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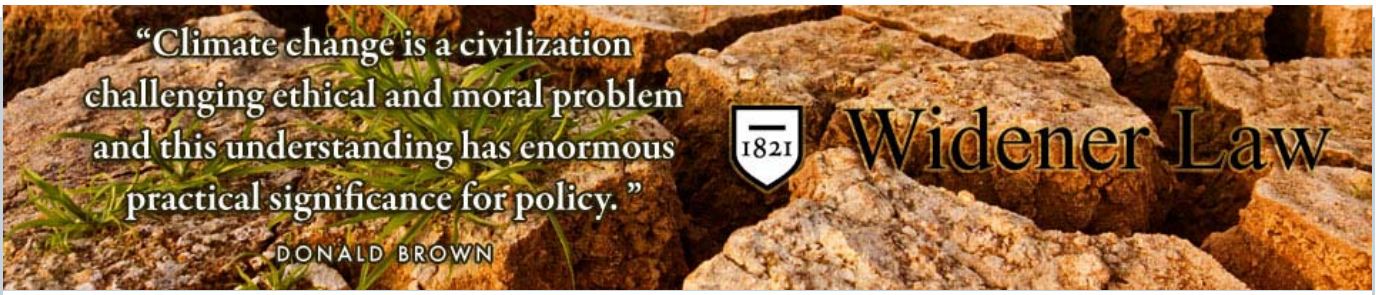
The Practical Importance For Policy Of Ignoring The Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change

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Ethics and Climate

Donald Brown



The Practical Importance For Policy Of Ignoring The Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change

I. Introduction

Here we examine the practical importance of identifying and expressly examining ethical issues that must be faced in policy formation as policy is debated and unfolds.

What distinguishes ethical issues from economic and scientific arguments about climate change is that ethics is about duties, obligations, and responsibilities to others while economic and scientific arguments are usually understood to be about "value-neutral" "facts" which once established have usually been deployed in arguments against action on climate change based upon self-interest. For instance, proponents of climate change often argue that costs of action to reduce the threat of climate change to a nation such as the United States should not be accepted because it is not in the US economic interest.

By ethics we mean, the domain of inquiry that examines claims that under certain facts, something is right or wrong, obligatory or non obligatory, or when responsibility attaches to human action. Since policy disputes are about what should be done given certain facts, ethical claims are usually already embedded in arguments about what should be done about policy questions, yet the ethical basis of these claims are often hidden in what appear, at first glance, to be "value-neutral" scientific and economic arguments. As a result, the ethical bases for arguments in support or in opposition to policy action on climate change are frequently ignored in policy debates. a phenomenon frequently discussed in EthicsandClimate.org

II. The Consequence For Policy Of Ignoring Ethical Issues.

If the ethical issues raised by climate change policies are ignored, several consequences for policy follow. The failure to examine arguments opposing climate change policies trough an ethical lens virtually guarantees that:

- Those opposing climate change policies on ethically dubious grounds will not be challenged on the basis of their ethically problematic positions.
- Those making economic arguments based upon short-term narrow self-interest will not be forced to admit that those causing climate change have duties, responsibilities, and obligations to others who can do little to reduce climate change's threat but who are most vulnerable to climate change's harshest consequences.

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- The ethical dimensions of economic arguments will remain hidden in public debates in cases where economic arguments against climate change policies appear to based on “value-neutral” economic “facts” although the calculations of the “facts” contain ethically dubious calculation procedures such as: (a) discounting future benefits that make benefits to others experienced in the middle to long-term virtually worthless as a matter of present value. (b) economic arguments usually only calculate the value of things harmed by climate change on the basis of market-value thus translating all things including human life, plants, animals, and ecological systems into commodity value, or (c) the economic calculations often ignore distributive justice issues including the fact that some people and places will be much more harshly impacted by climate change than others.
- Important ethical issues entailed by decision-making in the face of scientific uncertainty will remain hidden including: (a) Who should have the burden of proof? (b) What quantity of proof should satisfy the burden of proof when decisions must be made in the face of scientific uncertainty? (c) Whether the victims of climate change have a right to participate in decisions that must be made in the face of uncertainty? and, (d) Whether those causing climate change have obligations to act now because if the world waits to act until all uncertainties are resolved it will likely be too late to prevent catastrophic impacts to others and to stabilize greenhouse gas atmospheric concentrations at safe levels?
- Because no national, regional, local, business, organization, or individual climate change strategy makes sense unless it is understood to be implicitly a position on its duties and obligations to others to prevent climate change, whether the strategy is just or fair in relationship to the entity’s obligations to others will go unexamined.
- Given that the world needs a global solution to climate change, and that only just solutions to climate change are likely to be embraced by most governments, barriers to finding an acceptable global solution will continue.
- Unjust climate change policies will be pursued that exacerbate existing injustices in the world.
- Because those who cause climate change are ethically responsible for damages caused by them, funding for adaptation projects needed by those most vulnerable to climate change will not be generated.
- Because no nation may ethically use as an excuse for non-action on climate change that it need not reduce its greenhouse gases to its fair share of safe global emissions until other nations act, nations will continue to inappropriately refuse to act on the basis that other nations have not acted.
- Because the amount of reductions that nations should achieve should be based upon principles of distributive justice and not-self interest, nations will continue to make commitments to reduce their emissions based upon self-interest rather than what is their fair share of safe global emissions.

III. Whose Ethics Counts?

Climate change raises not one civilization challenging ethical issue, but a host of

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them including:

- What greenhouse gas atmospheric concentration stabilization goal should be agreed to by all nations?
- What is each nation's fair share of safe global emissions?
- Who is responsible for paying for the costs of climate change adaptation needs or damages in poor, vulnerable nations?
- Ethical issues that arise when arguments are made against action on the basis of scientific uncertainty or cost to national economies?
- Are individuals, sub-national governments, organizations, and businesses responsible for climate change?
- What ethical issues arise from the solutions to climate change such as geo-engineering, nuclear power, or biofuels, just to name a few?
- Are nations responsible for historical emissions?

These and other very challenging ethical questions need to be faced when climate change policies are developed. Yet a reasonable question might be asked at this stage about whose ethics should count in resolving these questions given that there are different ethical theories that are supported by different people that might reach different conclusions about what ethics requires.

We would agree that climate change raises some civilization challenging ethical questions about which different respectable ethical theories might reach different conclusions about what should be done. However, the fact that different ethically acceptable positions may lead to different ethical conclusions about climate change issues does not lead to ethical agnosticism or even confusion about all climate change issues including some of the most important ethical questions that must be faced in climate change policy formation. Three possibilities exist:

- For some climate change ethical questions, there is an overlapping consensus among ethical theories about what ethics requires.
- For some climate change issues, ethics issue spotting sometimes leads to conflicts among ethical theories about what ethics requires.
- For some climate change issues, ethical issue spotting may lead to disagreement among ethical theories about what should be done yet very strong agreement that some positions taken on these issues are ethically bankrupt even though there is disagreement on what ethics requires.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, there are some climate change ethical issues about which there appears to be agreement about what ethics requires. For instance, most cultures and religions support variations of the golden rule that holds that individuals should not be able to severely harm others because of economic self-interest, polluters should pay for harm that they caused, and nations should prevent their citizens from harming others beyond their boarders.

More importantly, even on matters about which there are legitimate differences about what ethics requires, there appears to be ethical agreement that the position of some nations are ethically bankrupt despite disagreement about what ethics requires.

For this reason, ethical issue spotting often can lead to narrowing positions in contention to those that pass minimum ethical scrutiny. For this reason alone, spotting the ethical issues that arise in policy formation may be key to making progress.

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And so, perhaps the most important practical consequence of spotting the ethical issues raised by climate change is that failure to do so will likely create a missed opportunity to make progress to an urgently needed global solution.

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October 7, 2012 at 9:01 pm 1 comment Donald A. Brown

One Response

John Hedstrom says:

Your emphasis on ethics is exactly what's needed. Thanks for your many efforts to clarify the debate. Unfortunately, the media is doing a lousy job of holding the fossil fuel industry (and their front groups and political allies) accountable for lying about global warming and blocking solutions to climate change. We are busily terra-deforming our Earth with hardly a second thought. What's good for the coal, oil, and natural gas industries (I like to call them the c.o.n. men), isn't good for the Earth. The "precautionary principle" prohibits irreversible harm.

October 8, 2012 at 6:07 pm Reply

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