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Are Fossil Fuel Industry Commercials Encouraging Americans to Engage In Unethical Climate Change Causing Behavior?

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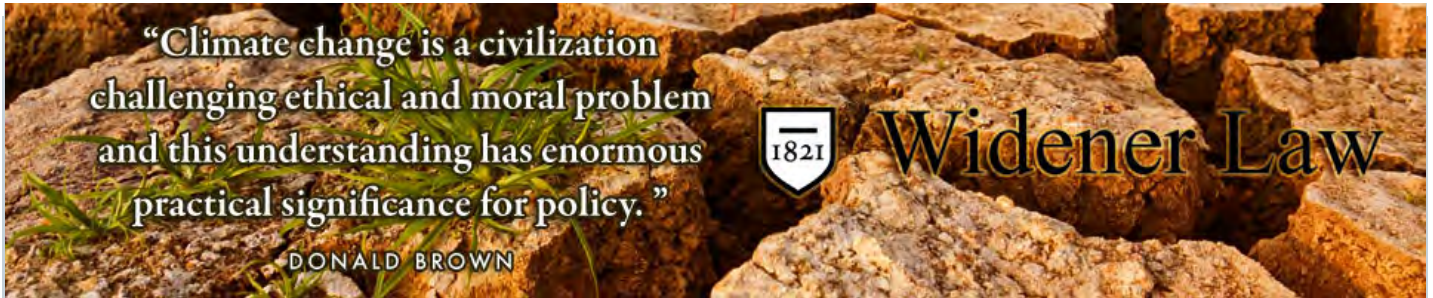
Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Brown, Donald
Publisher	Rock Ethics Institute
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-04 07:02:59
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/189210

Ethics and Climate

Donald Brown



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Are Fossil Fuel Industry Commercials Encouraging Americans to Engage In Unethical Climate Change Causing Behavior?

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I. Introduction

Are commercials currently being run in the United States paid for by the fossil fuel industry encouraging Americans to continue unjust and unethical behavior in regard to climate change? These commercials encourage Americans to organize politically against any legislation that would increase the cost of fossil fuel even though the US use of fossil fuel beyond its fair share of safe global emissions is already contributing to misery around the world and threatens many of the world's poorest people in the years ahead with catastrophic threats to human life and the resources on which life depends. ClimateEthics has written frequently about some obvious ethical problems with cost arguments often made by opponents of climate change policies. Among other problems with cost arguments are that they (a) don't acknowledge duties, obligations, and responsibilities to those most vulnerable to climate change impacts, (b) ignore obligations to prevent human rights violations, (c) wind up being used to give polluters permission to cause great harm to human health and the environment around the world, and, (d) often ignore the costs of doing nothing to reduce the threat of climate change. For instance, see: [Ethical Problems With Cost Arguments Against Climate Change Policies: The Failure To Recognize Duties To Non-citizens](#).

Despite the obvious ethical problems with these arguments that oppose climate change policies on the basis of increased cost to the United States alone, there is virtually no recognition of the ethical problems with these arguments by US politicians, the media, nor often even by environmental groups. This post explores this reality in regard to commercials currently being aired that have been paid for by the American Petroleum Institute (API).

To examine the strange anomaly of the failure to spot the obvious ethical problems raised by the type of cost arguments embedded in the API commercials, it is helpful to consider the following hypothetical:

If a Canadian manufacturer of garbage cans emitted toxic chemicals that migrated across the US border and killed Americans and harmed the environment and this company at the same time tried to convince Canadians that: (a) the chemicals were not toxic when there was strong scientific evidence that the chemicals would kill humans and harm the environment, and, (b) tried to convince Canadian citizens to oppose proposed Canadian government actions to prevent emissions

of the toxins only because of adverse impacts on the Canadian economy, Americans would likely easily see the Canadian company as unethical if not criminal.

Yet there is no evidence that Americans see the obvious ethical problems with very similar behavior of some fossil fuel companies in regard to climate change. That is some American fossil fuel companies have been supporting the dissemination of misleading information about whether climate change is a huge threat particularly to poor people around the world and we now know that climate change is already harshly affecting some of the worlds poorest people. Some of these companies are also fighting any US government policies that would lead to reduction in use of fossil fuels on the basis of increased costs to the United States alone without acknowledging that the United States has duties, responsibilities, and obligations to people who are at great risk from human-induced global warming. Yet there is virtually no discussion of the ethical problems with this behavior in the US press, among US politicians, or in any civil society debate about climate change.

A current example of a fossil fuel industry attempt to generate public opposition to climate change policies on the basis of cost to Americans alone is a commercial frequently currently being run by API in many US states. This commercial's goal is to defeat legislative proposals that would eliminate tax write-offs for the petroleum industry or impose new taxes on fossil fuel companies through a variety of mechanisms including cap and trade legislation.. The API commercial pictures ordinary working class people claiming that taxes on the petroleum industry will destroy jobs and ruin the economy. The commercial urges Americans to organize to defeat any legislation that would increase fossil fuel costs. Since most solutions to climate being seriously considered in the United States work by putting a cost on carbon, these commercials appear to be designed, at least in part, to generate political opposition to any climate change legislation.

(Although the fossil fuel industry is also opposed to the reduction of subsidies that will reduce oil company profits profits)

API is the key oil industry lobby organization in the United States, representing some 400 companies that cover the spectrum of the oil and gas industry, from the largest major to the smallest independent corporations. .

API has a long history of lobbying against climate change legislation For instance API was one of the major funding sources of the Global Climate Coalition along with ExxonMobil, Royal Dutch Shell, British Petroleum (now BP), Texaco, General Motors, Ford,

DaimlerChrysler, the Aluminum Association, the National Association of Manufactures, and others (Hoggan and Littlemore, 2010:13). The Global Climate Coalition was the major US industry group fighting against a global climate regime from the late 1980s to 2002. The Global Climate Coalition frequently opposed climate change policies on the basis of scientific uncertainty that human releases of greenhouse gases were threatening human flourishing and the environment and cost to the United States economy.

Last year, Green Peace asserted that they discovered a memo leaked from API that urged oil companies to encourage their employees to act in such a way that would give the impression that there was a spontaneous bottom-up citizen rebellion against climate change cap and trade legislation. (Green Peace, 2009) If the Green Peace claim is true, API engaged in activities designed to fool the media and US citizens that opposition to climate change legislation was being mounted by regular citizens voicing their spontaneous concerns rather than employees of petroleum companies that had been encouraged by their employers to make a ruckus at public meetings.

The API ads currently playing in many parts of the United States also attempt to make

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the case against taxes on the petroleum by showing opposition from what appear to be ordinary working Americans. The logic of the advertisement is it is not in the US interest to increase fossil fuel costs, and therefore Americans should act only in their self-interest and oppose any legislation that would increase fossil fuel costs, which means any solution to climate change under serious consideration.

II. Ethical Issues Raised By The API Commercials

To understand why these advertisements encourage unethical behavior, the following facts about climate change are relevant:

1. Climate change is a problem mostly caused by high-emitting countries that are putting some of the most vulnerable poorer people in poor countries at great risk of drought, flooding, rising seas, vector borne disease, damage from intense storms, and reduced agricultural productivity among other potential harms.
2. The potential climate change impacts on the world's poor are not just inconveniences but threats to life itself and the natural resources on which life depends.
3. As we have reported on ClimateEthics many times, for over thirty years, the major scientific institutions with expertise over climate change science including but not limited to the United States Academy of Sciences have been warning the world that climate change is a huge civilization challenging threat.
4. Largely because of the lobbying efforts of fossil fuel industry, the United States has taken no serious action to reduce the threat of climate change since the world's major scientific institutions have warned the world of the threat over thirty years ago and during this time the scientific basis for concern about climate change has become progressively stronger and the time to take necessary corrective actions to prevent catastrophic climate change increasingly shorter.
5. The longer the world waits to reduce the threat of climate change, the more expensive it will be to prevent harsh climate change impacts given that waiting makes the scale of reductions needed to prevent catastrophic warming steeper and deeper. Given this, if the United States would have taken action to reduce the threat of climate change several decades ago, the costs of reducing its emissions to its fair share of safe global emissions now would be much less.
6. Climate change is not only a great future threat but is already responsible for death and destruction around the world. A 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)
7. Many scientists believe that the world is running out of time to prevent catastrophic climate change and that drastic reductions are immediately needed to prevent very serious climate change impacts.
8. Because vulnerable people in poor countries are unable to partition their own governments to protect them against climate change because their domestic governments have no authority over high-emitting countries, only appeals to the high-emitting countries sense of fairness and justice have any hope of protecting the world's most vulnerable poor people.

Given all of this, the API commercials can be seen as encouraging highly unethical behavior by Americans because these commercials are a call for basing US energy policy on short-term economic self-interest and as such implicitly denying or ignoring that Americans have duties, responsibilities, and obligations to others to take action to reduce the threat of climate change. In other words, the API commercials appeal to American economic self-interest and thereby deny that Americans have ethical duties

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to others to refrain from emitting greenhouse gases above the US fair share of safe global emissions. These commercials clearly encourage US citizens to oppose climate change legislation if the legislation increases the costs of fossil fuel as a strategy to reduce energy demand or to make other non-fossil fuel energy sources more competitive with fossil fuel.

API and some fossil fuel companies have fought for over thirty years against US action to reduce the threat of climate change on the basis of cost to the US economy alone and scientific uncertainty about whether human actions were causing global warming.

Although, as ClimateEthics has frequently explained, there was more than enough non-contentious scientific evidence about the potential harm from human-induced climate change to create duties to act over thirty years ago, it is increasingly difficult to use scientific uncertainty as the basis for non-action on climate change. See, [Have We Been Asking the Wrong Questions About Climate Change Science? Why Strong Climate Change Ethical Duties Exist Before Scientific Uncertainties are Resolved.](#)

Given that now virtually every scientific organization with expertise in climate change science including the US Academy of Science has issued statements in support of the scientific consensus view articulated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and in light of the fact that every year the scientific evidence attributing warming to human activities has become stronger, it is not likely that the fossil fuel interests will be able to continue to argue against government action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on the basis of scientific uncertainty. And so, API and other fossil fuel industry arguments against climate change reduction policies based upon economic cost are likely to continue and perhaps increase.

ClimateEthics has published a series of posts that explain why these cost arguments are ethically bankrupt and will publish more in the near future. Yet API continues to push arguments against climate change policies based on cost to the United States alone despite obvious ethical problems with these arguments.

ClimateEthics agrees that the United States needs to find ways to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions at lowest cost but increased cost alone to the United States does not justify opposition to greenhouse gas reduction legislation because the United States must set climate change policies not only on the basis of self-interest but also in light of its ethical obligations to prevent harm it is doing millions of poor people around the world who are vulnerable to climate change.

By:

Donald A. Brown
Associate Professor, Environmental Ethics, Science, and Law
Penn State University
Dab57@psu.edu

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