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Ethical obligations of states, regional and local governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

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Climate Ethics

Ethical Analysis of Climate Science and Policy

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Ethical Obligations of States, Regional and Local Governments, Organizations, Businesses, and Individuals to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions.

By DONALD A BROWN on November 17, 2009 11:45 PM | [8 Comments](#)

I. Introduction

Several prior ClimateEthics posts have examined the ethical obligations of nations to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in considerable detail. See, for example, "Ethical Failures of National GHG Emissions Reduction Proposals Approaching Copenhagen," "Ethical Principles Governing the Basic Foundations on Climate Change Policies," and "Minimum Ethical Criteria For All Post-Kyoto Regime Proposals: What Does Ethics Require of A Copenhagen Outcome." As we have seen, under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), nations are duty-holders and as such have responsibilities to reduce GHG emissions within their jurisdiction. Consequently, as we have also seen in many prior ClimateEthics posts, all nations have duties to reduce their GHG emissions to their fair share of safe global emissions as quickly as possible.

Prior posts have looked at the ethical duties and responsibilities of nations. This post, for the first time, reviews what can be said about the duties of regional and local governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals.

II. The Duties Of Regional And Local Governments, Organizations, Businesses, And Individuals To Reduce GHG Emissions.

Do regional and local governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals have duties along with nations to reduce GHG emissions?

Because regional and local governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals are responsible for GHG emissions that have caused and will continue to cause harm to others, all have responsibilities to limit their harmful emissions to their fair share of safe global emissions without regard to whether their nation has acted. Yet, as was the case for nations, different theories of retributive and distributive justice would reach different conclusions about each entity's fair share of safe global emissions. However, as was also the case for national governments, some high emitting groups and individuals cannot reasonably argue that they are not currently exceeding their fair share of safe global emissions. The reasons are several and include: (a) Their emissions levels are very high compared to others; (b) Huge reductions in emissions from existing emissions levels are necessary to achieve safe atmospheric stabilization levels; and (c) Climate change damages to some people, not to mention plants, animals, and ecological systems, are already occurring. Under these facts, it is simply inconceivable that those emitting high levels of greenhouse gases compared to others are not exceeding their fair share of safe global emissions given the enormity of reductions that are needed globally to return total global emissions to levels that are not already causing harm.

Theories of distributive justice require anyone causing serious harms to others to limit their behavior to levels that in combination of with levels from others no longer cause harm to others where the magnitude of the levels of reductions are guided by principles of distributive justice. Distributive justice theories require that people shoulder burdens equally unless there are morally relevant criteria for being treated differently. For this reason, high-emitting regional and local governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals that cannot make the case that their emissions levels are justified by morally relevant criteria are exceeding their fair share of safe global GHG emissions and have an immediate duty to reduce their emission to their fair share of safe global emissions.

One might ask who are the high emitting regional and local governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals that are exceeding their fair share of safe global emissions given differences in distributive justice theories. Although different theories of distributive justice would lead to different allocations of responsibility (a matter to be considered in detail by future posts, but a matter beyond the scope of this post), it is safe to say that most governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals in developed nations far exceed any conceivably just global allocation of safe GHG emissions. This is so because of the huge differences in per capita



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emissions between developed and developing countries and the need to reduce total global emissions by 60 to 80% from global total emissions to prevent dangerous climate change. For instance, US citizens in 2006 were emitting 19 tons CO₂ equivalent per capita compared to 1.9 tons for Brazil, 0.8 tons for the Philippines, and 0.3 tons for Kenya. (UN Millennium Development Goals, 2009)

In addition, given that responsibility for past emissions is arguably a factor that should be considered in determining fair allocations and given that people in most developed countries have historically emitted much higher levels than people in developing countries, it is quite clear that the vast majority of regional and local governments, organizations, and businesses cannot reasonably argue that they are not exceeding their fair share of safe global emissions. For instance, if responsibility for reducing GHG emissions is allocated in part on historic emissions, the largest portion of historic responsibility has to be attributed to the United States with 25.6% of historic emissions, followed by the 15 European Union Countries at 15.9%, OPEC countries at 7.4%, Russia at 7.3%, China at 6.4%, Brazil at 5.2%, the 76 countries of AOSIS (Association of Small Island States) and the LDC (Least Developed Countries) at 4.1%, Japan at 2.8%, and finally India with next to no responsibility at 0.3%. (Müller, Höhne, Ellermann, 2009) Although there are interesting philosophical questions about when a nation should be presumed to have had enough knowledge about likely climate change harm to make them responsible for past emissions, even if the developed nations are only assumed to have responsibility after 1990, the year the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) wrote its first report to the world concluding that climate change was a huge threat, the developed nations still are responsible for the vast majority of the historical emissions since 1990. (Müller, Höhne, Ellermann, 2009)

Given the comparatively large per capita and historical emissions in developed countries and the need to make hard-to-imagine large reductions from existing global GHG emissions levels to prevent catastrophic climate change, it is extremely unlikely that regional and local governments, organizations, or businesses in developed countries can make any serious argument that they are not currently emitting in excess of their fair share of safe global emissions.

However, there may be some in developed countries that are emitting very small amounts of GHGs who can make a credible argument that they are already emitting at levels below their fair share of safe global emissions. Yet, since the world averages 6.5 CO₂ tons of per capita emissions while countries like the United States are emitting 19 tons per capita, and the world must reduce per capita emissions to perhaps less than 2.0 tons per capita to prevent dangerous climate change, it is very unlikely that many groups or people in developed countries can make a respectable argument that they are already below their fair share of safe global emissions. If entities believe that they are already below their fair share of safe global emissions, they have a duty to articulate the theories of distributive justice they are relying on to justify that belief.

There also may be regional and local governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals in developing countries that are exceeding their fair share of safe global emissions. In fact there are very likely to be groups and individuals exceeding their fair share of safe global emission in developing countries because wealth differences in many developing countries are great and there are wealthy and middle classes in most countries even in countries where the vast majority of the people are very poor. Those groups and individuals in developing countries who are exceeding their fair share of safe global emissions have a duty to reduce their emissions to levels required by retributive and distributive justice notwithstanding that they are in developing countries.

To precisely figure out the obligation of groups or individuals below the national level, one must examine theories of distributive justice and retributive justice. Distributive justice is concerned with how benefits and burdens of social policies should be distributed throughout society. Retributive justice is concerned with how responsibility for harms should be allocated among those who have caused harm.

Climate change raises questions of both distributive and retributive justice because: (a) Climate change is a problem caused by some people that inflicts harm on others; (b) Some of the poorest people in the world are extremely vulnerable to its impacts and can do little to protect themselves from those impacts; (c) The adverse impacts to some of the world's poorest people are likely to be catastrophic; and (d) Huge reductions from status quo emissions are necessary to prevent catastrophic warming. Because some people more than others have caused the problem, questions of retributive justice arise about how to allocate responsibility for past behavior and the harm that it has caused. Because the world needs to allocate acceptable levels of future GHG emissions among all peoples, climate change is a problem of distributive justice.

Retributive justice would require all people who cause harm to others to take responsibility to right the wrong they are responsible for in proportion to their contribution to the harm. Distributive justice requires that all people who are causing harm to others reduce their emissions to their fair share of safe global emission where fairness is determined either on the basis of equality or other ethically relevant criteria. There are several different respectable theories about what distributive justice requires concerning how duties and burdens should be distributed. The theories proposing respectable criteria for distributive justice include distributions on the basis of equality, need, or a Rawlsian basis where allocations must benefit poor people first, just to name a few.

ClimateEthics cannot say unequivocally what distributive and retributive justice requires in determining fair GHG reductions obligations for groups and individuals. However, since many arguments about what levels of GHG emissions should be required of groups and individuals fail to conform to any respectable theory of just distributions, it is possible to conclude that some

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levels of GHG emissions levels are unjust without being able to state unambiguously what justice requires. For this reason, an examination of the ethical obligations of non-national governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals may not lead to a clear consensus of what ethics requires although it would reflect the universal ethical condemnation of status quo emissions levels. Given this consensus, all groups and individuals have a burden of demonstrating what justice would require of them in terms of emissions levels mindful that, as a starting point, all human beings should be entitled to equal per capita shares of safe emissions unless some higher level can be justified on moral grounds.

III. How Do National Targets Affect The Ethical Obligations of Domestic Groups and Individuals?

Because nations have the authority and responsibility to allocate national GHG emissions responsibilities among local and regional governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals within the nation, national governments can create climate change obligations for groups and individuals. If nations create emissions targets in line with their fair share of safe global emissions and if sub-national entities comply with national targets, these entities could make an ethically respectable argument that they are complying with their ethical obligations. In other words, higher level governments can affect the climate change obligations of lower governments, groups, and individuals. Once a national government assigns its constituents the responsibility to reduce GHG emissions to levels sufficient to achieve a national target that is a fair share of safe global emissions, the sub-national entities may argue that they have satisfied their duty to reduce GHG emissions. However, since nations also have a responsibility to allocate emissions to sub-national entities in conformity with principles of distributive justice, an ethical case can be made that sub-national entities should do more if they receive preferential allocations which are not fair to others.

Without doubt, in the absence of a national allocation, groups and individuals within nations have a duty to limit their GHG emissions to their fair share of safe global emissions despite legitimate differences about what fairness requires. Because principles of distributive justice require that differences in allocations from equal per capita shares to use the atmosphere be justified on the basis of morally relevant criteria, at a minimum, sub-national governments and groups should be required to explain how their emissions levels are just if they assert that they are already below what justice requires of them.

Although groups and individuals have respectable ethical arguments to make that they are complying with their ethical duties if they are meeting nationally imposed obligations, ethical arguments remain that they should do more if: (a) the national target does not move as quickly as possible to reduce the nation's emissions to its fair share of safe global emissions, or (b) the group or individual could do more to reduce GHG emissions without imposing great hardship on themselves because they are wasting GHG emitting energy on unnecessary activities.

There are several ethical arguments that can be made that those who have the ability to reduce the great suffering of others, have an obligation to do so even if they are complying with a target assigned to them by governments. One such argument for this conclusion is that what is often is described as charity is actually a matter of obligation to others in cases where the action of a collective is necessary to restore the basic conditions necessary for the enjoyment of rights. Climate change will put into jeopardy the very lives, health, and indispensable natural resources upon which lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world depend, threatening the poorest and most vulnerable people in particular. Climate change is a threat to things that are the material conditions for human life and it is interference with the dignity of human life that is usually the predicate for recognizing specifiable human rights. In fact, climate change is currently threatening the very existence of nations like the Maldives and Kiribati. Since we have no problem acknowledging an ethical obligation to avoid trampling the specifiable rights of others, we may easily extend this principle to the conditions underlying those rights to say that we have an ethical obligation to promote and preserve the unspecified conditions that ground specifiable rights. Like charity, these "imperfect obligations" constitute an unbounded ethical constraint to go beyond specified duties in order to prevent harm when possible. (O'Neill 1989, 224) In the case of national and sub-national emissions targets, this would entail voluntary emissions reductions beyond legal restrictions on occasions when legal frameworks prescribe goals inadequate for distributive and retributive justice criteria.

Regardless of the unbounded ethical duties derived from imperfect obligations, if the climate change causing activities of some people are violating the human rights of others by interfering with life, health, or basic security, among other things, protected by human rights, a case can be made that those who can make reductions in GHG emissions targets that are nevertheless interfering with the rights of others should take steps to prevent human rights violations even if they are complying with just allocations. (For a discussion of human rights and climate change, see "The Significance of Understanding Inadequate National Climate Change Programs as Human Rights Violations.") In other words, if climate change causing activities are violating the human rights of others, and if governments, businesses, and individuals have the power to restore these rights, they should act without regard to GHG targets and allocations.

By:

Donald A. Brown
Associate Professor, Environmental Ethics, Science, and Law
The Pennsylvania State University
Program on Science, Technology, and Society
dab57@psu.edu

[Greenhouse Gas Emissions.:](#) - Render o

[Sal Gore commented on Ethical Obligations of States, Regional and Local Governments, Organizations, Businesses, and Individuals to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions.:](#)
individual

[Ray commented on Ethical Obligations of States, Regional and Local Governments, Organizations, Businesses, and Individuals to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions.:](#) Hi, I just

Joshua Kurdys
 Graduate Student in Philosophy
 The Pennsylvania State University
jjk312@psu.edu

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Müller, Benito, Niklas Höhne, Christian Ellermann. "Differentiating (Historic), Responsibilities for Climate Change." Summary Report, October 2007, <http://www.oxfordclimatepolicy.org/publications/DifferentiatingResponsibility.pdf>

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8 COMMENTS

Ray | [November 23, 2009 5:16 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

Hi, I just thought you may offer insight on the ethics of climate scientists altering data to suit a political goal or the ethics of same scientists actively thwarting the publication of papers counter to their view of AWG.

Thoughts?

Sal Gore | [November 25, 2009 3:03 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

individuals are responsible for GHG emissions that have caused and will continue to cause harm to others,

That's funny. Anyway looks like a bad weak for global warming - I mean climate change - and social justice and distributive justice and all that. Too bad about Copenhagen and all those embarrassing emails

Magnificat Environment | [November 26, 2009 5:37 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

- Render our environment magnificent and viable.
- Promote environmental education and training programmes.
- Protection and management for the security of resources sustainable development,
- - Struggle against environmental poverty

Organise sensitisation campaigns by the population for the struggle against poverty, sanitation and health, deforestation, the protection of endangered species
 Develop a partnership between the basis, local authorities and international organisations

Dr. Shaju Thomas | [November 27, 2009 12:30 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

Dear Donald Brown and Joshua Kurdys,

It is interesting to read your write up on the ethics of climate change. You tried to analyze the different perspectives and ended up in arguing that climate change is a human rights issue and all stake holders must honour the rights of the people. It is fine. As the Copenhagen is nearing and countries try to push nationalists arguments on emission reduction, I appreciate your initiative in bring out the role of the subsets in ER.

I think it is high time we see the issue not only from an anthropocentric , but also from the biocentric perspective.

My congrats and best wishes,

Dr. Shaju Thomas

Reader and Head of the Department

Postgraduate Dept . of ZSoology

Nirmala College, Muvatuupuzha.

Kerala, India

Ziggy | [December 4, 2009 10:24 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

I'm all about reducing greenhouse gasses and the like, but yet we keep drilling for oil and not mandating our public transportation to become more fuel efficient!

[Genaro Girt](#) | February 6, 2010 1:22 AM | [Reply](#)

I discovered your blog on Yahoo. I will certainly be bookmarking this blog so I can stay updated on the latest developments.

[Quit Smoking](#)

[canlı dizi](#) | June 24, 2010 7:20 PM | [Reply](#)

I just want to ask you a 1 question , What is the distribution of gas emissions in the world ?
can u tell us

[Hpc Registered Podiatrist Hattersley](#) | June 30, 2010 5:45 AM | [Reply](#)

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