

# Climate change and moral outrage

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## *Abstract*

*State governments have done little or nothing about climate change, and individuals have done little or nothing about their own carbon footprints. Perhaps both parties would do something if the moral demand for action were clear. This paper presents two arguments for the necessity of meaningful state action on climate change. The arguments depend on certain clear facts about emissions as well as two uncontroversial moral principles — one owed to Peter Singer and the other connecting capacities with the demand for action. Arguments are presented for individual action based on a similar set of facts and the consistent application of principles which apply in state cases. The arguments put consistency, not consequences, at the heart of the call for individual action. This is a strategy which might help individuals recognize their obligations to the environment.*

## Climate change and moral outrage

By many accounts, the decisions made by our generation will have profound consequences for the future of our planet and those who come after us.<sup>2</sup> Yet we have done and continue to do little or nothing about our changing climate. The ray of light in all of this has a great deal to do with the moral dimension of climate change. Human beings sometimes change course when they see that what they are doing is unbearably wrong. The ethics of climate change can push us in exactly the right direction.

However, reflection on the ethics of climate change can get us into trouble too. It can get us into philosophical trouble, because it is easy to make mistakes when thinking about rights and wrongs on a planetary scale. Morality, whatever it is, seems to waver out of focus when applied to the big picture. It does not like that sort of thing and feels more comfortable in homey contexts, probably because it grew up in small towns and copes best with little wrongs.

If we catch someone red-handed, right there in front of us, shop-lifting a bottle of tequila, it is easy to come to the conclusion that what is going on is wrong. With climate change, though, causes and effects are spread out in space and time (Gardiner, 2006). Actions set in motion in one hemisphere have effects on the other side of the world. The way the land is used here affects flooding over there. The

fuel burned over there changes the El Niño a little, which causes a drought somewhere else. Causes and effects are smeared out in time as well. It takes a while for our actions to translate into noticeable effects on the climate. We are feeling the effects of decisions taken more than a century ago, and what we do now will have effects long after our deaths.

Worse than this, from the point of view of coming to grips with the moral dimension of climate change, agency itself is spread out over time and space. There is a sense in which my actions and the actions of my present fellows join with the past actions of my parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, and the effects resulting from all of our choices will still be felt hundreds, even thousands of years in the future. Seeing rights and wrongs in this mess is not easy. It makes one long for shoplifted bottles of tequila.

Suppose that a billion little causes, rippling out into a trillion little effects criss-crossing over many years and all over the planet, conspire through a complex causal chain to raise the sea-level in 2111, inundating a coastal village in China, ruining crops and destroying potable water, resulting in the loss of many lives. Probably we can tell that there is harm in there, but whose fault is it? Whose responsibility is it? Who should have done otherwise? Can we really say, with a straight face, that we did it, in our microscopic share of those trillion criss-crossing effects? Can one really see oneself as hooked up to the environment in such a way that one's teeny contribution to this slow-motion, distant disaster constitutes a genuine wrong? Maybe this is exactly what we have to do, if we are to take action on climate change.

Reflection on the ethics of climate change, even on a smaller scale, can get us into other sorts of trouble too. Primarily, it annoys other people. Not only can it end up sounding like moralizing, rather than moral philosophy, but it gets us where we live. It issues in the conclusion that our comfy lives of high-energy consumption have to change, that we in the developed world should make serious sacrifices for other people. Arriving at this conclusion is not very difficult, but seeing it clearly and acting on it certainly is. What gets in the way, partly, are certain consequentialist worries, particularly problems associated with seeing our small role in the temporally and spatially and causally spread-out confusion that is the problem of climate change. The aim of this paper is to get past those worries or at least head in the right direction. We will start by homing in on the West's moral failings in this connection.

### A lack of moral rectitude

Many people believe that the developed world's failure to take action on climate change amounts to a moral wrong, perhaps an enormous moral wrong. (e.g. Brown, 2002; Gardiner, 2004; Garvey, 2008a; Grubb, 1995; Jamieson, 2001; and Singer, 2004). The right spokespeople for this view might really be those presently on the receiving end of some of the worst effects of climate change. Antigua and Barbuda is one of the small island states, like Tuvalu and the Carteret Islands, whose existence is threatened by the predicted rise in sea levels owed to climate change. Its ambassador to the United States, Lionel Hurst, gave a speech in 2002 at the International Red Cross Conference on Climate Change and Natural Disasters. He said a great deal, but consider just these lines: 'We see a lack of moral rectitude by those who are in leadership positions, who know the consequences of their inaction, and yet insist that they will not act...[the] thirst for environmental justice must be cast in moral terms....It must be seen as good versus evil' (Hurst, 2002).

That is strong stuff — particularly when you realize that the leaders he has in mind are ours, the ones running the West. We are where the evil is. Let us take Hurst's suggestion seriously and think a little about the possibility that our governments are responsible for a kind of evil. For clarity and concision, if not completeness, we will limit our thoughts to reflection on human wrongs, as opposed to crimes against our fellow creatures, ecosystems, or the planet as a whole. This is more than enough for us to reach a few conclusions very quickly.

Rather a lot has been said about the previous U.S. administration's efforts to deny or play down or conceal worrying findings about the future of our planet. Still more has been said about American efforts to wreck the Kyoto Protocol as well as recent efforts to muddle things in Bali.<sup>3</sup> The developed world's biggest polluters fought hard to take the teeth out of Kyoto. Members of the EU managed to negotiate the right to club together as a single entity for the purposes of counting carbon emissions, secure in the knowledge that plenty of wiggle room would be made by recent members whose emissions were dropping as fast as their economies. Some argue that things in the West are changing, although few would say that the changes are anything near enough. The failure at Copenhagen might be more complicated than Kyoto and Bali, but certainly the rich committed themselves to much less than many hoped, and at the time of writing there are questions about whether or not they'll pay what they've promised to the poor. It is possible to see the recent behaviour of the developed world as a kind of moral outrage. It has known for some time, perhaps decades, that the planet is changing and that these changes will lead to human suffering.<sup>4</sup> It has done very little about it.

Let us consider two arguments for the conclusion that the West's behaviour really is a moral outrage. These arguments are based on some facts about greenhouse gas emissions, along with a certain view of those facts. The view depends on two principles — one best-stated by Peter Singer and the other having to do with the capacity or ability to do the right thing. The facts and the principles are uncontroversial. Once you have a feel for the arguments behind the view that the West's behaviour is a kind of moral outrage, I want to spring another conclusion on you. It is a conclusion which might matter, anyway a conclusion which might undermine what is the single most common personal excuse for failing to take individual action on climate change. It has something to do with our earlier inability to keep a straight face while entertaining the thought that our teeny contribution to climate change is morally wrong. It is an excuse rooted in an outmoded conception of our place in the world. It is a response that should die the death, a response that ought to be replaced by a better conception of ourselves and our effects. A better view depends on seeing our connection to the environment through moral lenses. We'll come around to it in a moment. We'll start, though, with an argument for the claim that the West's failure to take action on climate change is morally wrong.

### Facts and Singer's principle

A lot of people accept the fact that the present state of play is somehow unjust or wrong. You can arrive at this conclusion in just a few paragraphs. Burning fossil fuels thickens the blanket of greenhouse gasses around our world, and the world warms up as a result. The warmer our planet becomes, the more suffering we are in for — suffering caused by failed crops, hotter days and nights, rising sea levels, dwindling water supplies, altered patterns of disease, conflict over shifting resources, and more dramatic weather. This connection between fossil fuels and suffering has a lot to do with the fact that our planet's carbon sinks cannot absorb all of our emissions. The sinks are therefore a limited and valuable resource.

Some countries on the planet — the richer, more developed, industrialised ones — have used up more than a fair share of the sinks and therefore caused more of the suffering which is underway and on the cards. If one thinks a little about fairness or justice or responsibility for harm, or the importance of doing something about unnecessary human suffering, then one will quickly be drawn to the conclusion that the rich countries have a moral obligation to reduce emissions. Maybe they should pay for a few sea walls in Bangladesh, possibly foot the bill for a bit of disaster relief, too. Zoom in on the thought that the developed world has a moral obligation to reduce its emissions. Its failure to do so

is tied to human suffering. The fact that the world's polluters have not taken meaningful action is an obvious wrong. It seems easy enough to see it.

Singer, who is better at this than I am, only needs two sentences to make essentially the same point. His first sentence presents a fact, and the second offers a moral, interpretive principle which leads to a conclusion about action on climate change: 'To put it in terms a child could understand, as far as the atmosphere is concerned, the developed nations broke it. If we believe that people should contribute to fixing something in proportion to their responsibility for breaking it, then the developed nations owe it to the rest of the world to fix the problem with the atmosphere' (Singer, 2004). Probably both the fact and the principle are uncontroversial. Thinking a little about the actual proportions of damage and attending responsibilities is instructive.

The USA, with less than 5% of the world's population, is responsible for an enormous share of carbon dioxide emissions by country each year: about 20% of the global total.<sup>5</sup> The European Union is responsible for much more than half of this, almost 14% of the global total. The numbers then drop off pretty quickly, with Russia and India each responsible for about 5% of the global total. China recently overtook the US and now emits a bit more than 20% of the world's total emissions. Try to bear in mind, as you think about this, that China has about a billion more people in it than the United States.

If one thinks that the total amount of carbon dioxide emitted by a country since the Industrial Revolution matters more than how things now stand, then perhaps cumulative totals should be our focus. The US comes first, responsible for about 30% of cumulative CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The EU is next on the list, with 26.5% of the cumulative total. Again, the numbers drop off very quickly, with Russia responsible for 8% and China responsible for about 7.5% of the cumulative total (Baumert et al., 2004).

Think for a moment just about the United States. The US is responsible for a large part of the damage to our planet, perhaps the largest part. Its cumulative total of emissions is largest, and it currently uses a vastly disproportionate share of the planet's carbon sinks. The US therefore has perhaps the largest obligation to do something. Others in the West have similarly-sized or anyway proportional obligations. As Singer's two sentences suggest, the principle underpinning this conclusion is not exactly complicated or difficult to grasp: people ought to contribute to fixing something in proportion to their responsibility for breaking it. Couple that principle with the facts about emissions now on the table, along with the fact that the US and other developed countries have done very little about climate change, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that the behaviour of the developed

world is morally wrong. If you think for a moment about the people who suffer now and those who will suffer as a result, the West's behaviour might strike you as a moral outrage.

### More facts and a second principle

Thinking a little about room for reduction and capacity for reduction can make a second principle clear, a principle having to do with being able but unwilling to do the right thing. Consider room for reduction first.

Not all emissions are morally equivalent. Some emissions might be quantitatively identical but differ dramatically in moral quality. The greenhouse gasses resulting from a long-haul flight for a weekend break on some sandy beach are not on a par with an equal quantity of emissions resulting from the efforts of subsistence farmers toiling away in a field. As Shue puts it, some emissions are luxury emissions and others are subsistence emissions, and if cuts must be made, it is the former which have to go first (Shue, 1993). It nearly goes without saying that the West emits considerably more luxury emissions than the developing world, and it therefore has more room for reduction.

Think now about the capacity for reduction, the varying abilities of states to make cuts in emissions or otherwise shift resources around. It is fairly obvious that the West is best-placed to make large cuts in a number of senses. The developed world has the strength to move mountains. Its people are formally educated for longer, and the technological options available to them are greater. Compared to the poor countries of the world, the rich nations have better infrastructures, a greater capacity to produce and store food, better healthcare, better housing, more manpower, more money, and on and on and on.

The developed world has not just the room for reduction, but also the capacity and the resources generally to do what is right. The developed world is best-placed for action on climate change by just about any measure you like. The fact that it has done so little when it is most able to take action is grounds for a second argument for the conclusion that its behaviour is a moral outrage.

Take a moment to think about the facts and principles underpinning this conclusion. The developed world is primarily responsible for a problem with our atmosphere. Singer's principle tells us that there's a connection between damaging something and an obligation to fix it. The developed world has done the most damage to our planet, and it continues to use a disproportionate share of our planet's carbon sinks. It, therefore, has the largest responsibility to take serious action on climate change.

The developed world also has the room and the capacity to take the necessary action, certainly as compared to the developing world. The fact that it fails to do so, against this

background, is another reason to think that the developed world is doing something wrong in its failure to take action on climate change. There is a principle behind this conclusion too: the greater the ability to do what is right, the greater the obligation to do what is right. Like Singer's principle, this one is uncontroversial. One would have some explaining to do if one walked past a drowning child and did nothing to help. One would have a lot more explaining to do if one were a physically fit and well-trained life guard.

### Outrageous lives

If you see the behaviour of the West as clearly wrong, even a moral outrage, you might be drawn to an uncomfortable conclusion, the one I promised to spring on you eventually. It might be that our individual lives are morally outrageous too. It is consistency of principle which leads to this unpleasant conclusion.

Consistency is near the heart of reflection on moral matters. There is, of course, a great deal of pre-reflective, everyday morality which just insists on consistency in our dealings with one another. It is not an accident that our mothers scold us for our misdemeanours by asking how we would feel if someone did to us whatever we did to them. It is not just our mothers. The ancient injunction, 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you', just is the call for the consistency of principle in human relationships. Kant's reflections on the universalizability of maxims put consistency at the centre of things. Consistency lies just behind Bentham's insistence that we give equal consideration to the pleasure and pain of all interested parties when deciding what to do — it is not just our pain or our friend's pain that counts.

One might argue about the finer points of these admittedly quick observations, but for now take the demand for consistency as the more or less uncontroversial insistence that we apply moral principles to all people in like circumstances in just the same way. All things being roughly equal, if I think some moral judgement applies to you in such and such circumstances I've got no grounds to complain about that judgement applying to me if I find myself in those circumstances too. If I think stealing is wrong when you do it, consistency demands that I've got to admit that stealing is wrong when I do it, too.

If the thoughts scouted above about climate change lead you to the conclusion that the behaviour of the West is a moral outrage, then consistency of principle might lead you to the conclusion that your own behaviour is a moral outrage too. Think again about Singer's principle and those thoughts about the lifeguard. Couple those two principles with a new set of facts — facts not about the West, but about you.

If it is correct to think that the US and other countries in the West are wrong to do nothing meaningful about climate

change despite being responsible for the largest share of emissions, then it is correct to think that we are wrong to do nothing in our everyday lives despite being responsible for the largest emissions per capita. People who live in the US are responsible for nearly 20 metric tons of carbon dioxide on average each year.<sup>6</sup> Australians are responsible for 18 metric tons. Canadians emit a little more than 17 metric tons. People in many EU countries — like the Netherlands, the UK and Germany — emit around 10 metric tons on average. The people in other EU countries are typically responsible for a bit more or a bit less than this, with those industrializing late or just making the transition to a market economy responsible for around 5 metric tons.

Residents of more than half of the countries on our planet, including the Chinese, emit less than 5 metric tons each year. People living in India are responsible for just over 1 metric ton each year. Residents of more than a third of the countries on the planet are responsible for less than even a single metric ton. Many human beings are responsible for no measurable emissions at all. Compared to most people on the planet, the greenhouse gas emissions resulting from our individual lives in the West are enormous.

If it is correct to think that the West does wrong by doing nothing despite having the room to reduce emissions and the capacity to do so, then it is correct to think that we are doing wrong in our everyday lives too. Plenty of your emissions are luxury emissions; most do not result from securing the real necessities of life. Probably, also, you have advantages when it comes to taking action on climate change as compared to many people on the planet, and those advantages line up with the ones we considered a moment ago when thinking about the developed world. We have plenty of cash to spare, certainly as compared to others on our world, and not just the desperately poor. Probably we are well-placed to take action in other ways too, just given the fact that we live in the relative safety of a developed country: we are healthy and well-fed, we have easy access to the information required to do what is right, we are not trapped in a refugee camp, there are no snipers about, we can avail ourselves of energy-saving lifestyle choices, and we can express ourselves freely and push for a greener world.

Our emissions might be as much as 10 or 20 times more than others in the world; we might be doing as much as 10 or 20 times the damage to the planet as compared to other people. We could do a lot, but just like the US, we do almost nothing about our emissions. If we are consistent in the application of our moral principles, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that our lives are moral outrages too.

### Worries and conclusions

The point of these reflections is to get past entrenched

thoughts which stand in the way of thinking about the ethics of climate change, of seeing our moral connection to the environment with the right kind of clarity. The thoughts have something to do with the belief that our little effects cannot matter all that much — so why bother changing them? Our cultural and intellectual heritage owes a lot to reflection on consequences, but consequentialist reflection — such a fine thing in the proper context — is a disaster when coupled with some aspects of the moral dimension of climate change. Bottles of tequila, local wrongs, obvious causal connections to human suffering and the like lend themselves to thoughts about consequences. Human beings have had to think through these sorts of things forever, and we are not bad at it. However, next to nothing in our history has prepared us for careful thinking about a spatially smeared out, causally jumbled, intergenerational slow-motion disaster. Thinking our way through it will require new thoughts, but we can make some progress with the morality we already have. A large part of that is built on consistency.

Does talk of consistency just side-step consequentialism? Reflection on consequences has plenty to do with the conclusions we just reached about the developed world. The trouble is that consequentialism is not much help when we try to think about our moral connection to the smeared out effects and causes of climate change. The demand for consistency can help put teeth on that old bit of neo-hippy wisdom: think globally, act locally. It can help us avoid various moral mistakes having to do with hypocrisy, too.

There is another sort of concern which sometimes surfaces in this connection. It has to do with the behaviour of other countries, particularly China. Maybe it's hard to portray us in the West as the bad guys when we're no longer at the top of the emissions list. Shouldn't China make some cuts too? The usual thing to do here is to point to complications concerning cumulative and per capita emissions — we're still the villains in several morally relevant senses. There are also reasonable points to make about our obligation to help developing countries leapfrog into green energy rather than point the finger. After all, we've effectively clogged up the planet's carbon sinks and thereby blocked the cheapest path to progress. But I want to insist on a different answer: the moral demands placed on us in the West are what they are no matter what China does. You don't get to lie just because other people do. At any rate dredging up realpolitik in the middle of a conversation about ethics can only muddy the waters.

That said, there is still a fair and live moral question here. Suppose China should make some cuts, and the only way to leverage them into doing the right thing is for us to hold out too. Should we put our moral obligations to one side for a moment in pursuit of some greater good? Should we wait in an effort to secure a binding deal that has the best ef-

fects overall? These are questions partly about how we rank what matters to us. Notice, however, that in order to ask them you have to accept the moral demands placed on us, and that's all I was after in the first place. Once we have a grip on those demands, it's possible to come to further conclusions about real and no doubt difficult political questions — do as much realpolitik as you like. What we mustn't do, though, is allow the murky political questions to obscure the clear moral case for action. We ought to try things the other way around — get a grip on what's right first, and then find the political means to achieve it.

As time goes on, though, the moral situation is likely to shift around.<sup>7</sup> Those responsible and those affected will not neatly distribute themselves into rich and poor, East and West, North and South forever. There are complications already, and as the present century grinds on, the bulk of the responsibility for the damage to our world could well be owed to the Chinese, the Indians, or even a mishmash of international corporations or individuals or...who knows? If the facts change we'll need to think about all of this again, but given the facts that we've got and the principles we've accepted, the conclusion for us and for the West is clear enough: we ought to take meaningful action right now.

Meaningful action — perhaps very large changes to our individual lives — really is required of all of us. The requirement comes from something other than expected utility, but not something too distant from it. If you think, for example, that the US does wrong for such and such a reason, then consistency demands that you apply the same principles operative in your thinking about the US to your own life, and see what you get. This just is a demand for consistency in our thinking, and it is as legitimate a move in a moral debate as you are likely to see. If the conclusion is that your life is a moral outrage, it follows that you ought to take all rational steps to change it, starting right now.

## Endnotes

- 1 j.garvey@royalinstitutephilosophy.org.
- 2 No doubt we are already lumped with many changes no matter what we do now, but we can still do something. Perhaps the clearest warning for non-specialists comes from the New Economics Foundation. They say that 100 months from 1 August 2008, atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases will exceed a point whereby it is no longer likely that we will be able to avert the very worst of climate change. The report is free online at <http://www.neweconomics.org/>.
- 3 The results of a congressional investigation led by Henry Waxman were widely reported by Reuters on 31 January 2007. Similar reports came out of Kyoto, Bali and Copenhagen during and after talks on climate change.
- 4 Some argue that the West has known about the changing climate for decades, and certainly real evidence and warnings have been avail-

able since R. Revelle and H. E. Suess (1957). It is, anyway, impossible to plead ignorance since the publication of the IPCC's first report in 1990. It got a lot of press.

- 5 Unless otherwise indicated, the statistics I mention come from the United Nations Statistics Division, Millennium Development Goals indicators: Carbon dioxide emissions (CO<sub>2</sub>), collected by CDIAC. The data sets are available at <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/SeriesDetail.aspx?srid=749&crd=> (accessed 26 May 2010).
- 6 Again, these numbers are from the UN Statistics Division, collected by CDIAC.
- 7 I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for making this excellent point. It's got me thinking in an interesting direction.
- 8 This paper was originally presented at the meeting of the Society for Human Ecology, Bellingham, WA, September 2008. Thanks to those taking part in the conference and especially Thomas Heyd who among other things helped a number of us deliver our papers by conference call rather than airplane.

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