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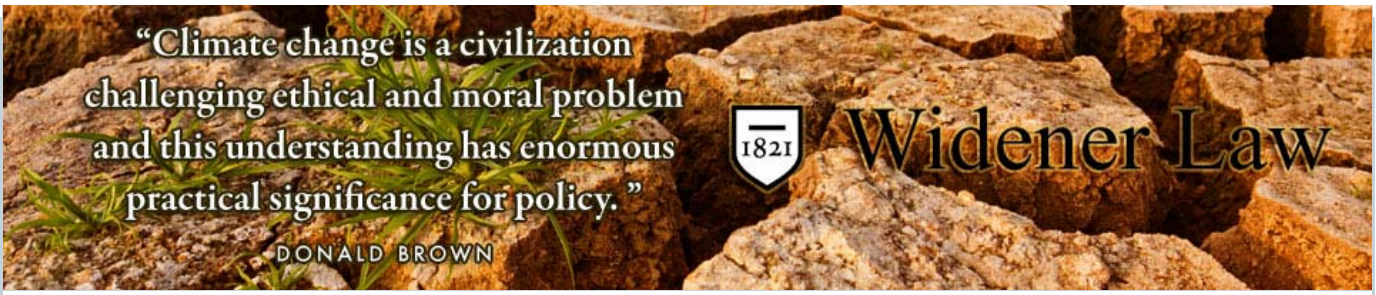
Why Climate Change Must Be Seen Essentially An Ethical Problem and What Practical Differences Follow From This.

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Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Brown, Donald
Publisher	Widener University School of Law
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-12 17:22:52
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/189546

Ethics and Climate

Donald Brown



Why Climate Change Must Be Seen Essentially An Ethical Problem and What Practical Differences Follow From This.

The great importance and urgency of examining the ethical dimensions of climate change becomes obvious upon the realization that: (a) human-induced warming creates many civilization challenging ethical questions, (b) this understanding has enormous practical significance for climate change policy options including the fact that no nation or entity may justify its response to climate change on the basis of self-interest alone, (c) a thirty-year debate about climate change policies that began in the early 1980s has been framed almost exclusively by scientific and economic arguments that have largely ignored the ethical questions, (d) an urgently needed global solution to climate change to climate change is not likely to arise and be accepted unless it is just, and (e) millions of the world's poorest people are most likely to experience the harshest climate change impacts, and (f) there is a growing consensus among most mainstream scientists that the world is running out of time to prevent very dangerous climate change.

It should be obvious upon initial reflection that climate change is a civilization challenging ethical problem because: (a) it is some high emitting nations and individuals in some parts of the world who are putting other often very poor people in other parts of the world at great risk, (b) the potential harms to the most vulnerable are not mere inconveniences but catastrophic threats to life and natural resources on which life depends, and (c) because of the global scope of the problem, the victims cannot petition their governments to protect them-their best hope is that high emitters of greenhouse gases will respond to their ethical responsibilities to greatly reduce their emissions.

Although is should be obvious that climate change is a civilization ethical problem, it has not been debated as such. In a new book to published in October, this author reviews a thirty-year climate change debate in the United States. (Brown, 2012) This historical analysis reveals that, for the most part, the three decade old US climate debate has been exclusively about scientific and economic issues that have both ignored and hidden important ethical questions. The press and even some of the NGOs participating in the debate that have supported action on climate have completely ignored the ethical issues that should have been seen by the nature of the issues being debated and if acknowledged would have transformed how the debate was structured.

The deeper the understanding of the scientific issues raised by climate change such as what amount of warming will likely trigger catastrophic climate changes, the more obvious it becomes that climate change is a moral issue. In other words, scientific sophistication about climate change deepens one's understanding of the ethical

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disinformation campaign (see also climate change disinformation) (4)
Distributive and International Justice (17)
Durban (2)
Duty to aknowledge risk (8)
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dimensions of climate change.

A new article by Bill McKibben is a must read in this regard for US citizens who are working to turn up the volume on the ethical dimensions of climate change. It is: ***Global Warming's Terrifying New Math: Three simple numbers that add up to global catastrophe – and that make clear who the real enemy is***

This article will greatly enhance both any reader's sense of the urgency of the need to respond to climate change and their understanding of why global warming must be understood essentially as an ethical problem. This article also points to a deeper ethical condemnation of the forces opposing climate change policies, a matter recently discussed in several prior posts on EthicsandClimate.org under the category of "climate change disinformation" and "crime against humanity."

References:

Brown, D. (2012) ***Navigating the Perfect Moral Storm, Climate Ethics,*** forthcoming October 2012, Routledge, EarthScan.

By:

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July 19, 2012 at 9:15 pm 1 comment Donald A. Brown

One Response

Peter Capen says:

Although a recent poll found that 70% of the American public now believe that the current heatwave gripping large parts of the nation is directly related to a rapidly warming climate, that awareness has yet to translate into who the electorate vote into office, or the enactment of laws to confront meaningfully the threat. If voters continue to elect climate deniers to office, or do not hold all all elected officials' "feet to the fire" to confront global warming, then the likelihood is that another decade will be wasted with no action taken. If voters truly see the threat facing modern civilization, as the polls suggest, it is high time for that concern to be translated into citizen activism and be reflected at the ballot box. Our political leaders must pay a price for their continued inaction on global warming. So, ultimately, the problem is not so much with our elected officials, as with the voters and their continued apathy and unwillingness to demand change.

Peter Capen

July 20, 2012 at 6:42 am Reply

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ethical questions raised by climate change (25)
ethics and energy policy (11)
ethics and scientific uncertainty, Add category (11)
ethics of climate change (31)
General Climate Ethics (75)
global warming ethics (39)
Higher education and climate change ethics (3)
Human Rights-Universal Rights (6)
hurricanes and climate change (1)
Independent Responsibility to Act (11)
liability for climate change (1)
magnitude of needed greenhouse emissions reductions (5)
Market Theory (1)
Media and climate change (5)
Media Coverage of Climate Change (13)
Mitigation (4)
Obama and climate change (3)
Practical need to see climate change ethical issues Add category (6)
Presiden Obama and climate change (4)
press and climate change (8)
Procedural Justice and Fair Process (8)
propaganda and climate change (2)
Qatar climate negotiations (2)
reasonable skepticism (17)
renewable energy ethics (3)
Romney and climate (1)
scientific disinformation (20)
Scientific Uncertainty and Risk (34)
sustainability ethics (4)
sustainability law (1)
temperature limits (1)
tornadoes (1)
Trading Issues (2)
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