



DEBATING CLIMATE ETHICS

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In Defense of Climate Ethics (a “teaser”)

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Part 1

Introduction



“We the people still believe that our obligations as Americans are not just to ourselves, but to **all** posterity.

We will respond to the threat of climate change, knowing that failure to do so would **betray** our children and future generations.”

President Obama, Second Inaugural (2013)

UNFCCC: Values in the Aim

Motivation:

- Protect Current and Future Generations of Mankind



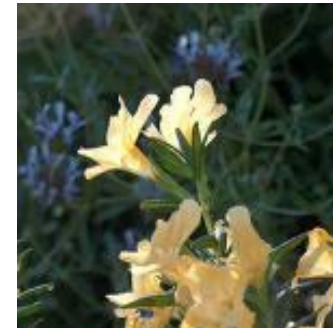
Ultimate Objective:

- Prevent Dangerous Anthropogenic Interference with the Climate System



Parameters:

- Ecological Values (Allow Ecosystems to Adapt Naturally)
- Subsistence Values (Protect Food Production)
- Sustainable Economic Development



Values in the Principles

- **Benefit** Present and Future Generations of Humankind (Article 3.1)
- **Equity** (Article 3.1)
- Common but Differentiated **Responsibilities**: “The developed countries should take the lead” (Article 3.1)
- Recognize Special **Needs** of Developing Countries (Article 3.2)
- **Precaution**: “lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing” (Article 3.3)
- **Cost-Effectiveness**: “policies and measures to deal with climate change should be cost-effective so as to ensure global benefits at the lowest possible cost” (Article 3.3)
- Countries “have a **Right** to, and Should Promote Sustainable Development” (Article 3.4)
- Countries “should cooperate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to **sustainable** economic growth and development in all Parties, particularly developing country Parties” (Article 3.5)
- No Manipulation: policies “should not constitute a means of arbitrary or unjustifiable **discrimination** or a disguised restriction on international trade” (Article 3.5)



Resistance

Economic realists:

- “pragmatically” harnessing national self-interest offers the **only** chance of success in tackling climate change given the actual motivations of governments
- ethical concepts, and especially the key notion of justice, are hopelessly unfit for the purpose

General anti-ethics:

- foolish, naïve, dangerous

Specific anti-ethics: ...



“You can have justice or you can have a
climate treaty. Not both.”

Eric Posner (2013)



“If equity’s in, we’re out”

*Todd Stern, US Envoy for Climate Change
(Durban 2011)*



My Task

- Defend ethics against marginalization
- Explain why climate change is fundamentally an ethical issue
- Explain why ethics is not easily eliminated from climate policy
- Do not (for reasons that emerge) try to offer a comprehensive climate ethics



Key General Claims

- 1) Ethics gets the problem right.
- 2) Economic realists get the problem wrong, and dangerously so.
- 3) The official rejection of ethics prevents us raising central questions that need to be discussed.

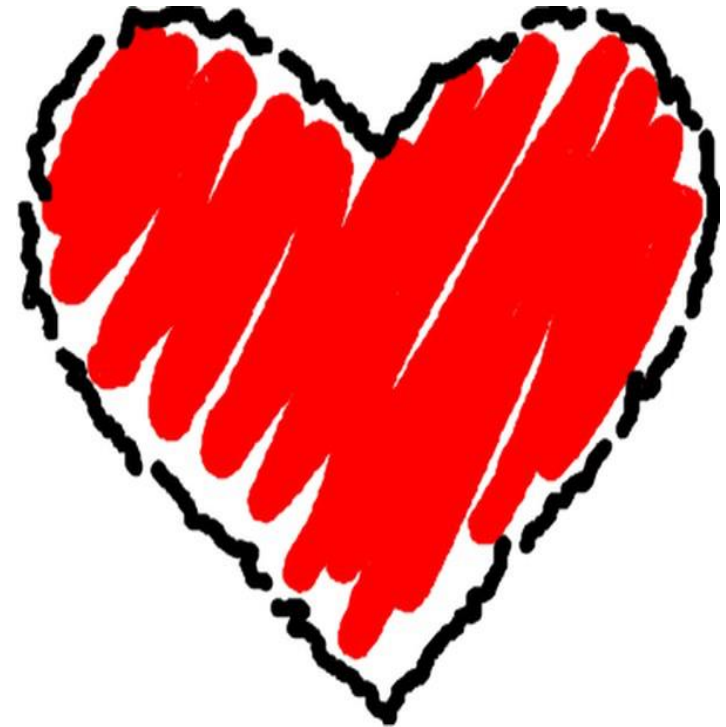


Part 2

Getting the Problem Right

Three Reasons for Ethics

- 1) Ethical concepts are needed to identify the relevant problem.
- 2) Ethical considerations are at the heart of the major policy decisions that need to be made.
- 3) Climate change poses a severe ethical challenge.



Reason

- 1) Ethical concepts are needed to identify the relevant problem.

Illustration

- Intelligibility constraints (e.g., stranded assets, 2 degrees)



Reason

2) Ethical considerations are at the heart of the major policy decisions that need to be made.

Illustration

- Trajectory, allocation (e.g., zero now)
- Right to self-defense? Error theory, limits



Reason

3) Climate change poses a severe ethical challenge.

Illustration

- A perfect moral storm

A Perfect Moral Storm

Global Storm

- Spatial Dispersion of Causes and Effects
- Tragedy of the Commons/Invisible Boot
- Passing the Buck: Skewed Vulnerabilities

Intergenerational Storm

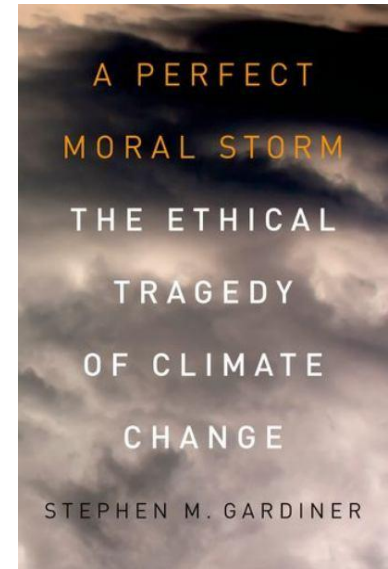
- Temporal Dispersion of Causes and Effects
- Tyranny of the Contemporary
- Passing the Buck: Future Generations, Predictable Bias, Iteration

[Ecological Storm

- *Cross-species Dispersion of Causes and Effects*
- *Passing the Buck: “Kick the Dog”]*

Theoretical Storm

- Intergenerational Ethics, International Justice, Scientific Uncertainty, Contingent Preferences and Persons, Animals and the Rest of Nature



Implications

- Problem of moral corruption (e.g., “judges in our own case”)
- Institutional gap
- Ethics of the transition (e.g., clear cases, constraints, overlapping consensus)
- Defensive ethics



**KEEP
CALM
AND
REPRESENT
YOURSELF**

Part 3

Economic Realism Getting it
Dangerously Wrong

Strands of Anti-ethics Argument

- 1) “Pure policy” vs. ethics
- 2) Quasi-scientific imperialism
- 3) Political feasibility
- 4) Self-interest
- 5) Institutional optimism
- 6) Welfarism
- 7) Rejecting justice

MY GENERAL ARGUMENT:

- **pull in different directions (tensions, contradictions)**
- **internal vacillations**

Strand

- 1) “Pure policy” vs. ethics
- 2) Quasi-scientific imperialism
- 3) Political feasibility
- 4) Self-interest
- 5) Institutional optimism
- 6) Welfarism
- 7) Rejecting justice

Worries

- **Both; caricatures**
- Zero emissions? When?
- **Being your own feasibility constraint**
- Narrow/expansive; 3 generations?; SI and NSI as ethically rich notions
- **Competing “realisms”: IP vs. generational P, elite capture, fractured**
- CBA as a poor relation of utilitarianism
- **Extortion?**

Some Dangers of Economic Realism

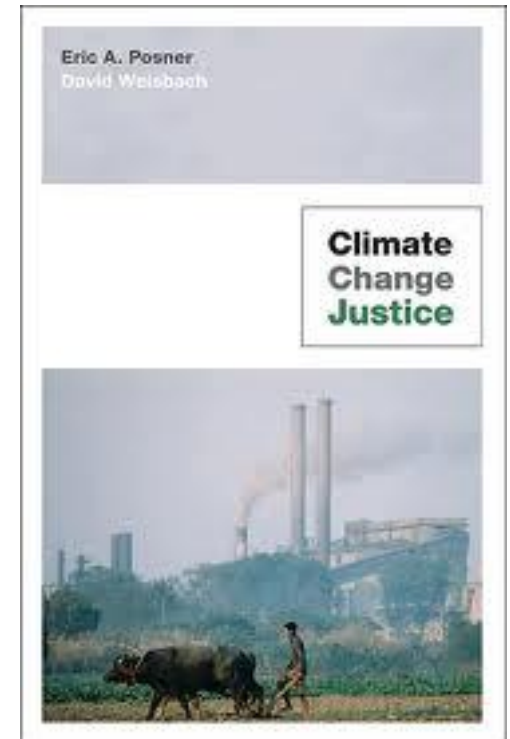
1. Neglecting the tyranny of the contemporary
2. Misdiagnosis
3. Heroic assumptions
4. Shadow solutions
5. Hidden values and unwitting technocratic delegation
6. Neglect of justice



Part 4

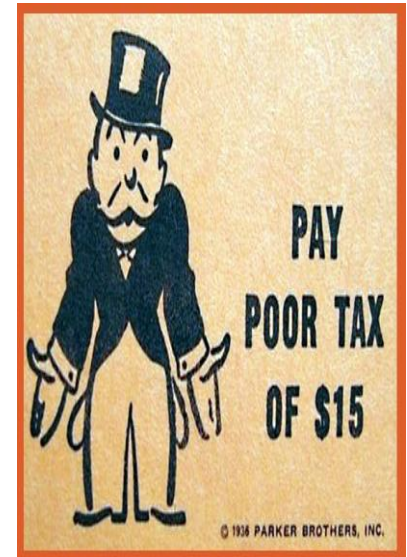
Neglecting Justice

- “Like it or not, the only way for other nations to ensure Chinese co-operation is through a special inducement, such as cash or extra emissions rights. Here is the harder question: should the US also be paid for its participation? **No one is suggesting such an approach and this should be puzzling.**” (Posner and Sunstein 2007)
- “... an optimal climate treaty would probably not require side payments to poor countries. It could well require side payments to rich countries like the United States and rising countries like China, **and indeed possibly from very poor countries** which are extremely vulnerable to climate change – such as **Bangladesh.**” (PW 2010, 86)



Implicit Argument?

- (1) Countries will accept a climate treaty if and only if (and to the extent that) it benefits them.
- (2) Some countries benefit more from climate action (e.g., emissions reductions) than others.
- (3) Those that benefit most are the most vulnerable countries.
- (4) Those that benefit least are the richer, high emitting countries.
- (5) If the richer, higher emitters engage in climate action only to the extent that it benefits them, they will not do enough to protect the most vulnerable.
- (6) So, to get the level of climate action that is needed to protect the most vulnerable, the most vulnerable must compensate the richer, higher emitters.



“Polluted Pay” (+ “Polluters get Paid”)?

Polluted Pay Principle:

- The most vulnerable countries – primarily the poor and low emitting nations – should pay off the large emitters in order to stop them polluting so heavily.

A likely “top ten” most vulnerable:

- Bangladesh, Sudan, Haiti, Zimbabwe, Nepal, Rwanda, the Philippines, Equatorial Guinea, Trinidad and Tobago, Afghanistan.

Current and emerging large emitters:

- US, China, EU, India, Brazil, Russia, etc.



(1) Realist Presumptions against “Polluted Pay”

Is there anything that the very vulnerable have that the more powerful high emitters want enough to stop overemitting?

- Poverty
- Weakness

Implies:

- Relying on “polluted pay” is probably **unfeasible** (it is not “what works”)

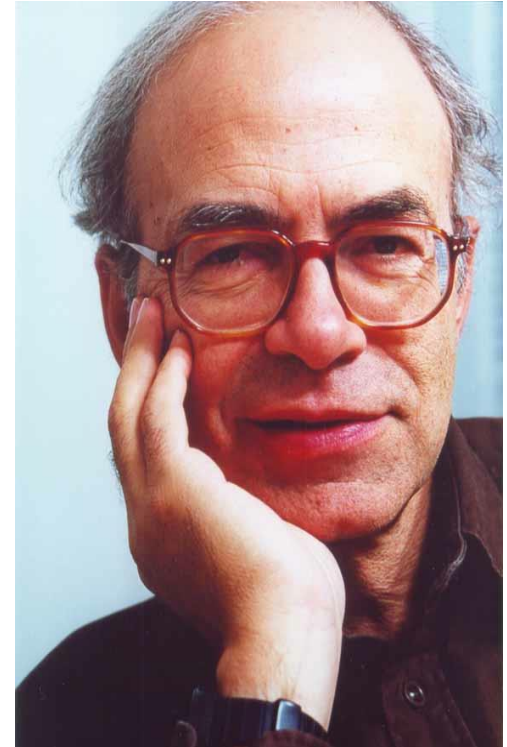


(2) Climate Ethics Presumption against “Polluted Pay”

- Conflicts with broad ethical consensus that richer, more developed nations should take the heaviest burdens, at least in the short-term (Singer 2001, Shue 1999; Gardiner 2004, 2011)

Major views of fairness:

- Historical
- Equality
- Priority to the least well-off
- Utility



(3) Commonsense Morality Presumptions against “Polluted Pay”

- Myopic
- Compound injustice
- Licensing Extortion ...



(4) Extortion

Extortion:

- involves obtaining something “through the inducement of a wrongful use of force, threat, intimidation, or the undue or illegal exercise of power” (OED; Websters)

Paradigm case: extortion racket

- “protection money”
- “compensation” as euphemism: demand is ungrounded, violates important ethical constraints
- illegitimate baseline: no “loss” that ought to be made up



Of course ...

Don't deny extortion is sometimes "what works":

- *perspective of the extortionist* (e.g., successes of the Mafia, brutal dictatorships, totalitarian regimes)
- *perspective of the victims*, acceding sometimes the best available option (ransom may cost me, but at least I get my daughter back)

Still, stark, pragmatic approach misses much of what is going on, especially from the ethical point of view:.

- We simply do not view extortion as merely "a mutually beneficial transaction that enhances the welfare of both parties", under the constraint of each agent's pursuit of its own self-interest.
- Instead, we condemn it.



Why Condemn it?

General Ethical Objections to Extortion

a. *Respect*

- Extortionists
- Victims

b. *Social costs*

- Downward spiral
- Breeding resentment, undermining trust

c. *“Who we are”*

- What extortion makes of us
- Shallow conception of SI

All relevant to climate case.



The Point ...

Example of one ethical constraint on climate policy:

- avoid becoming an extortionist



Part 5

We Don't Agree

Why We Don't Agree

- Robust general theories vs. ethics of the transition (e.g., clear cases, constraints, overlapping consensus)
- CBA and NSI
- Ineliminable ethics
- Risk of extortion



Presuppositions?

Weisbach's high bar:

- decisive model?
- CBA and NSI (again)
- babies and bathtubs

“Vaguely right, precisely wrong”

Chesterton's claim

Visions of moral theory:

- top-down (Weisbach?)
- bottom-up

