

## Emissions Rights and Environmental Justice Abstract

Climate change is one of the most important problems of our time. One of the most important aspects of this problem is determining who should bear its costs. Climate change is, among other things, a problem of distributive justice. My aim in this essay is to develop a view about how to distribute the costs of climate change. This approach will consist of two claims: one analytical and the other normative. The analytical claim is that we should think about the atmosphere—specifically, its ability to absorb greenhouse gasses—as a scarce natural resource that commands an economic rent. The normative claim is that we should use *Georgist* rather than *Lockean* principles to distribute this economic rent. John Locke held that the person who first improves a natural resource can claim ownership of the resource.<sup>1</sup> Henry George, by contrast, held that improvers only obtain an entitlement to the value of their improvement, but not to the value of the resource that they improve.

In his *magnum opus*, George wrote: “*The equal right of all men to the use of land is as clear as their equal right to breathe the air—it is a right proclaimed by the fact of their existence. For we cannot suppose that some men have a right to be in this world and others no right.*”<sup>2</sup> Following George, I will argue that everyone has an equal right to use the atmosphere, and that this entails that rights to emit should be allocated on an egalitarian basis to everyone in the world. The Lockean view, by contrast, holds that citizens of nations that have been emitting for a long time—rich Western nations—should be accorded more emissions rights.<sup>3</sup> First, I will argue for my core analytical claim: that the atmosphere is (now) a scarce resource that commands an economic rent. Second, I will argue for my core normative claim: that the economic rents generated by the atmosphere, like all scarce natural resource rents, should be distributed on an egalitarian basis.

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<sup>1</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter 5.

<sup>2</sup> George, *Progress and Poverty*, Book 7, Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> Bovens (2011) “A Lockean Defense of Grandfathering Emission Rights” is a defense of this view.