

Review and Comments

One World: The Ethics of Globalization

A book* of Prof. Peter Singer, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., U.S.A.

Reviewer: John Burton
(061208)

In this book, Prof. Peter Singer has a chapter, "One Atmosphere," in which he discusses how principles of fairness could be applied to solving the problem of global warming. The following applies only to what he says in this chapter.

Singer starts by saying that both September 11th and the CO₂ emissions from gas guzzling SUVs are indicators of how we are now one world. The climate change to which SUVs contribute will almost certainly kill far more people than will be killed by terrorists.

In evaluating actions to avert climate change, the first principle should be one based on the past record of each country, commonly called "the polluter pays." This is the principle the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been using in clearing up polluter sites in the U.S. A clean (non-warming) atmosphere is a heritage shared by all humans. Since today nearly all of the greenhouse gases (the pollutants) have been put in the atmosphere by the people of the industrial nations, it is clear that by this principle it is their responsibility to put an end to excess greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

Under a second principle, the principle of equal rights, the people in the developing nations can increase their emissions until their total amount emitted as calculated on a per person basis equals the amount that has been emitted by the people in the industrial world. We in the current and the coming generations in the industrial world would be in effect paying for what our past generations have done. Singer suggests one modification of this principle. Since it was not known until about 1990 that greenhouse gases were a danger, we might in the above balance be held responsible for only what we have emitted since that date.

A principle of justice would be based, not on the past record, but on what represents justice to present and future generations. We then could say every human has the right to emit equal amounts (Singer estimates about one ton) of carbon dioxide equivalent per year. Under this formula, Americans would need to reduce their emissions to one-fifth of the present level, while those in India could increase their emission to five times their present level. While applying this principle looks to be a handicap for the industrial nations, we should note that it is much less burdensome than using the historical "polluter pays" principle.

The 1997 Kyoto Protocol targets on greenhouse gas emissions were set by negotiations among government leaders and are not defensible on any of the above principles of fairness. The provisions in the Kyoto Protocol resulted from the need to get the agreement of governments. One objection that the U.S. had to this Protocol was that it

required no participation by the developing countries, but it was understood that these developing nations will have some binding restrictions after the industrial nations have made progress in reducing their emissions.

Singer proposes a means of giving every country an incentive to reduce its emissions as much as possible and a plan that would also be in line with principles of fairness and justice. The basis for this is to accept a principle that each nation has the right to emit CO₂ in proportion to its population.

Each country would receive an emission permit in tons of CO₂ per year based on the number of people the U.N. projects it will have by 2050. This would be a tradable permit system. Under this system, developing nations would be below their quotas and would sell permits to the industrial nations. Developing nations would thus realize financial gain while the industrial nations, who would be buying permits, could avoid the very deep cuts that equality would require. A tradable permit system in a different form is allowed in the Kyoto Protocol and is somewhat similar to the U.S. tradable permits to emit sulfur dioxide that are bought and sold among U.S. utilities.

Thus every nation would have a proper economic incentive. The developing ones have an incentive to minimize the amount of their emissions and thus increase the tons of GHGs they have to trade. Wealthy countries have an economic incentive to reduce the amount of emissions above their quota.

Establishment of national quotas based on projected population also gives nations incentives to limit population growth, an objective that is desirable for other reasons. And receiving funds for being under their emission quotas would be helpful in reducing poverty in many countries.

In order to be certain that corrupt governments in developing countries do not squander funds received for selling emission permits, these sales would be monitored by an international authority answerable to the U.N.

Reviewer's comments:

It is increasingly accepted these days that the wealthy nations should make more of an effort to reduce poverty in the developing ones. Singer's proposal would be an effective way of accomplishing this and it would be seen, not as welfare, but as a fair and just program, so it would be more acceptable to the public than our usual type of foreign aid.

The recent Stern Review has a short discussion of the "polluter pays" principle and of moral responsibilities. It questions the concept of everyone having equal rights for emissions. It ends the discussion by saying of equal rights for emissions, "action on climate change requires international agreement and this is not a proposition likely to gain the approval necessary for it to be widely accepted."

Of course there would be difficulty in measuring net emissions of the developing countries, but in accepting Kyoto the participating countries have accepted a belief that they can manage this problem. It is fortunate that by far the greatest emissions come from the use of fossil fuels and national consumption of fossil fuels is already measured. The difficulty would be in measuring changes in absorption or emissions from forests and soils.

Singer recognizes the potential problem of a corrupt government in the developing countries not using such income in a manner good for the welfare of the people. His remedy is to have an international authority hold these payments in trust until the situation is corrected. I note that recently this problem is getting international recognition in connection with the payments that foreign oil companies make to countries that have petroleum. This is an effort to require accountability as to how these funds are spent.

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