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Marcus Hedahl

**DIRECTIONAL CLIMATE JUSTICE
IN AN ERA OF ADAPTATION:
DISTINGUISHING DIRECTED
OBLIGATIONS FROM CLAIM RIGHTS**

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Summary

About the author

Dr. Marcus Hedahl is currently a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at LSE after being a Charlotte Newcombe fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and a Fellow of Environmental Justice at The Kennedy Institute of Ethics. Marcus Hedahls research focuses on the relational and collective aspects of ethics, particularly with respect to considerations of human rights and global justice in the context of climate change. Marcus Hedahl holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Georgetown University and a BS in physics from the University of Notre Dame. He is a former research associate at NASA-Langley and a former Major in the US Air Force.

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Marcus Hedahl

Abstract

DIRECTIONAL CLIMATE JUSTICE IN AN ERA OF ADAPTATION: DISTINGUISHING DIRECTED OBLIGATIONS FROM CLAIM RIGHTS

One of the most common ways to justify the moral duties stemming from anthropogenic climate change is to ground those duties in rights. Considerations of such rights, however, bring with them theoretical difficulties, for historically the analysis of rights has held that a right exists *if and only if* there exists of a corresponding directed obligation owed to the rights holder. In a simplistic example, if Mary has a right against Tom not to be assaulted, the content of her claim is the same as the content of his corresponding directed obligation to her. She has a right against him; he has a directed obligation owed to her to do so. The claim right and directed obligation form an ordered pair.

Unfortunately, this traditional correlation poses a distinct problem for analyzing the obligations stemming from anthropogenic climate change, for many purported climate change rights appear to lack corresponding directed obligations. Climate change may violate rights, but for many of those most vulnerable to the adverse effects of a warming planet, there simply is not yet any currently entity that could have the specific obligation to make it the case that those adverse effects are avoided. There is nonetheless an important directional aspect of these normative considerations. When we fail to do our duties stemming from anthropogenic climate change we do not merely *do wrong*, we *wrong those harmed* by our action or inaction. Additionally, at least defeasibly, the concerns of those harmed by anthropogenic climate change ought to have more normative import with respect to our obligations than the concerns of other, uninvolved agents. Finally, those most harmed by climate change gain a type of special standing to demand that we do as we ought and to rebuke us if we fail to do so; they thereby ought to have the most say in what happens to them. In other words, the obligations stemming from anthropogenic climate change appear to be, in an important sense, *owed* to those harmed.

It would be helpful, therefore, to be able to capture the *directed* nature of these duties while avoiding the traditional correlation problem of rights and directed obligations. I attempt to do so by considering the possibility of *directional climate justice*. In short, I contend that there *is* a necessary connection between climate rights and directed obligations to those harmed by climate change but that connection is normative rather than descriptive. Normatively, rights ought to entail directed obligations. Descriptively, they do not actually have to do so in order to be properly considered rights.

Therefore, if the world is aligned such that some basic rights do not correspond to specifically-addressed directed obligations, at times at least, we ought to regard that as a normative failure of the world rather than as a descriptive indication that a right fails to exist. On such an analysis, even in absence of specifically-addressed directed obligation, we can *wrong* others. More importantly, we can *further wrong* those harmed by anthropogenic climate change if there is no way for them to engage in meaning second-personal exchanges about what is rightfully their due, *i.e.*, if they cannot prioritize the duties they take to be most important or demand as their due. These normative authorities are particularly important in non-ideal conditions where rights will not be fully fulfilled. In other words, the normative authority to have some say in how rights get specified and prioritized is particularly significant in our morally fractured world without reform, collective agreement, or justice.

Finally, recognizing this fact about the link between climate change rights and directed climate change obligations also has important practical implications regarding our duties stemming from anthropogenic climate change, implications that are particularly salient as developed nations move to a period of increasing adaptation. First, there is a duty to empower those operating with institutional structures to allow them to be re-

sponsive to the local demands of those who are harmed by the effects of anthropogenic climate change. Second, the duty to put in place institutional structures to meet basic rights does not rely solely on the ability of that structure to fulfill rights. So, even if one is skeptical of the efficiency of any institutional order (as Onora O'Neil is), or even if one believes much more radical, systemic, and even revolutionary measures are required in order to prevent the rights violations of climate change (as I do), there are nonetheless normative reasons to support institutional structures to respond to the rights violations associated with climate change.