

Essay #3: Ethics and Morals in a Time of Climate Chaos

More people are now recognizing that climate is an ethical issue. They write, testify, just talk, and sometimes even preach that readjusting our ethical outlook is the key for finding government and business policies that will help arrest the warming. But is that really true.

Ethics has to do with how groups should behave. Ethics drive group policies and their execution, including in government and business. The growing belief is that a focus on climate change ethics will help us get governments policies which encourage or force citizens to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, and push corporations to make their operations climate friendly. Maybe.

But during the last half-year I have come to the sad conclusion that our society won't act sufficiently in arresting the warming before it tips into a cascade of positive feedbacks (secondary impacts from the initial warming that make the problem worse). If I am right, this cascade will take our world into warming-induced chaos despite even the best efforts to change our ethical practices. As a result, I am now focusing on moral behavior – on my behavior and that of others as an individuals, in spite of climate change – as we move into a time of climate chaos. That will be the focus of this essay.

The good news is that focusing on morals sets aside thorny ethical questions related to climate change. Questions like: how much warming is OK; how much do we need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; is coercion acceptable in order to get people to reduce greenhouse emissions, and if so how much; and on and on. These ethical questions may once have been important, but they aren't as relevant if catastrophic climate change is coming regardless.

More important to me then is how I as an individual should act regardless of what comes. But even here, there are a plethora of moral questions we could explore – easily leading to confusing diversions. So I want to narrow the discussion down to a moral essence – to the two crucial questions I believe should drive our behavior as we move into increasing climate chaos.

The human behaviors causing climate change are our consumption of fossil fuels, products and services made with fossil fuels, and other activities driven by our desire to consume more (more meat, more wood, more electronics, and on and on). Consumption is key; and particularly in industrial economies, consumption drives our daily lives. But how does our level and type of consumption fit into a moral framework that relates to climate change? What are the moral questions we need to explore.

The first is: how do we individuals, particularly we who are economically privileged, stop the damage our greenhouse gas emissions are causing? The second: how do we (again we economically privileged) make amends for the damage our past emissions have caused?

Looking at these as moral questions, the emissions of others, the actions of the great energy corporations, and the inaction of our national government are not immediately relevant. Our behavior is the focus.

Looking at these questions from from a theological point of view, Christians, Jews, and Moslems all sign on to a moral code whose summit (at least for Christians) resides in the Ten Commandments. Three of those commandments seem relevant here: Thou shall not kill – but our behavior, through our greenhouse gas emissions, is contributing to killing hundreds of thousands if not millions of people. As we move through this century and beyond that number will rise – perhaps to hundreds of millions or more.

Thou shall not steal – yet our emission are stealing the stable atmosphere and environments across the globe it supports, causing the misery of tens of millions of people, and will eventually ruin the lives of billions – people living now and those from future generations.

Thou shall not bear false witness – and yet many of us have for years denied the existence of human-

caused climate change, or more commonly, denied that we needed to change our lifestyles to stop it. Some of us have advocated a position of outright climate denial; and most of the rest of us, despite the overwhelming evidence that justifies aggressive action, have supported a position of climate avoidance through our lack of meaningful action. So either by assertion or omission, we are publicly denying the importance of climate change and thus are guilty of false witness.

So from a theological point of view, my past and continued emission of greenhouse gases make me guilty of committing three major sins. I suspect most of you readers are in a similar position. And despite our words, we continue to do this daily and so are effectively unrepentant.

A more secular point of view of climate morality would look at crimes rather than sins. Oxford dictionary defines crimes against humanity as “deliberate acts, typically as a part of a systematic campaigns, that causes human suffering or death on a large scale.”

I argue that, given all the readily available information on climate change and its impacts, our continued greenhouse gas emissions is a deliberate act. And by our willing participation in an economy driven by the longstanding campaign of fossil fuels and industrial firms – one that urges us to keep consuming – we are a part of a systematic campaign that results in billions of tons a year of greenhouse gas emissions and is responsible for human tragedy of global warming. As a result, I and many of you are guilty of a secular “crimes against humanity.”

In either case my/our sins/crimes are terrible. I have helped cause the misery of millions if not hundreds of millions, and helped kill hundreds of thousands if not millions. The damage will grow as we move through this century and beyond. Yet for a considerable time I denied the problem and then denied the extent of my contribution.

For all of that, I need to redeem myself. How I do that won't be easy. Even discussing it may be difficult. But I'll introduce concepts in my next essay that I hope will help.

Respectfully, Allen Edwards