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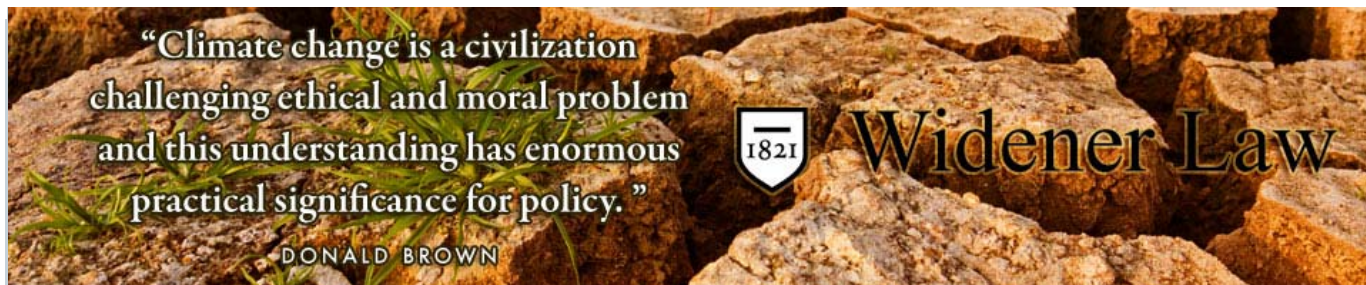
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Ethics and Climate

Donald Brown



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The Practical Significance of US Congressman Waxman's Acknowledgement That Climate Change Is A Moral Issue

I Introduction.

On March 7th, US Congressman Henry Waxman, speaking at the Center for American Progress, encouraged Americans to see US action on climate change as a moral responsibility. To our knowledge, Congressman Waxman is the first US elected national politician to speak about the moral dimensions of climate change despite the fact that climate change must be understood as essentially a problem that creates a host of civilization challenging ethical issues. For this reason, Congressman Waxman should be commended.

Congressman Waxman did not, however, discuss the practical implications of understanding climate change as moral matter and for this reason this post identifies some of the logical conclusions that necessarily follow from seeing climate change as a moral issue. If these principles were followed it would transform how climate change has been debated in the United States.

II. The Significance of Waxman's Ethical Claim

After riling against many efforts underway in the Republican controlled US House of Representatives to prevent the US government action on climate change that are based upon fraudulent scientific views propagated by some fossil fuel interests, Congressman Henry Waxman said:

We are at a pivotal time in which every member of Congress will decide whether they will be on the right side of history or the wrong side of history," Mr. Waxman said. "Civil rights in the 1960s was a moral issue, and there was a right side and a wrong side. Climate change is an environmental issue. It is an economic issue. But it is also fundamentally a moral issue. (Broder, 2011)

If climate change is a moral issue it is important to identify the practical significance of this understanding. If climate change is a moral issue then, at minimum:

1. *High-emitting nations and individuals may not make decisions about greenhouse gas reductions by looking only at self-interest alone. Any position on climate change must respond to duties, responsibilities, and obligations to others.*
2. *A nation that is exceeding its fair share of safe global emissions may not refuse to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on the basis of increased domestic*

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cost alone.

3. A nation may not refuse to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that put others and the ecological systems on which they depend at risk of harm on the basis of some scientific uncertainty once it is established that great harms are possible.

4. A nation must limit its greenhouse gas emissions to its fair share of safe global emissions. In deciding what is fair, a nation must look to ethically relevant criteria for being treated differently than others.

5. Some of the economic analytical tools that are often used to judge the acceptability of public policy such as cost-benefit analysis are ethically problematic when harms and costs are greatly disaggregated among those who would bear costs of action to reduce the threat and those who experience harms of non-action as they are in climate change.

6. Those who cause damages to others have a duty to compensate them for their harms.

7. National policies on greenhouse gas emissions must take into consideration their responsibility to limit their emissions to their fair share of global emissions that will achieve safe levels of levels of atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases.

8. Before setting domestic climate change policies, nations must consult with those who could be harmed by non-action on climate change.

9. Nations, sub-national governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals have responsibilities to reduce the threat of climate change.

If climate change is a moral issue as Congressman Waxman has asserted that it is, then it follows that how the climate change debate has been conducted in the United States must be transformed. No longer can the climate change debate focus exclusively on whether proposed climate legislation or policies are in the US interest alone.

The US must consider its duties, responsibilities, and obligations it has both to living people around the world and future generations. So far, ethics is the missing crucial element in the US debate about climate change because the US climate change debate has up until now focused exclusively on whether climate change legislation and policies are in the US interest alone.

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