

Benjamin Howe  
Final CEJS Report

The original purpose of my grant was to fund the writing of one journal article, but over time the project evolved into two papers: one on how to conceptualize the environmental benefits of a climate policy and another on how to conceptualize an individual's responsibility for helping to prevent climate change. Both papers will be submitted for peer review during the fall of 2016.

My initial plan was to expand an argument that I had developed in two earlier essays which criticized environmental theorists who argue that the United States must reduce immigration and tie foreign aid to family planning initiatives, in order to meet its environmental obligations. In both essays, I claimed that assessing the environmental benefits of a policy requires us to consider that policy's likely impact on future environmental agreements. My grant allowed me to expand my study of international relations theory and the growing body of critical literature in applied ethics on the use of cost-benefit analysis in climate policy debates. Put simply, my goal was to use this literature to articulate a formal standard, which had been assumed in my earlier papers, for determining what should count as a policy's environmental benefit.

Many applied ethicists, including John Broome (the lead author on Working Group III of the UN's International Panel on Climate Change) have criticized policy-makers' use of certain types of cost-benefit analysis for evaluating climate policies. Briefly, they argue that if an analysis discounts future commodities (such as grain) at a high rate, then it will lead us to undervalue the goodness of preventing human suffering caused by climate change in the distant future. Most of these critics argue that we need to adopt standards for evaluating climate policies that promote a balance between preventing harm to future people and not imposing economic hardships on current people.

In my paper, I show how these critiques can be generalized into an account of how we ought to think about the benefits of climate policies. I argue that the benefit of a climate policy can only be determined by considering whether it reduces emissions and strengthens international relations in ways that increase the likelihood of future international climate agreements. To advance this thesis, I distinguish between two ways that a policy can affect emissions: directly (by encouraging a decrease in emissions) or indirectly (by helping to create favorable conditions for further decreases in emissions). In other words, just as we ought to adopt policy standards that balance the needs of future and current people, so too should we adopt standards that promote a balance between decreasing emissions and creating conditions for future decreases in emissions. I concede that it is challenging to predict whether a given approach to climate change will strengthen or undermine international relations, but argue that we can infer reasonably that climate policies that exacerbate economic inequality or violate widely-recognized principles of international justice threaten the chances of future climate agreements.

While working to elaborate the distinction between a policy's direct and indirect impacts on emissions, I developed a similar distinction that we can make regarding personal emissions. An individual can affect personal emissions directly (by driving or not driving a car, for example) or indirectly by encouraging other people to increase or decrease their emissions. After working on this for several weeks, however, it became clear that I had enough material for a second paper and that the way in which I was drawing the distinction between direct and indirect personal emissions had too many implications for the current debate in applied ethics over how to think about an individual's personal responsibility for climate change.

In applied ethics, no one disputes that climate change harms people in a variety of ways, and no one denies that governments, at least the wealthy ones, have an obligation to reduce the emissions that cause it. But it is easy to find arguments that claim to show that individuals are not obligated to reduce their personal emissions, such as the ones they produce by driving a car or using fossil-fuel-generated electricity. These arguments generally fall into two categories: those that argue that individuals are not required to

reduce personal emissions because they can compensate for the harms they cause (by buying carbon offsets, for example) and those that argue that individuals are not obligated to reduce their personal emissions because doing so would have no impact on overall emissions.

In my second paper, I show that most arguments that absolve individuals of their responsibility to reduce personal emissions rely on an incomplete picture of how human behavior affects overall emissions and that this leads to an incomplete account of an individual's responsibility to help prevent climate change. I argue that a more complete reckoning of how we influence emissions leads us to think of individuals as possessing a duty to capitalize on opportunities to reduce emissions in general, not just personal ones. Unlike others who have criticized arguments that absolve individuals of responsibility for personal emissions, I do not claim that personal emissions are *prima facie* wrongs. Instead, I argue that in some cases reducing personal emissions is one's only opportunity to reduce emissions in general and that if this is so one is obligated to reduce them. But I also argue that many people, especially those in countries with higher *per capita* rates of emission, have opportunities to reduce emissions that go far beyond their personal ones and that in some cases it may be more opportunistic for them to maintain or increase their personal emissions if it leads to greater reductions overall. As long as we accept that behavior can affect emissions both directly and indirectly, intuitive moral reasoning leads us to condemn people for squandering opportunities to reduce emissions in general, even if they have already reduced their personal emissions.