

Making Sense of the Anthropocene: The Moral Shift in Public Discourse About Climate Change

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Abstract

How is humanity making sense of climate change? Some see it as a technical challenge, and so focus on issues such as the transition to renewable energy, biodiversity preservation, or carbon dioxide sequestration. Others see it more as a behavioral issue, looking for instance at how to design public policies that might re-direct the economy in sustainable directions, how companies might alter their strategies to be more sustainable, or how individual human behaviors might be nudged in the direction of sustainable consumption. Still others point to the compelling moral questions raised by climate change, seeing the challenge as primarily about justice and injustice as we decide who will suffer, who will pay, and who will benefit from the changes taking place. In these ways, how we make sense of climate change drives how we deal with it.

This paper asks to what extent is humanity's understanding of climate change driven by a moral imperative? The answer to this question is important, because moral construals are especially motivating, and so hold out the promise of greater action to deal with the problem. To answer this question, we employ large language models in an analysis of the fifth and sixth assessment cycles of the IPCC reports (one ending in 2014, and the other in 2023). We analyze the public commentaries on these reports, and determine the extent to which these commentaries are primarily technical, behavioral, or moral - or a combination of these. Our findings show a clear shift to construing climate change as a moral issue. The moral construal is proportionately strongest in the global south, but the global north is seeing the strongest shift in the direction of moral construal. We discuss the implications for action on climate change.