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Climate Ethics

Ethical Analysis of Climate Science and Policy

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Ethical Problems With some of the Obama Team's Approach to Climate Change?

By DONALD A BROWN on January 6, 2009 1:45 AM | [4 Comments](#)

Three times in his movie Inconvenient Truth, Al Gore asserts that climate change is a moral issue. Yet, the US response to climate change has often failed to take seriously the implications of the claim that climate change raises moral issues. Although statements of President-elect Obama indicate a new willingness to assure that US climate change policy is consistent with global obligations, a recent report raises the question of whether the failure to understand the moral and ethical dimensions of climate change policy remains a problem among members of the Obama team.

The New York Times on Saturday, January 3rd reported differences on climate change between two camps of the Obama team. (Broder, 2009). One camp, led by Carol Browner supports strong caps on emissions. The other, led by Lawrence Summers, supports an economic escape clause if caps become too expensive while requiring developing nations to agree to emissions limits apparently as a precondition to strong US greenhouse gas caps according to the Times.

The position on climate change attributed to Summers by the Times makes sense if one sees US climate change policy as strictly a matter of national interest. However, if one takes seriously the idea that policy on climate change is not just a matter of national interest but also a fulfillment of global ethical responsibilities, the Summers' position is seriously ethically flawed.

What is ethically wrong with the view that a nation may make domestic climate change policy on the basis of national interest? Assuming one agrees with the mainstream scientific view that has concluded that the international community is running out of time to prevent dangerous climate change, then as a matter of ethics all nations immediately have a duty to reduce emissions to their fair share of safe global emissions. In fact, as an ethical matter, even if one is not fully convinced that the mainstream scientific climate change view is entitled to strong scientific respect, a strong case can be made that given certain now undisputed facts about climate change, scientific uncertainty is not justification for failing to live up to climate change obligations. These facts include: (a) the majority of the most prestigious scientific institutions around the world including national academies of science have officially issued statements supporting the mainstream climate change scientific view articulated by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC); (b) if nations wait until all uncertainties are resolved and the mainstream view is vindicated it will be too late to prevent dangerous climate change; (c) the longer the world waits to lower emissions, the more difficult it will be to stabilize greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to prevent catastrophic climate change; and (d) those who are most at risk from climate change including some of the world's poorest people have not consented to be threatened by those who want to bet on uncertainty.

Therefore as an ethical matter, scientific uncertainty is not a viable excuse for non-action on climate change and those who want to make scientific arguments to support delay on climate change action now have the burden of proof of discrediting the mainstream scientific view. Yet, no one can reasonably argue that the climate change skeptics have proven their case in mainstream scientific journals.

In addition, given that the mainstream scientific view articulated by IPCC also has concluded that some parts of the world are already experiencing adverse climate change impacts and that large reductions from current levels are urgent, obligations to take climate change action are not deferrable to the future as a matter of ethics.

Given this, Summers' view, assuming it is based upon national interest, suffers from several serious ethical problems. One, no nation has a right to look at national economic interest alone to determine its obligations for climate change. This is so because climate change obligations are a matter of global justice, not only national interest. Nations that are harming others by their emissions may not look to their own interest alone to determine policy about their domestic



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emissions.

The United States must act now because it cannot make a credible case that its greenhouse gas emissions are already below its fair share of safe global emissions levels. This is true because the mainstream scientific view has concluded that the world must reduce total emissions by 60 to 80 percent below existing levels and the United States is a huge emitter both in historical terms and in comparison to current national emissions levels. Yet, some low-emitting developing countries can make a credible case that their current emissions levels are still below their fair share of safe global emissions. And so although some nations can make a credible case that their existing greenhouse gas emissions levels don't yet trigger immediate emissions reductions obligations, the United States is not a member of this group.

In fact, even if some nations are not willing to reduce their emissions to levels consistent with what justice requires of them, no nation, including the United States, can refuse to reduce its emissions to their fair share of safe global emissions levels on the basis that others won't act. The US obligation to reduce its emissions is terminated only when it is below levels required by fair global allocations that will prevent dangerous climate change. All nations have a duty to keep greenhouse gas emissions below their fair share independent of whether others are doing. Although what fairness requires is a matter about which different ethical theories might reach different conclusions, a US claim that it is already below its fair share of safe global emissions is highly unlikely to pass ethical scrutiny on any conceivable ethically respectable theory. In any event, at minimum, if the US wants to claim that it has no duty to immediately reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to fulfill its global responsibilities, it has an obligation to explain to the world how existing US greenhouse gas emissions levels are just. And so, the Summers' view that appears to assume that the US obligations on climate change are not triggered unless other nations are living up to their obligations is ethically problematic.

In addition, in ratifying the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the US agreed as a matter of binding international law that it would reduce its emissions based upon equity to prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. (UN, 1992, Art. 2) In becoming a party to the UNFCCC the United States also agreed that it would not use scientific uncertainty as a basis for failing to take cost-effective action. (UN, 1992, Art. 3) As so, not only as matter of ethics, but because the United States has already agreed to do so in becoming a party to the UNFCCC, it may not now rely on either national interest alone or scientific uncertainty as a basis for failing to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to its fair share of safe global emissions without breaking its international promises.

Economists like Lawrence Summers can help policy makers figure out how to achieve US international obligations at lowest cost but they do not have a right to conflate national economic interest with global obligations.

By :

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References:

Broder, John, M., Jan3, 2009, In Obama's Team. 2 Camps on Climate: Rematch Struggle Within Clinton White House Could Be Offing. New York Times

UN, 1992, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change: UN Document A:AC.237/18.2,3.

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4 COMMENTS

[mstrong661](#) | January 6, 2009 2:17 PM | [Reply](#)

It is the duty of the news media and the IPCC supporters to at least publish opposing opinions. They mostly don't. But more importantly, it is the duty of the scientists to be UNBIASED in presenting data; especially data from predictive models.

I couldn't disagree more with Donald Brown's statement: "...mainstream scientific view articulated by IPCC also has concluded that some parts of the world are already experiencing adverse climate change impacts". "Mainstream"? define that?

First of all "main stream" means only a few dozen politically tainted and enourmously-grant-funded scientists associated more with politics than true science. If you call Hansen "main stream" simply because he gets more press time and hearings in front of Congress, then OK. But what about the hundreds of scientists who disagree with Al Gore and the IPCC?

How about a true scientist like Anthony Watts <http://wattsupwiththat.com/> who presents unbiased data about our not so scientific weather measuring stations in urban heat islands and argues with Hansen based upon facts, not bias.

So, while the Climate Ethics web site continues to promote the shaky "science" of global warming, the readers should do a side by side comparison of the GROWING global ice extent, concentration at both the Arctic and Antarctic by looking at the National Snow and Ice

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Data Center's NASA satellite images of sea ice extent and concentration. One ice shelf busting up on one side of the Antarctic is offset with huge gains in ice extent and concentration on the other side. Imagine that! See it for yourself on links to government and education websites that show the real facts about the ice caps and climate change. I am sure you have seen these before. <http://arctic.atmos.uiuc.edu/cryosphere> and http://nsidc.org/data/seaice_index/daily.html and <http://arctic-roos.org/observations/satellite-data/sea-ice/ice-area-and-extent-in-arctic>

The bottom line is that with snow for the first time ever in Bagdad last year, while China had the worst snowfalls on record and the ice recovering nicely from the cyclic 2007 melt down (just like in the 1930s), and this year Alaska has the worst 50 below zero coldest season ever along with Siberia...and to add to it, no one anywhere can measure any ocean level rising while they argue the best place on earth to see it happening based upon historical watermarks and tidal action...

I think it is time to consider the hundreds of "non-main stream" scientists who are finally speaking out about Hansen and the biased and subjective data put forth by the IPCC and the fact that none of the predictions and models are proving to come true.

Instead of talking ethics, lets talk scientific fact.

[Climate Ethics](#) | January 9, 2009 2:18 AM | [Reply](#)

In a previous post, ClimateEthics.org explained in some detail its view of why, as a matter of ethics, the science articulated by the IPCC is entitled to respect. By this we mean that IPCC has sufficiently made the case that a serious threat from climate change exists to trigger duties to act even if there remains some uncertainty about the nature of the threat. Among many other reasons for this conclusion is the fact that the IPCC view has been supported by many scientific institutions around the world with expertise in the science of climate change including the United States Academy of Science, many other national academies of science, and a host of other prestigious scientific institutions with relevant expertise over the subject matter. In fact, we know of no respected scientific institution that asserts that climate change is not a serious threat. ClimateEthics.org explained in this post that, as a matter of ethics, even if one assumes more uncertainty about climate change impacts than that acknowledged by IPCC, the burden is on the scientific skeptics or those who want to use scientific uncertainty as justification for non-action to prove their case in scientific peer-reviewed journals. See: Ethical Duty to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions in the Face of Scientific Uncertainty, <http://climateethics.org/?p=35/>

Since publishing this post, ClimateEthics.org knows of no serious successful efforts that have been made by climate change skeptics in the peer-reviewed scientific literature to prove that climate change is not a serious threat. In fact, no one can seriously argue that the skeptics have proven their case that climate change is not a serious risk even if one believes that new issues worth looking into have been raised. Yet, without doubt, as a matter of ethics, the burden of proof is now on the climate change skeptics to prove their case because of a number of undisputed facts about climate change science discussed in detail in the above referenced post on scientific uncertainty.

ClimateEthics.org believes that what to do in the face of scientific uncertainty is not exclusively a scientific matter but an ethical question about such matters as who should have the burden of proof and what quantity of proof should satisfy the burden of proof. It is an ethical question because not to act in the face of uncertainty has potentially harsh consequences in cases where: (a) waiting will assure that it is too late to prevent the harms if the threat is real, (b) those most vulnerable to the harms have not consented to be put at risk by placing a bet on the uncertainty, and, (c) it is a problem about which where there is a lot at stake. See the above referenced post. In fact, climate change is a strong example of a problem which creates a duty to act in the face of uncertainty given certain undisputed facts about climate change. See the above referenced post. And so it is not necessary to adopt all the conclusions of IPCC as having been factually proven to conclude that those threatening others by their greenhouse gas emissions now have a duty to reduce their emissions. This is particularly the case because uncertainties entailed by the work of IPCC could turn out to lead to worse climate change than that predicted by IPCC even if one concludes that IPCC overstated the degree certainty it had in its conclusions.

ClimateEthics.org Editor

[jarad](#) | January 10, 2009 8:33 PM | [Reply](#)

From my colleague, here is some burden of proof the IPCC skeptics would like to bring to the table:

National Snow and Ice Data Center (NSIDC):

From: Katherine Leitzell

Sent: Thursday, December 18, 2008 9:27 AM

Subject: NSIDC {nsidc-176334} Re: December 16th Extent Plots look odd

Dear Sir or Madam,

In response to your question, I checked with the sea ice index team. The Antarctic sea ice extent is much greater than the median line this year because a large section of ice is melting out later than usual. The small area of open water at the top of the extent map usually opens

quickly this time of year, creating a quick drop in the daily median extent. This year, it has not yet opened up. As you can see from the Antarctic daily ice extent chart (http://nsidc.org/data/seaice_index/s_plot_daily.html), this year's ice cover has been larger than average since about the beginning of November. Regarding the Arctic sea ice extent plots, first of all the ice is still growing, albeit at a slower rate. This change could be due to a number of factors. Weather, winds, and temperatures can all affect the rate of ice growth. Furthermore, ice extent is measured as the area of ocean with more than 15 % ice cover. While the extent graph seems to have slowed, it is quite possible that the concentration continues to increase. You can find sea ice concentration images on the Sea Ice Index Web page. http://nsidc.org/data/seaice_index/daily.html. For more information on the image derivation and data used, please see the documentation on the Sea Ice Index Web page. It is also important to note that the daily extent data is a near-real-time data product that is subject to anomalies and variation. For more accurate information, scientists rely on monthly averages, which contain less noise and are subject to further levels of quality control. Please let me know if you have further questions.

Regards,
Katherine Leitzell
NSIDC Science Communications

[ccrealpolicy](#) | April 15, 2009 11:42 AM | [Reply](#)

"Lawrence Summers, supports an economic escape clause if caps become too expensive while requiring developing nations to agree to emissions limits apparently as a precondition to strong US greenhouse gas caps according to the Times...The position on climate change attributed to Summers by the Times makes sense if one sees US climate change policy as strictly a matter of national interest. However, if one takes seriously the idea that policy on climate change is not just a matter of national interest but also a fulfillment of global ethical responsibilities, the Summers' position is seriously ethically flawed."

Mr. Summers must find a way forward to begin the CCP (Climate Change Policy) transition from the former administration. Caps on emissions makes sense but how would the Obama Administration be able to get national support for higher costs to already failing companies. How can we sell a strict carbon cap only policy to Congress and our citizens under our current economic situation?

Like most controversial political changes in the United States, consensus and more importantly (and unfortunately) special interests severely influence the content and passage of laws in our union. Additionally and unfortunately the American public tends to only be concerned with the "alligator closest to the boat." Behind the economy, two wars, and health care reform, climate change might not even be in the same body of water.

Ethically, the United States must have a significant a role in climate change policy. We need to lead the way but have to get our foot in the door first (to even get near the boat). Mr. Summer's position may be weak ethically but it is a positive method for introduction of more substantial United States CCP in the future.

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