Global Political Issues

Lecture 3: Climate change

§1. The ethics of climate change

Why is climate change such a bad thing…?

Is it simply because it will be worse for people if climate change is not addressed…?

Do future people have a right that we address climate change…?

What if it turns out that nobody will be worse off if we fail to address the problem of climate change…?

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Us</th>
<th>Our descendants if we act</th>
<th>Our descendants if we don’t act</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We act</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>We don’t act</td>
<td>10</td>
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How should the burdens of addressing the problem of global justice be distributed between different states and between citizens of different states…?

Duties of mitigation

The duty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, e.g. by reducing car use and air travel.

The duty to create/protect greenhouse gas sinks, e.g. forests, the oceans.

Duties of adaptation

The duty to prevent climate change from causing serious harm, e.g. by building seawalls, facilitating migration, improving irrigation, inoculating against diseases…

Second-order duties

Duties to ensure that other states are complying with their first-order duties, e.g. by imposing sanctions on reckless greenhouse gas emitters/greenhouse sink destroyers…

Should we treat the global distribution of the burdens of dealing with climate change separately from the global distribution of other good and bad things…?

Cf. Simon Caney, Just Emissions.
§2. Polluter pays

The Polluter Pays Principle

The states that are causally responsible for climate change are also morally responsible for dealing with it…

P1 By causing climate change, polluter states have imposed burdens on other states.

P2a If X has imposed burdens on Y, X has a duty to shoulder those burdens unless Y has released X from this duty.

C Polluter states have a duty to shoulder the burdens they have imposed on other states by causing climate change unless these other states release them from this duty.

Can we really criticize Britain for not having known about the effect of its industrial policies in the late 18th Century…?

P2b If X has imposed burdens on Y, and X was not excusably ignorant, then X has a duty to shoulder those burdens unless Y has released X from this duty.

The Time-Restricted Polluter Pays Principle

Let t be the time at which states no longer had any excuse to be ignorant about climate change. The states that are causally responsible for climate change after t are also morally responsible for dealing with it…

Strict liability

There is no such thing as excusable ignorance…

P2c If X has imposed burdens on Y, and X has benefited from doing so, then X has a duty to shoulder the burdens unless Y has released X from this duty, whether or not they were excusably ignorant.

In the end, it’s individuals who are going to have to shoulder these burdens, but none of them were around in the late 18th Century…

P2d If X has imposed burdens on Y, and Z is a co-national of X, Z has a duty to shoulder the burdens unless Y has released Z from this duty, whether or not X was excusably ignorant.

P2e If X has imposed burdens on Y, and Z has benefited from X’s doing so, Z has a duty to shoulder the burdens unless Y has released Z from this duty, whether or not X was excusably ignorant.

T1 ‘…it is not entirely inappropriate that [white male] applicants should pay the costs… No doubt few, if any, have, themselves, individually, done any wrongs
to blacks and women. But they have profited from the wrongs the community did… even those who did not directly benefit… had, at any rate, the advantage… which comes of confidence in… one’s rights being recognized as a matter of course.’

(Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Preferential Hiring*, p.152)

This is a plausible moral principle, but does it apply in the present case…?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burn fossil fuels</th>
<th>Them</th>
<th>Us</th>
<th>Their descendants if they don’t burn</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burns fossil fuels</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don’t burn fossil fuels</td>
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§3. *The right to emit*

Presumably the polluters had a right to emit some quantity of greenhouse gas. They just didn’t have a right to emit as much as they did.

Suppose that the global environment can absorb 500 billion metric tons of CO\(_2\) between now and 2500…? How much of this 500 billion metric tons should each of us be allowed to emit…?

*The Equal Per Capita Principle*

Suppose there will be \(n\) persons between now and 2500. Everyone is entitled to emit \(1/n\) of 500 billion metric tons of CO\(_2\)…

- **P1** Justice requires that everybody has equal well being.
- **P2** Everybody has equal well being only if everybody is allowed to emit an equal quantity of CO\(_2\).
- **C** Justice requires that everybody is allowed to emit an equal quantity of CO\(_2\).

But why accept P2…?

- **P1** Everybody owns an equal-sized part of the CO\(_2\) absorption capacity of the global environment.
- **P2** Everybody is entitled to use the part of the CO\(_2\) absorption capacity of the global environment that they own.
- **C** Everybody is entitled to use an equal-sized part of the CO\(_2\) absorption capacity of the global environment.

Suppose I build a machine that increases the quantity of CO\(_2\) that the global environment can absorb between now and 2500 to 500 billion plus 1 metric tons…
Does this mean that I am entitled to emit \((500 \text{ billion} + 1)/n\) metric tons of CO\(_2\)…?
Or am I now entitled to emit \((500 \text{ billion})/n + 1\) metric tons of CO\(_2\)…?

P1  Brazil owns 60% of the Amazon rainforest.
P2  The Amazon rainforest is (among other things) a machine that increases the quantity of CO\(_2\) that the global environment can absorb.
C  Brazil is entitled to emit 60% of the additional quantity of CO\(_2\) that the global environment can absorb because of the Amazon rainforest.

T2  ‘…in many cases… resources such as soil and trees are there now because of the specific territorial decisions that [a] group has made over time, and are part of what has made that group the group that it is… This sort of natural attachment between groups and territorial resources seems to be the sort of thing that would give rise to a legitimate claim to the resource in question…

(Megan Blomfield, *Global Common Resources*, p.295)

P1  If a particular part of the global environment has had a big impact on the cultural identity of a group of people then this group of people owns this part of the global environment.
P2  A particular part of the Amazon rainforest has had a big impact on the cultural identity of Brazilians.
C  Brazilians own this part of the Amazon rainforest.

What if a particular part of the global environment has had a big impact on the cultural identity of distinct groups of people…? E.g. indigenous Amazonian peoples vs. descendants of European settlers…

P1  If a group of people has had a big impact on a particular part of the global environment then this group of people owns this part of the global environment.
P2  Brazilians have had a big impact on a particular part of the Amazon rainforest.
C  Brazilians own this part of the Amazon rainforest.

P1  Justice requires that everybody’s basic needs are satisfied.
P2  The quantity of greenhouse gas that I have to emit to satisfy my basic needs is equal to the quantity that everybody else has to emit to satisfy theirs.
C  Justice requires that everybody is allowed to emit an equal quantity of greenhouse gas.

Is this valid? Is P2 true?

*The Subsistence Emissions Principle*

Everyone is entitled to emit that quantity of the total 500 billion metric tons of CO\(_2\) that is necessary for them to secure a minimal quality of life…