

Is Climate Change One Problem? Culturally Particular Notions of Environmental Harm

Abstract

Drawing on research about the role of religious ideas and cultural traditions in addressing climate change, this paper concentrates on differences among concepts about what constitutes “environmental harm.” In contrast to the banal utilitarianism that typifies international political discourse about climate change, I argue that different societies understand the impacts of climate change according to a complex mixture of universal and particularistic ethical values. Drawing examples primarily from the different adaptation challenges facing the Global South—especially in the Himalayan and Andean Mountains, and the Caribbean and South Pacific archipelagos—this paper engages the cultural dimensions of environmental perception. Instead of framing climate impacts as essentially commensurable, climate adaptation efforts need a more thoroughgoing recognition of the cultural and religious contexts within which environmental harms are experienced.

Introduction

Quite a bit of ink has been spilled in explaining why the moral imperative for bold action on climate change incumbent upon the international community has been met with such underwhelming energy. In a word, the structural causes of climate change are similar to the structural impediments to robust international action. That is, the nations that benefit most from carbon emissions have been, to date, less impacted by the changing climate, and are thus disincentivized to act, whereas those nations that contributed far less to the atmospheric concentration of CO₂ have been disproportionately affected, yet are disempowered to lead mitigation efforts.¹ Exhortations to reduce carbon emissions are only partially motivated by self-interest, and instead center on moral arguments that assert the importance of collective action and of global justice. Climate change demands international attention because all people are affected, because the rich ought be obligated to protect the most vulnerable.

This is the ethical landscape of climate change painted in broad brushstrokes, and many abler philosophers have considered its various moral intricacies in detail. There does seem, however, to be an underappreciated aspect of this well documented dilemma. Specifically, the idea that international collective action is aimed at protecting the universal interest of human well-being presumes that climate change is a single problem. It is certainly true that climate change threatens human livelihoods and imperils healthy ecosystems around the planet, and such implications rightly establish a sufficient, generic imperative to action. But such action is not necessarily itself singular: climate change necessitates not just response, but particular responses. We use the broad heading of ‘climate change’ to describe not just a problem, but a range of environmental conditions and ongoing ecological challenges.² Climate change has radically different implications for different societies inhabiting different parts of the globe, each of which draws on their own repositories of cultural knowledge in order to grapple with the magnitude and significance of these systemic transformations.

¹ See, for example, Shue, Henry. “Subsistence Emissions and Luxury Emissions.” *Law and Policy* 15:1 (January 1993) 39-60; or Stephen Gardiner. *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

² Hulme, Mike. *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

I contend that with respect to questions of causality climate change is properly understood as one problem, but that with respect impacts, it is difficult to articulate a unified frame of analysis. Ethical discourse about the harms of climate change merits closer scrutiny because the plurality of responses to changing environmental conditions may not always be conceptually compatible. Climate change is a global issue, yet there may be commensurability issues for moral philosophers interested in adaptation policy. Put another way, we would do well to ask to what degree does the fact that certain communities understand climate change on very different terms present obstacles for those approaching climate change from the perspective of global ethics? How might an ethical framework adequately incorporate the diversity of culturally particular notions of environmental harm? I will not pretend in an essay of this length to develop answers to these questions, and instead remain content to discuss cases that highlight the challenges specific to adaptation ethics.

The Challenge of Adaptation Ethics

There is ample evidence that the increased concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will cause all manner of bad things to happen, and I do not wish to be misunderstood to suggest that this does not provide a sufficient basis for action. Rather, in contrast to the relatively straightforward justification for mitigation efforts (i.e. emissions reductions help abate many social and ecological harms), the ethical challenge of adaptation is less conceptually coherent. As David Schlosberg previously wrote in this journal,

the vast majority of the current theories of climate justice are focused on frameworks of prevention or mitigation, or on the distribution of the costs of adaptation to climate change. This leaves a crucial dimension under-addressed: how justice can be applied to the ways we actually adapt to the very real and growing effects of climate change on the ground.³

Mitigation is comprised economic reforms, changes in consumer behavior, and political mechanisms, each of which has globally distributed benefits. Adaptation, in contrast, is necessarily predicated on local environmental conditions and seldom indicates comprehensive international solutions. More to the point, adaptation is not an ethical category shaped exclusively by global moral norms: international political engagement with climate change is articulated through a set of “thin” values, including morbidity, mortality, economic wealth, etc. These are important metrics by which to measure the impacts of climate change, and they provide ready tools for citizens and policy makers to use in considering the global distribution of climate induced harms. Such metrics are not, however, necessarily the measures by which societies understand what is happening to their local ecosystems.

Cultural contexts shape the ways that different societies understand and respond to changing environmental conditions: around the world farmers, fishermen, and others who depend on their immediate environments for resources consistently identify shifting ecological patterns independent of their knowledge of anthropogenic atmospheric carbon concentrations. Many such groups rely on traditional ecological knowledge (generally called TEK) in coming to grips with such changes, emphasizing changes, for example, in weather

³ Schlosberg, David. “Climate Justice and Capabilities: A Framework for Adaptation Policy.” *Ethics and International Affairs* 26:4 (August 2012), 446.

conditions or animal behavior.⁴ Substantive anthropological attention to these issues has elaborated a broad body of knowledge about culturally particular ways of knowing about and understanding environmental processes.⁵ Such locally specific and culturally conditioned modes of ecological awareness are often conjoined with sophisticated understandings of atmospheric science, though link such knowledge with expressly local beliefs and values.

Many societies developed in close syncopation with specific environmental conditions they encountered, which have often remained relatively stable for the entirety of their cultural history. Cultures themselves are adapted, and even where robust measures might be adequate to preserve human life and secure economic well-being, climate change threatens to radically disrupt modes of life in ways not easily measured. But perhaps the most crucial dimension of culturally particular environmental views concerns the valuation of certain landscapes and ecological processes as sacred. In every corner of the planet, indigenous peoples hold mountains, forests, and rivers in religious esteem. The language through which these views are given voice and the bearing of such views on the life and well being of communities varies tremendously—the degree to which claims about sacred landscapes can be meaningfully compared is questionable. Suffice it to say that the cultural impacts of climate change are tremendous.⁶ Policy makers and moral philosophers have yet to fully appreciate the ethical complexities inherent in navigating a future where environmental degradation precipitates disenchantment and curtails cultural rights. I wonder if we can claim to have succeeded if we act collectively to curb climate change, but disregard all ideas about what constitutes environmental goods and harms outside the banal econometric framework that orients the international climate policy apparatus.

Climate Change in Cross-Regional Perspective

Two brief comparative cases help illustrate my claim that locally salient notions of environmental harm point to markedly different adaptation responses to similar environmental impacts. My aim here is to indicate the ethical complexity that emerges when we acknowledge that adaptation ought to be grounded in, or at least substantially consider, culturally particular environmental values.

One of the most commonly cited implications of climate change is glacial melt, a form of environmental change that is occurring at increasingly rapid rates and which disproportionately affects people living above the arctic circle or glaciated regions of the tropics. With approximately 120 million people living in the Andean Region, and more that 200 million living in the Himalayas, glacial melt is massively impactful, but how should we understand these impacts?

In the Andes, glaciers are said to serve as a kind of “gateway to local cosmologies,” reflecting the “wellbeing of the supernatural world.”⁷ The loss of cultural traditions associated with

⁴ For example, see Whyte, Kyle P. “On the role of traditional ecological knowledge as a collaborative concept: a philosophical study.” *Ecological Processes* 2:7 (December 2013), 1-12.

⁵ Crate, Susan. “Climate and Culture: Anthropology in the Era of Contemporary Climate Change.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011), 175-194; and Wolf, Johanna and Susan Moser. “Individual understandings, perceptions, and engagement with climate change.” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 2:4 (Winter 2011) 547–569.

⁶ Figeroa, Robert Melchior. “Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Losses” in *The Oxford Handbook of Climate and Society*. J. Dryzek, R. Norgaard, and D. Schlosberg, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

⁷ Gagne, Karina; Mattias Borg Rasmussen; and Ben Orlove. “Glaciers and society: attributions, perceptions,

proximity to glaciers—from key religious ceremonies to traditional beverages made from glacial ice—is acute for Andean societies.⁸ Hydrological dependence on glaciers in the Andes is accentuated by the intensive demands for water by rapidly growing urban areas in the arid coastal regions of Pacific Latin America. As in South American, the peaks and glaciers of the Himalayas are abodes of divinity. Local ecological management regimes take for granted the fact that ritual supplication is proper to environmental engagement.⁹ Although it is a threat shared by many glaciated regions, the issue of glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) is particularly menacing in the Himalayan region, where dramatic precipitation events and flooding are often understood within a theological frame of divine retribution. For reasons of expediency, policy makers should assume that religio-cultural beliefs and practices are an enduring feature of adaptation efforts at the local level.

Discussions about the communities on the frontlines of climate change often feature the low-lying atolls of the South Pacific as “stand-ins” for vulnerable cultures.¹⁰ A group of 40 small island developing states (SIDS) coordinate their efforts within the UNFCCC, with most of these clustered in the South Pacific and Caribbean regions. Communities in these countries face a common set of challenges—include sea level rise, which affects coastal communities around the world, as well as increasingly frequent and intense tropical storms, and saltwater inundation of onshore freshwater sources. These shared challenges have given rise to multilateral cooperative efforts, but despite such solidarity, there are important differences in the adaptation challenges facing South Pacific and Caribbean societies. Many communities in the region inhabit low-lying atolls and find themselves imperiled by a host of climate-related environmental impacts, which often compound preexisting ecological challenges, including, in some areas, nuclear testing, phosphate mining, and overfishing.¹¹

The South Pacific is a geographically distinctive region, in which island communities often possess unique linguistic, cultural, and religious traditions accentuated by vast expanses of ocean between island clusters.¹² The Caribbean Basin shares much in common with the South Pacific: it is characterized by significant cultural diversity and is vulnerable to tropical storm intensification and ocean acidification. In both regions, climate change is a driving force of regional out-migration as well as intra-regional migration. In the Caribbean, however, climate change further destabilizes the region’s fragile economy and undercut traditional modes of livelihood, including fishing and agriculture.¹³

Conclusion

It is reasonable that international consensus about climate action be built around “thin” values, but serious moral reflection about the ongoing challenge of climate change demands

and valuations.” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 5:5 (Fall 2014) 793-808.

⁸ Jurt, Christine; Maria Dulce Burga; Luis Vicuña; Christian Huggel; and Ben Orlove. “Local perceptions in climate change debates: insights from case studies in the Alps and the Andes.” *Climatic Change* 10:5 (2015)

⁹ Sherpa, Pasang. “Institutional Climate Change Adaptation Efforts Among Sherpas of the Mount Everest Region, Nepal.” *Research in Economic Anthropology* 35 (2015), 3-23.

¹⁰ Lazarus, Heather. “Sea Change: Island Communities and Climate Change.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012) 285–301.

¹¹ Lazarus, op cit.

¹² Adger, W. Neil et al. “This Must Be The Place: Underrepresentation of Identity and Meaning in Climate Change Decision Making.” *Global Environmental Politics* 11:2 (January 2011) 1-25.

¹³ Scott, Daniel, Murray Charles Simpson, and Ryan Sim. “The vulnerability of Caribbean coastal tourism to scenarios of climate change related sea level rise.” *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 20:6 (Fall 2012) 883-898.

Berry

a more nuanced cosmopolitanism that can take into account culturally specific “thick” environmental values. In many places, there may be significant overlap between such “thick” and “thin” values, but there is a clear need for deeper consideration of encounters where these two ethical strata are incommensurable.

The UNFCCC negotiations have articulated two primary vehicles through which to tackle the wide variation in climate change impacts: the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage and the Green Climate Fund. Setting aside important details about the implementation of these policies, these mechanisms each operate according to the principle that local and regional environmental harms can be financially remediated, that environmental harm is *per se* fungible. But what can be done about non-fungible harms, like the loss of cultural memory or the inundation and destruction of sacred places? These problems do not have easy answers, but expanding the power of human rights frameworks to matters of climate change seems an appropriate starting point. Environmentally induced forced migration is not covered by the United Nations Refugee Convention, nor is there established jurisprudence about climate related impacts on religious or cultural rights.¹⁴

Because the field of global ethics has long grappled with questions of moral incommensurability, scholars working in this area are well positioned to help articulate an environmental cosmopolitanism that honors culturally specific environmental values. Rich possibilities for an ethic of climate adaptation exist within established conversations about intercultural moral divergence, and environmental ethicists would be well advised to incorporate local knowledge about the impacts of climate change into their thinking. For socially engaged philosophical work to be normatively persuasive and of tangible utility to both political decision makers and grassroots advocates alike, it needs to “engender plural representations of Earth’s present and future that are reflective of divergent human values and aspirations.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Biermann, Frank and Ingrid Boas. “Preparing for a Warmer World: Towards a Global Governance System to Protect Climate Refugees.” *Global Environmental Politics* 10:1 (January 2010) 60-88.

¹⁵ Castree, Noel, et al. “Changing the Intellectual Climate.” *Nature Climate Change* 10:8 (August 2014) 763-768