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Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Brown, Donald A.
Publisher	Rock Ethics Institute, The Pennsylvania State University
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-08 23:24:37
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Climate Ethics

Ethical Analysis of Climate Science and Policy

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Twenty Ethical Questions that the US Press Should Ask Opponents of Climate Change Policies.

By DONALD A BROWN on February 25, 2010 1:50 AM | 19 Comments | 1 TrackBack

I. Introduction

This post identifies twenty questions that the US press has failed to ask opponents of proposed US climate change policies that should be asked if climate change raises civilization challenging ethical issues.

To understand why these questions should be asked, it is first necessary to review the kinds of arguments that have usually been made in opposition to US climate change policies, programs, and legislation and why these arguments fail to deal with the profound ethical questions raised by the threat of human induced climate change.

Since international climate change negotiations began in 1990, the United States has yet to adopt meaningful greenhouse gas emissions reduction legislation. For almost 20 years arguments against US climate change legislation or US participation in a global solution to climate change have been made that have almost always been of two types.

By far the most frequent arguments made in opposition to climate change policies are economic predictions of various kinds such as claims that proposed climate change legislation will destroy jobs, reduce GDP, damage US businesses such as the coal and petroleum industries, or increase the cost of fuel. A variation of this argument is that the United States should not adopt policies on climate change until other nations such as China take steps to reduce their emissions because if the United States acts and other nations don't reciprocate this will harm the US economy.

The second most frequent argument made by opponents of climate change policies are assertions that governments should not take action on climate change because adverse impacts have not been sufficiently scientifically proven. These arguments range from assertions that what is usually called the "main-stream" scientific climate change view is a complete hoax to the milder assertions that the harsh climate change impacts on human health and the environment predicted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and other climate change researchers are unproven.

Both the economic and scientific arguments against climate change policies implicitly argue that climate change policies should be opposed because they are not in the US national interest.

The responses of advocates of US climate change policies to these arguments are almost always to take issue with the factual economic and scientific conclusions of these arguments by making counter economic and scientific claims. For instance, in response to economic arguments opposing climate change legislation, proponents of climate change action usually argue that climate change policies will create jobs or are necessary to develop new energy technologies that are vital to the health of the US economy in the future. In responses to the lack of scientific proof arguments, climate change advocates usually stress the harsh environmental impacts to people and ecosystems that climate change will cause if action is not taken or argue that climate change science is settled. In other words, advocates of climate change action, respond to claims of opponents to climate change programs by denying the factual claims of the opponents.

By simply opposing the factual claims of the opponents of climate change, the advocates of climate change policies are implicitly agreeing with the assumptions of the opponents of climate change action that greenhouse reduction policies should not be adopted if they are not in national self-interest.

Yet, climate change is a problem that clearly creates civilization challenging ethical issues. By ethics is meant the domain of inquiry that examines claims that given certain facts, actions are right or wrong, obligatory or non-obligatory, or when responsibilities attach to human activities.

If nations or individuals have ethical obligations, they are likely to have duties, responsibilities, and obligations that require them to go beyond consideration of self-interest alone in making decisions. And so, if climate change raises ethical considerations, governments may not base



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policy decisions on self-interest alone.

Given this, one might ask what aspects of climate change raise ethical questions. In fact there are several distinct features of climate change call for its recognition as creating civilization challenging ethical questions.

First, climate change creates duties because those most responsible for causing this problem are the richer developed countries, yet those who are most vulnerable to the problem's harshest impacts are some of the world's poorest people in developing countries. That is, climate change is an ethical problem because its biggest victims are people who can do little to reduce its threat.

Second, climate-change impacts are potentially catastrophic for many of the poorest people around the world. Climate change harms include deaths from disease, droughts, floods, heat, and intense storms, damages to homes and villages from rising oceans, adverse impacts on agriculture, diminishing natural resources, the inability to rely upon traditional sources of food, and the destruction of water supplies. In fact, climate change threatens the very existence of some small island nations. Clearly these impacts are potentially catastrophic.

The third reason why climate change is an ethical problem stems from its global scope. At the local, regional or national scale, citizens can petition their governments to protect them from serious harms. But at the global level, no government exists whose jurisdiction matches the scale of climate change. And so, although national, regional and local governments have the ability and responsibility to protect citizens within their borders, they have no responsibility to foreigners in the absence of international law. For this reason, ethical appeals are necessary to motivate governments to take steps to prevent their citizens from seriously harming foreigners.

And so if climate change raises civilization challenging ethical questions which imply duties, responsibilities, and obligations what questions should the press ask opponents of climate change policies when they make economic and scientific arguments against climate change policies?

II. Ethical Questions That Should Be Asked

Given that climate change must be understood to raise ethical questions, the press should ask opponents of climate change policies the following questions:

1. You argue that climate change policies should not be adopted because there will be adverse economic impacts on US jobs or the economy, given that greenhouse gas emissions from the United States are threatening others outside the United States do you deny that the United States has duties, responsibilities, and obligations to others to stop emissions potentially harmful to others?
2. Do you deny that the United States has duties, responsibilities, and obligations to others to limit US greenhouse gas emissions to the US's fair share of safe global emissions?
3. If you agree that the United States has duties, responsibilities and obligations to others to limit its greenhouse gas emissions why should the acceptability of US climate change policy turn on whether climate change policies will create adverse economic impacts to the United States alone?
4. If you argue that the United States should not adopt climate change policies on the basis that economic competitors such as China have not adopted climate change policies, are you claiming that no nation has a duty to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to its fair share of safe global emissions until all other nations reduce their greenhouse gas emissions accordingly?
5. If you argue that the United States should not adopt climate change policies on the basis that economic competitors such as China have not adopted climate change reduction policies, do you agree that economic competitors such as China have no duty to reduce their emissions until the United States does so?
6. Do you deny that those nations who are mostly responsible for global climate change emissions have stronger duties to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions than those nations that are emitting greenhouse gases at much lower levels?
7. Do you agree that no national strategy on climate change makes sense unless it is seen to be implicitly a position on what atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases should be acceptable given that some poorer nations are more vulnerable to climate change than others and nations must work together to assure that atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases don't rise to levels that are very dangerous to the most vulnerable?
8. What is the US's fair share of safe global greenhouse gas emissions and on what principles of equity do you rely on for determining the US's fair share?
9. Should those nations who have refused to commit to reduce climate change emissions on the basis of cost to them be liable to others for the harms caused by the delay if very harsh climate change impacts are eventually experienced by others?
10. When you argue that the United States should not adopt climate change policies because adverse climate change impacts have not yet been proven, are you claiming that climate change skeptics have proven that human-induced climate change will not create adverse impacts on the human health, resource base, and ecological systems of others and if so what is that proof ?
11. When you argue that the United States should not adopt climate change policies because

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there is scientific uncertainty about adverse climate change impacts, are you arguing that no action of climate change should be taken until scientific uncertainties are resolved given that waiting to resolve all scientific uncertainties before action is taken may make it too late to prevent human-induced climate change harms?

12. Do you deny that those who argue that they should be allowed to continue to emit greenhouse gases at levels that may be dangerous should assume the burden of proof that their actions are safe?

13. Do you deny that those who are most vulnerable to climate change's harshest potential impacts have a right to participate in a decision about whether to act to reduce the threat of climate change in the face of scientific uncertainty?

14. Given that in ratifying the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change the United States in 1992 agreed to the following under Article 3, do you believe the United States is now free to ignore this promise by refusing to action on climate change on the basis of scientific uncertainty?

The Parties should take precautionary measures to anticipate, prevent or minimize the causes of climate change and mitigate its adverse effects. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing such measures, taking into account that policies and measures to deal with climate change should be cost-effective so as to ensure global benefits at the lowest possible cost.

15. If you argue that if the climate change impacts predicted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have not reached a level of scientific certainty that warrants action, do you agree that climate change impacts predicted by IPCC could be wrong in both directions leading to even harsher adverse impacts than those predicted?

16. If you acknowledge that human-induced climate change impacts could be harsher than those predicted by IPCC, do you deny that this possibility has ethical significance including the creation of duties for high emitters to cease dangerous emissions levels.

17. Given that it has been almost two decades that the United States has refused to commit to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions based upon the justification that there is too much scientific uncertainty to warrant action, if it turns out that human-induced climate change actually greatly harms others human health and the environment should the United States be responsible for the harms that could have been avoided if preventative action had been taken earlier?

18. Because climate change is a global problem, does any one nation have the right by itself to refuse to reduce the climate change threat based upon scientific uncertainty without giving those most vulnerable to climate change impacts the right to consent to be put at risk?

19. Because the longer the developed countries including the United States wait to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions on the basis of scientific uncertainty the steeper the cuts will be needed to avoid dangerous climate change if the mainstream climate change science view proves to be correct, should the United States be expected to agree that it will be financially responsible for unavoidable climate change damages created by the delay if predicted climate change impacts are experienced?

20. Because one the possibilities recognized by mainstream climate change science is that the Earth could experience rapid non-linear climate change impacts which outstrip the ability of some people and nations to adapt, should this fact affect who should have the burden of proof of determining whether climate change is safe or dangerous?

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Categories: Allocation Issues, Atmospheric Targets, Distributive and International Justice, Economics and Cost, General Climate Ethics, Independent Responsibility to Act, Media Coverage of Climate Change, Procedural Justice and Fair Process, Scientific Uncertainty and Risk

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1 TRACKBACK

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from A climate ethicist on climate economics « Public Goods: The economics of climate, equity and shared prosperity on March 1, 2010 9:01 PM

TITLE: URL: <http://lizstanton.wordpress.com/2010/03/01/a-climate-ethicist-on-climate-economics/>

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19 COMMENTS

Ronnie Hawkins | [February 25, 2010 12:58 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

I think anthropogenic climate change raises ontological issues that are prior to the ethical ones that are posed here. Since our planet's climate system is a global commons, we need to inquire just what sorts of entities are "threatened" by it. Nation-states and corporations are not biological individuals--they "exist" only as legal fictions. They do not have real, functional parameters (such as temperature and precipitation) that must be maintained for their survival, because, while that "survival" is utterly dependent on the continuation of biospherical life, i.e., the living human beings who conceptually constitute them, the necessities for sustaining that life are for some reason completely taken for granted within the frame of our present socially constructed "reality," as is the ontological objectivity (mistakenly) of these conceptual entities. A more solid ethical approach, I think, will "see through" our social subgroupings and their constructs to take a more cosmopolitan point of view--our species makes it through this self-induced ecological crisis, or it does not.

Valikor | [February 25, 2010 3:15 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

A most intelligent way to engage climate sceptics.

westwood | [March 1, 2010 5:29 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

Intelligent, yes. Well-considered, yes. Practical? No. The position opposing action is, by and large, not a rational one. As a result, logic is unlikely to sway them.

Nelson T. Enojo | [March 1, 2010 8:04 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

Good morning,

Japan continues to "bombard" us with hungry diesel engines to run our economy. China continues to "dumped" plastic appliances we consider luxury. One of our presidentiables is swimming in the pasig river of garbage because The United States is telling us not to burn trash. We have to buy the technology from them fit to dispose of our garbage. How can we encourage tourism when our streets is littered with garbage. Just like bundles of joy hanging everywhere.

This will only make us even poorer making the unborn generation pay the debt and discourage further tourism. A supposed to be "booming" industry.

I burn plastic trash after sorting the biodegradable in one school in the neighborhood. Toxin, if there is such emission is captured by the vegetation around and we also have plenty of tree seedlings for sequestration. Above all, it keeps us away from dangerous mosquitoes while cooking our food.

Thank you. And More Power to us All.

Bholenath Vishwakarma | [March 1, 2010 9:08 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

It surprising that while american public raises so much hackle on the ethical issue of treatment of suspected terrorist and many other smaller aspects of their social life, they have not raised enough voice in 20 years to make their government do something about climate change.

Does this imply that they some how know that since they are used to energy guzzling lifestyle they are afraid of looking at it let lone giving a thought to it or going for a constructive action.

The ethical angle is very much valid in the context of modern globalized society because to deal with climate change since it was the same ethical responsibility that made Americans join the war against Hitler where they had no business to be let alone it being profitable!

I fully agree with above argument and would not like to get on the ontological debate. Even if we go with the angle proposed here by Ronnie Hawkins and say that the earths resource is a 'commons' available to everyone and its usage for survival by any living entity on this planet is taken for granted, we can not claim to be at the level on non thinking primates to just look after our own survival and let nature take care of the consequences of our action.

I wish there was even a debate on world stage among the leaders of G7, G20 or all countries to see on what arguments they take or resist from action.

Sam Mwangi | [March 2, 2010 2:12 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

Issues of distributive and environmental justice aside, there are grave doubts that a firm commitment would be obtained by posing these questions, or any other, to US lawmakers opposing action on climate change. The entire concept can be summarised in a simplistic way: have your cake, and eat it too.

Living in a least developed economy, watching millions suffering from climatical vagaries and

political (mis)governance, caught up in disasters that kill thousands, listening to this or that expert expound on increased disease incidence and degradation of the commons, listening daily to woeful tales of extreme impoverishment from previously stable communities, forgive us when we view with derision actions that serve only one purpose: add to the amount of words in the air (or printed and often 'quotable' texts). Africa sits and waits for governments to take action, governments wait for 'resources' and goodwill from Big Brother (and organisations directed by Uncle Sam) to initiate action in mitigation and building resilience, but the discussion is.... in boardrooms? Steps of various Capitols? Congress? White House lawn? Senate hearings? University labs?

As Ronnie Hawkins summarises above, "our species makes it through this self-induced ecological crisis, or it does not". Many, sadly, of our species are not making it through. But we have to keep talking, don't we?

Ricardo Coelho | March 2, 2010 7:09 AM | Reply

These are valid questions. I wonder why there are so few academics studying these issues. BTW, I've added this blog to my links list.

Anuradha Vittachi | March 2, 2010 10:25 AM | Reply

Thanks for a very clearly laid out argument. I will pass it on to the editor of OneClimate.net.

Michael Hutchinson | March 3, 2010 6:13 AM | Reply

Your question 8 is key. The most rational proposal in play, and one that is gaining support following the disarray of Copenhagen, is the Contraction & Convergence model which has been consistently put forward by the Global Commons Institute since 1996. This divides the finite future global carbon budget on the basis of equal per capita entitlements and creates a parallel trade in unused entitlements which carbon-frugal nations can sell to carbon-profligate nations that can't keep their emissions within the declining national quotas they would receive during C&C's 'contraction period'. Like the formula of truth and reconciliation that ended apartheid in South Africa without provoking civil war, C&C is a formula for 'climate justice without vengeance' (i.e. unlike Greenhouse DEvelopment Rights and other spin offs of C&C which seem more concerned about being seen to be equitable than cutting global carbon emissions) it does not require industrialised countries to go to negative carbon entitlements so that developing countries can have their turn at being carbon greedy. It is no coincidence that Aubrey Meyer, who founded the Global Commons Institute in 1991 grew up in South Africa and spent fifteen years as a composer and professional musician before turning his attention to the challenge of global warming. The acutely time dependent and proportionate logic of music that underpins C&C makes it an overarching rationale for cutting and sharing future carbon emissions which is mathematically, scientifically and ethically sound. C&C is backed by Rajendra Pachauri, Ross Garnaut, The Global Humanitarian Forum, The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, The Institute of Physics, The Royal Institute of British Architects, The Lancet/UCL Commission on Climate Change and The (UK) All Party Parliamentary Climate Change Group. However it has no institutional support or funding and remains sidelined by the governments and NGOs that backed the Kyoto Protocol. It therefore needs advocacy from academics and in fora such as this. For more info see www.gci.org.uk
www.gci.org.uk/Animations/BENN_C&C_Animation.exe
www.tangentfilms.com/C&C29sept.pdf

Robert OSullivan | March 4, 2010 8:40 AM | Reply

Thank you for the interesting and thought provoking article. If only more debate around climate change was a little more thought out! In the interest of providing some (hopefully) constructive criticism, I have jotted down a few comments:

Attacking the underlying assumptions of the skeptics does not imply implicit acceptance of their conclusion that one should not act contrary ones self interest. It simply means the responses don't go that far! I would also argue that simply trying to argue we respond to the skeptics claims by arguing there are ethical duties to act beyond one's self interest is also not rhetorically compelling - from the skeptic's perspective this makes no sense if they don't believe in climate change in the first place! Many of the questions lose meaning if the reply is a simple "climate change is a hoax anyway". I would argue that the most robust response to the skeptics is to challenge both the basis of their claims (their doubts over the science + the economic impact) plus the do nothing conclusions they draw from this. You do achieve that in some of your questions (e.g. 10, 11) which is good.

There is a gap in logic between the claim that ethical considerations will (necessarily) imply considerations that go beyond simple self interest. Indeed, it is entirely plausible to propose that anything that is not in ones self interest is unethical.

The question of acting beyond ones self interest does cut to a very relevant point though in climate politics - whether or not one should act counter to selfish interests explains some of the underlying political polarization of climate change politics. A stereotypical liberal political viewpoint includes consideration for others and a degree of empathy for the less fortunate and

needy within society. A stereotypical conservative viewpoint on the other hand emphasizes individualism and individual freedom to do as they choose (within certain topics, which I will get to below) – opposition to government health care and gun rights are good examples. Given climate change necessarily effects others and action to mitigate it is in the interest of the collective whole at the expense of personal “freedoms”, arguing that people should act beyond their own self interest goes against the heart of conservative ideology. This is, however, not absolute – conservatives are more than happy to jump up and down over what they see as the immoral behavior of others – homosexuality and abortion are the two obvious examples. There are a number of examples of the inconsistency of conservative logic. Some examples (i) there is clear uncertainty over whether or not gay marriage harms the concept of “family” or the “institution of marriage”, yet conservatives will happily scream and shout for the restriction of gay rights; (ii) there is debate over when “life” starts yet conservatives want to ban abortion; (iii) there was uncertainty over whether or not Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, yet conservatives wanted to take pre-emptive action to prevent this uncertain harm. In all these cases the conservative ideology calls for restricting an action that has uncertain harm that implicitly acknowledges principles of a precautionary approach. In climate change on the other hand, the opposite seems to be the rhetorical modus operandi – because they claim uncertainty, do nothing!

All of this aside, I do like most of the questions.

Question 12 is particularly intriguing and also reflects some of the political differences around the world. For example, the US approach to regulation of chemicals is based on the approach you implicitly state is inappropriate - in the US companies are free to produce and use chemicals unless the EPA finds them harmful. This is different to the approach in Europe (which you imply is more appropriate) - a new chemical needs to be proven to be safe before it is widely used. I agree with the latter precautionary approach - but we clearly have an uphill battle to get this across in the US in CC and other areas!

Good luck. Most of the time I find that arguing with the skeptics is like trying to argue with a brick wall.

[Gary Herstein](#) | [March 5, 2010 12:56 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

"I think anthropogenic climate change raises ontological issues that are prior to the ethical ones that are posed here."

At the very least, I am inclined to resist the way in which that statement is phrased. There appears, at least, to be a presupposition that ontological questions can be prior to ethical ones. I am myself strongly influenced by the American Personalist movement that claims such luminaries as Josiah Royce, Edgar Sheffield Brightman, and Martin Luther King. Along this line of thought, ethics *IS* First Philosophy, and ontology is only uncoverable after first revealing value.

This is obviously a fairly abstract cavil.

[Kalibrasyon](#) | [June 23, 2010 9:11 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

I think anthropogenic climate change raises ontological issues that are prior to the ethical ones that are posed here."

 [DONALD A BROWN](#) replied to [comment from Kalibrasyon](#) | [June 25, 2010 11:15 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

I would be interested in an explanation of your claim that ontological questions are prior. Even if this is true, I am not sure this changes the ethical critique of arguments being made about climate change policies.

[Pmashoes](#) | [July 4, 2010 11:42 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

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[Pmashoes](#) | [July 5, 2010 3:10 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

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[medikal kalibrasyon](#) | [July 10, 2010 10:51 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

thank you ...

[传奇私服](#) | [July 14, 2010 2:45 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

Hi Webmaster, commenters and everybody else !!! The blog was absolutely fantastic! Lots of great information and inspiration, both of which we all need!Keep 'em coming... you all do such a great job at such Concepts... can't tell you how much I, for one appreciate all you do!

biyomedikal kalibrasyon | July 17, 2010 1:06 PM | Reply

thanks

Sanal Şirket | August 3, 2010 2:11 PM | Reply

Published because of the useful information I know, thank you. You have given us your valuable comments I wish you continued thanks to informative content

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