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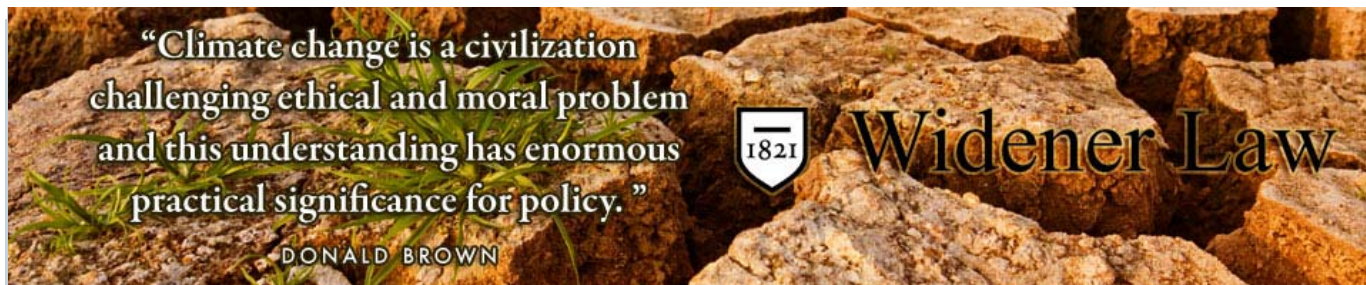
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Ethics and Climate

Donald Brown



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Ethical Problems With Cost Arguments Against Climate Change Policies: Increased Costs May Not Justify Human Rights Violations

I. Introduction

As we have seen in prior ClimateEthics' posts, with the possible exception of arguments that claim the science of climate change does not support action on climate change, by far the most common arguments against action on climate change are claims that proposed climate change policies should be opposed on grounds that they cost too much. These arguments are of various types such as claims that climate change legislation will destroy jobs, reduce GDP, damage specific businesses such as the coal and petroleum industries, increase the cost of fuel, or simply that proposed climate change legislation can't be afforded by the public. This post is one of a series that identifies ethical problems with these cost arguments made against the adoption of climate change policies and legislation. In the entry entitled [Ethical Problems With Cost Arguments Against Climate Change Policies: The Failure To Recognize Duties To Non-citizens](#), ClimateEthics explained how cost arguments were usually deeply ethically problematic because they ignored duties, responsibilities, and obligations to others to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In an entry entitled [Ethical Issues in the Use of Cost-Benefit Analysis of Climate Change Programs](#), ClimateEthics explained that cost arguments were ethically flawed because they:

(a) ignore the fact that costs would be imposed on those who are causing the problem yet the victims of climate change that would benefit from taking action are some of the poorest people around the world, and

(b) implicitly rely on "preference utilitarianism," a justification for non-action on climate change that is deeply ethically problematic.

This post now identifies another ethical problem with the use of cost arguments made against proposed climate change policies and legislation: They ignore the duty to prevent human rights violations.

II-Cost Arguments and Human Rights Violations

A recent report by Sir Nicolas Stern, the chief economist for the United Kingdom, acknowledged that if climate change violates human rights there could be a moral, if not legal, obligation that those nations or groups most responsible for climate change to reduce their emissions notwithstanding what cost-benefit analysis conclude. (Stern, 2006, 42). Therefore, according to Stern, if climate change policies are viewed to create human rights violations, it could be argued that all have the

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right only to emit some very small amount of greenhouse gases, equal for all, and that no one has the right to emit beyond that level without incurring the duty to compensate. (Stern, 2006: 42).

According to Henry Shue, a human right provides: (1) a rational basis for justification: (2) that actual enjoyment of the substance of the right may be enjoyed by the right holder, and (3) that the right be socially guaranteed. (Shue, 1980: 13). In other words, to have a right is to be in a position to make demands on others about one's entitlement to enjoy the right. As Shue asserts, if a person has a right, the right can be insisted on without embarrassment. (Shue, 1980:15). To have a right also entitles the right holder to expect that those who can do so guarantee that the right can be enjoyed by the right holder. For this reason, if a person has a right to be protected from climate change caused by others, then they may expect that those who can act to prevent climate change caused harm will take protective action. This obligation is not modified by the fact that reducing pollution will impose costs on the polluter. In other words, if climate change violates human rights, high-emitters can't use cost arguments to minimize their responsibility to reduce their emissions to their fair share of global emission levels that don't cause human rights violations.

A very strong case can be made that human-induced climate change triggers human rights violations because of the destructive nature of climate change damages. If human rights are to be understood to be recognition of those norms that are necessary to protect human dignity, inadequate climate change policies must be understood to trigger human rights violations because climate change will not only make human dignity impossible for tens of millions of people around the world, including countless members of future generations, but directly threaten life itself and resources necessary to sustain life. That is, inadequate climate change policies qualify as human rights violations because of the enormity of harm to life, health, food, property, and inviolability of the right to enjoy the places where people live.

According to the scientific consensus view articulate by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, these harms:

- (1) are already being experienced by tens of thousands in the world,*
- (2) will be experienced in the future by millions of people from GHG emissions that have already been emitted but not yet felt due to lags in the climate system, and*
- (3) will increase dramatically in the future unless GHG emissions are dramatically reduced from existing global emissions levels.*

The harms include deaths from disease, droughts, and floods, heat, storm related damages, and damage from rising oceans, heat impacts on agriculture, loss of animals that are dependent upon for substance purposes, and social disputes caused by diminishing resources, sickness from a variety of diseases, the inability to rely upon traditional sources of food, the inability to use property that people depend upon to conduct their life including houses or sleds in cold places, the destruction of water supplies, and the inability to live where has lived to sustain life. The very existence of some small island nations is threatened by climate change.

Deaths from climate change are not only a future problem but are identifiable at the present. A recent article in the respected scientific journal Nature concluded that the human-induced warming that the world is now experiencing is already causing 150,000 deaths and 5 million incidents of disease each year from additional malaria and diarrhea, mostly in the poorest nations. Death and disease incidents are likely to soar as warming increases. (Patz, 2005)

Facts such as this demonstrate that climate change is already compromising rights to life, liberty, and personal security and inadequate government climate change

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policies will assure that these harms will multiply.

Human-induced climate change is now discernible and is already adversely affecting some humans, plants, animals, and ecosystems around the world. However, as some parts of the world are warming faster than others, in some other parts of the climate change damages are more discernible. (IPCC, 2007). That is, for instance, destruction of homes from melting permafrost in polar regions is now visible and increases in vector borne disease are most discernible in tropical and semi-tropical areas.

The developed nations are mostly responsible for the build up of GHGs in the atmosphere to present levels although total emissions and per capita emissions levels vary greatly among nations and the percentage of GHGs from developing nations is increasing. (Argawal and Nairin 1991) In addition, those most vulnerable to climate change damages are often the least responsible for GHG emissions. (IPCC, 2007; Estrada-Oyala, 1992)

In fact, climate change threatens the very existence of numerous communities around the world through no fault of their own. For instance, climate change is likely to cause agricultural decline around the world in places dependent upon local agricultural production with resultant displacement of people from their native region. In many parts of the world it will no longer possible to depend upon water availability that societies have used for centuries or temperatures that sustain agricultural activity.

The type of damages to life and security from human-induced climate change are much more destructive to fundamental human interests than many things that are already recognized to be entitled to human rights protection. In fact, climate change damages are likely to exceed in sheer destructive power human behaviors which are viewed to be most heinous including crimes against humanity and war crimes, matters about which there is little contention in international law that basic rights are violated

IPCC has found that:

The health status of millions of people is projected to be affected through, for example, increases in malnutrition; increased deaths, diseases and injury due to extreme weather events; increased burden of diarrheal diseases; increased frequency of cardio-respiratory diseases due to higher concentrations of ground-level ozone in urban areas related to climate change; and the altered spatial distribution of some infectious diseases. (IPCC, 2007, sec 3.3.1)

Cost arguments usually do not recognize the rights individuals or nations may have to be protected from greenhouse gas damage nor the corresponding duties that high emitters have to prevent human rights violations.

For these reasons, cost arguments made in opposition to climate change policies and legislation are ethically troublesome: Cost arguments against climate change policies and legislation ignore obligations to prevent human rights violations.

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Donald A. Brown

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