

Second Equal Prize

How far is climate change a matter of international justice?

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In this essay, I shall firstly argue that climate change is not only a matter of international justice but that international justice is also indispensable for successful management of climate change. Next, I will focus on a central problem of achieving climate justice – the conflict of interests between acting out of self-interest and for the collective good. Finally, I will conclude that the achievement of international, just agreements requires the understanding of the harm our actions have on others and the cultivation of global responsibility.

Climate change is caused by greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the atmosphere - mainly caused by human activities such as burning fossil fuels and agriculture. Even though there are different calculations on how much exactly, there is common agreement that there is only left a certain amount of additional emission – the carbon budget – to keep global warming within 2 degrees of pre-industrial levels (Hausfather, 2018). Thus, time is pressing to reduce GHG emissions.

However, a severe conflict of interest makes an international mutual consent on reduction of GHG emissions difficult: high carbon emissions are correlated with economic growth, cutting down emissions threatens economic growth.

The countries with the highest living standards have contributed most to climate change (Shue, 2010, p.103). In contrast the developing countries, which barely contribute to climate change, are suffering most from the consequences (flood, drought) while being without means for climate change adaptation and mitigation measures (reduction of GHG emissions).

Obviously, people in some countries are harming others' countries by causing life-threatening living conditions from which they cannot protect themselves. This is unfair.

Kant based his ethics on the "principle of humanity" that we have to respect each other and to recognise others' right of self-determination. (Johnson and Cureton, 2022; Talbot, 2012, p.38). It is difficult to see how this respect should end with the border of a country. But it is obvious I restrict someone's right of self-determination by harming them. Therefore, our moral duty is not to harm other people independently of where they live.

Furthermore, according to John Stuart Mills' harm principle, liberty restrictions are justified to prevent harm to others (Brink, 2022).

The argument goes as follows:

- (1) It is unjust to harm other people.
- (2) Emission of greenhouse gases leads to global warming.
- (3) Global warming is causing extreme weather conditions e.g., droughts or floods.
- (4) Extreme weather conditions are life-threatening, and thus can severely harm people.
- (5) Emission of greenhouse gases is unjust.

Therefore, agents who are emitting GHGs above a limit to secure essentials for life should be held accountable for their harm.

Even though one might object that the harm was not done deliberately and the effects could not have been foreseen, this objection might apply to past emissions but cannot be used for recent emissions.

Anyway, even for emissions which have been made before the knowledge of the damaging effects, polluters are still liable for the damages. It is about taking responsibility and not about punishment (Shue, 2010, p.104).

However, international complexity makes it very difficult to hold someone accountable. Impacts of the polluter are dispersed, which makes it impossible to assign causes and effects accurately; a vast number of countries with different interests and possibilities is involved; and no global governance exists which can hold the polluters accountable (Gardiner, 2010). Thus, climate action requires an unprecedented international effort.

In order to address international justice, questions concerning various areas of justice have to be discussed (Barnard, 2022):

- Who pays the costs for mitigation and adaptation? (Distributive justice)
- Should those countries that contributed to most CO₂ emissions in the past pay an extra burden or get fewer benefits? (Corrective justice)
- Who decides fairly how benefits and burdens are allocated, and how to ensure everybody has a fair say? (Procedural justice)

Justice requires that countries who have been historically most responsible, who benefited from the emissions and/or who have the money to pay, have to bear the costs. Those decisions have to be made under fair conditions.

Some people may say that, when tackling climate change effectively, international justice could be neglected as poor countries are not the main polluters.

But climate justice has not only to be served up for ethical reasons: it is important to prevent further environmental damage. Poor countries do not have money to invest in mitigation - e.g., green technologies - and will increase their CO₂ emissions in the future to catch up with the developed countries. It is equally important, that all countries have a fair say, otherwise it is unlikely that those who feel treated unfairly will commit to agreements.

It follows that climate change is not only a matter of international justice, but international justice is indispensable for successful management of climate change.

Nevertheless, even if we clarify those pressing questions, emissions are ongoing and so is the harm to other people. Mitigation measurements take time and GHGs can stay for hundreds of years in the atmosphere. To prevent further harm, emissions have to be reduced drastically.

International agreements like the Paris agreement or the Glasgow agreement have been made to reduce emissions (COP26, 2021). But there is a gap between agreement and implementation of actions (Barnard, 2022). Without an institution enforcing sanctions or incentives, we are apparently in the mid of the "Tragedy of the Commons". This is a thought experiment by Garrett Hardin in which several shepherds use common land and each will "overgraze" the land for their own benefits. This illustrates that common resources are used by users to their own self-interest, even though they know they are acting irrationally as collective. (Gardiner, 2010) The common resource is our carbon budget; the shepherds are the different countries. As long as countries are in competition with each other, they will continue to emit CO₂ to stay ahead.

On an individual basis it seems to be rational to act selfishly. Our economy is dominated by this image of self-interested humans (Raworth, K., 2018, p.28). This is supported by Darwin's natural selection theory, according to which all our behaviour has some degree of selfishness as it is necessary to help us and our tribe to survive (O'Shea K., 2012). Therefore, the main difficulty to reach international climate justice is that each country puts its self-interest over the common interests.

One could argue that self-interest is deeply rooted and our main motivation for acting. I would argue differently, and suggest that humans can be instead motivated morally. Even though there is a complex interplay with other factors, harm is often paramount in commonsense morality (Williston, 2018, pp. 126).

“The drowning child” – a thought experiment from Singer – asks the question if you would help a drowning child in a shallow pond in the case of no danger for you besides getting wet and dirty. Probably everybody would answer this question with yes. Would it make any difference if the child was far away and we could help it without endangering our life, by e.g., reducing our energy or meat consumption? Most will agree that morally it makes no difference. The important point is that our circle of people, to whom we have moral responsibility, has significantly increased in the last decades. This requires the understanding of the consequences of our actions. The realisation that presumed innocent actions (e.g., the way we consume) can harm people far away, has not really sunk in. There is an unprecedented interdependency of the world which makes each human being globally responsible. (Singer, 1997)

For deontologists our moral responsibility is independent of how big our contribution might be. Utilitarians might deny the importance of individual responsibility in climate justice by claiming that climate change is such a big issue that actions of individuals are too small to make any impact (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2005). But if it is not our individual actions that cause climate change, what else is it? (Hiller, 2011)

Still, one could object that if actions are not collectively done and coordinated by institutions like states, it will have little impact (Williston, 2018, p.139). But if those institutions effectively want to implement just agreements, they need the people to support those actions even though they might have consequences for their lifestyle. Thus, it is necessary that everybody understands their entanglement in climate change and takes responsibility for it.

Therefore, education on the harm our actions have on other people and a new image of humans who act morally responsible are needed.

To sum up briefly, successful management of climate change is inseparably linked with international justice. GHG emissions harm other people, especially the most vulnerable. In order to prevent further harm, all countries have to cooperate with each other, which can only happen with just agreements. Successful implementation of those agreements can only be achieved by promoting our moral responsibility instead

of our self-interest. Therefore, understanding of the interdependency of the world is essential. Then, and only then, can we act morally and globally responsibly, which is a requirement for international justice.

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