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Climate Change and Morality's Role

The issue of climate change has been around since the industrial revolution, but even though scientific sentiment has always asserted that our current approach will lead to inevitable disaster, not much has truly been done to alter our course. At this point, many regions in the tropical and ice-covered areas of the globe are experiencing drastic environmental changes, and these will only expand to the rest of the world. As a response, global conferences such as the Paris Agreement in 2015 and the more recent COP26 occurred to determine future plans. Though many major issues were brought up during these meetings, the world leaders at COP26 could have drawn up more impactful policies. Their decisions were an accurate reflection of their stakeholder interests to acknowledge need for change but try all the same to maintain the system's integrity; therefore, sufficient change to prevent climate change's worst effects will not occur without a significant incentive such as a breakthrough clean technology. The issue of morality is rooted in COP26's list of decisions, culminating in the moral problem that is the difficulties accompanying efforts to convince those in power and the general public of climate change's urgency.

Before discussing the issues of climate change regarding morality and ethics, it is important to note the crucial figures at the COP26 conference, their options and decisions, and the affected parties. Firstly, COP26 is not a final indication of all courses of action, as the countries will reconvene next year to make further cuts to emissions of carbon dioxide, a main culprit of global warming (BBC). Some countries qualify as crucial figures and stakeholders,

especially the world leaders like the U.S., China, Russia, etc., who have significant influence on policy making as well as contributions to climate change. An example where a bad alternative was chosen was when China and India intervened to lower coal usage rather than the good alternative to attempt to do away with it entirely (BBC). Other major decisions include a U.S.-China agreement to better manage methane emissions and increase usage of clean energy, a plan to cut 30% of methane emissions by 2030, and a pledge to stop deforestation by 2030 with stronger funding (BBC). While these do qualify as good alternatives, they lack critical components such as proper policing policies for the deforestation pledge and larger contributor's participation in the methane cut, most notably China, Russia, and India. I agree with the choices and what they represent, but they need to be complete with assurance that they will be carried out fully. These oversights as well as the existing issue of climate change greatly affects those in poorer nations and regions with tropical environments, as those populations lack proper means to cope with the effects. It will not be long before major changes such as floods and temperature spikes reach developed nations, who carry the responsibility to enact positive change now.

However, since climate change is such a subtle and slow change in our environment, it does not generate a strong moral implication and cause urgent action like other moral imperatives do. Ezra Markowitz and Azim Shariff detail this conundrum in "Climate Change and Moral Judgement", noting why climate change is such a large challenge to our moral judgement system. As mentioned before, public opinion on how quickly climate change is occurring is still mixed, with only 26% of U.S. citizens voting that it is an urgent matter to be dealt with (Markowitz, Shariff). A potential explanation for this lies in recent studies focusing on moral psychology, which note that an important barrier to changing public opinion on climate change might be that current approaches do not utilize our moral intuitions, as they do not invoke a

reaction where we feel something needs to be corrected (Markowitz, Shariff). One main reason for this is that moral judgement is heavily decided by emotional responses, and analytical reasoning for moral judgement is slower. Climate change's sporadic and seemingly disjointed effects serve to discourage a quick emotional reaction, and is worsened by how it is not perceived as a result of intentional actions. It is seen more as a byproduct of certain actions, making it harder to consider as a wrong that needs to be corrected. Markowitz and Shariff specifically discuss this concept as "blamelessness" for the actions that cause climate change. Additionally, since people currently believe that only others who are far away, from the future, or both will have to deal with the consequences of climate change, the moral gravity of the issue is greatly lessened, leading to less action taken. I believe that these are the moral issues relevant to climate change, and these concepts can be extended to the relevant stakeholders and their interests.

Rather than analyze the behavior of world leaders/stakeholders the same way we view the public, it would be better to consider them from a businesslike standpoint. "Morality, Ethics, and Values Outside and inside Organizations: An Example of the Discourse on Climate Change" by Christina Besio and Andrea Pronzini discusses this perspective, focusing mainly on how morality becomes a medium for corporations and firms, causing them to either change their core values and consequent actions or simply create a facade to present themselves as proactive. Most of the referenced studies indicate that corporations that introduce climate change-related ethics policies do so to improve company image. While this is a common case, solutions sometimes exist and are pursued by companies where environmental concerns are addressed and profit is still made, a prime example being applying cleaner transportation and/or production methods to reduce costs as well as emissions. If these methods are not properly managed, however, the

companies may still benefit, but those in at-risk areas are far more likely to suffer. A carelessly implemented change in manufacturing could increase labor needs at a plant, or redirect pollution to other locations rather than eradicate it. The idea that the polluter, such as world leaders, does not pay highlights the need to achieve balance between national interests like economic affluence and the global population's well-being.

In order to compose a successful long-term plan for healing the planet's global warming crisis and assure national prosperity, we must examine responsibilities across global communities and their options. Though it is true that everyone is involuntarily exposed to the effects, they are unequally distributed and should be considered when listing solutions. Jonathan Patz and others look into these statistics and their implications within their article "Climate Change and Global Health: Quantifying a Growing Ethical Crisis". Currently, developed countries are operating on the concept of "natural debt", where they borrow the processing capacity of the Earth in regards to dealing with greenhouse gases and such, and are thus the most responsible for contributing to climate change's progression (Patz, et al). Poorer and remote populations are more vulnerable to the consequences, yet borrow the least natural debt. Thus, if we use this as a metric of responsibility, world leaders that are the greatest contributors to global warming should prioritize at-risk regions in their policy making. In addition, those countries can take internal actions such as revising their energy infrastructure to rely on cleaner sources, lessen dependence on automobiles by revamping public transit, and simultaneously monitor and manage the global energy system to prevent further damage. However, to incentivize these changes, we must consider the aforementioned obstacles to improving public opinion on the urgency of climate change. Some initial ideas include utilizing pre-existing values from either liberals or conservatives, such as the concept of purity that is often supported by the latter (Markowitz,

Shariff). We can also increase appeal to emotions, such as guilt over burdening the future generations, or by framing progressive policies as a prideful achievement. By changing how the issue of climate change is communicated to both crucial figures and the population they represent, we can expect to improve long-term sentiment over protecting the environment and more efficient and equitable policies.

As climate change's effects become more obvious, it is increasingly important that those in power take action to redirect the environment's course. Such measures are necessary as these effects are experienced regardless of location, though certain regions bear the brunt of global warming and its disasters. In order to protect these populations and ourselves as well, we must design our policies to prioritize everyone's safety rather than just our own. The decisions made at the conference were made with care and attention mainly to the interests of the stakeholders, namely world leaders and their frontal industries, but could have done more to solve the issues of climate change. Rather than draw up agreements that lack a defined date or a plan for enforcement, these logistics should be decided as soon as possible. Greater changes to lessening usage of fossil fuels and natural gases in order to lower greenhouse gas emissions should have also been prioritized, instead of clearly attempting to maintain the current energy system. Climate change is a universal threat, and should be treated as such by global organizations and world leaders.

Bibliography

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