

Beyond Science: Ethical/Religious Dimensions of Global Warming

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Introduction of Donald Brown *by Claudia Kern, Chair, UU Ministry for Earth*

Mr. Brown is currently Director of the Pennsylvania Consortium for Interdisciplinary Environmental Policy, an organization comprised of 56 colleges and universities in Pennsylvania as well as the Pennsylvania Departments of Environmental Protection and Conservation and Natural Resources. Mr. Brown also serves as Senior Counsel for Sustainable Development for the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. Before holding these positions Mr. Brown was Project Manager for United Nations Organizations, United States Environmental Protection Agency, Office of International Environmental Policy from 1995 to 1998. In this capacity, Mr. Brown, among other things, represented the United States Environmental Protection on delegations to United Nations that negotiated sustainable development issues including climate change, water quantity and quality, and toxic substances. Mr. Brown has also served in a number of senior legal and policy positions with the Pennsylvania and New Jersey environmental programs, worked as an engineer and taught philosophy, environmental law, and sustainable development at a number of universities. Mr. Brown has written and spoken extensively on the need to integrate environmental ethics, science, economics, and law. His most recent book is entitled: ***American Heat: Ethical Problems with the United States Response to Global Warming***. Mr. Brown is also director of the Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change. This program is a collaboration of ten institutions around the world interested in the ethical dimensions of climate change for which Rock Ethics Institute at Penn State University is the secretariat.

Setting the Religious Context *by Claudia Kern*

Are UUs prepared to address the ethical quandaries that global warming has set before us? In a world in which we must stabilize and then reduce greenhouse gas emissions to less than half their current levels, what will our role be in influencing the choices that have to be made? How can we insure that the choices made will honor the worth and dignity of the individual? And, at the same time, how can we protect the rights of the individual, while practicing a global form of justice and equity. By what means do we broaden the concept of justice to encompass not only human rights, but also the intrinsic value of plants and animals in the all-inclusive web of life?

At the heart of these questions is the metaphysical challenge inherent in our UU Principles - that of reconciling the one with the many – truly a central paradox of human existence. We are one species, yet we are many distinct individuals. We share one planet, yet we inhabit many different cultures. Within this tension between the universal and the individual, that we Unitarian Universalists are called to respond to global warming, reconciling our “manyness” with our oneness, with deference to neither.

Our world is transitioning from educating ourselves to the science of global warming toward finding solutions, and Donald's remarks today will make crystal clear that there is a critical necessity for a serious ethical examination of all proposals for halting global warming and

mitigating the effects. We as a religious community have an essential role in making this happen. With our statement of conscience in place, joining with people of all the world's religions, we must insure that deep reflection on the ethical dimension of climate change takes place.

As Unitarian Universalists, our principles give each of us a theological grounding for this work. We have strong foundations for considering the ethical questions that Donald will raise in just a few moments.

First, our honorable allegiance to the “inherent worth and dignity of every person” and to the rights of the individual make it clear that any negotiated agreements must treat **every** person on the planet as having equal value. When it is still a struggle for many to regard minorities, the disabled, the mentally ill, the poor, and other marginalized people as equals even within our own country, how will we expand our circle of community to recognize the intrinsic worth of every man, woman, and child on Earth?

Second, the UU commitment to democratic process calls us to insure that all the people of the world are given information and access to equal participation in the decision-making process. When the marginalized people and cultures of the world are not present at the negotiating table, there is no democratic process. When half of the world is under-represented in negotiations, solutions stumble or are not implemented because they are inherently undemocratic.

Third, as UUs, we state proudly that we stand on the side of justice. Yet, the crisis of global warming requires us to reexamine our understanding of justice, expanding it to encompass more than just due process. Global justice will be built on a consideration of what is just or right with respect to the allocation of resources, allocation of responsibility for halting climate change, and allocation of responsibility for remediating the harmful effects to both people and the planet.

And, finally, for UUs, our seventh principle, “respect for the interdependent web” is a lens that concentrates and shifts our perspective at a very fundamental level. Global warming brings the seventh principle into strong focus, for if we are to survive and if our planet is to flourish, we will do so as a whole or not at all. Truly, in this living community of life we are all one.

Unitarian Universalists have much to contribute to a new global ethos. We value diversity within the whole of the community, we honor the rights of the individual while revering the living system that sustains us, and we are committed to justice. Let us begin preparing our minds and our hearts to lead the way to new ethical choices.

Beyond Science and Economics, The Moral and Ethical Urgency of Climate Change

By Donald Brown, Esq.

I am greatly honored to have the opportunity to address UUs on the ethical dimensions of climate change. Hopefully it will be very clear by the end of my presentation why I believe that climate change belongs at the very, very top of the UU social action agenda.

I begin with a few words about why getting Americans to see the ethical dimensions of climate change is extraordinarily urgent.

The first cause for this urgency stems from the enormity of the threat entailed by climate change. Now I would guess that most of you know that there is now a strong scientific consensus about climate change. This consensus has certain elements: They are: (1) our planet is warming and this warming is already causing serious problems for some people. According to the World Health Organization, for instance, 150,000 people are already dying every year from new malaria cases induced by climate change; (2) most of this warming is human caused; (3) unless the world dramatically reduces greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions in the next 30 years, the world is headed for very dangerous warming, and, (4) it is too late to prevent some additional harm from climate change that will most harshly affect many of the poorest people in the world.

Although I would guess that most of you know this, I suspect that many of you don't fully understand why some are saying that climate change is not only the worst environmental problem facing humanity but also possibly the worst problem of any kind facing humanity. I think it is a safe bet that there are aspects of this problem that are still not well understood even by some of you here today despite the fact that you are likely among the more sophisticated Americans on this issue.

The first feature of climate change that puts this problem at the very top of the list of world threats is the size of the reductions needed to prevent dangerous warming. The world is now emitting 7 billion tons of carbon per year. Because world-wide energy demand is increasing at about 2% per year, the world may be emitting as much as 20 billion tons per year by the end of this century. Because GHG are long-lived in the atmosphere, the world needs to reduce the current 7 billion tons of emissions to approximately 3 billion tons in the next 30 years to prevent very dangerous warming. Therefore, the steepness of the needed reductions makes climate change very threatening.

The climate change feature not widely understood is the enormity of the challenge entailed by the need to allocate responsibility among the nations so that the whole world does not exceed the 3 billion tons global emissions limit necessary to assure that atmospheric concentrations don't exceed dangerous levels. This is the problem of equitable allocation. If it is assumed that each person in the world should have a right to an equitable share of the atmosphere, some nations, including the US, that have large levels of current emissions would have to make proportionality even steeper cuts than the rest of the world. And so, the second reason for the extraordinary seriousness of climate change is that some nations will need to reduce emissions in excess of 90 % if equity is taken into account in allocation responsibility.. If equity is not taken into account in allocating the world's emissions, the developing nations will not likely agree to a global solution.

The third aspect of climate change that makes it such a frightening problem is the fact that the most recent climate change science indicates that the warming we are likely to experience in the years ahead from increasing GHG atmospheric concentrations is greater than we thought just a few years ago. For instance: (1) it looks like the Greenland ice sheet is melting

twice as fast as we thought just a few years ago; (2) it now looks like the warming we will see from a doubling of carbon in the atmosphere is greater than was assumed just a few years ago, and (3).if this were not bad enough it looks like the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere is increasing at an accelerating rate.

For these scientific reasons, today's topic belongs at the very, very top of the UU social action agenda.

However, the main idea I hope to leave you with today is not simply the urgency of the climate change threat as understood by climate change scientists, but rather the urgency of getting citizens to see the moral and ethical dimensions of climate change. Unless Americans see the ethical dimensions of this problem, it is very unlikely that this country will commit to a response so urgently needed. It is in articulating the ethical dimensions of climate change that there is a special role for UUs

Now it seems so obvious that it almost does not need to be mentioned that climate change raises profound ethical issues. This is so because, as we have said, the atmospheric concentration of GHGs will determine who lives and dies and what plants and animals survive in the years ahead. On this issue alone, climate change raises the most profound type of ethical questions. Yet, the ethical dimensions of climate change are not fully appreciated and rarely expressly discussed in public discussions about responses to climate change. In fact, we frequently hear denials that climate change raise profound ethical questions. Just a few weeks ago, for instance, in commenting on Al Gore's movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, Greg Easterbrook said, in *Slate* magazine:

Gore says accumulation of greenhouse gases "is a moral issue... wouldn't deprivation that would have been caused by the absence of the use of fossil fuel also be unethical?

I could give many other examples from American media of blindness to the ethical dimensions of climate change. Much work needs to be done to enable Americans to see the moral dimensions of climate change. The idea I hope to leave you with today, is that climate change actually raises different moral issues, some of which are more obvious than others, although all of the ones I will touch upon are important to remove barriers to action. There are many practical reasons why we need to frame climate change policy questions as ethical issues. Among other reasons, framing these issues as ethical matters helps to make it clear why status quo approaches to climate change are ethically bankrupt.

I am working with Rock Ethics Institute at Penn State University and eleven institutions around the world to develop a deeper understanding of the ethical dimensions of climate change. By looking closely about what is being said about climate change in the public arena, we have identified eight ethical issues that can't be ducked in climate change policy-making and that are affecting international negotiations. A few of these ethical issues should be obvious to most people. Others are more obscure. I will begin with some of the more obvious issues.

Ethical issue one, the atmospheric stabilization question.

As we have seen the level of warming that is permitted will determine which humans, plants and animals survive. If warming is allowed to rise above certain levels -- according to a growing scientific consensus, about 2 degrees Celsius above current world average temperatures -- millions of the poorest people around the world will be at great risk from rising seas, disease, droughts and floods, storms and killer heat waves. As I have already noted the atmospheric GHG stabilization question raises the most profound ethical questions, literally matters of life and death.

Issue two, the national equity question.

The international community will not be able to duck the question of how to allocate emissions targets among nations so that total atmospheric concentrations of GHGs do not exceed very dangerous levels. In the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 180 nations, including the United States, agreed that each country should reduce its emissions based upon **equity** to prevent dangerous interference with the climate system. As we have noted if some developed nations take equity seriously, they will have to reduce their emissions by more than 90%- not just the 60 to 80% reductions required of the entire global community. Therefore the second critical ethical question raised by climate change is what does “equit” require of each nation in determining its fair share of acceptable global emissions. Unless Americans see that justice requires the US to commit to very steep reductions, they are not likely to support very large reduction targets so desperately needed. On this issue alone, getting Americans to see its ethical dimensions is strategically important.

Issue three, who will pay for damages?

A third obvious ethical question entailed by climate change, although one rarely discussed in the US, arises about who should pay for damages that we now know are already occurring or that the world will not be able to avoid as warming that is already in the pipeline is experienced. In international climate change negotiations, representatives of developing countries that are already being harmed by climate change are beginning to demand that someone pay for the damages that they are experiencing through no fault of their own. . For instance, last year in Buenos Aires representatives of small island developing states that are under great threat from rising seas, Inuit Indians whose way of life is now threatened from melting sea ice, sherpas from Nepal whose communities’ water supplies are disappearing as glaciers recede, appeared and demanded compensation for their damages. The issue of who will pay for damages is becoming a big issue in international climate negotiations. A related issue is who should pay for mitigation responses such as building of dikes and sea walls that will be necessary to keep rising seas back. The issue of who should pay for damages from climate change is beginning to become a big focus of climate change negotiations, yet it is an issue hardly visible in current climate change debates in the US.

So much for the more obvious ethical questions raised by climate change policy-making. I now want to direct your attention to a few other issues that raise vital ethical questions but whose ethical implications are not initially apparent because they are hidden in technical discourse about climate change. . Yet understanding the ethical dimensions of these issues is perhaps as practically important as the others for these issues arise out of justifications that are being used by some for not taking action.

The fourth issue, scientific uncertainty.

For over 20 years in international negotiations, the United States has argued that it need not reduce its emissions because of scientific uncertainty about global warming consequences. Even though there is now a strong scientific consensus that includes many elements including the fact that humans are changing the climate, there is still some uncertainty about magnitude and timing of climate impacts. The way the scientific community deals with the remaining uncertainty is to set upper and lower bounds for expected warming. Although many have been confused by this, the uncertainty that remains about climate change is not about whether we have an enormously threatening problem but rather about how catastrophic will the warming be. Some governments and organizations are likely to continue to use scientific uncertainty as an excuse for refusing to make the steep GHG emissions reductions urgently needed. This is so even though the most optimistic assumptions about future warming identified by the lower end of the range of likely warming will result in great harm to some of the poorest people around the world.

When the Evangelical Environmental Network tried to get Americans to see the ethical dimensions of climate change in a campaign launched in March of last year, they were attacked on the basis that climate change is a scientific issue, and nonscientists should keep quiet about it. The attackers cited scientific uncertainty about climate change for their position.

We need to get Americans to see that scientific uncertainty itself raises profound ethical questions, not just scientific issues. This so because the moral questions raised by decision-making under uncertainty are rarely identified in public debate.

Even if one assumes that there is more uncertainty than recognized by the mainstream scientific consensus view, huge ethical problems exist with using scientific uncertainty as justification for non-action on climate change. These ethical problems arise out of certain non-disputed facts about climate change. These facts include: (1) the potential for widespread catastrophic impacts for many around the world if the actual climate impacts turn out to be toward the higher end of the likely impact range; (2) the disproportionate harm of these impacts on the poorest people who have done little to create the problem. (3) the fact that some damage is already occurring; (4) the possibility that irreversible damage will be experienced long before all scientific uncertainties are eliminated; (5) the fact that the longer nations wait to act, the more difficult it will be to stabilize greenhouse gases at safe levels; (6) and, finally, the fact that the most vulnerable people have not consented to wait until all uncertainties are resolved.

The notion that one should not be able to use uncertainty to justify very risky behavior is a non-controversial ethical conclusion. Those engaged in dangerous behavior cannot justify continuing that behavior because they don't know for sure what the damages will be, particularly when the damages may will likely occur before all uncertainties are resolved.

UUs could help in the climate change debate if they could clearly articulate what is ethically problematic about relying on scientific uncertainty as an excuse for not doing anything about a problem such as climate change when so much is at stake

What the public sees in scientific uncertainty discussions around climate change are scientists fighting about the uncertainties, while the ethical implications of the uncertainty are ignored. I believe if we would have framed the debate about scientific uncertainty as an ethical question more than 20 years ago when climate change negotiations started, more people would have recognized then that despite some uncertainty, morality required immediate reductions.

Issue five, cost to national economy

The US and others frequently have defended doing nothing on climate change on the basis that reducing GHG emissions will create unacceptable costs to their national economies. This argument frequently takes one of two forms. Argument one is the mere assertion that costs to a country's national economy is unacceptable. Another argument asserts that a cost-benefit analysis that has been prepared does not justify action. This later argument was used in the late 1990s when the US was considering participating in the Kyoto Protocol. The public debate on these matters often is limited to a dispute about whether the calculations were correctly performed, and in so doing ignoring the enormous ethical problems with the use of cost in this way. Yet the ethical problems are many.. One, the economic health of one nation is not an adequate justification for endangering the basic rights of others to life, health and security. That is, all ethicists seem to agree that no person has a right to use other people as means to reach their economic ends. Amazingly, the US sole justification for refusing to participate in Kyoto was that cost to the US alone where to steep, an argument that ignored devastation to others. In addition to these straight cost arguments, there are

other serious ethical problems with the use of cost-benefit analyses as justification for doing nothing on climate change. A few of these problems are as follows: Cost-benefit analysis typically aggregate costs and benefits in analyses in a way that ignores principles of justice that require a just sharing of harms and benefits among people. In other words, because climate change harms some people more than others, and cost benefit analyses ignores this fact, the use of cost-benefit analyses as a prescriptive tool can lead to allowing some people to be greatly harmed if the costs to the harming party of changing their behavior are high. Cost-benefit analysis also usually ignores the rights of future generations. Most troublesome as a matter of ethics is that cost benefit analysis transforms the values of things that have sacred significance to some into commodities. It makes dollars in markets the sole measure of value without any recognition of potential sacred significance. For instance, it makes the value of life the economic income of the individual even in cases where the result of the cost-benefit analysis may allow people to be killed. Although the use of CBAs to argue against reducing GHG emissions raises many serious ethical problems, rarely are these ethical problems identified in public debate about climate change policy.

The final three issues that we have identified in Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change I will only mention in passing. Issue six is what is the ethical significance of a nation's argument that it need not do anything to reduce emissions until all other nations reduce their emissions? Issue seven is what is ethically problematic about the excuse used by some nations that they need not do anything now because less costly new technologies are likely to be invented in the future that will get us out of the jam of climate change. Finally, what fair and just procedures should be implemented in international negotiations to assure that the interests of the poorest, most vulnerable people are effectively represented in decision-making.

Hopefully it is clear that there are many important ethical questions raised by climate change. Yet most of these ethical issues are often hidden in scientific and economic arguments about climate change policy making. For this reason, we need for UUs and others to become involved in discussions about climate change policy and to demand that the moral dimensions of climate change policies be considered.

If the ethical issues raised by our scientific and economic policy tools are ignored, then climate change solutions will be unfair and unjust. In addition, the failure to expressly consider certain ethical questions is tantamount to a failure to consider many current barriers to progress in climate change negotiations. That is, not only could the failure to examine the climate change ethical issues lead to unjust responses; this oversight has practical consequences. For instance, climate change negotiations often have been stalled by disagreements between rich and poor countries about what is fair in creating global GHG emissions reductions strategies, yet the different assumptions about what constitutes fairness that are the basis for disagreements are not seriously examined. Therefore, express consideration of ethical questions may be needed to achieve the consensus that is urgently needed to achieve a global climate change solution.

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with some hope based upon my experience as an international negotiator in the United Nations system. Climate change might appear as such a large issue that a few people can't make much of a difference. Time and time again during the three years I represented the United States Environmental Protection Agency at the United Nations, I saw how a few committed individuals could change the course of international negotiations. To do this, they had to pay close attention to issues in dispute, know just a little about where the opportunities were to effect the process, and focus on issues that were actually in discussion. In other words they had to be involved in the public debate. It is not enough to debate these issues in UU churches, we need UUs to become involved in the political process, particularly to raise the ethical issues that are now buried in the complex languages of science and economics.

We also need people to work on climate change at all scales of government. That is, the challenge of climate change is so huge, that we need to get all levels of government that can have an effect on the use of fossil fuels, namely local, state, and national governments, to set GHG reduction targets and develop and implement strategies to reduce GHG emissions. We need people to encourage governments to take bold steps to reduce emissions.

It is very important for UU Churches to model responsible energy behavior, but more important, in my view, is to get UUs to become involved in climate change policy at local, state, and national levels. For those who become involved, they will be most effective if they articulate the ethical and moral problems with arguments made in defense of the status quo.

Let me conclude by mentioning an op-ed piece written by Bill McKibben in the NY Times that said he was beginning to wonder why Americans did not see the obvious ethical dimensions of climate change. Bill McKibben said it made him think of his parents who were good moral people but who did not get the moral significance of civil rights in the 1950s until they saw the dogs on the bridge in Selma Alabama attacking the unarmed civil rights marchers. Once, his parents got the moral dimensions of civil rights, according to McKibben, they really got it. They became advocates for civil rights issue. Our job, is to help Americans see the equivalent of the “dogs on the bridge” caused by climate change; that is the human suffering that will continue to increase from climate change. I ask you to help in the work of getting Americans see the ethical and moral dimensions of climate change.

This work is urgent and needs to be at the very, very top of the UU social action agenda.