and *till* they roll the stone from the well's mouth; then we water the sheep. 9 And while he yet spoke with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep: for she kept them. 10 And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, that Jacob went near, and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. 11 And Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted up his voice, and wept.

In this excerpt, the well's use awaits a "they" to roll the stone off, and Jacob takes it on himself to do just that. Once the water is available, the woman Rachel, named by her matriarchal lineages ("his mother's brother") and her sheep, which she controls, are watered. Jacob, who understands her power at once, and who understands he has found what he is seeking is suddenly vulnerable. He weeps, reversing traditional gender roles swiftly. It is here that the act of exchanging water begins the deeper social exchanges that culminate in marriage. Jacob and Rachel return to the community and begin to live amid a world of others, with work demands, family obligations, and the competing pulls of tradition and debt.

The third and final rehearsal of the scene of "The Man at the Well Meets the Women at the Well," is Moses's flight east, in this case, to Midian, east of Egypt. Moses was the adopted son of the Pharaoh, although he was born to a Jewish family and thus a descendent of one of the sons, Levi, of Jacob, and he has killed a man, an overseer, in an attempt to right a cruelty to a slave.

*Exodus 2:15*

15 Now when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian: and

he sat down by a well. 16 Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came and drew water, and lled the troughs to water their father's flock. 17 And the shepherds came and drove them away: but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock. 18 And when they came to Reuel their father, he said, How *is it that* ye are come so soon to day? 19 And they said, An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and also drew water enough for us, and watered the flock.

In the third telling, the infrastructure—the well—is more profoundly in the control of the men of the society—they guard it, they are hostile, and they drive away the women, who presumably have to wait until the men leave, perhaps? But Moses intervenes, actively aiding them, and in addition, helping, unlike in the previous two scenes, with the actual work of watering the flocks in their control. As in the other scenes, he marries one of the sisters and begins a life and family.

#### *Qur'an 28:22–24*

This same story of a seeing Moses, women, and wells appears in this version in the Qur'an:

And when he came to the well of Madyan, he found there a crowd of people watering [their flocks], and he found aside from them two women driving back [their flocks]. He said, "What is your circumstance?" They said, "We do not water until the shepherds dispatch [their flocks]; and our father is an old man." So he watered [their flocks] for them; then he went back to the shade and said, "My Lord, indeed I am, for whatever good You would send down to me, in need." Then one of the two women came to him walking with shyness. She said, "Indeed, my father invites you that he may reward you for having watered for us."

In the Qur'an, the characters are similar: the stranger who is thirsty, the women with flocks to care for, and a well. We see the fugitive Moses, seeing from Pharaoh into the desert, appearing as moral agent. In these two last texts, moral agency is active—not just acting on the well but against other men who control it, a part of a strategic holding, a move in a water war—and the implication is that in some degree, the use or threat of force must be at play. Here, we are now describing the move from ethical to political, an exchange of justice against a situation of scarcity.

#### *John 4:1–14*

We see this in a reading of a similar scene in the Gospel of John, in the New Testament:

Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—<sup>2</sup> although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples <sup>3</sup> So he left Judea and went back



once more to Galilee.<sup>4</sup> Now he had to go through Samaria.<sup>5</sup> So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.<sup>6</sup> Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.<sup>7</sup> When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?"<sup>8</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?"<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."<sup>11</sup> "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?"<sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"<sup>13</sup> Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again,<sup>14</sup> but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

In this text, the scene is repeated, but overturned in the telling: stripped of men, of flocks of sheep, and finally, of actual water, the pitcher that appears in the first text as a sign (of generosity and hospitality) is abandoned at the end of our final text, for the exchange is not about actual but metaphorical water. And the thirst, the physical care, and move toward marriage and social order, are all spiritualized and unhooked from the facticity of the tangible ("whoever drinks from me will never be thirsty again"). The woman is specifically unmarried and an outsider, and the exchange this text is interested in is not reciprocity but undeserved grace.

### **The Phenomenology of the Well**

I have made the case that it is sensible to turn to these texts because of the actual repetition of the act of thirst at dry wells in our twenty-first-century world order and that, to the extent that feminist ethics needs to dwell in the actual world of scarcity and finitude and address it, these texts provide language (treasured language) to address it. Here, exchange is possible between powerful men and relatively powerless women. Now I turn to the reasons of philosophy and of phenomenology to deepen this account, seeking to address the question under the narratives, which is—How do we act justly now, in our present situation? My answer is this: We live in a world in crisis, and there is no place to flee that will be safe from its reach. Much of the crisis of climate change will be experienced as scarcity, and one of the most precious resources will be fresh water, just as it was in the world of scripture and just as it is now in the marginal areas now.

We all live four days from dying of thirst. In this reality, we all wait at the well with that for which we must care. If you live in a big city, as I do in Chicago, this

seems remote, for you (like most readers of this journal) own, if not control, in a corporate sense, the water systems that are the endless wells of modernity. (And, even more absurdly, you in all likelihood carry a bottle of water around with you as if on a safari in a country with no running water.) Thus, the contingency of the well—Will the stone be on top? Will men drive us off? Is the water abundant?

But the textual confrontations, including the New Testament reversal of the scene, are thematized in schematic terms: There is a powerful man forced east out of his land and made insecure, yet even in his powerlessness, he is still structurally possessive of the core resource, water, the first instrumentality drilled out of the ground, the first human energy taken from there to here. Water wells foreshadow oil wells, of course, and in that, they mirror the productive relationships of ownership and power.

The men of these societies control the water. They have dug the wells. They are the only ones who can cover it with stone and take the heavy stones off. They control the space around the well—proximity equals priority. And this is true even in societies where women are not without their own power. After all, it is women in each of our cases who are in charge of the large, lowing, baaing herds of goats, the essential economic capital, the main objects of worth in the herding societies of the biblical and Qur'anic Near East, but yet, without access to water, they would be lost. In other texts, Jacob or Moses or David assume control of the flocks, and Jesus is metaphorically the Shepherd who guards the gate—but not in the well stories. Here, women bring the flocks and organize their care.

Yet the women come to a limit. They can begin the act of hospitality toward strangers so central to all human exchanges in scripture, but only after the systemic power around infrastructure shifts. In this sense, the *ethical act*—the recognition that the stranger is thirsty, lost, needing home, or in exile—the recognition at the heart of the moral universe—is only made possible when the *political act*, the opening and defense of the well, the sharing of public resources, makes it possible. In the retellings in the Hebrew scripture, Qur'an, and New Testament, more and more moral agency is needed to make the phenomena of exchange possible. In fact, the stranger who has come to the well first is only required to show up, then to move a huge stone, then to fight off men who will not share the water. For all the individual acts of ethics—the recognition of the other and his need and hospitality—there is a need for adjudication. There are others at the well, the water needs to be shared, and societies need to be organized.

### Finding the Language of Response

It is this relationship between the ethical and the political where Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas often turned. We face a problem when we face the issue of climate change, and it is this: How ought one live at a time when the

world is burning with our own desires, when our desires for stuff, for possession, for meat, and for water cannot be fulfilled without pouring greenhouse gases into the air, making the climate steadily warmer? Even if individuals act well, how do individual, private acts address problems of the magnitude on the scale of regional drought and millions of refugees in flight?

Levinas clarified that climate change is a problem of justice—and justice, he claims, is “the way in which I respond to the fact that I am not alone in the world with the other.”<sup>8</sup> For Levinas, the face-to-face encounter (think Jacob and Rachel) was the beginning of ethics. But the world surrounds each well and the encounter takes place within a world that must be structured to respond to many needs. To respond to climate change in a world of scarcity will require some significant degree of sacrifice, which I have argued can be understood as the just payment of debts owed to the poor because we in the West have already borrowed so heavily from the future. To respond to climate change will take individual acts, to be sure, but it will take political and social philosophy as well. Michael Morgan, in thinking about how Levinas has understood justice, has defined politics as a series of “principles for designing a system of norms, institutions, and practices that ought to organize the lives of individual persons living together in groups. There are various values that such principles should express and that the system itself should exemplify. Among such values are the security of the individual citizens, stability, fair treatment of all, some measure of equality . . . an effort to promote and protect general and group interests as well as the needs and interests of individuals.”<sup>9</sup>

In short, what Morgan is interested in is how Levinas moved from his insistence on the interruption of the self by the face of the other to the creation of just societies. This happens, in Levinasian terms, with the “entrance of the third.” In everyday life, “the act of consciousness is motivated by the presence of a third party alongside of the neighbor approached. A third party is also approached and the relationship between the neighbor and the third party cannot be indifferent to me. There must be a justice among incomparable ones.”<sup>10</sup>

The issue of climate change needs to be understood as a problem of justice that will require the sharing of resources among a plurality of people—some near, others unseen, and yet others unborn. It will require acting complexly, not only because of what is happening right now in front of us

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 171, 174.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 352.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 51, citing Emmanuel Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” *Entre Nous* (1985): 165–68.

(which for many in the West will not be apparently troubling or desperate) but also for what will happen to future people. Because it takes decades for the climate system to respond to increased levels of carbon in most cases (although there may come a time in which a sudden tipping point is reached that creates a dramatic cascade of effects), we live in the climate system created by choices made by our grand- or great grandparents. In 1905, when my grandmother was a young woman, she made her choices against a horizon without cars, planes, the Internet, or nine billion people, and her activities generated far less carbon than do mine. Yet, even her choices helped create the climatic changes that spurred the drought in Syria. Think of all the neighbors since—the pluralities of choices, needs, and desires since—and you get a sense of the urgent need for a politics that is able to balance competing needs and to create stable structures for distribution of social goods under conditions of scarcity.

Thus, we must create social structures for response on a global scale. The scholar's role is to create the linguistic justification for these responses—to create persuasive arguments that will change behaviors and move politics to call for changes on preventive regulations, protests, and repair for harm. All of these larger tasks need state action that is predicated on an underlying ethics.

For Levinas, it mattered greatly whether politics assumes an ethics of encounter and infinite responsibility or competition and violence and whether it emerges from a scripture or a “Greek” set of assumptions. Our texts imply that the first act of such exchanges is one of hospitality, but they are not naïve about the world in which the ethical act of one to another takes place. To have a coherent response to climate change means one must understand this, but having an analysis is only the beginning of our response.

### **The Tasks of a Feminist Ethics**

First, it is the task of feminist ethics to understand, illuminate, and analyze relationships within political systems of exchange, especially hidden ones. We must understand our place and thus our responsibility. In the West, all women are well owners relative to the developing world. Even for the poorest Americans but surely for the readers of this journal, our practices, our consumption, and our gardens mean that we have participated in the creation and control of the world's water. This is not an evil act on its face, for one is born into this world, thirsty already, and into the arms of a society of relative abundance, but there is no doubt that once you know this is the case, it carries the mark of sin, the trace of failure, and the deep, persistent throb of violence. Why violence? Because we would defend our resources from the traveler in need; because the systems of distribution have been set up as a sort of taking from the beginning.

According to Pope Francis, “the warming caused by huge consumption on the part of some rich countries has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world, especially Africa, where a rise in temperature, together with drought, has proved devastating for farming.”<sup>11</sup> From this understanding of our taking comes the reality of our debt. If the relationship between humans, the interruption of the face-to-face encounter, is to be fully seen, then we must see the enormity—what Levinas reminded us is the infinity—of what we owe the other. I would add that not only are we born into this ethical relationship in a time (unlike his) where we know perfectly well that our consumption has caused much of their need, where we live in the tightening noose of climate change, we participate in much more: we have not only not given to the other what she needs to live, we have taken from her and we owe her repayment. This is the ethical world under the political one, as Morgan reminds us.

Second, because we are aware of the ethical duties, we understand the way that politics and its pragmatic justice, its impartiality, and its distance can seem outside our capacity to control or act within it. But an awareness of the centrality and constancy of ethical exchanges means that they cannot simply be ignored or outsourced to “politics” in a sort of despair. What does this mean?

In other work, I have argued that one must act as if every act was subject to the judgment of the poor, that acts like using bottled water or eating meat or wasting water and power or flying and driving or having excessive possessions were important because they shaped you as a moral being. Such acts marked you publicly as an ally of the big oil companies or an ally of the poor, and such was their worth and value. But this argument adds to that assessment. Here, I argue that individual acts to affect the climate also remind us of something important philosophically. They remind us—or rather, they insist on speaking to us—of a world that is based on ethics and not Hobbesian competition.

At a historical moment in which the levers of politics seem particularly remote, after an election in which even democratic forms proved insufficient to protect the environment, ethical action is even more important, for it now serves the function of serving as collective memory, a terrain of human action in the “as if” of morality and the “what if” of lost power. We act “as if” when we act ethically, and we understand politics as an approximation, a compromise. But we act “what if” when we see politics as failed, and then, feminism, with its great tenderness for the private act as political, carries a redemptive power.

Pope Francis worries about the future: “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?”<sup>12</sup> he writes. Indeed.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudito Si*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

The encounters at the wells take place in a liminal space, just before the exchange that will allow the women and the strangers to be welcomed into a new social order—a space in which there will be a plurality of needs, conversation and structures. New families will emerge and the future will open, if the contingent, fragile encounter goes well. We too have come to a liminal space, a place in time that may be brief, when there is still a choice for hospitable behaviors, but only if we understand where we are in the time and the geography of the crisis of climate change. This clarity is the aim of feminist ethics.

Third, we must develop a practice of feminist ethics that foregrounds the urgency of climate change on both a personal and political level. I argue that it is no longer acceptable to live in an unthinking manner—in particular, individual habits such as eating meat, drinking bottled water, and so on must be reexamined, particularly if we are serving food to others. While it is unusual to be this specific in an academic scholarly article, I do so here because I am convinced that our words must have some meaning if we are to be read seriously, and this meaning will come with a sacrifice. We must sacrifice some of our attention and our time to teach about this issue, to educate first ourselves (by reading and understanding and defending the science) and then our students and our neighbors and our families—all the others who surround us—about why this issue has a claim on us.

This issue has a long arc, for the environment has a long memory. The wells we have dug will need to go deeper and deeper, but the encounters that surround the drawing of the water are extraordinarily durable, and the texts of scripture are received three thousand years later as signs for us, and as judgments on our acts. Feminist ethics returns to these narratives as well for languages and for authority. It is the intention of ethics to create a set of practices that will ensure that there will not be a last well on earth but that solutions for social practices can emerge from the ethical norms that we have a duty to create.

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