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## An Ethical Analysis of the Climate Change Disinformation Campaign

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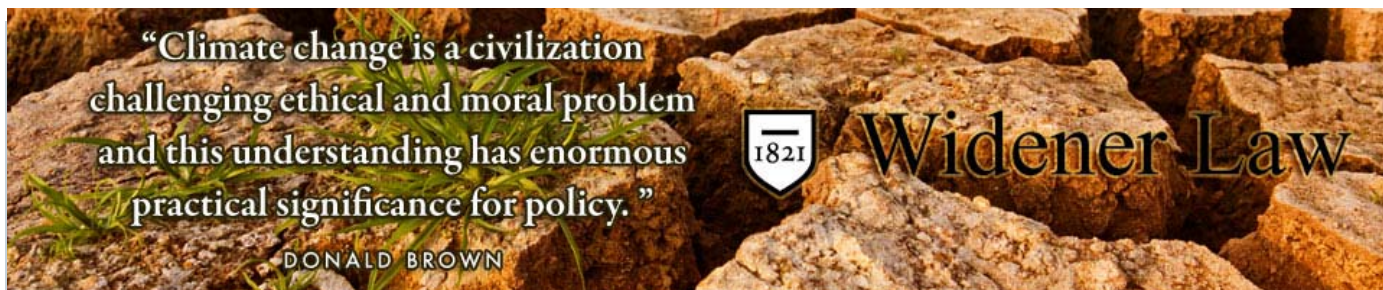
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# Ethics and Climate

Donald Brown



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## An Ethical Analysis of the Climate Change Disinformation Campaign: Is This A New Kind of Assault on Humanity?

**I Introduction:** The following is an ethical and moral critique of the climate change disinformation campaign made at an event at COP-17 in Durban, South Africa on November 29th 2011. In addition to Donald A. Brown, editor of this blog, a number of philosophers, scientists, and lawyers who work on the ethical dimensions of climate change participated in this event. They included Stephen Gardiner from the University of Washington, Jon Rosales from St. Lawrence University, Katherine Kintzell from the Center for Humans and Nature and the IUCN Environmental Law Commission Ethics Working Group, Kenneth Shockley from the University of Buffalo, and Marilyn Averill from the University of Colorado at Boulder.

### An Ethical Critique of Climate Disinformation Campaign

Climate change must be understood at its core as an ethical problem because; (a) it is a problem caused by some people in one part of the world that are hurting and threatening people who are often far away and poor, (b) the harms to these victims are potentially catastrophic, and (c) the victims can't protect themselves by petitioning their governments- they must hope that those causing the problem will see that their ethical duties to the victims requires them to drastically lower their greenhouse gas emissions. That is the victims best hope is high-emitters of greenhouse gases will respond to climate change as justice requires of them.

Because climate change is an ethical problem, those causing the problem may not use self-interest alone as justification for policy responses, they must respond in light of their responsibilities, obligations, and duties to others. This is also true about how we respond to scientific uncertainties about climate change. We must be very careful about making claims about uncertainty because overstatements of uncertainty may lead to harsh consequences. That is to not act in the face of uncertainty about dangerous activities has consequences, particularly when waiting makes the threat worse and harder to remedy. Unfortunately the uncertainty arguments discussed here have led to almost thirty years of inaction on climate change.

We are here today to encourage greater reflection on the moral travesty of the climate change disinformation campaign. We will argue that this campaign is some kind of new assault on humanity.

Let me stress we are not attacking scientific skepticism. Skepticism is the oxygen of science. Climate science continues to need skeptical approaches to current understandings of how human activities may affect the climate to help scientists understand what we don't know about human impacts on the climate system.

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We are also not denying that individuals have unalienable rights to free speech. Yet free speech about something that is dangerous entails responsibilities and lying and misinformation is always morally reprehensible even if the right to free speech is fully conceded. Free speech must not deceive. We are not denying that individuals have a right to express their opinions on climate change; we are however claiming that the tactics discussed in what follows are ethically unacceptable.

I will in a minute review the tactics of the climate change disinformation campaign. We think you will agree that these are not acceptable ways of acting skeptically or responsibly but often malicious, morally unacceptable disinformation tactics that are deeply irresponsible.

To understand the full moral depravity of the climate change disinformation campaign, one must know something about the state of climate science. There is a "consensus" view on climate science that has been articulated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC. This consensus is not a consensus on all scientific issues entailed by climate change; it is a consensus about the fact that the planet is warming, that this warming is largely human caused, and that under business-as-usual we are headed to potentially catastrophic impacts for humans and the natural resources on which life depends. Furthermore, these harms are likely to be most harshly experienced by many of the Earth's poorest people. These poor people have not consented to be put further at risk while uncertainties are resolved and many nations most vulnerable to climate change have been pleading with those causing climate action to take action for well over twenty-five years.

Every Academy of Science in the world has issued a report or statement supporting the consensus view including four reports by the US Academy of Science. Well over 100 scientific organizations with expertise in climate science have also issued reports or statements in support of the consensus view. At least 97 % of all scientists that actually do research in climate science support the consensus view according to two recent surveys in respectable scientific journals.

There are six recent books that have investigated the disinformation campaign on climate change science. (See references below) What follows is an ethical analysis of the disinformation campaign based upon the findings in these books.

The disinformation campaign began in the 1980s when some of the same scientists and organizations that fought government regulation of tobacco began to apply the tactics honed in their war on the regulation of tobacco to climate change. For almost 25 years this campaign has been waged to undermine public support for regulation of greenhouse gases.

The organizations trying to undermine public support on climate policies by exaggerating scientific uncertainty have expanded over the last few decades to include think tanks, front groups, AstroTurf groups (that is groups pretending to be bottom-up citizen responses), PR firm led campaigns financed by fossil fuel interests and free-market fundamentalists philanthropic funded organizations. Much of the funding support for all of these efforts has come from some fossil fuel interests.

The tactics deployed by this campaign are now all well documented including in the six books mentioned above. These tactics have included:

**A. Lying.** Some of the claims made by some of those engaged in the disinformation campaign have been outright lies about such things as the claim that the entire scientific basis for human-induced climate change is a hoax or that there is no evidence of human causation of climate change. Given that every Academy of Science in the world has issued reports or position statements in support of the consensus view, it is clearly not true that the scientific basis for human-induced warming is a hoax: in fact such a claim is preposterous. Such a claim is far from reasonable skepticism, in fact a lie. The same can be said of the claim that there is

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no evidence of human causation. There are many independent lines of evidence that humans are changing the planet including multiple finger-print and attribution studies, strong correlations between fossil fuel use and increases in atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations, carbon isotopic evidence that carbon dioxide elevations are from fossil sources, and model predictions that best fit actual observed greenhouse gas atmospheric concentrations that support the conclusion that human activities are the source of elevated atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gase. It is clearly a lie to assert there is no evidence of human causation of observable warming.

**B. Focusing On An Unknown While Ignoring the Known.**

Frequently those engaged in the disinformation campaign stress what is unknown about climate change science while ignoring the huge amount of well-settled climate change science that supports the consensus view. This tactic is often referred to as cherry-picking the evidence.

**C. Specious Claims Of Bad Science.** Those engaged in the disinformation campaign often characterize matters that are not fully proven as “bad science” even in cases where there is strong evidence for conclusions that are based upon “the balance of the evidence. ” Because climate change science will never be able to fully prove all future climate change impacts, insisting on absolute proof creates a burden of proof that can’t be met. This is not reasonable skepticism but an ideological assumption that makes necessary protective action impossible.

**D. Creation of Front Groups.** Those opposed to action on climate change have often created front groups that hide the real parties in interest. These front groups sometimes have held fake conferences attended by scientists that never or infrequently publish in peer-reviewed journals. These front groups then publish the results of these conferences and send them to the media as if they were entitled to the same respect as peer-reviewed science. This is a species of “manufacturing” science, a tactic that fails to abide by the scientific norm that scientific conclusions be published in peer-reviewed journals whose mission is to review scientific claims for accuracy and completeness.

**E. Creation of Misleading Lists of Climate Skeptics .**

Organizations engaged in the climate change disinformation campaign have created lists of climate skeptics that are highly misleading because they often are comprised mostly of people who have questionable, at best, scientific credentials and who infrequently, if ever, publish in peer-reviewed climate change scientific journals.

**F. Think Tank Campaigns..** Fossil fuel interests and right-wing, anti-regulatory philanthropic organizations have funded think tanks that have held forums or published non-peer reviewed reports on climate change science or economics. These reports are then widely circulated to the press and legislators as if they were entitled to the same respect as peer-reviewed research. Neither the press nor the legilators usually have the credentials or skills to critique these dubious reports. The reports are difficult to unpack because they are technical requiring technical expertise to evaluate. Such evaluation is the very mission of peer-review journals.

**G. Public Relations Led Campaigns to Convince the Public That There is No Scientific Basis for Climate Science.** Fossil fuel related interests have sometime hired public relations firms to create a campaign to convince citizens that climate change science is deeply unsettled and therefor any action taken is a waste of money.

**H. Astroturf Groups..** Organizations engaged in the disinformation campaign have created astroturf groups designed to give the impression that there is wide-spread, bottom-up opposition to climate change policies that disguise that the funding and organization of these efforts actually come from organizations engaged in the disinformation campaign.

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**I. Cyber-Bullying Scientists and Journalists.** Organizations engaged in the climate change campaign have encouraged the cyber-bullying of climate change scientists or journalists that publicly claim that human-induced climate change is a significant threat. In this effort, they have sometimes posted the picture and email on climate denial websites of scientists and journalists who are viewed to be supportive of action on climate change and encouraged followers to send nasty, threatening emails to the target journalists and scientists. This is sheer intimidation, not reasonable skepticism.

None of these tactics constitute reasonable skepticism or even reasonable use of free speech. In fact, given the potential catastrophic harm from climate change, these tactics constitute some kind of new assault on humanity. In addition, these tactics are likely to have been the cause for failure of the United States and several other large emitting countries to enact strong greenhouse gas emissions reductions policies for over twenty years since international climate negotiations began.

A few things we are not saying. We are not against skepticism in but skeptics must play by certain rules of science. That is skeptics should:

- Publish conclusions in peer-reviewed literature.
- Stop claiming that anything that is not fully proven is bad science.
- Not lie about or overstate their scientific conclusions.
- Not cherry-pick scientific evidence by focusing on what is not known while ignoring what is known.
- Not repeat scientific arguments that have been fully refuted.
- Publicly condemn cyber-bullying of journalists and scientists.

We are not trying to limit free speech but encourage people to see that lying or misinformation is deeply ethically problematic particularly in cases when deception can lead to immense harm.

For all of these reason, we here encourage civil society and the press to engage in deeper reflection on a few of these matters including:

- How do we classify this troublesome behavior: although its is obviously unethical, is it also criminal or civilly actionable?
- What does reasonable skepticism look-like?
- Although not everyone who expresses an opinion on climate science is ethically blameworthy, how should we morally classify those who fund disinformation about climate change?

In conclusion we encourage civil society to turn up the volume on the often highly unethical and sometimes deeply malicious tactics of the climate change disinformation campaign. We believe we need a new word for morally irresponsible behavior that attempts to undermine through disinformation political action needed in response to very threatening human activities.

If the consensus view of climate science is right, it is already too late to prevent some human-caused harms in the form of droughts, floods, vector borne disease, loss of water supply, intense storm damage, heat wave related deaths, and rising sea levels. When the climate change disinformation campaign got started over twenty-five years ago, atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations were much lower. The world has lost over two decades in the fight to reduce the threat of climate change. We must insist on the highest standards for climate skepticism and strongly condemn malicious disinformation.

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Penn State University

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Donald A. Brown

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