

The moral element of climate change

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Blake Francis, doctoral candidate in philosophy, is working to create a framework that governments could use to evaluate the moral implications of energy and transportation policies that affect the environment. Credit: L.A. Cicero

Lawmakers around the world struggle to create policies that balance their nations' needs and interests with their impacts on global warming.

Trying to figure out what to prioritize is a tough call for many.

Blake Francis, a doctoral candidate in philosophy at Stanford and a Geballe Dissertation Prize Fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center, hopes to help guide those decisions by identifying the harms of climate change and assessing their moral significance.

Through his research, he aims to create a framework that governments could use to evaluate the moral implications of their energy, transportation and other climate change policies in order to consider when it is morally justified for them to emit greenhouse gases.

"We often have debates in climate change about how to trade off benefits and burdens without

adequately considering what constitutes benefits and burdens – and whether all burdens are of the same kind," said Debra Satz, a professor of philosophy and senior associate dean for the humanities and arts. "Blake's approach introduces an important dimension – not all burdens to people count as harms."

For example, a wealthy company losing a small portion of its assets is less harmful than a person losing his or her subsistence – even if the dollar amount of the company's loss is greater than the individual's loss, said Satz, who is also Francis' advisor.

"This research is poised to make a significant contribution to our obligations to others in the context of the differential consequences of climate change," she said. "It's political philosophy at its best – illuminating, deep and action-guiding."

Chris Field, director of the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment, said the philosophical perspective on climate change is crucial for approaching the problem in an efficient way.

"As natural scientists, we know a lot about what controls the climate and what kind of impacts we're likely to see in the future," said Field, a professor of biology and of Earth system science and a member of Francis' dissertation committee. "But increasingly the important questions are human ones. What will people decide is important regarding climate change? Natural science can't speak to those issues and philosophy can."

Dissecting tough calls

As part of his research, Francis has looked at hard decisions governments across the world have made regarding climate change.

Some of the cases he has examined include the debate over fracking technologies in the United States and the energy crisis in Pakistan.

Over the past several years, Pakistan has been dealing with a shortage of electricity as a result of its weak supply and infrastructure that leads to frequent blackouts affecting millions of citizens.

The country struggled with the decision of whether to convert to renewable energy, extract more coal or continue to rely on importing oil for its energy needs. Officials eventually decided to extract more coal despite the adverse environmental effects.

"This has helped me get a sense of the stakes involved in these types of debates," Francis said.

Subsidized gas prices are another example of a moral challenge nations face, he said.

"Americans aren't paying the true price of gasoline," Francis said. "And I think there is something very worrying about the fact that because of government subsidies we are not paying that true cost. But it's complicated because we know that keeping gas prices low is really good for the poor and the middle class."

In addition to examining specific cases, Francis is studying [climate change policies](#) and their evolution on the national and international level to determine the current moral assessment the public has about actions that lead to [global warming](#). He is also researching the rules of organizations, such as the World Bank and the World Health Organization, regarding climate change, the restrictions they put on projects they help finance and how those policies were decided.

The information and insight Francis gains will be used to help create the moral framework so that nations can choose wisely when it comes to climate change policy. But that framework will require a long time and an effort from experts of all disciplines.

"Ultimately, it's a big interdisciplinary task that philosophers by themselves won't be able to accomplish," Francis said. "But I think there is a big chunk of it having to do with what counts as a harm, how to trade off benefits and harms and when emitting is wrong that I could have a say in."

Unhappy with current philosophical takes

Francis, who previously worked for the forest service in Arizona and Alaska, has been passionate about the environment since an early age.

He was first exposed to climate change ethics at the University of Montana before coming to Stanford in 2010. Francis said he decided to home in on climate change and morality after being unsatisfied with the take on the subject by current philosophers, who either talk broadly about how nations and individuals are harming others by [greenhouse gases](#) for their own benefit or suggest that humanity needs a new set of moral tools to deal with climate change debates. Some in the literature also simply deny that greenhouse gas emitters do any harm.

Francis said he believes challenges, such as air pollution, are similar to the complexity of the [climate change debate](#). Pollution is regulated but is not outlawed because its presence also means there is a production of goods, Francis said.

"Carbon dioxide emissions won't ever go away – we exhale it," Francis said. "So there is nothing inherently wrong with emitting carbon dioxide. But there does seem to be something terribly wrong with the scale of human emissions since the Industrial Revolution. But at the same time, we are all the beneficiaries of incredibly important advancements in medicine, science, infrastructure and other areas from the Industrial Revolution."

The current international discussion around climate change is complicated because different countries have varying perspectives on how to distribute the burdens of combating it, Francis said.

"I think there is a strong feeling among government officials in some countries that large emitting countries are more responsible for doing something about [climate change](#)," Francis said. "But there are also others, including members of our government, who are only concerned with satisfying national interests – even at the expense of others."

In the 1990s, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change formulated a

distinction between the developed and the developing countries by putting more responsibility on the developed parts of the world to curb their emissions, which were larger than those of other countries at that time.

But since then, the emissions produced by developing countries have skyrocketed. China is now the largest emitter of [carbon dioxide](#), although the United States is still considered to have produced the most emissions in total since the Industrial Revolution.

"Is China doing wrong by basically leading the biggest anti-poverty movement the world has ever seen?" Francis said. "To actually determine whether a country's emissions are morally justified, I think you have to go case by case. There is a certain degree of [greenhouse gas emissions](#) that could be justified by the benefits they produce."

Provided by Stanford University

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