Climate Advocacy Ethical Issues and Challenges of Moral Responsibility

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Abstract
Climate change around the world is changing in accordance with the changing environment. The science of climate change confirms that the main cause of this change is caused by human activities. When anthropology tries to understand the concept of climate change, it notices that significant ethical issues surround it and the question of responsibility is important. Some of the ethical issues, including responsibility related to climate change, are discussed in this paper. The research paper examines and reviews some common or traditional notions of individual and collective responsibility in relation to climate change responsibility. Central to the arguments is that individual efforts to reduce carbon emissions will have little or no effect on climate change unless everyone acts. This recognizes the need to propose a different way of affirming moral obligation in climate change. An epistemological theory of ethical relativity is recommended for this. This theory expects agents to act in light of existing knowledge and explains that obligations at the individual level cannot be different from obligations at the collective level if existing knowledge exists in today's world during climate change. It is concluded that this knowledge-based ethical theory is a viable way of assigning responsibility in climate change, but it is acknowledged that this theory may face some limitations.
Keywords: Climate Change, Ethical Issues, Moral Responsibility ect….

Introduction

If we were to see our planet from space today we would notice that it is changing colors. Martin Schonfeld says, ―The white of the North Pole is melting into blue. The greens of temperate regions are wilting into more arid hues, beige, ochre, and burnt sienna. The blue-green planet is turning into a blue and yellow world. Everyone around the globe today is experiencing constant climatic changes. Some of the major changes include the melting of the Arctic ice sheet and the diminishing glaciers every year. Over the past century, normal surface temperatures have increased worldwide resulting in a wide variety of counter effects at the global, regional and local levels. Constant fluctuations have been experienced in sea levels, wind patterns, weather conditions, food production and human health.

In the past few years many parts of the world have seen some severe floods, droughts and snow storms; sources of fresh water are also drying up. Climate catastrophes which made the headlines in the last couple of years include the Hurricane Sandy in the United States which rendered many people homeless and destitute in the New York City and the Tropical Cyclone Nilam in India which wreaked

havoc in the country. Climate advocacy and Ethics Most of the scientists claim that a thick band of greenhouse gases is the reason for the rising temperatures and the natural disasters that we are facing today worldwide. But on the other hand there are skeptics who say that there are no changes happening in the climate at all. Moreover, many scientific researchers claim that climate change is largely anthropogenic but there are a few who do not agree that climate change is caused by humans. Consequently, science juggles with many questions regarding climate change.

Besides scientific slip-ups, questions are unanswered regarding what humans should do with regard to their activities which brings harmful effects to the environment. Many people often go about their daily activities without considering or giving a thought to the fact that the energy that supports these actions generally come from burning of fossil fuels which brings about alterations in the climate. Therefore the release of greenhouse gases by activities of humans raises an important ethical concern of how humans ought to respond to climate change.

Objective of the Research First of all my research considers the scientific consensus on climate change and throws some light on the role of human beings in changing the natural environment.

Then I proceed towards looking into some general ethical aspects of climate change. I bring out important ethical issues that surround the debate regarding climate change. With regard to the ethical challenges in the area of climate change I raise the question of responsibility in climate change. The primary aim of my research is to find ways in which one can assign moral obligations to do something regarding climate change. Moreover I also look for the role of an individual or the status of an individual‘s contribution in it

Review of Literature Much has been written in the area of climate change and ethics. These works have also raised questions about moral responsibility. This section includes a brief review of ethical readings on climate change generally and specifically on moral responsibility. Several scholastic anthologies can be found which are dedicated to the ethics of climate change. They cover a wide range of topics such as policy responses to climate change, energy consumption and emissions, ethical dimensions of effect of climate change on nature, human rights and climate change, intergenerational justice and economics of climate change. Two very significant edited anthologies are Climate Ethics: Essential Readings by Stephen Gardiner (2010) and The Ethics of Global Climate Change by Denis G. Arnold (2011)10. These anthologies contain a collection of normative essays written by various well respected philosophers and scholars. Some of the essays are very introductory and others focus on certain under explored and vital debates in climate change. So though these are good source books for a general reference on climate change they do not advocate any particular viewpoint in detail. Within the first anthology two articles can be found that introspect on individual responsibility regarding climate change.

Many single authored books on ethics and climate change have been published recently. One such book is James Garvey‘s Ethics of Climate Change: Right and Wrong in the Warming World that recommends what we have to do about environmental change. He says that the justification for any action regarding climate change cannot be just limited to economic, political, scientific or social aspects; instead he looks at climate change as a moral problem. He believes that what we ought to do about it relies on what matters to us and what we believe is correct. This book offers an important perspective on responsibility that dwells upon governments and individuals in the light of climate change.

Methodology This study does not include any field study. The findings of this research will not involve any collection of information by surveys or questionnaires. This research is a qualitative one and largely limited to the field of social science. Though it is interdisciplinary and does touch on economics and science, it does not cover these in detail. This will be a philosophical investigation to bring out the insights of philosophers on climate change and moral responsibility. It aims to be a

purely academic research based in philosophy and ethics and involves information available from various books, journals, research papers accessible online or in libraries.

Addressing Climate Change

Trajectory of Future Emissions

While it seems clear that we, as a generation, have serious responsibilities not to inflict severe climate damages on the future, determining the more precise trajectory of future emissions requires more thought about global, intergenerational, and ecological justice. As an illustration, consider three issues.

First, from the perspective of future generations and some vulnerable species it would probably be better if emissions were substantially reduced quickly, so as to minimize future climate damages. However, this may be costly for the current generation while having only minimal benefits for them, which may seem unfair.

Second, poorer people and nations who have not emitted very much thus far may believe it unfair to demand that they minimize their emissions for the sake of future generations, especially if future people are likely to be better off, and if many present high emitters are already much richer than the future poor are likely to be (e.g., Posner & Weisbach 2010, Harris 2010).

Third, climate change threatens nonhuman animals and nature in potentially devastating ways. For example, we may have an immediate obligation to protect coral reefs to preserve biodiversity, fragile and unique ecosystems and the sentient beings living in such reefs. However, over the long term, climate change will also bring new species into existence and change ecosystems around the world. It is unclear how we should understand our responsibilities in light of such changes (e.g., Palmer 2011).

The future trajectory concern is currently theoretically under explored. Public debate tends to focus on quantitative targets, such as 2˚C or 350ppm. However, specific quantitative targets require further ethical defense in light of issues such as those raised above, and so are likely to come under increasing philosophical pressure if and when the world moves towards serious action.

Allocating Emissions at a Particular Time

Significantly more philosophical attention has been devoted to the question of how to allocate fairly whatever total global emissions are allowable at a particular time under an appropriate long-term trajectory. As it turns out, most writers agree that developed countries should shoulder most of the burden (at least initially), such that they should be permitted fewer emissions than developing countries (e.g., Shue 1999, Singer 2002). This consensus rests on a number of distinct but overlapping justifications. Historical accounts of justice support it because developed countries are causally responsible for most of the cumulative emissions that are currently contributing to climate change. Views that emphasize moral equality support it because developed countries continue to emit much more per capita than developing countries. Those that prioritize aiding the least well-off endorse the consensus because developed countries are much richer on average, and so more able to bear the burden of reducing emissions. Finally, utilitarian views support it because it seems that better outcomes will be achieved if the global poor are able to meet their subsistence needs and to move out of poverty through a larger share of allowable emissions, than if the “luxury emissions” of wealthier countries are protected. It has even been argued that there are good utilitarian reasons for supporting the other approaches to justice in this case, as secondary rules that promote utility (Singer 2002).

The primary objections made to the consensus view concern fairness. For example, some argue that countries are not responsible for emissions prior to 1990 (at least) because of ignorance

about the climatic effects of these emissions, and others claim that it would be unfair to hold the present inhabitants of developed countries responsible for past emissions given that many of those responsible are now dead (see, e.g., Caney 2005, Posner & Weisbach 2010). However, these arguments remain controversial (e.g., Shue 1999, Gardiner 2011a). For example, it is argued that since the present inhabitants of developed nations have benefited in many ways from the emissions of past inhabitants (e.g., from infrastructure and an established way of life), it is not unfair to hold them (rather than the victims) accountable for at least some historic emissions.

Climate Change as a Challenge to Ethical Action

Climate change has been described as a "perfect moral storm" because it brings together three major challenges to ethical action in a mutually reinforcing way (Gardiner 2011a). The first challenge stems from the fact that climate change is a truly global phenomenon. Once emitted, greenhouse gas emissions can have climate effects anywhere on the planet, regardless of their source (IPCC 2007). This is often said to result in a prisoner's dilemma or tragedy of the commons structure played out between nation states: although collectively all countries would prefer to limit global emissions so as to reduce the risk of severe or catastrophic impacts, when acting individually, each still prefers to continue emitting unimpeded (e.g., Soroos 1997, Helm 2008, but see Gardiner 2011a). At the same time, there are skewed vulnerabilities: at least in the short- to medium-term, many of the most vulnerable countries and people are those who have emitted the least historically, and whose emissions levels continue to be relatively low. This appears to be seriously unfair and casts a notable shadow over both practical and theoretical efforts to secure global cooperation.

Figure 1 "Climate Change Presents a Perfect Moral Storm Because of the Mutually Reinforcing Challenges It Poses."

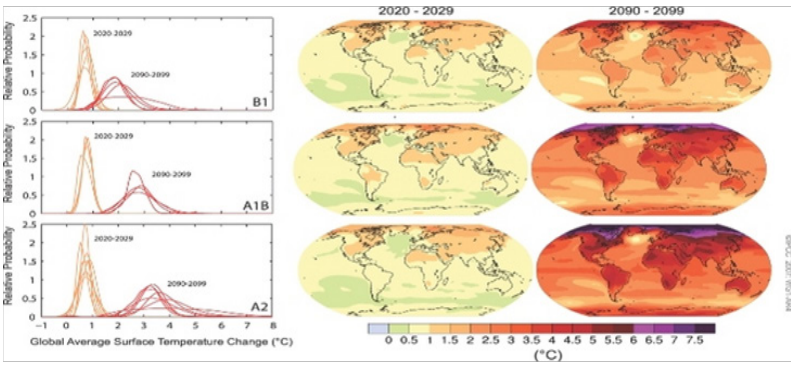

Figure 2 Higher Levels of GHG Emissions Correlate with Higher Future Global Average Surface Temperatures, Though Warming will not be Evenly Distributed

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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