

# The Gaia Commission: Climate Change and Moral Responsibility

TRAVAIL CRÉATIF / CREATIVE WORK

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## Résumé

Cette courte histoire se déroule dans le futur. Francis, un professeur de bioéthique à la retraite, doit comparaître devant la Commission Gaia pour tenir compte de ses émissions de carbone. Parce que celles-ci ont contribué aux changements climatiques, qui ont porté atteinte à certaines personnes et détruit des écosystèmes, il est accusé d'imprudance, de négligence et d'indifférence. Il semble avoir vécu une vie modeste et responsable, sauf pour ce qui est des émissions de carbone qu'il a généré par ses vols de longues distances pour assister à des conférences sur l'éthique et pour donner des présentations. Le narrateur de l'histoire a la tâche de défendre Francis devant la Commission Gaia. Il prend donc contact avec lui pour en savoir plus sur l'affaire et pour préparer sa défense. Ensemble, ils examinent le comportement et la pensée de Francis. Ce récit fictif soulève des questions éthiques pour tous ceux qui ont des empreintes de haute teneur en carbone, mais surtout pour ceux d'entre nous qui travaillent dans la bioéthique.

## Mots clés

changement climatique, émissions de carbone, voyage aérienne, bioéthique, responsabilité morale, réactivité

## Summary

This short story is set in the future. In it, Francis, a retired professor of bioethics, is scheduled to appear before the Gaia Commission to account for his carbon emissions. Because his carbon emissions contributed to climate change, which harmed people and destroyed ecosystems, he is charged with recklessness, negligence, and indifference. He seems to have lived a modest and responsible life, except for the carbon emissions that he generated by flying long distances to attend ethics conferences and to give lectures. The narrator of the story is assigned to defend Francis before the Gaia Commission, so he contacts Francis to learn more about the case and to prepare a defense. The two of them examine Francis' conduct and thinking. This fictional account raises ethical issues for all of us who have high carbon footprints, but especially for those of us who work in bioethics.

## Keywords

climate change, carbon emissions, air travel, bioethics, moral responsibility, responsiveness

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Aucune déclaré

## Conflicts of Interest

None to declare

## Preamble

This story grew out of three concerns. First, I am concerned about how bioethics has developed. Around 1970, Van Rensselaer Potter coined the English word "bioethics" because he saw the need for a field that combined ethical values with biological understanding [1]. He hoped this new field would address broad issues about human survival, population health, and the capacity of the natural environment [2,3]. But the field that took over the name "bioethics" focused most of its attention on ethical issues in research and medical care; it tended to ignore environmental issues. Now that environmental issues are more serious and urgent than ever, it is time to reconsider the narrow focus of bioethics [4].

The environmental issue that looms as the largest public health threat is climate change. That brings me to my second concern. Since some people and generations are more vulnerable to the effects of

climate change, while other people and generations have contributed and are contributing more to the problem, climate change raises issues of justice. Issues of intergenerational justice arise because the way the present generation is living will shape the environment in which future generations will have to live. Issues of international justice arise because many countries with relatively low carbon emissions will suffer consequences from the conduct of wealthy countries with high carbon footprints. Issues of societal justice arise because the distributions of emissions, health risks, and power within societies are so unequal. A lot of good scholarly work has addressed these issues of justice [5]. Since the injustice of the present course seems relatively clear but hard to ameliorate, I have tried to focus more attention on issues of responsibility and responsiveness [6].

That brings me to my third concern: with putting ideas into practice. I've always admired those thinkers who emphasize practice, engagement in the world, and the need to change both ourselves and society. Something that Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden* keeps coming back to me:

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. [7]

I hope that this story can help, in an indirect way, to solve some of the problems of life. The story does not merely describe an imaginary future state; it shows where we might end up if we do not change our present course. In this way, it clarifies and intensifies the meaning of our present choices.

### **Short story text: *The Gaia Commission: Climate Change and Moral Responsibility***

The charges were always the same: recklessness, negligence, and indifference. The people were almost always guilty. But it was my job to defend them, so I did the best I could. I studied the reports and looked for mitigating factors. I wanted to be prepared when each case came before the Gaia Commission.

The twentieth century had its war crimes tribunals, its international courts, and its truth and reconciliation commissions. But our century needed a Gaia Commission to hold people accountable for ruining a relatively hospitable climate, and to prompt people to live in more sustainable ways. Of course, the Commission started with the worst offenders: all the politicians who denied the evidence, catered to the special interests, and delayed necessary steps; and all the business people who sowed doubts, camouflaged their intentions, and made millions by destroying the future. But the Commission decided to call everyone to account, and to provide everyone with counsel.

I defended my share of cases – politicians, profiteers, and ordinary people. But something about this case didn't make sense. The defendant was a retired professor of bioethics. I studied the report on his yearly carbon emissions:

*Food:* 1.10 metric tons, below average FOR (For Overdeveloped Regions). Ate very little meat; tried to buy local produce.

*Electricity:* 0.70 metric tons, below average FOR. Hung laundry out to dry; turned off computer; but left the surge protector on at night.

*Heating:* 0.40 metric tons, below average FOR. Lived in what used to be the cold region of North America, but turned the thermostat down to 17° C and wore long underwear.

*Consumption:* 0.90 metric tons, below average FOR. Not a big shopper; used an old cell phone; recycled.

*Transportation:* 2.50 metric tons, way above average FOR. Bicycled to work; but flew several times a year to attend conferences or give talks.

*Total:* 5.60 metric tons of carbon (equivalent) per year, 500% of sustainable emissions.

His account was better than many of my clients – except for the flying! That would be hard to defend. As the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere increased from 350 ppm to 450 ppm, I saw no change in his emissions from air travel.

We all know what these emissions did. Heat waves increased in intensity and frequency. Water-borne and vector-borne diseases increased. Flooding from storms and rising sea levels destroyed habitations and ruined cropland. Hundreds of millions of people became environmental refugees. Malnutrition increased as changes in precipitation led to lower crop yields. Whole ecosystems were disrupted.

Was my client really indifferent to all that? I needed to talk to him, so I connected for an online chat.

**Me:** I was assigned to defend you before the Gaia Commission, but I need to understand your case better.

**Francis:** Please ask whatever you need to.

**Me:** What were you people in bioethics thinking? You flew all over the world, emitting tons of carbon, to talk about individual autonomy, informed consent, and rationing ventilators.

**Francis:** I rarely talked about those things. I tried to raise broader issues about justice, responsibility, and responsiveness.

**Me:** But this was at a time when carbon emissions should have been rationed, and the whole world should have been put on life support. What were you people in bioethics thinking?

**Francis:** Many people thought that the twenty-first century would be the century of biology. So they focused their ethical attention on new developments in genomics, medicine, and biotechnology.

**Me:** Well, it is the century of biology, but not in the way you thought. It's the century of the biosphere. Why didn't you focus ethical attention on what you were doing to the atmosphere and life on earth?

**Francis:** I tried. I discussed the problem in classes and at conferences. But what I did was too little, too late.

**Me:** It's going to be hard to defend you because of your high intelligence and privileged position. The Commission expects more from those to whom more was given. We could try the Al-Gore defense, if we can show that your flying helped to change people's conduct.

**Francis:** I was a teacher all my life, but that was an act of faith because I don't really know what the effects were. People in classes and at conferences said good things, but there was a kind of selection bias.

**Me:** Well, at least you only had one child. That will count in your favour.

**Francis:** My wife and I wanted to have two children, but her first pregnancy was so difficult that a second pregnancy was out of the question.

**Me:** We don't have to tell the Commission that.

**Francis:** I want to be honest.

**Me:** We're not going to lie. The emissions don't lie. I'm just looking for mitigating factors that the Commission will recognize. Here's one thing I noticed. You were good at the small things. You carried a pair of chopsticks in your backpack so that you didn't have to use disposable chopsticks in Chinese restaurants. But you were bad at the big things – like flying. Why did you obsess about small matters and ignore big matters?

**Francis:** I don't know, I just don't know.

**Me:** If we can show that your lack of perspective, your pattern of behaviour, was due to an obsessive-compulsive disorder, then we may have found a mitigating factor.

**Francis:** I see what you are getting at. No, I wasn't much more obsessive and compulsive than most of my peers. I now see my pattern as a moral failing.

**Me:** Yes, recklessness and negligence.

**Francis:** No, my real failing was a lack of responsiveness. I'm sorry that I didn't respond adequately to the big problem, to the needs of the people who would be most affected.

**Me:** There's another thing that stood out in your report: the lack of political engagement. You worked at a university that used coal-generated electricity, and you lived in one of those overdeveloped countries. Why didn't you engage with others to try to change the course of your community and country?

**Francis:** I'm not sure. I guess I thought that education would help to bring about change. I guess I always felt a bit uncomfortable with political activism.

**Me:** But the gravity and urgency of the problem should have called you out of your comfort zone. You needed to take some responsibility as a citizen. You were well informed, well educated, and well paid. Look, there's a powerdown coming.

**Francis:** A what?

**Me:** A powerdown, one of the scheduled shutdowns of electricity. They are designed to cut emissions, conserve resources, and promote low-carbon lifestyles. So we need to conclude our discussion. Is there anything else that you want to say?

**Francis:** I admit I'm guilty, but I want to suggest a punishment: I should be made to figure out why so many well-informed people failed to act appropriately.

**Me:** That's too little, too late – again. The Commission will expect more.

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