



Negotiator Briefs on Cognition and Climate Change

No. 3 | November 2013

Rationality and Ethics – Are you a consequentialist?

by Manjana Milkoreit

This COP 19 issue of the *CCC Briefs* uses the current negotiation context and events here in Warsaw to explore the link between rationality and ethical thinking in the climate negotiations under the UNFCCC. The last issue of this series outlined that rationality can be understood as weighing the costs and benefits of various paths of climate action. It argued that depending on the types of climate-related costs a person is concerned about, they can use very different ethical frameworks. Here I add an important emotional dimension to the relationship between rationality and moral judgment, and link it to the concept of national interest.

Yeb Saño, the lead negotiator of the Philippines, is fasting for the climate. Making the end of his fast dependent on “significant progress” in several areas of the negotiations, he has not only provided an important frame for COP 19, but he has also chosen to put his own wellbeing at risk for global climate governance, and in essence for the benefit of people who are affected by the impacts of climate change. How can his action be explained? Is it rational – can he reasonably expect that his personal, physical sacrifice will affect the directions and speed of the negotiations – or is it an ‘irrational’ move in response to the suffering in the Philippines that doesn’t serve anybody but the media? Obviously, Mr. Saño is highly emotional in the aftermath of the Typhoon Haiyan, but how do emotions relate to rationality?

This *Brief* will offer answers to these questions, but will also illuminate discussions about equity, climate finance, loss and damage, and many other issues that divide developed and developing countries in the climate negotiations. Before diving into these practical issues, *CCC Brief No. 3* requires a basic introduction to questions of justice, which are often shrouded in equity language of the Convention.

Ethics and Climate Change

Moral philosophers and cognitive scientists have applied the traditional distinction between deontology and consequentialism to determine ethical responsibilities – usually of states – to take action in response to climate change.

Deontology emphasizes moral rules, most often articulated in terms of rights and duties. Consequentialism is the view that the moral value of an action is a function of its consequences alone. Put differently, consequentialism is concerned with bringing about the most amount of good as a result of one’s actions, while deontology cares primarily about an action being right or wrong, often regardless of the losses or benefits it might produce.

Key Lessons

- There are two main types of moral reasoning – deontology is concerned with norms of right and wrong; consequentialism judges moral behavior based on the goods and bads they bring about.
- Both types of moral thinking exist among climate negotiators.
- Two factors determine whether an individual thinks about norms of right and wrong or in terms of consequences: the quality of climate-related risks they perceive (*CCC Brief No. 2*), and the emotions they experience because of those risk perceptions.
- Emotions are an integral and necessary part of all human cognition; they are not an indicator of irrational behavior.



Deontology

Deontology - norm-based thinking - dominates the scholarship on climate ethics, COP side events on climate justice and occasionally the negotiation positions of vulnerable countries in the negotiations. Examples of such deontological norms expressed by climate negotiators include:

- Solidarity based on shared humanity.
- The obligation of the rich to help the poor.
- The duty to alleviate bads if you can.
- The individual responsibility of every affluent person, including those in the poor countries, to address climate change.
- The failure to act would violate the values of the human community, including mutual survival and solidarity.

What is interesting about these norms is that they do not obligate states or governments, but communities beyond state boundaries ('the rich' or 'the human community') or individuals anywhere in the world. None of these obligated entities is real – a formally acknowledged actor - in the international rules-based system. Although these norms are incompatible with the current rules of the international community, many negotiators believe that they matter.

The Convention's most famous principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR & RC) is also fundamentally deontological. Art. 3.1 UNFCCC acknowledges that different kinds of actors ought to have different kinds of responsibilities, because the conditions of the international system warrant such a distinction, in other words: it is simply 'right' to differentiate. For some, normative thinking is also at the heart of climate finance – it is simply right that some countries ought to pay for the mitigation and adaptation efforts of others – and part of the motivation for the complex debate about loss and damage.

The scholarly literature on climate ethics is primarily deontological and has developed numerous principles for distributing the burdens of emission reductions and adaptation. For example, four major principles have been put forward to address the equitable distribution of the remaining global carbon emission budget (however determined): grandfathering, egalitarian, sufficiency, and prioritarian principles. But none of these principles has been found to be superior to the others, leaving the question of justice (or equity) unresolved.

Consequentialism / Utilitarianism

In contrast, a version of consequentialism – utilitarianism – forms the foundation of much of today's economic and political thinking. It is the core of economic policy frameworks and reflects the current structures of the international system, in which diplomats are representatives of states who protect national interests – the idiosyncratically defined benefits, goods and services that accrue to the government, economy and citizens of the country. This is one of the key features and maybe challenges of the climate negotiations: diplomats in the UNFCCC are obligated to represent and defend the national interests of individual states, and as long as these interests remain at odds, the negotiations make no progress. There is nobody in charge of protecting humanity, poor people or future generations, or of upholding fundamental moral norms, like the protection of the weak and vulnerable.

Since both types of ethical thinking exist among negotiators, what determines who thinks what way? And what is Yeb Saño – a deontologist or consequentialist?

Explaining the Difference

As explained in the last *Brief*, a key reason for the difference in moral thinking lies in the quality of the risks that individuals perceive and focus on. Some negotiators are concerned about the loss and human suffering that climate impacts will and already do bring about, while others focus on the potential and experienced economic cost of climate



policies. If you believe that climate change had something to do with Typhoon Haiyan, you begin to understand Yeb Saño's challenge to grapple with the staggering loss of life, health and happiness in the Philippines. If you are a German politician, you have to keep an eye on electricity prices and the political backlash against the cost of the *Energiewende*. The former type of risk perception tends to trigger deontological thinking; the latter is strongly linked to a consequentialist framework of costs and benefits.

In addition to the difference in the quality or nature of expected costs – some being more morally upsetting than others – there is one more factor that shapes the relationship between rationality and ethical judgments: emotions.

Recent advances in cognitive science lend tremendous support to the idea that emotions play a crucial part in moral reasoning, including the moral acceptability of risk. This research renders untenable much of the Enlightenment view of human nature - the separation between reason and emotion – suggesting that emotions are an integral part of all human reasoning and reflection processes. However, the character of the relationship between cognition and emotion remains contested, as does the role of emotion in moral judgment.

Typhoon Haiyan from Space
Photo Credit: NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, Copyright 2013 JMA/EUMETSAT



Traditionally deontological thinking has been considered as purely logical or 'cold'. Moral norms are supposedly derived in your armchair, far from the situations they apply to, and therefore free of emotional influences. Consequentialism has more of an emotional flair – avoiding pain and anticipating pleasure are considered key motivations for consequentialist thinkers.

Based on recent research in moral cognitive neuroscience, this historical understanding has to be turned on its head. New insights suggest that deontology is in essence an effort to rationalize moral emotions ("intuitions") rather than a 'cold,' purely reason-based morality. Certain moral situations trigger specific 'hot' emotional responses in most human beings. This applies in particular to "up, close and personal" situations that are about life and death, that require an individual intervention, and therefore demand a quick, intuitive and intensely emotional response. Consequentialism on the other hand is a slower, more deliberative – calculating – reasoning process, from which emotions are often consciously purged.

A qualification of the 'hot deontology' and 'cold consequentialism' argument is in order. All moral judgment must have some emotional component, since no thought process is completely void of emotions. For example, in order to weigh costs and benefits, one must be able to feel and assign value to different costs and benefits. But while emotions dominate deontological decision-making, they merely influence elements of consequentialist reasoning processes.

Hot deontology implies that an individual's initial moral response to a problem like climate change is conditioned by the interaction between her perceptions of the nature of the moral challenge, in other words, whether climate change is experienced as "up, close and personal," and her evolutionarily developed emotional response to this type of challenge. Consequently different individuals can have very different moral responses to the same situation – a pattern that clearly characterizes the current situation in the UNFCCC.



Yeb Saño's perceptions make it impossible for him not to think of climate change as a life-and-death situation, right here and right now. His moral emotions translate into the belief that the international community has a shared responsibility to act decisively on climate change, that it is simply the right and human thing to do, and that it is worth staking his own wellbeing on it. While the calamity in the Philippines might make it somewhat easier for many other delegates to understand his response, it still remains very difficult for them to *feel* his response – the heart-wrenching loss is his and his people's, not theirs or their peoples. Their emotional responses don't match his, nor do their cost concerns related to climate action. Yet, neither side is irrational.

Questions like 'Who do you represent?' 'Who are your people?' and 'On whose behalf do you feel and suffer?' are vitally important for the risk perceptions and emotions that drive moral judgment in response to climate change. CCC *Brief No. 4* will pick up these identity issues, adding a third lens on rationality.

This *Brief* has outlined how cognition, moral philosophy, and international climate politics intersect. Depending on present risk perceptions of individual political actors regarding the threats posed by climate change, their cognitive-emotional-moral response will shape their political beliefs and negotiation positions in the UNFCCC process in very different ways.

About this document

This document is part of the publication series "Negotiator Briefs on Cognition and Climate Change" that builds on research conducted by Manjana Milkoreit since 2011. The series is co-sponsored by the Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiative (WSSI) at Arizona State University's Global Institute of Sustainability (GIOS) and the Waterloo Institute of Complexity and Innovation (WICI) at the University of Waterloo in Canada.



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About the Rob and Melani Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiatives

The Rob and Melani Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiatives are the result of a \$27.5 million investment in Arizona State University's Global Institute of Sustainability by the Walton Family Foundation. Within the Walton Sustainability Solutions Initiatives, diverse teams of faculty, students, entrepreneurs, researchers, and innovators collaborate to deliver sustainability solutions, accelerate global impact, and inspire future leaders through eight distinct initiatives.



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