



Greta Thunberg: No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference

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No One is Too Small to Make a Difference is a selection from the speeches given by Greta Thunberg over a period of about a year, from September 2018 to September 2019. Just before this period started, Thunberg was a solitary schoolgirl sitting outside the Parliament Building in Stockholm with her homemade placard “Skolstrejk för Klimatet” (“School strike for climate”). One year later, she was a global celebrity addressing the UN General Assembly in New York.

How did this extraordinary achievement come about? A part of the answer can be seen in this book. Thunberg is a superb orator, though not in a classical style. There are no theatrics when she speaks; she does not raise her voice or exaggerate her emotions. She does not gesticulate. She says what she has to say calmly and firmly. “A whisper sometimes is louder than shouting”, she says (p. 29). The power of her oratory lies in the words she uses, and those words are in the book.

The words contain no rhetorical flourishes, either. They are plain, but sometimes they are strong: “Our house is on fire”; “I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day.”; “How dare you!” (pp. 17, 22, 96). There is no sham emotion in these forceful expostulations. Thunberg is transparently honest about her thoughts and feelings. She is truly shocked and outraged at the world’s lack of action on climate change. Her speeches express her anger without exaggeration. And they are fearless; she told the European Economic and Social Committee that “you’re acting like spoiled, irresponsible children” (p. 38).

In some of her speeches, she describes how her feelings originated. She first heard about climate change when she was about eight. She could not understand why it did not fill the

headlines every day. “If burning fossil fuels was so bad that it threatened our very existence, how could we just continue like before?” (p. 6). She did not understand our ordinary human ability to shelter ourselves from devastating worries by putting them out of our minds, stopping them from becoming obsessions, and so making it possible to get on with our lives. She herself seems not to have this ability; she cannot shelter from her fear of the future. She has been diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder and Asperger’s syndrome. She regards her Asperger’s as a gift (p. 28). It allows her to concentrate all her efforts on fighting climate change. I am sure it also contributes to her own transparent honesty, and it makes it hard for her to comprehend the avoidance mechanisms and the dissimulation of other people.

Thunberg’s “How dare you!” speech to the UN General Assembly was an exception to the usual measured style of her delivery. It is her greatest speech. (It is not included in the first printings of this book; you need the expanded edition of November 2019.) You must watch this speech as well as read it. You will see Thunberg’s emotion breaking through her composure. She almost weeps with anger as she spits out “How dare you!” (p. 96). She says to the world’s leaders: “Your generation is failing us. But the young people are beginning to understand your betrayal. . . . And if you fail us I say we will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this” (p. 99).

Her indignation is so powerful because it is so justified. She belongs to a generation that will suffer badly from climate change. In another speech, she looks ahead. “The year 2078 I will celebrate my seventy-fifth birthday. If I have children then maybe they will . . . ask about you. Maybe they will ask why you didn’t do anything while there was still time to act. You say you love your children above all else. And yet you are stealing their future.” Until her speech, the world leaders at the UN had been able to think of the victims of climate change as some indefinite future generations. But here was a living representative of those generations, and she had come to demand her rights.

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In his Reith Lectures, Mark Carney describes the effect Thunberg's speech in the General Assembly had on him. At the time, he was Governor of the Bank of England and had a hand in UK climate change policy. "We'd entered the room feeling pretty good ourselves", he says, "We weren't the deniers; we were armed with pragmatic solutions." Then, he says, Thunberg's words cut through. "With the clarity and certainty of youth, Greta Thunberg was telling us that we were failing."¹ A few months later, when Carney, Thunberg, and Donald Trump were all speakers at the World Economic Forum in Davos, the *Guardian's* headline was "Carney sides with Greta Thunberg against Trump over climate."²

No one is too small to make a difference. This slogan principally refers to the difference each person can make through political action. Thunberg spectacularly demonstrates its truth understood this way. At each event she attends, she is always the smallest person on the stage and the one who makes the biggest difference. Few of us can aspire to achievements on the scale of hers. But all of us can do something by way of political action. Voting is one thing, of course. Remember too that reducing our own emissions is also a sort of political action: it signals that we care. Our behaviour registers in the statistics and will influence the political process.

The slogan also refers to a different way of making a difference. Thunberg says:

"Every single person counts. Just like every single emission counts. Every single kilo. Everything counts" (p. 4). Each kilo you emit does harm, and by reducing your emissions, you do good. This needs stressing because many people think that their own emissions are too small to make a difference: they do no harm. This view may contribute to people's widespread apathy towards doing anything about the climate emergency.

Even many moral philosophers share this view. It was popularised in philosophy by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong in an article entitled "It's not *my* fault."³ In contrast to Thunberg, Sinnott-Armstrong thinks that every person is too small to make a difference. No one's individual emissions do harm. This is a surprising view for these philosophers to take, since they recognise that the human species together does great harm by its emissions. It is as though they think a lot of zeros can add up to a positive number.

They are wrong in any case. The harm that each of us does can be estimated. It exists, and it is serious. Let us concentrate on just one sort of harm: through our contribution to climate change, we shorten people's lives. On the

basis of very detailed mortality data from around the world, a group of economists have estimated how much.⁴ They have presented their result in terms of money, but out of their sophisticated work, I have extracted my own crude estimate in terms of quantity of life. Given moderately optimistic assumptions about the world's response to climate change, an average citizen of a rich country emits during her lifetime enough greenhouse gas to shorten people's lives in total by about 6 months.⁵

This is an average. The atmosphere is a chaotic system, which means that the actual effects of our emissions will vary hugely, and be entirely unpredictable. No one can ever know how much harm each person has done. Few of us will take away 6 months of life from a single person. The emissions of the unfortunate ones among us will precipitate some tragic event, and take away many years of life from many people. Others of us will shorten the lives of many people by some small amount each. Some of us will shorten no one's life at all, and may even extend some people's lives. But the average is 6 months. This is plainly a serious harm. No one would want to be responsible for shortening people's lives by so much, even on average. "No one is too small to make a difference" is an apt slogan to remind us of our individual responsibility for harm.

No One is Too Small to Make a Difference is a very short book; it takes about an hour to read. It contains fifteen speeches and one Facebook post. It is a book of inspiration rather than information. You would not read it for information about climate change. When Thunberg was asked to give evidence to the US House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis, she said "I don't want you to listen to me. I want you to listen to the scientists."⁶ As evidence, she presented the committee with a copy of *Special Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on Global Warming of 1.5 °C*.

Nevertheless, of course, her speeches have to contain information. It is accurate apart from one temporary deviation. In early 2019, she was saying that "we are about eleven years away from setting off an irreversible chain reaction, way beyond human control, that will probably be the end of our civilization as we know it" (p. 39). That may be true. We do not know enough about tipping points and feedback cycles in the atmospheric system to be sure it is not. But it is not what

¹ https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2020/Reith_2020_Lecture_4_transcript.pdf, p. 4.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jan/22/carney-sides-with-greta-thunberg-against-trump-over-climate>

³ Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter, 'It's not *my* fault: global warming and individual moral obligations', in *Perspectives on Climate Change: Science, Economics, Politics, Ethics. Advances in the Economics of Environmental Research*, Volume 5, edited by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and R. B. Howarth, (Elsevier, 2005), pp. 293–315.

⁴ Carleton, Tamma, Michael Delgado, Michael Greenstone, Trevor Houser, Solomon Hsiang, Andrew Hultgren, Amir Jina, Robert Kopp, Kelly McCusker, Ishan Nath, James Rising, Ashwin Rode, Hee Kwon Seo, Justin Simcock, Arvid Viaene, Jiacan Yuan, and Alice Zhang, 'Valuing the Global Mortality Consequences of Climate Change Accounting for Adaptation Costs and Benefits', *Becker Friedman Institute Working Paper* No. 2018–51, July 2019.

⁵ John Broome, 'How much harm does each of us do?', in *Philosophy and Climate Change*, edited by Mark Budolfson, David Plunkett, and Tristram McPherson, (Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 281–91.

⁶ <https://web.archive.org/web/20190920070220/https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA14/20190918/109951/HHRG-116-FA14-Wstate-ThunbergG-20190918.pdf>

the scientists of the IPCC say. Within a few months, Thunberg reverted to reporting their conclusion more accurately (p. 77). To have a decent (two-thirds) chance of holding global warming to less than 1.5 °C, the Earth has a “carbon budget”, which is the total amount of carbon dioxide that can be emitted, and at the present rate of emissions this carbon budget will be exhausted before 2030.

The notion of a carbon budget has gained a central place in discussions of climate change only within the last decade. It was given prominence in the IPCC’s Report in 2014. Its scientific basis is that the expected warming of the atmosphere is largely determined by the total amount of carbon dioxide that is emitted, and not much by the rate at which it is emitted. This is the conclusion that emerges from climate models. Each different temperature target implies a different carbon budget.

Thunberg does very well to focus on the carbon budget. Comparing the remaining budget with the rate at which we are still emitting carbon dioxide, as she does, is a simple and graphic demonstration of the peril we are in. Moreover, talking of a carbon budget makes it clear that eventually our rate of emission has to fall to zero. Any positive rate of emission increases the total emitted, and so it leads to a steady increase in the temperature that will be reached. For a long time, it was commonly assumed that there is some positive level of emissions that is sustainable, but that is not so. No positive level is sustainable; we have to reach zero. Thunberg regularly stresses this point. “Perhaps the most dangerous misconception about the climate crisis is that we have to ‘lower’ our emissions. But that is far from enough. Our emissions have to stop . . .” (p. 61).

Very sadly, I do not think that Thunberg’s target of 1.5 °C will be met. It was not feasible even when the Paris Agreement adopted it as an aspiration in 2015, and since then greenhouse gas emissions have steadily increased (apart from a drop in 2020 caused by covid). But Thunberg’s battle has inspired millions of people to join her in fighting climate change. Fridays for Future, which she created, is a worldwide community of child activists determined to push their elders into action. It organised strikes and protests in September 2019 that were joined by six million people. Activism is a strong new force ranged against the malign power of the fossil fuel companies. I am not convinced that it will win the battle without help. To defeat climate change, I think those companies will have to be bought out. Nevertheless, grassroots activism has changed the nature of climate change politics. It is no longer exclusively managed by governments and manipulated by private lobbying. The people also make a difference.

No One is Too Small to Make a Difference is an inspiration and we may later see that it marks a turning point in the history of the climate crisis.

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