

THE ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE AND WATER RESOURCES

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Summary

Environmental ethics has two dimensions, namely human-to-nature ethics and human-to-human ethics. In terms of the former, the environment is regarded as a stakeholder and therefore the protection of the environment is a virtue in itself and should not only be pursued to ensure the survival of mankind. Mitigating human-induced climate change should therefore be an end in itself, because of the loss of biodiversity and other negative environmental impacts that can occur. In terms of the latter the principle of equity, both intergenerational and among the current generation should dictate the use of environmental commons. Climate change and its implications should thus be addressed in such a way that future generations and developing countries should not have to suffer from a problem that they have not caused. International efforts to manage the use of the atmosphere as a global sink should reflect these ethical considerations by assigning responsibility to developed countries to facilitate clean development in developing countries and thus prevent them from following the same environmentally unsustainable path. The ethical considerations of climate change are highlighted by the implications that it will have on the water sector, where a water ethics should include these concerns.

1. Introduction

Ethics in environmental affairs first and foremost concerns the impact of human actions

upon non-human and natural entities and nature as a whole. In this respect, there are increasing efforts to develop an ethical framework to guide human interaction with the rest of nature towards supporting humane and sustainable societies. However, ethical considerations go beyond the relationship between humans and nature to include the relationship between humans themselves especially when it comes to the causes and solutions of environmental problems. This is especially the case for global commons. A global commons is commonly defined in literature as a domain that is beyond the exclusive jurisdiction of any one nation but one that all nations may use for their own purposes (such as extracting resources or discharging pollutants). The atmosphere, oceans, seabed, outer space, and Antarctica are examples of global commons. The dual nature of ethics (human to nature/human to human) in environmental affairs is illustrated by the so-called tragedy of the commons, as Garrett Hardin (1968) refers to the overuse of a commons to the point that it becomes severely depleted, contaminated, or unusable. Of moral concern is not only that human activities may have these adverse effects on the environment, but also that there exists among humans inequality with respect to those who perpetrate, benefit and suffer the most from unethical environmental activities.

2. Ethical Considerations

2.1. The Debate between the Neo-Malthusians and Cornucopians

Differing views regarding the impact of human activities on the environment and natural resources is often grounded in the neo-Malthusian versus cornucopian debate. Neo-Malthusian analysts - or growth pessimists - emphasize the limits of natural resources to meet the needs of a world population that is growing by a factor of six while their energy use is growing by a factor far larger than that. The consequent impact on food security, economic development and environmental quality is decisively negative and can already be seen in famine, deforestation and pollution in developing countries. In contrast, cornucopians - or growth optimists - point to global trends in the 1990s such as the increase in global life expectancy, health and productivity. They also argue that the issues of moral concern to growth pessimists are not so much related to environmental sustainability as to issues of poverty and skewed distribution of global resources. These issues are attributable to and rectifiable by policies and practices of governments and do not signify an inherent limit to the amount of people and level of economic development that the earth can support. The debate between the two groups implies a focus shift of environmental ethics from the human-to-environment dimension for neo-Malthusians to the human-to-human dimension of cornucopians. The mutual exclusivity of the debate ignores the duality of environmental ethics and frustrates the pursuit of humane and sustainable societies. The climate change debate in many respects reflects the shortcomings of the neo-Malthusian versus cornucopian debate.

2.2. The Climate Change Debate

Within the framework of environmental ethics the Climate Change debate has two dimensions, namely:

- what is the impact of human activity on climate change?; and

- what should the human response to climate change be?

The first dimension of the debate largely focuses on climate science. Climate science describes the way in which the climate has changed over recent years and tries to explain the reasons for these changes, most notably the scientific evidence that the climate changes of the 20th century is attributable to human activity. An understanding of this aspect of the debate will require a brief overview of the claims by proponents of human induced climate change as well as the counter arguments of those scientists who do not support the view that human activity is significantly altering the global climate. The second dimension of the debate concerns at one level whether the human response to climate change should focus on the causes or the symptoms of climate change. On another level, it becomes a debate between developed and developing countries and how the skewed responsibility for and consequences of human induced climate change should be reflected in the international response to climate change. In order to understand this dimension of the debate, a short overview of the international response to climate change is required.

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http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/in_depth/sci_tech/2000/climate_change/default.stm [This web site gives regular news updates on global climate change. It gives a concise overview of climate science, the climate change debate and public views on climate change.]

<http://www.globesa.org>. [GLOBE Southern Africa groups over 170 environmentally-committed parliamentarians in 15 countries in Southern and East Africa and works in close cooperation with Globa International. The organization addresses environmental issues via the legislative process and other means. The Globe SA web site hosts the Globe SA Newsletter, which give in-depth analysis on environmental issues and publishes proceedings of meetings and conferences. Publications from the Globe SA web site that were used in this article include Newsletter Issue 9 November, 1999; Newsletter Issue 5, September-October, 2000; and *Freshwater resources and climate change*. Abridged version of a GLOBE Southern Africa lecture given in the South African parliament on 5 April 2001 by R. Sherman.]

Biographical Sketch

Joelien Pretorius is a senior lecturer in Political Studies at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and completed her PhD at the University of Cambridge in the UK. She has written on the social and ethical applications of technology in international relations.