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Review of Betting the Earth: How We Can Still Win the Biggest Gamble of All Time

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BETTING THE EARTH: HOW WE CAN STILL WIN THE BIGGEST GAMBLE OF ALL TIME

John Charles Kunich. Little Rock: Parkhurst brothers, 2010. 376 pages.

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I first learned of *Betting the Earth* when the Gonzaga Law School chapter of the Federalist Society invited me to debate its author, John Kunich. I later learned that the Gonzaga debate was part of Kunich's informal tour of Federalist Society chapters across the country. Because climate change seems to have a macabre sense of humor, our event ended up being cancelled due to a large snow storm. "Global warming debate cancelled due to blizzard" was the inevitable headline announcing that the event would be rescheduled. This sort of cheap rhetoric is not surprising. However, what did surprise me is that Kunich is not a climate change denier (or what the influential climate change writer Joe Romm memorably calls "climate zombies"). *Betting the Earth* is not an anti-scientific denial of climate change. Indeed, Kunich notes that part of his motivation for writing the book is to help overcome what he sees as the dangerous politicization of the study of and response to climate change. Noting that there are no "easy answers" to the "important questions about our planet's well being," *Betting the Earth* does not set out concrete proposals to address climate change (307). Rather, drawing on his experience as a gambler and a Harvard-trained lawyer, Kunich's goal is to "set out a way for all of us to make logically correct, evidence-guided, probability-based, rational de-

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cisions regarding the future of our planet" (185–86). Thus, Kunich is less interested in defending a particular course of action than he is in outlining how environmental challenges, such as climate change and species extinction, should be *approached*, even in the "dim light of unknowable facts and gap-riddled evidence" (14). Though there are serious, perhaps fatal, problems with the author's argument, *Betting the Earth* does contain several noteworthy insights.

First, Kunich is quite right to note that the debate over climate change is often simplistic, misleading, and hyperbolic and that the push for doctrinal purity on this issue—whether by the Tea Party or progressives—makes rational decision making more difficult. For instance, many political leaders seem to be of the view that, if climate change is a problem or if it becomes a serious problem, we can "fix it" by inventing our way out of the problem. American's love of and trust in technology is seemingly boundless. Although technology will no doubt play a role in our mitigation and adaptation strategies, Kunich is right to note that there is no "neat, tidy, insta-fix, happy-ending resolution" to the problem of global climate change (306). He is quite right to argue that, given the stakes, what is needed are fewer hyperbolic sound bites and mindless litmus tests and more science-based policies.

Secondly, Kunich is right to note that, while consensus is (used to be?) of the essence in politics, strictly speaking, it has no place in scientific inquiry *per se*. The beautiful, self-correcting nature of science is only possible because scientific claims are continuously subjected to rigorous testing. As E.O. Wilson noted in his 1998 book of the same title, science proceeds via "consilience," not consensus. Kunich goes to greater lengths than most to note that absolute certainty is not possible in science. Indeed, he dedicates a chapter each to Gödel's incompleteness theorems and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Although he admits that his use of Gödel's and Heisenberg's work goes far beyond what they intended, his use of them is not entirely inappropriate. His point is that there is no *absolute* certainty in science or in any form of investigation for that matter. If absolute scientific certainty is unattainable, Kunich argues, then it is a mistake to insist on scientific certainty regarding the nature of climate change before taking action. "If doubt, indefiniteness, and incompleteness are in some sense inevitable features of all scientific theories and the means by which we test them, we should not demand an impossible level of certitude as a prerequisite for taking action" (169).

Finally, Kunich reminds his reader that doing nothing is in fact a form of action (136). Staying with the consumption-based, fossil fuel-intensive economy of the present is in fact a decision. Indeed, the choice to do "nothing" could be the most fateful decision (wager) the current generation of leaders will make. Kunich claims to derive the gambling metaphor around which the book is framed from his interpretation and application of Pascal's famous wager. Pascal reasoned that, given that we can never be certain in this life whether there is a God, we should approach the decision whether to believe in such a being by weighing the risks and costs associated with each course. Pascal argued that, since the risk is the possibility of eternal damnation and the cost of belief is relatively low, belief in God is a "good bet." Wanting to avoid longstanding objections to Pascal's Wager, Kunich is quick to note that he is more interested in the form of the wager than its content: when confronted with the possibility of serious risks and a lack of absolute certainty about the likelihood of those risks, when should one act and when are the costs too high? More specifically, the culmination of Kunich's project is what he calls a "decision-making matrix" that tells decision-makers when, given the lack of certainty, action is warranted. In the concluding chapters, Kunich applies this decision-making matrix to what he sees as two of the most pressing ecological challenges: species extinction and climate change.

Regarding the former, Kunich concludes that, although there is some uncertainty with regard to the causes of species extinction, "We know, more or less, what it would take to conserve hotspots—the top enclaves of endangered life on Earth—as viable habitats for the many species huddled within them.... We know it can be done, and we know how to do it. We've just never cared to try" (315). Thus, Kunich argues, despite the lack of absolute certainty regarding the causes of species extinction and the means required to save them, the smart "wager" is to spend the nominal sums required to protect the habitats of endangered species.

On the other hand, with respect to climate change, Kunich finds that, weighing the likely risks of inaction and the costs of action, aggressive action responding to climate change is *not* warranted. "In contrast [to species preservation], the realistic prospect of failed intervention in the climate change context interjects a formidable additional dose of uncertainty into the decisional equation. If it is objectively impossible for us to change the course of our planet's climate, then no matter how much we might need to or want to, we'd be better off focusing our attention and

resources on those things we can actually influence" (315–16). Not only does Kunich doubt our ability to affect the climate, he concludes that if it were possible to significantly affect the climate through our actions, the costs of such measures would be too high. "Even assuming that it is indeed possible for us to exert adequate targeted influence on our planet's climate (which, as we have seen, is by no means certain), it would by all accounts be extraordinarily expensive" (319). Thus, taken together—the high degree of uncertainty regarding the likely efficacy of our actions and the "extraordinarily" high costs of action—these two points suggest that the smart "wager" would be *not* to address climate change at this time.

There are severe problems with the author's approach to moral decision-making, which I will address shortly. However, even on its own terms, Kunich's argument founders. For instance, given that climate change-induced habitat loss is expected to be the leading cause of species extinction this century, it is not clear that one can protect species without also addressing climate change. It does no good to preserve land from development if the endemic habitat of a species disappears due to climate change. It will do little good to protect a coral atoll if an increasingly acidic ocean undermines polyp formation; an undeveloped arctic does little good to a polar bear that has no ice floats from which to hunt; establishing a large natural preserve does no good to a tree frog whose alpine biome no longer exists. However, there is a deeper problem with *Betting the Earth*: it utterly fails to live up to its stated objective of modeling responsible, "evidenced-guided, probability-based" decision-making.

Take, for instance, Kunich's analysis of climate science. Although he suggests that a responsible decision-maker will ground his or her decisions in scientifically established probabilities, such an analysis is utterly absent. Indeed, Kunich never examines the conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,which, notably, presents all of its findings in the form of probabilities (IPCC 2007). While the *media* may say that "the 1990s is the warmest decade on record"; "that scientists are certain that humans are causing global warming"; or "that CO2 levels have never been higher than they have been today." What climate *scientists* actually claim is that "the 1990s are *likely* [>66% likelihood] to have been the warmest decade of the millennium in the northern hemisphere"; that "Careful assessments of these observational and model results confirm that natural variability (… e.g. by volcanoes or change in solar output) is *very unlikely*

[<10% likelihood] to explain the warming the latter half of the twentieth century"; and "that CO2 levels are 'unlikely' [<33% likelihood] to have been exceeded during the past 20 million years" (Houghton 2009, 81). Thus, although he bills his work as "evidence-guided" and "probability-based" (185), when the time comes to look at the evidence and the probabilities, they are noticeably absent.

Kunich's analysis of the economic cost of mitigation measures suffers from a similar problem. For instance, in his concluding chapter he states that "Even assuming that it is indeed possible for us to exert adequate targeted influence on our planet's climate…, it would by all accounts be extraordinarily expensive" (319). Amazingly, the author provides no evidence for or qualification of the claim that it would be "extraordinarily expensive" to address climate change. It is simply asserted. On its face, the claim—that "by all accounts" it would be "extraordinarily expensive" to address anthropogenic climate change—is false. Even a casual review of the literature reveals a large range of economic analyses of the economic cost of responding to climate change, ranging from a net positive economic impact to costing many trillions of dollars.

For instance, perhaps supporting Kunich's claim, the Yale economist William Nordhaus has developed a model which concludes that the cost of CO_2 reductions are too high in comparison with the benefits. However, even Nordhaus' model, which has been roundly criticized from a number of quarters, cannot support Kunich's claim that responding to climate change would be "extraordinarily expensive." As Thomas Schelling notes in his analysis of Nordhaus' position, while in absolute terms the amount of money required to address climate change is large, even if Nordhaus' estimates are right, the cost of responding to global climate change would only amount to two percent of global net productivity or GNP, "the difference is about the thickness of a line drawn with a number two pencil, and the doubled per capita income that would have been achieved by 2060 is reached by 2062" (Schelling 1992, 8). Indeed, even Bjorn Lomborg, who uses Nordhaus' analysis, agrees that "there is no way that the cost [of stabilizing the climate] will send us to the poorhouse"(Gardiner 2004, 571).

Moreover, there are many reasons to doubt whether in fact Nordhaus' economic model should be given significant weight. Many have rightly criticized Nordhaus for his use of a social discount rate of 3–6%

(Lomborg uses 5%), which rate makes those future individuals more than a generation away worth effectively nothing today(Gardiner 2004, 572). Furthermore, it has been suggested that Nordhaus' analysis is inadequate because it only accounts for the *costs* of mitigation, but not the possible and projected economic benefits of shifting our economy away from dirty, polluting forms of energy production to a cleaner, renewable energy-based economy. Many estimates note that, if these factors are included, responding to global climate change could result in a net economic benefit.

For instance, in their analysis of the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009, which was passed by the House but never taken up by the Senate, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office scores the economic cost of implementation very differently, estimating that "the net annual economy-wide cost of the cap-and-trade program in 2020 would be $22 billion—or about $175 per household. That figure includes the cost of restructuring the production and use of energy and of payments made to foreign entities under the program, but it does not include the economic benefits and other benefits of the reduction in GHG emissions and the associated slowing of climate change" (CBO 2009). On its own terms, then, Kunich's *Betting the Earth* has failed to live up to its own goal of setting out a way "to make logically correct, evidence-guided, probability-based, rational decisions regarding the future of our planet" (185–86).

However, beyond these serious shortcomings, there is reason to wonder whether Kunich's entire approach to creating a "decision-making matrix" is misguided. Simplistic tools such as this are appealing because they give policymakers and moral agents the illusion of having control over complex issues such as climate change; it gives one the *feeling* of having made a responsible, moral decision. Although the challenge of anthropogenic climate change is indeed a legal, economic, and technological issue, at its root it is fundamentally a moral issue concerning the nature and locus of value. Economics cannot adequately account for the intrinsic value of the existence of wilderness, the extinction of a species, the loss of a human life, the loss of one's sovereign nation (as might happen to some island nations), or the diminishment of the quality of life of future humans. As Dale Jamieson has rightly noted, "Economics may be able to tell us how to reach our goals efficiently, but it cannot tell us what our goals should be or even whether we should be concerned to reach them efficiently" (Jamieson 1992, 147).Thus, even if there were a decision-mak-

ing matrix that could tell us *when* to act, it would not in fact tell us *what* we ought to pursue.

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