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## Climate ethics in Bali - the urgency of seeing climate change as an ethical and justice concern

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# Climate Ethics

Ethical Analysis of Climate Science and Policy

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## Climate Ethics in Bali - the Urgency of Seeing Climate Change as an Ethical and Justice Concern

By DONALD A BROWN on December 7, 2007 12:47 AM | 0 Comments | 0 TrackBacks

**EVENT FLASH: Bali side event, December 14th 2007.**

Details: [http://climateethics.org/?page\\_id=28](http://climateethics.org/?page_id=28)

### I. Introduction - The Urgency of Ethical Analysis of Climate Change Issues

Express ethical reflection on climate change issues is urgent for three reasons. First, climate change raises the most profound types of ethical questions, literally issues of life and death, and such questions as to how burdens of reducing the threat of climate change should be shared among people and nations throughout the world given that groups have different responsibilities for causing the problem and different vulnerabilities to climate change harms. These questions cannot be reduced to solely scientific or economic questions (although ethics needs to be informed by these disciplines). Such questions of responsibilities and damages are essentially questions of ethics, morality, and justice. Ethics is the domain of inquiry that rigorously examines claims about what is right or wrong, obligatory or non-obligatory, or when responsibility attaches to human actions.

Second, unless people see that climate change creates ethics and justice concerns, they will not likely be motivated to do what is needed to protect those most vulnerable to climate change who include many of the world's poorest people and future generations. If citizens look only what is needed to protect themselves from harm, they are not likely to commit to the huge greenhouse gas reductions needed to protect those who will be most severely harmed by climate change.

Third, unless developing nations believe that an international approach to climate change is just, they are not likely to join a global regime urgently needed to solve the problem. That is, the failure to consider just and ethical solutions to climate change has direct practical consequences.

Particularly in large emitting countries like the United States, citizens need to understand the ethical dimensions of climate change to generate political support in their country for a fair solution to climate change's immense threat. Although the scientific and economic facts about climate change must be considered in formulating national policy, only express ethical reflection about climate change policy options can lead to just global response. Science and economics can tell us crucially important information about climate change responsibilities, but these disciplines can not guide ethically justifiable responses.

### II. Ethical Questions Entailed by Climate Change

Last year the Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change issued the White Paper on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change. (Brown et al, 2006) This paper was prepared by ethicists around the world collaborating on climate change ethics. The goal of this program is to identify the ethical issues that are arising in climate change negotiations and policy-making and then subject these matters to express ethical reflection. This work has led to the conclusion that climate change raises many different ethical issues. The questions looked at in the White Paper included:

1. Who should pay for climate change damages?
2. What are the ethical dimensions of setting a global atmospheric greenhouse gas stabilization target?
3. How should the world allocate national emissions targets so that safe greenhouse gas atmospheric concentrations are not exceeded?
4. What does ethics have to say about scientific uncertainty in climate change science?
5. What are the ethical issues that arise when nations try and justify their climate change responses on costs to them?
6. Can nations wait until new less costly technologies are invented?
7. Can nations use the excuse for not reducing their greenhouse gas emissions that they need not act until other nations act?
8. What is a just process for resolving the climate change crisis?



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The White Paper also identified other ethical issues that need to be examined in the future and noted that additional ethical questions would arise as the global negotiations proceed.

The solutions to climate change also raise ethical questions because all of the solutions have potential adverse harms, yet these harms differ greatly among solutions. For this reason, the Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change has begun work on the ethical dimensions of climate change solutions and has in this regard begun working on biofuels, geologic carbon sequestration, and geo-engineering. The program expects to look at other climate change solutions including wind, solar, hydroelectric, hydrogen, and nuclear power in the near future. The world needs to think about these solutions from a comparative ethical point of view because we need to think about which of the solutions represent the best ethical approach and the adverse ethical conclusions of some of the solutions may be less ethically problematic than business as usual.

### III. Ethical Issues Under Consideration in Bali

The Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change is meeting on December 14 to examine ethical issues entailed by the work of IPCC at a side event in COP-13. IPCC, an organization widely respected around the world and recipient of this year's Nobel Prize along with Al Gore, regularly synthesizes the peer-reviewed scientific and economic literature for policy makers around the world.

Although IPCC is widely believed to perform its mission well, occasionally how IPCC does its work raises ethical questions. Examples include how it handles scientific uncertainty about climate change impacts and its use of economic tools as prescriptive guidance to policy makers. In addition the ethics and justice questions that the negotiators need to face also point to ways that IPCC might reorganize its work in the years ahead. Good ethics will drive good science and economics. For instance, if from an ethical perspective, we need to think about how harms and benefits are disaggregated, then we need to look to science and economics to help us understand disaggregated harms and benefits The Bali side event will look at the work of IPCC through an ethical prism.

Bali is also the place that beginning structure of a post-Kyoto regime is likely to emerge. Because it is expected that nations will push for second-commitment period international law under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change that don't always pass ethical scrutiny, the Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change will monitor the Bali negotiations with a goal of doing ethical analyses of post-Kyoto proposals. Most observers of the negotiating process believe that the world needs the Bali negotiations to make progress on a new climate change regime that satisfies two criteria. First, the nations need to agree that in the second commitment period they will collectively reduce emissions that start to make real reductions in global greenhouse gas emissions capable of putting the international community on a glide path that will protect the world. Second this glide path must be based upon equity. For this reason, the members of the Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change expect to begin ethical analyses of alternative post-Kyoto regimes during and soon after returning from the meeting.

#### References:

Brown, D, N. Tuana, and 23 other authors. 2006. White Paper on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change. Rock Ethics Institute, Penn State University, PA. 40 pgs, <http://rockethics.psu.edu/climate/index.htm>

#### By:

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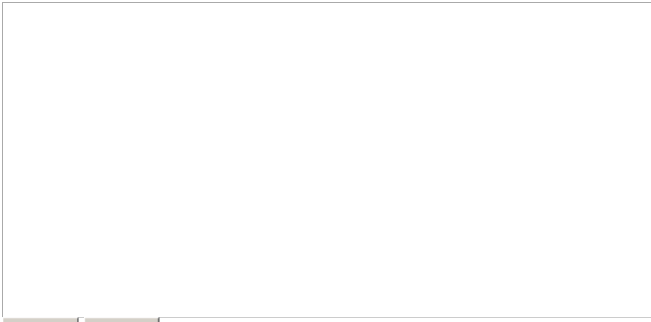
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