

CLIMATE CHANGE: A MORAL ISSUE

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Abstract

Any action on climate change confronts serious global ethical issues of duty, equity and responsibility among individuals, generations and the rest of nature. Climate change is an alteration in the total weather condition of a location averaged over some long period of time. It has become one of the major issues keenly discussed in contemporary environmental ethics. On the other hand, Moral refers to actions that fall within the purview of behaviours that can be analyzed by use of principles of right or wrong. In other words, a moral act is an act that complies with set standards or principles of good or right behaviour. However, it is highly controversial among scholars whether climate change can be taken to be a moral issue or not. The question of what constitutes the basis of morality when considering climate change is still very problematic. Even among those who consider it a moral issue, there are overlapping concerns on how the moral evaluation should be considered. To this effect, this paper attempts a clarification of why climate change is a moral issue; it brings to the fore, the various perspectives and controversies of the moral dimension of the debate on climate change. Adopting an analytic, hermeneutic and evaluative method, this paper attributes a significant part of the controversies to conceptual misinterpretation. It thus elucidates, through arguments and conceptual clarification why it becomes a moral duty for man to preserve his natural environment. It concludes that as moral agents, the ecological protection and preservation of our world is our primary responsibility because the earth is ours to plough and not to plunder.

Key words: Climate, Climate Change, Greenhouse theory, Global Warming, Morality.

Introduction

Ethics as one of the core areas of philosophy is concerned with the quest for fundamental principles that investigates the morality of human conduct. Over the years, it has begun to raise specific moral questions regarding most practical aspects of human endeavors which earn it a branch called *applied ethics*. We can now talk of Management Ethics, Biomedical Ethics, Environmental Ethics, and so on. With attention shifting from man-centered perspectives of morality, the ethicists have begun to look at the effect of man's activities and his

responsibilities towards his natural environment. Ecological ethics for instance highlights the manner in which human negligence leads to his dehumanization and destruction through ecological disaster occasioned by industrial pollution and the consequences of the use of nuclear and biological weapons. For the past two decades, the question of environment and its safety has taken a very drastic importance in ethical discussions.¹ Central to this is the issue of climate change. Questions like: “Do the activities of man affect the climate? What or who is responsible for global warming? Do we have responsibilities towards our natural environment? If at all, what sort of responsibilities do we have? How do we minimize, to a great extent, the effect of man’s activities on nature? Does man have moral justification for not caring for his environment?” and so on, pre-occupies the mind of an average scholar and world’s leader.

Although the issue of climate change is dated back to antiquity (precisely 18,000 years ago), the December 1997 agreement of the highly industrialize countries (in Kyoto, Japan) on the fair distribution of green gas emissions makes it to gain prominent attention from the world’s leaders, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and scholars. This agreement is called “Kyoto Protocol”. This was triggered by 2006 documentary film of Al-Gore entitled “*An Inconvenient Truth*” when the issue of its morality was raised. In the film, Gore exposes the causes and the danger of global warming and maintains that taking action on the global warming is now an important moral issue. The duty he perceives according to Bob Carter is not in the sense of caring for the victim of climate change but in the sense of humans having a duty to prevent what he perceives has dangerous and man-induced climate change.² It becomes imperative to inform people that it is better to prevent the dangers of environmental degradation that can result to serious climate issues because it will cost more to deal with remediation. So, people should take responsibility, yield to the warnings and prevent the dangers from occurring instead of waiting for the situation to degenerate and be remediated.

It is an established and indisputable fact that the earth absorbs about 700 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) annually, about 12 billion of which is due to man’s activities such as, burning of fossil fuels.³ However, some scholars have a divergent view on whether or not the emission of fossil fuels is what actually causes greenhouse effect (Ozone layer depletion which in turn leads to UV rays). This is one of the major reasons why some scholars disagree with Al-Gore and the proponents of the morality of climate change. Also, scholars are of different opinions as to whether or not we can trust the science behind the belief that the

planet will get a lot hotter in the future. The former view advanced by the set of scholars who refuse to treat the issue of climate change as a moral one but rather as a 'practical one' is tagged *economic/practical reason*. While the later view is tagged as *scientific reason*. Having understood the basic facts surrounding the discuss on the morality of climate change, it is expedient to first examine the arguments of *the greens* who claim that climate change is essentially caused by the anthropogenic emission and they spend enormously to forestall the predicted hotter situation in the future, and later examine the arguments of the *anti-green* counterparts.⁴ It is against this back drop that this paper will clarify why climate change is a moral issue.

However, in order to get the grasp of this discuss, before delving into the whole argument, it is pertinent to first do a definitive, conceptual analysis of some of the salient terms that are germane to this paper.

A Conceptual Clarification of the Key words

- 1. Climate:** it has been defined in various ways; however, these varied definitions have a very closely related meaning. Usually, it refers to the average (or typical) weather condition observed over a long period of time for a given area. It encompasses the statistics of temperature, humidity, atmosphere, wind, rainfall and other metrological elemental measurement in a given region over a long period of time. It is often construed as weather.⁵ In other words, climate is referred to as the total weather condition in some location averaged over some long period of time.
- 2. Climate change** is a variation in the weather condition from year to year, decade to decade, country to country, or any larger time scale. Most of the argument concerning the morality of climate change stem from the uncertainty and the initial controversy about what causes climate variation (including global warming and cooling). The biggest uncertainty in predicting future climate change is in knowing which part is natural and what part is man-made. According to weather street question:

Since climate change, at least to some extent occurs naturally, we do not know how much of the approximate depth of the warming of the global-average temperature in the last century is due to mankind pumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere verses the earth's supply coming out of the little Ice Age.⁶

Another closely related concept to climate change (especially global warming) is what is called greenhouse theory.

3. **Greenhouse theory** is a theory that blames global warming on human emission of carbon dioxide from the burning of natural gas and oil (gas flaring). The greenhouse believing scientists claim that it is this emission of greenhouse gases that causes the depletion of Ozone layer which results to the release of Ultra-violet rays that in turn causes the apparent global warming recorded by the scientists over the last hundred years, or so. This phenomenon is known as *greenhouse effect*.
4. **What then is Global Warming?** Global Warming is a rise in the average global temperature. This warming is often erroneously used (even by some of the environmentalists and the greens) interchangeably with climate change as if they are exactly the same. While global warming is one of the indicators (effects) of climate change, climate change on the other hand is all encompassing; it encompasses global cooling and warming, rainfall, wind, et cetera (as earlier pointed out in the analysis of climate)⁷. Thus, it would be too constricted to continually consider global warming alone when the issue of climate change is being discussed.
5. **Morality** is concerned with the rightness and wrongness of human action. It is mainly concerned with principles of human conduct. It assesses the quality of human behavior to ascertain whether particular acts are right or wrong, good or bad etc. Its aim in the human society is to ensure law and order, rationality, objectivity, peace, harmony and so on⁸. Man is seen as a moral agent because of his rational nature. To be moral is to be rational; both rationality and morality are involved in making a distinction between good and bad. It becomes imperative for human beings capable of rationalizing to have an intrinsic moral principle to habitually do the right things and always avoid wrong acts; this is however seen as instinctive⁹. Human person having being endowed with sound faculty of reasoning is then morally responsible for the consequences of his actions and inactions. Ethics, in its normative sense (especially applied ethics) seeks to evaluate and answer practical questions about human conduct regarding specific moral issues using certain standard. Moral theory therefore, concerns general moral questions like what human beings “ought to do” or ‘how human persons ought to behave’. It defines one’s duty as a moral agent and prescribes how man should carry it out. Thus, any step taken with respect to the consequences of our conduct either practically or theoretically (even in principle) implies a recognition of and having a sense of morality.

On the Controversies

The controversies and contentions on why climate change is a moral issue are in two folds; the arguments of the greens verses the greenhouse skeptics is on one side, and the arguments of the greens verses the pragmatists- who seek a 'practical' solution to the problem of climate change- is on the other side of the divide. This paper refers to these two opponents as the "green" and the "anti-green". It shall examine both positions; first, the arguments of the greens as a form of thesis then the arguments of the anti-greens as a form of anti-thesis.

The "greens" - as earlier mentioned, are the set of scholars (mostly scientists) who believe that the change in the climate is human induced (anthropogenic); as such, if preventive actions are not taken urgently, then in the future the earth will get very hot to the extent that no living thing will be able to survive in it. Again, they consider it as the moral duty of the highly industrialized nations concerned to prevent the dangerous effects of climate change from occurring in the future, in order for the dangers not to affect the entire world (especially the less industrialized nations). The reasons offered in support of their claims are numerous but can however be summarize into two major premises: first, that the increase/rise in the emission of Carbon dioxide, natural gas, or methane and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) which are all potent greenhouse gases in the air since the industrial revolution (particularly the beginning of the 20th century) is what has been found to be responsible for the gradual rise in recorded global temperature and the second (which of course relates to the first), is based on paleoclimatology, which is the study of ancient climates. They did this by using computer climate models (the mathematical models of the past, present and future climate). It is from this they infer that the future climatic condition will become dangerous to living organisms¹⁰. To this effect, the environmentalists and the world's leaders make attempt to reverse global warming and forestall the predicted climate condition by organizing series of conferences, constituting numerous Panels and establishing several NGOs. We hear of 1997 Kyoto protocol, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)¹¹, the Intergovernmental Panel on climate change (IPCC) that was established by World Metrological Organization (WMO) and United National Environmental Programme (UNEP) in1988 was also saddled with more responsibilities. In fact a conference tagged "sixth International Conference on Climate Change (ICCC), organized by Heartland Institute; Washington, held between June 30th and July 1st 2011 and of course the several plenary sessions of the Paris agreement.

All of these efforts by the highly industrialized and advanced countries seem reasonable as they may have perhaps been influenced by their sense of moral responsibilities towards the less industrialize and developed countries. As a matter of fact, it is not morally permissible for the advanced countries of the world to continuously make the third world countries bear the effects of their highly industrialized activities. As Ryan rightly puts it:

... from the Kantian perspective, this means that the right of the poor countries to cleaner earth should not be sacrificed for the good of the industrialized world.¹²

In the long run, the tremendous environmental degradation by the activities of these advanced industrialized countries far outweighs the economic benefits that industrialization brings.

Even from a utilitarian perspective, one would opine that it is morally repulsive to indulge in actions that will benefit few industrialized countries while the majority (comprising of less industrialize countries) is suffering. Some Utilitarian's may want to view it in terms of the end- the earning. Research has however shown that majority of the citizens of some of these industrialized countries (India and China specifically) are living in abject penury despite the earnings of their countries. Meanwhile, there is no amount of wealth accumulation that can compensate for the dangerous effects of climate change because it will cost more to deal with remediation.

Nevertheless, this position has being vehemently criticized by their opponents, the anti-greens. The greenhouse skeptics for instance reject the notion of man-induced global warming and doubt the belief that the earth will get hotter in the future. On this basis, they reject the whole idea of prevention (as a moral step), claiming that it is a way of introducing socialism from the back door by the socialist conspirators. They argue that there is no empirical fact to this effect. Bob Carter Succinctly puts:

It is a remarkable fact that despite the world's expenditure of perhaps \$50 billion US dollars since 1990, and the efforts of tens of thousands of scientists worldwide, no human climate signal has yet been detected that is distinct from natural variation. Accordingly, the IPCC alarmist case regarding dangerous human climate rests not on empirical data, but on invalidated computer models, failed greenhouse theory and anecdotal

accounts of climate changes that may well be of wholly or largely natural origin.¹³

The above extract summarizes their argument on the rejection of both human induced “climate change” and the prediction of the hotter earth surface in the future. They also base their rejection of the prediction of climate condition on the history of climate and concludes that 20th Century was not (as the greens claim) unusually warm. According to them, “there had been at least one other period in the past millennium when, worldwide temperatures were as much as 2⁰ C to 3⁰ C warmer than 1990s”¹⁴.

The greenhouse skeptics also raised a very big objection to the greenhouse theory. They claimed that research has debunked greenhouse theory, stating that the emission of greenhouse gases is just an insignificant part of one of the four major factors responsible for cycles of the climate change. According to them, global warming (and cooling) cycles is controlled primarily by:

1. Cyclical Variations of the sun’s energy output
2. Eccentricities in Earth’s Orbit
3. The influence of plate tectonics on the distribution of continent and oceans
4. The so-called “greenhouse effect”, caused by atmospheric gas such as water vapour, carbon dioxide, Methane and nitrous oxides¹⁵. They thereby remark that of all the gases that cause greenhouse effect, water vapour is the most potent such that any little rise in water temperature tends to affect the climate. While agreeing that greenhouse effect is actually a bit player, man did not cause the greenhouse effect for the activities of man (emission of CO₂) in greenhouse effect is too insignificant that we cannot talk of greenhouse effect in relation to man. This agreement was reached in a meeting at the University of Leicester (UK) where the greenhouse theory was ‘nailed’ and a new theory explaining the global warming was to be published.¹⁶

The last of the major objections raised by the Skeptics was on a book and a film titled “An Inconvenient Truth” by Al Gore. They argued that Al Gore did it not only deliberately to create an effect but he also misled the entire world populace. Some of the flaws they identified with Al Gore’s book & film fall under these sub-headings.

- Misleading links between weather events and climate change
- Misrepresentation of data (especially in graph)
- Exaggeration about the sea level

- False claim about scientific views on global warming
- Misleading claims about the responsibilities of the United States
- Conceptual errors,¹⁷ etcetera.

Some of the critics maintain that if at all the question of the morality of climate change will be raised, it is not in the sense Al-Gore and other greens conceive it. To them, the morality sensed in the issue of climate change is in two ways; First we may talk of man having a duty to rescue the victims of natural disasters such as the Tsunami, and not to prevent the 'natural phenomenon' for nature herself is morally neutral and any attempt to stop its occurrence will just amount to a waste of time and money. The second sense in which we can talk of its morality is in accusing; Al-Gore, the NGOs, the individual Scientists, Managers of research Centers, Government agencies, the environmentalist and several other "climate change alarmists" for (1) knowing the truth and concealing it (2) deliberately raising alarm to create panic and fear (3) for wasting money on false research (by scientist), salaries of the managers of research centers, sales made from the news on this false claim by the press, etc.¹⁸.

Meanwhile, there seem to be some sense in what they are saying. One may wish to reject the inconclusive and invalidated inference based on the computer climate models and Paleo- climatology (that the earth will be hotter in the future) for its arbitrariness. It may also be worth rejecting if truly Al-Gore's documentary is misleading and full of errors. More so, they made reference to scientific facts to prove that man's emission of fossil fuels only plays a little role in greenhouse effect; and that water vapour (i.e. nature) is the most potent cause.

Nonetheless, the whole of their argument is highly misplaced. It is based on the erroneous conception of the two major terms that are germane to this discuss "climate change" and "morality". This has led them to several other errors which shall be discussed under these two concepts.

On the Notion of Climate Change

The major issue with the arguments of the greenhouse skeptics (anti-green) is their sheer inability to distinguish between Climate Change and Global Warming. If only they knew this, they wouldn't have committed the *fallacy of straw man* by attacking the greens notion of man-induced global warming alone and thinking that they have succeeded. This has also led them to commit the *fallacy of division* for taken *part* for a *whole*. For instance, it has been confirmed that acid rain (which is also one of the changes in the climate and which has highly

destructive result) is primarily caused by some invisible gases that usually come from automobiles or coal-burning power plants.¹⁹ Thus, it is better for man to take responsibility, yield to the warnings and prevent the dangers of climate change from occurring. Cases of this abound; this perhaps leads to their narrow view of 'morality'.

On the Notion of Morality

Following the arguments of the skeptics, one would observe that they only consider morality in terms of cause and not of effect. What this means is that they think one is morally responsible only for what he has directly caused and not the effect of his actions (or inactions). For them, the conservation of the natural environment that has inherent value is not an obligation. Thus, having a sense of moral duty towards the environment should not be considered. Since they do not see the need to conserve the environment, they mistreat it believing that their activities are too minute to damage it and then blame whatever damage that may be incurred on nature. In other words the environment is ours to plunder and not to plough. Relating to the subject of this discuss, the argument of the skeptics may be summarized in the following *Modus Tolens*:

Man has the moral duty to prevent Climate
Change, if he is the cause,
Since man is not the cause of Climate Change,
Therefore, man does not have the moral duty to
prevent it.

But then, issues about morality should not be conceived in this sense alone, because morality deals with how men ought to behave and why, especially when viewed from the deontological perspective which sees the performance of duties as imperative. Assuming that science has not validated the man-induced global warming argument, it is evident enough to know that deforestation does not only lead to erosion but aggravates the effect of whirlwind. Trees are known to cushion the effects of winds but now the reverse is the case as natural disasters like hurricane has become rampant due to climate change. Even if it is purely a natural occurrence, the cry now is the alarming rate at which these disasters occur frequently with higher intensity at each occurrence despite the fact that nature has a way of balancing itself. Human activities such as dredging of rivers, channelling water on the beach to sand fill and construct houses, gas flaring and so on have been known to have negative effects on living organisms. The natural

environment can be appreciated because of its aesthetic values and ploughed rather than to be plundered. The environment when conserved has more benefits for humanity than when it is pushed.

On the Issue of Global Warming

The Skeptics identified 'water vapour' in the atmospheric state as the most potent gas causing the greenhouse effect. They argued that the release of water vapour in the atmosphere is a resultant effect of a rise in the water temperature which is a natural phenomenon and not man induced. However, they refuse to realize that man's activities such as combustion, heat generated from factories, transport (land or Freight) gas emission, agriculture and glass house horticulture, emits the most carbon dioxide. Including livestock and crop farming that are major sources of methane and nitrous oxide; all these activities of man emits greenhouse gas that also contribute to a rise in the water temperature leading to the greenhouse effect. Although they agreed that man's emission of fossil fuels constitute a small amount contributing to the greenhouse effect, but then, however insignificant it may be, it is better to take responsibility and mitigate it so that in the future the earth can still be habitable bearing in mind that one has a right to a cleaner earth.

It is pertinent to reiterate here that the greenhouse skeptics (anti-green) agree that there is global warming but not as caused essentially by man; thus, they do not subscribe to climate change as being a moral issue but rather as a practical one. Also, they are of the view that the arguments raised by the greens are exaggerated to create unnecessary panic and that is why the world is making bad decisions. For instance, they claimed that the initial effort of Kyoto protocol style to tackle global warming was a bad idea because its aim to get the industrialized countries signed up for greenhouse gas emissions had failed. It failed in the sense that most of the countries concerned were not cooperating initially. Countries like India and China did not even comply while the US claimed that it will affect her economy negatively and then suggested that other industrialized countries should also sign the treaty.

However, they agreed that global warming is real and likely to be a significant problem in the future; but they believed that the best way to tackle it was not the Tokyo protocol style. In their view, investing in green energy research will be more efficacious than investing in green technology. This is because green energy technology not only amount to waste of time and money but also limits development. Rob Lyons posited that:

As climate negotiators in Mexico waste another two weeks-and an awful lot of money on flights and hotel bills-banging their collective heads against a brick wall, a policy proposal that put faith in humanity's ability to innovate and to solve problems seems a far better option than tracing to grand out a miserable deal that limits development.²⁰

The above quote summarizes what this group means by 'a practical not a moral problem'.

Rob, making reference to Bjorn Lomborg's film on climate change titled 'Cool it', reported that Lomborg (being an advocate of this view) claimed that, with relatively small sum (about \$250 billion- just about 0.4% of the world's economic output per year- to be spent over many years in research, adaptation and third World development), would go a long way to solving not just the climate change problem but opening up a whole new energy sources for humanity and preparing countries for whatever kind of climate change (hot, cold, wet or dry) they may face in the future. Furthermore, it is reasonable to doubt the efficacy of Kyoto Protocol Style since the (highly industrialized) countries mostly concerned are not yielding to the 'call'; besides, it is expensive and limits development. Also, there is no reservation in supporting their aim which according to them, is to make low-carbon technologies- some of which exist, some of "which are waiting to be discovered" cost competitive with the energy sources that are already being used now. For example, when solar, wind, wave, geothermal, nuclear and so on are as cheap and reliable as oil, gas and coal, it will be no-brainer to switch to these technologies. He however remarks that those climate friendly technologies are expensive and not very reliable at the moment. This, according to Rob Lyons, is the very gap that Lomborg hopes to be "closed by further research and development".²¹

Apparently, the argument of the skeptics is lucid, but then they misconstrue the term "morality" when deeply observed. As earlier pointed out in the 'conceptual clarification,' having perceived that one ought to carry out a particular duty, the next thing is to take a step (practical, theoretical, or effective) towards carrying out that duty. The initiative to proffer a solution to mitigate the issues of climate change depicts a sense of responsibility. The fact that they considered it a duty to prevent the effects of climate change with particular considerations to develop the third World Countries that are affected by their industrial activities, shows that climate change is a moral issue and the their argument thus far buttresses it.

Conclusion

This piece has critically examined the debates on climate change and it maintains that climate change is a moral issue due to the fact that human activities contribute a great deal to climate degeneration, thus man has a moral responsibility to preserve the environment especially when viewed through the lens of Kant's categorical imperative in particular and deontological ethical theory in general. It suggests that the reasons giving by the skeptics for not considering it as such can be attributed to conceptual error. No wonder G.E. Moore demands for conceptual analysis in our ethical discourse, observing that a great deal of the vast disagreement prevalent in ethics is due to our failure in analysis.²² In submission, mitigating the effects of climate change requires an eclectic approach that cannot be solved from just one angle; hence it is important to note that it is better for man to take responsibility, yield to the warnings and prevent the dangers of climate change from occurring because it is more beneficial to conserve the environment than to mistreat it. The environment when taken care of will care for us in return but if we push it then it will kill.

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