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The True Terror of Climate Change

By now it should be universally accepted that climate change is a reality. Its occurrence is something that ninety seven percent of scientists support, and the amount of evidence in favor of its existence continues to overflow and overwhelm. Actions taken by the human race in the previous decades are responsible for the changing climate on Earth and actions need to be taken now to counter these effects and preserve the planet. This was the theme of President Obama’s address to Georgetown University in June of 2013. Obama’s explicit aim of this speech was to address the younger, college-aged generation and influence their thinking on climate change because decisions that they make “now and in the years ahead will have a profound impact on the world that all of you inherit” (Obama). While this was his spoken intention, a sub theme was evident in his address. Being that it was one of the first major addresses by a President on climate change, it also seems that he is taking aim at businesses, corporations, and anyone who opposes climate change in our country, and calling the audience to action against them. Throughout this speech the audience can observe two distinct forms of argument made by the Commander in Chief in order to persuade the audience of the seriousness of this ongoing change in our society and the importance of taking action immediately to counteract it. His points of attack alternate between economic and ethical incentives in order to drive his point to those listening. For example, he states:

Farmers see crops wilted one year, washed away the next; and the higher food prices get passed on to you, the American consumer. Mountain communities worry about what smaller snowpacks will mean for tourism -- and then, families at the bottom of the mountains wonder what it will mean for their drinking water. Americans across the country are already paying the price of inaction in insurance premiums, state and local taxes, and the costs of rebuilding and disaster relief (Obama).

This statement puts the resistance against climate change under an economic lens. He uses scare tactics and negative economic effects in order to try to persuade his audience to fight against this issue. Then, the President makes the claim that “the question now is whether we will have the courage to act before it’s too late. And how we answer will have a profound impact on the world that we leave behind not just to you, but to your children and to your grandchildren” (Obama). The juxtaposition of the two subjects, moral and economic, creates an interesting tension in his speech and can actually be noticed in the entire argument for action against climate change itself. Do these arguments complement each other, or create a tension due to their naturally opposing ideas? Is one method more effective than the other? The lens of both economic and moral arguments must be studied in order to advance these questions.

Setting aside the ethical and moral responsibility side of the debate, the first argument attempting to spur action against climate change is that of the purely economic perspective. This is one that President Obama leans on heavily in his analysis of the issue. When he states “we know that the costs of these events can be measured in lost lives and lost livelihoods, lost homes, lost businesses, hundreds of billions of dollars in emergency services and disaster relief” (Obama), the argument against climate change is put into a clear spotlight that seems to demand action. Higher prices, taxes, and costs for consumers and corporations are a terrifying prospect and will stir action towards finding more reasonably priced fuel alternatives. This forms a solid argument for standing up to climate change.

The economic argument has also been seen to be framed in a positive way. More specifically, the body of work in green innovation itself seems to be a strong argument for a switch to a “cleaner” fuel source. Recently, Mike Bloomberg wrote an oped in the New York Times on the topic of green innovation, identifying what he feels to be the driving force behind the modern resistance to climate change: the free market economy. Bloomberg claims that this change is occurring “because energy companies are providing cleaner and cheaper alternatives” (Bloomberg) to outdated fuel sources in America. From the perspective of a corporation, any possible way to save money, including switching to a possibly cheaper source of energy, will be explored. So, if prices of more “green” technologies are able to lower their prices on their own then they are effectively arguing for their own usage and benefits. This supports the side of economic arguments being more effective because they are able to, from Bloomberg’s perspective, drive resistance to climate change on their own. Just informing citizens, businesses, or corporations of the economic benefits of green technology is enough to drive this resistance and it does not require any federal regulation at all. This is, as Bloomberg puts it, “Economics 101” (Bloomberg), because if the benefits for opposing climate change is framed in a positive economic way, then there is no one that would oppose it.

Research into this effect on multiple businesses seems to agree with Bloomberg’s claims. Other than the obvious reason for this transition from fossil fuels, a decreasing price of green technology, many economic incentives exist to create this change. Looking outside the borders of the United States, a report done on twelve Canada and Italy based manufacturing companies adds more depth to why this trend is occurring. One claim states that “marketers are facing increasing challenges to address sustainability issues in order to attract, satisfy, and retain customers” (Jones and Levy). The movement by so many people to support climate change has created motivation for companies to follow suit in order to earn their business. Brought up in an article for Science Direct is the idea of not viewing climate change as a burden, but instead as an opportunity:

Companies at the vanguard no longer question how much it will cost to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but how much money they can make doing it. Financial markets are starting to reward companies that are moving ahead on climate change, while those lagging behind are being assigned more risk… Shareholders and financial analysts will increasingly assign value to companies that prepare for and capitalize on business opportunities posed by climate change (Jones and Levy)

From this it can be seen that there are positive externalities for businesses making the switch to green technology and more efficient methods of power. This leads to perhaps the most compelling argument of all for self-induced climate action: more customers and revenue. Businesses will always go where they can attract the most business, and if this includes a switch to alternative and environmentally friendly fuel sources then it will occur naturally.

Moving away from the economic argument, the simultaneous point is that of the ethical and moral opposition to climate change. Where the economic argument tends to focus on the physical returns for businesses as a reward for slowing climate change or the consequences that could occur for ignoring it, this argument plays on our role as citizens of Earth and our responsibility as people. When President Obama makes the argument that “the question now is whether we will have the courage to act before it’s too late. And how we answer will have a profound impact on the world that we leave behind not just to you, but to your children and to your grandchildren” (Obama), he is making a classic moral plea to persuade his audience. In the news today, the moral argument is commonly seen in the political landscape as the main dispute against President Trump’s decision to roll back previous actions against climate change. It is also commonly seen in an attempt to end the struggle and partisan divisions between Congress on how to respond to climate change issues. Roll Call recently published this plea to Congress in order to end this struggle, reading “Democrats and Republicans in local communities are coming together to fight climate change. So the American people must ask Congress: When will you step up on the side of everyday Americans who want the next generation to inherit a healthy planet” (Pallone). This argument clearly plays on the ethics of opposing climate change and stems from values and beliefs that every citizen has the right to a stable economy. It does not mention any reward in present day, like the economic argument, but calls to the audience to be unselfish and slow climate change for the betterment of the future. Recognizing that climate change causes harm to others on Earth and jeopardizes the future of our species is critical to the success of this argument.

The problem with this line of thinking is that it is polarizing: In ethical issues, at least two sides are always supported. Unlike the economic stance, which has a universal reaction from any businessman to follow the highest revenue stream, a moral debate can be locked in stalemate for a very long time. For example, the election of 2016 was considered one of the most significant ever for climate issues, as some groups believe that by 2036 efforts against climate change could be too late (Mann). Even with this knowledge present, President Trump decided to roll back preventative actions against this enormous issue in our society. Seemingly backward moves like this one show the stubborn stance many people can have on moral issues. In another article, it is claimed that “During his eight years in office, President Obama regularly warned of the very real dangers of global warming, but he did not sign any meaningful domestic legislation to address the problem, largely because he and Congress did not see eye to eye” (Feldstein). The bottom line is that moral arguments seem to not be effective enough on their own to end this divisive issue. While these arguments are put in the right direction, there is still shakiness in their basis and persuasiveness. As long as climate change is framed as a moral problem, there will be those who oppose its validity.

Interestingly enough, the most progress against climate change has been coming from those who see benefits to the process in an economic way. According to CNBC, multiple corporations have stated that “investing in a low-carbon economy will not only help foster a healthier environment, it is also a key to unlocking new business growth potential for the US and around the world” (Wong). Corporations including General Mills and American Electric Power pledging to “keep cutting carbon emissions for economic reasons” will create a powerful resistance to climate change (Wong). Viewing investments in green innovation and climate friendly fuels as a “win-win” for both corporations and the public is the attitude that will drive changes in policies the fastest. Jones and Levy support this view as “Perhaps the most significant change in the corporate landscape” and state that “Groups such as the Pew Center actively promote this position; indeed, the win-win paradigm is a key discursive foundation for a broad coalition of actors supporting the emerging climate regime” (Jones, Charles and Levy). If it seems to be moving faster in an economic sense than politically, would it not make sense to keep the problem framed in a business sense and allow the economics of the situation to take care of itself? Why are the moral arguments less effective than their economic counterparts?

On the surface moral arguments seem to be naturally subordinate to those based in economics. According to Donald A. Brown, Associate Professor for Environmental Ethics, Science, and Law at Penn State University, “Some go so far to assert that people don’t care about ethics and therefore only self-interest-based arguments should be used to convince people to enact domestic climate change legislation. In other words, they argue:”get real” only self-interest arguments matter” (Brown). Humans naturally seek self interest, so it would make sense that the economic argument is more successful in persuasion for actions against climate change. Especially while viewing Obama’s speech, this seems to hold true. The self-interest arguments made by President Obama seem to have more urgency than those based in ethics. Why then is the moral argument is still prevalent today? If it seems the economic argument is sufficient to provoke action, why continue to place emphasis on the ethics of the situation?

The contradiction in the coexistence of these two types of arguments, moral and economic, puts the audience of President Obama’s speech into an uncomfortable position. According to logic, an ethical argument should be decided with the option that makes the most sense morally, without the need for reward. Following in this logic, the use of an economic argument is, in itself, immoral. If personal gain drives decisions then it cannot be considered moral because of its departure from what moral really means: knowing the difference between right and wrong. The very fact that additional arguments, on top of the preservation of Earth for generations to come, are required to convince people to take action against climate change proves a general ineffectiveness of moral arguments as a whole. In relation to President Obama’s speech, his economic arguments would not, in a perfect world, be needed. This points to a deeper issue in America today: a naturally selfish attitude. Donald Brown continues this argument when he states "distributive justice demands that harms and benefits must be disaggregated in the case of climate change because the costs of taking action will be most pronounced on those taking corrective action while the harms avoided will be experienced by others” (Brown). The true terror of climate change will not affect those who have the power to stop it, but it will hit those who are poor and powerless in any economic sense. This fact is known, and it still does not influence those in power to take action. The true terror of climate change is that it exposes the naturally selfish attitude of those in power or positions of influence.

The way an argument is framed is perhaps its most important aspect. It affects who hears it, what part of their lives it targets, and ultimately how much they agree with the topic as a whole. In regards to perhaps the most important issue in the world today, climate change, the lens through which resistance is framed is exceedingly significant. If corporations and people tend to respond stronger to economic arguments, then specifically framed arguments will help combat this potentially fatal issue. Even if this promotes a moral dilemma, the most important thing is that climate change is slowed. Our national security is dependant on this fact as, according to President Obama, “The fact that sea level in New York, in New York Harbor, are now a foot higher than a century ago -- that didn’t cause Hurricane Sandy, but it certainly contributed to the destruction that left large parts of our mightiest city dark and underwater” (Obama).

Climate change is not only an issue for our future generations, but one vital to our nation’s security today. Instead of dwelling on how economic and moral arguments, when given in tandem, provide a contradiction that puts America’s self-centered tendencies on display, we need to embrace the economic role that will help us avoid this issue. It is imperative that the economy takes a role in making green innovation a more viable and usable option, like Bloomberg stated in his op-ed. Incentives to get businesses and corporations to switch to more environmentally friendly fuel sources are a must. The economic consequences, like the one spelled out in Obama’s address to Georgetown, must be made clear to every person with the economic power to affect anything. In today's world, no matter how cynical it sounds, people of influence simply are not likely to think outside of their own lives. They are, however, heavily involved in their financial decisions. While this exposes an even deeper rooted problem in our society, humanity’s natural self-centeredness, it must be accepted before we are able to tackle climate change once and for all.

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