

CLIMATE ETHICS AND JUSTICE

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Abstract

Ethics are important because it is a philosophical technique that can help society take a step back and have a broader view of what the causes and consequences of climate change are, and how to react and act accordingly. As an illustration, climate change is viewed as the greatest threat to national development especially for small island developing states. Climate change is the most significant moral and environmental issue of our time. The collapse of the 2009 Copenhagen negotiations lead many to question whether the international community really had a moral compass to follow, beyond shallow declaratory statements and ambiguous phrases. The critical 2015 Paris negotiations will again put the actions and inactions of states squarely before the world's peoples.

Introduction

Ethics is a particularly relevant if underreported topic of conversation at the United Nations conference on climate change in Paris. While technical disputes grab the lion's share of attention, we should not forget the moral reasons we must address global warming – because of the substantial harm it does and will do to the human and nonhuman world. Climate justice refers to the disproportional impact of climate change on poor and marginalized populations, while climate equity refers to who should bear the burden of responsibility for addressing climate change. These twin concerns have both intranational and international dimensions. Climate change will negatively and disproportionately impact poor and marginalized people *within* national borders as well as cause

conflicts *between* nations, regions and cities that are more or less vulnerable to climate disruptions.

Climate Ethics and Justice

Climate ethics is an area of research that focuses on the ethical dimensions of climate change (also known as global warming), and concepts such as climate justice. Human-induced climate change raises many profound ethical questions, yet many believe that these ethical issues have not been addressed adequately in climate change policy debates or in the scientific and economic literature on climate change; and that, consequently, ethical questions are being overlooked or obscured in climate negotiations, policies and discussions . It has been pointed out that those most responsible for climate change are not the same people as those most vulnerable to its effects.

Climate justice is a term used for framing global warming as an ethical and political issue, rather than one that is purely environmental or physical in nature. This is done by relating the effects of climate change to concepts of justice, particularly environmental justice and social justice and by examining issues such as equality, human rights, collective rights, and the historical responsibilities for climate change. A fundamental proposition of climate justice is that those who are least responsible for climate change suffer its gravest consequences.

The ability of populations to mitigate and adapt to the negative consequences of climate change are shaped by factors such as income, race, class, gender, capital and political representation. As low-income communities and communities of color possess few if any adaptive resources, they are particularly vulnerable to climate change. People living in poverty or in precarious circumstances tend to have neither the resources nor the insurance coverage necessary to recover from environmental disasters. On top of that, such populations often receive an unequal share of disaster relief and recovery assistance. Additionally, they generally have less say and involvement in decision-making, political, and legal processes that relate to climate change and the natural environment.

Disproportionate Impact

Disadvantaged groups will continue to be disproportionately impacted as climate change persists. These groups will be affected due to inequalities that are based on demographic characteristics such as differences in gender, race, ethnicity, age, and income. Inequality increases the exposure of disadvantaged groups to the harmful effects of climate change while also increasing their susceptibility to destruction caused by climate change. A problem with destruction is that disadvantaged groups are the last to receive emergency relief and are rarely included in the planning process at local, national and international levels for coping with the impacts of climate change.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fourth National Climate Assessment Report found that low-income individuals and communities are more exposed to environmental hazards and pollution. One problem with this disproportionate impact is that it takes longer for low-income communities to rebuild after natural disasters. Low-income groups will be affected by increased warming due to climate change because wealth will be a factor in determining one's ability to cope with warmer temperatures. This means that individuals with more money could afford resources that will help adapt or cope with increased warming while individuals of lower income may not be able to afford the same resources. Low-income communities also have access to less information which makes it harder to be able to prepare for the impacts of climate change.

Communities of color, women, indigenous groups, and people of low-income all face an increased vulnerability to climate change. These groups will be disproportionately impacted due to heat waves, air quality, and extreme weather events. It has been found that there are more U.S. racial and ethnic minorities that live in low-lying areas than Whites which shows a disproportionate impact since these areas are more susceptible to flooding. Women are also disadvantaged and will be affected by climate change differently than men. This will impact the ability of minority groups to adapt unless there is progress made so that these groups have more access to universal resources. Indigenous groups are affected by the consequences of climate change even though they historically

have contributed the least. In addition, indigenous peoples are disproportionately impacted due to their income and continue to have fewer resources to cope with climate change.

One way to mitigate the disproportionate impact of climate change to achieve climate justice is to involve disadvantaged groups in the planning and policymaking process so that these individuals have a say in their own futures. This would also help minority groups achieve more access to resources to adapt and plan for a changing climate. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Environmental and Climate Justice Program was also created to support community leadership in addressing the disproportionate impact of communities of color and low income.

Developed countries, as the main cause of climate change, in assuming their historical responsibility, must recognize and honor their climate debt in all of its dimensions as the basis for a just, effective, and scientific solution to climate change. (...) The focus must not be only on financial compensation, but also on restorative justice, understood as the restitution of integrity to our Mother Earth and all its beings.

The second challenge is that current emissions have profoundly intergenerational effects. Emissions of the most prominent greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, typically persist in the atmosphere for a long time, contributing to negative climate impacts for centuries, or even millennia (IPCC 2007). This too seems unfair, especially if future negative impacts are severe and cumulative. In addition, the temporal diffusion of climate change gives rise to an ethical collective action problem that is even more challenging than the traditional tragedy of the commons both in its shape and because normal kinds of cooperation do not seem to be possible across generations.

The third challenge to ethical action is that our theoretical tools are underdeveloped in many of the relevant areas, such as international justice, intergenerational ethics, scientific uncertainty, and the appropriate relationship between humans and the rest of nature (e.g., Jamieson 1992). For example, climate change raises questions about the (moral) value of nonhuman nature, such as whether we have obligations to protect

nonhuman animals, unique places, or nature as a whole, and what form such obligations take if we do (see, e.g., Jamieson 2003, Palmer 2011). In addition, the presence of scientific uncertainty and the potential for catastrophic outcomes put internal pressure on the standard economic approach to environmental problems (e.g., Sagoff 2007, Stern 2007, Gardiner 2011a), and play a role in arguments for a precautionary approach in environmental law and policy that some see as an alternative (see, e.g., Sunstein 2005, Whiteside 2006).

The global and intergenerational dimensions of the perfect moral storm provide serious temptations for those in the current generation who contribute heavily to climate change to pass most of the burden of their activities on to people in other parts of the world and the future in unfair ways. In particular, the complexity of the ethical and scientific terrain may make us susceptible to arguments for inaction (or inappropriate action) that shroud themselves in moral language but which are actually weak and self-deceptive. Unfortunately, there is some evidence for this in the ongoing political inertia in developing a robust global regime. This suggests the need for work in moral and political philosophy that exposes inadequate rationales and articulates compelling reasons as to how and why we should address climate change. Such work can help preserve and extend the limited progress currently being made and reinforce arguments against those who have failed to deliver on their promises to reduce emissions and contribute to adaptation funds (e.g., Brown 2002).

Principles for Just Climate Change

The Environmental Justice movement has demonstrated that pollution's effects often fall disproportionately on the health of people of color, Indigenous Peoples, and low-income communities. The effects of global climate change, which is caused in large part by fossil fuel emissions, are no exception. Climate change, in fact, could have broader and more severe impacts. For example, people of color, Indigenous Peoples, and low-income communities are the first to experience negative climate change impacts like heat death and illness, respiratory illness, infectious disease, and economic and cultural displacement. Climate policy must protect our most vulnerable communities. The

principles for just climate change policies that will ensure the protection of our livelihoods:

- **Stop Cooking the Planet** : Global climate change will accelerate unless we can slow the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. To protect vulnerable Americans, we must find alternatives for those human activities that cause global climate change.
- **Protect and Empower Vulnerable Individuals and Communities** : Low-income workers, people of color, and Indigenous Peoples will suffer the most from climate change's impact. We need to provide opportunities to adapt and thrive in a changing world.
- **Ensure Just Transition for Workers and Communities** : No group should have to shoulder alone the burdens caused by the transition from a fossil fuel-based economy to a renewable energy-based economy. A just transition would create opportunities for displaced workers and communities to participate in the new economic order through compensation for job loss, loss of tax base, and other negative effects.
- **Require Community Participation** : At all levels and in all realms, people must have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Decision makers must include communities in the policy process. The Central and State governments, recognizing their government-to-government relationship, must work with tribes as well.
- **Global Problems Need Global Solutions** : The causes and effects of climate change occur around the world. Individuals, communities, and nations must work together cooperatively to stop global climate change.
- **Stop Exploration for Fossil Fuels** : Presently known fossil fuel reserves will last far into the future. Fossil fuel exploration destroys unique cultures and valuable ecosystems. Exploration should be halted as it is no longer worth the cost. We should instead invest in renewable energy sources.
- **Monitor Domestic and International Carbon Markets** : We must ensure that carbon emissions and sinks markets are transparent and accountable, do not concentrate pollution in vulnerable communities, and avoid activities that harm the environment.

- **Caution in the Face of Uncertainty** : No amount of action later can make up for lack of action today. Just as we buy insurance to protect against uncertain danger, we must take precautionary measures to minimize harm to the global climate before it occurs.
- **Protect Future Generations** : The greatest impacts of climate change will come in the future. We should take into account the impacts on future generations in deciding policy today. Our children should have the opportunity for success through the sustainable use of resources.

Individual Responsibility

Thus far the discussion has focused on how climate change should be addressed from a collective perspective, but what, if any, responsibilities do individuals have with respect to climate change? At one extreme, some argue that the responsibilities of individuals are primarily political, and that they have little or no obligation to change their consumption or lifestyle choices (Sinnott-Armstrong 2005); at the other, some maintain that individuals ought take responsibility for their personal choices and develop a set of "green virtues" that are not contingent on how others respond (Jamieson 2007). Part of the problem that this debate wrestles with is that one person's emissions seem very small in comparison with the global total, and as such unlikely to harm anyone considered in isolation. However, recently, this assumption has been challenged by an argument that claims that, on average and over the course of a lifetime, the emissions of a single typical American are significant enough to contribute to the severe suffering and/or deaths of two future people (Nolt 2011). The theoretical debate about individual responsibility is in its infancy, but is likely to heat up as more philosophers devote attention to this issue.

Conclusion

Climate change involves serious ethical issues, especially in its global, intergenerational, and ecological dimensions. Despite challenges owing to underdeveloped theories and pragmatic issues, there is an important initial consensus concerning the need for, and the overall shape of, serious action and the relevance of key ethical concerns, such as fairness and responsibility. Climate ethics is an emerging field that has much to offer, but within which much more work remains to be done.

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