

Ethical Claims about the Basic Foundations on Climate Change Policies¹

Prof. Dr. phil. Konrad Ott
Greifswald University, Botanical Institute

1. „The issue of climate change is ultimately an ethical issue.“ (Rayner et al. 1999)
2. It has been often said that there should be a serious *debate* about ethical aspects of climate change. Let us take this claim seriously and choose *discourse ethics* (Habermas 1983) as ethical framework. This procedural framework makes much room for substantial arguments. (Implication: *Arguing* comes first and *bargaining* later on. We are arguing not bargaining about the following claims.)
3. Cost-benefit analyses (CBA) should be a decision criterion only if there is nothing of moral importance at stake (Randall 2002).
4. If so, CBA should not be decisive in climate change issues. (Follows from no. 1 and no. 3.)
5. The scientific community should reject the (misleading) idea to calculate an *economic optimal* („*efficient*“) *climate path* (Azar 1998, SRU 2002, Ott 2003, van den Bergh 2004) and should better rely on a standard-price-approach.
6. If so, a basic standard has to be justified on ethical grounds. (To be derived from no. 1, 2 and no. 5.)
7. A commonly shared interpretation of Art. 2 FCCC could serve as a basic standard (Ott et al. 2004). (Without any such ground the COP probably will be trapped in prisoners'-dilemma situations as game theoretical modelling of climate policies have shown.)
8. The concept of a *political* objective entails the requirement that it should be specified in its decisive parameters (quantity, time-frame, actors, compliance).
9. The term „*dangerous*“ in Art. 2 is inherently related to concepts of *risk* (danger, hazard) which are related to ethical concepts (gain, damage, precaution, risk aversion, care). There is no risk theory without any implicit ethics (Skorupinski & Ott 2000). Therefore, no serious interpretation of Art. 2 can avoid to address ethical questions.
10. Interpretation of Art. 2 should avoid naturalistic fallacies. „Physical“ criteria are always related to implicit judgements about the acceptability of long-term risks. This is true for a „*Tolerable Windows Approach*“ or a „*Soft Landing Approach*“ as well.
11. Well considered, reflective and balanced *judgements* are a third category between strictly defined scientific proofs and arbitrariness. This is true for judgements about how to interpret Art. 2.
12. There are viable ethical strategies of „*arbitrariness-reduction*“ in order to reach such reasonable judgement. One strategy is to look for *ethical convergence*.
13. There is a plurality of ethical theories. Nevertheless, it is logically possible to derive same or similar judgements from competing theories. If this logical possibility is actualized, there is „ethical convergence“.
14. If all current ethical theories E *converge* toward the same judgement J, one has a reason to adopt this judgement. Ethical convergence counts morally and politically. (To refuse this claim comes at the price of either relativism or egoism (or both).)
15. If most, but not all ethics theories E converge toward the same (or very similar) judgement J, and if one wishes to avoid relativism/ egoism as well as J, one has to adopt the remaining ethical theories. (*Caveat*: One can not adopt a general ethical theory only *ad hoc*. An adoption of an ethical theory implies a bundle of commitments.)
16. The *general structure* of Art. 2 is this: Three basic requirements („constraints“ on food, ecosystems, sustainable economic development) must be obeyed simultaneously in the overall courses of

¹ These claims have been presented at a Workshop on Climate Policies organized by the German Ministry of the Environment (June 9-11 2004) and on a Summer Academy on „Energy and Environment“ at the University of Greifswald (July, 5-11 2004). The argument is to be found at length in a report written for the German Federal Environment Protection Agency.

actions which are devoted to reach specific non-dangerous GHG-levels in a certain time frame. These requirements are themselves open for interpretation.

17. The more moral concerns (food security, species protection, strong sustainability) are embedded in the three basic constraints, the more stringent the obligation to reach low stabilization levels will be.
18. Future generations have binding moral claims upon us. No-obligation-arguments fail (Ott 2004). Thus, a given set of deontological principles must be applied to classes of probable consequences (*deontologic approach*); the overall future hedonic changes which are involved in climate change impacts must be taken into account to its full extent (*welfarist approach*). Hedonic changes can be specified by the WEHAB-approach (water, energy, health, agriculture, biodiversity).
19. High stabilization levels can't be justified by *discounting* future events (damages). Unmodified general discounting implies the possibility of severe accounting errors because discounting entails a strong bias against mitigation (see contributions in Hampicke & Ott 2003). (B. Lomborg's so called "*Copenhagen Consensus*" was strongly biased in this respect, due to a (poor) paper by R. Mendelsohn.)
20. There is a strong *convergence* in utilitarianism and welfarist approaches towards low stabilization levels (Broome 1991, Lumer 2000). No utilitarian can agree upon high stabilization levels since the overall hedonic changes are negative at a high confidence level. (Utilitarianism has always opposed to discount future utilities. Maximizing the net *present* value is not a principle of ethical utilitarianism.)
21. To deontologists, there is a fundamental *obligation to avoid injuries* in actions as well as in institutions. To deontologists, CO₂-emissions can be regarded as kinds of indirect and systematic injury to other persons (O'Neill 1997). If the burden of climate change will probably fall onto vulnerable groups whose members didn't contribute much to the problem, this should be perceived as a case of environmental *victimization*.
22. Under a Rawlsian *veil of ignorance* which covers time and place, prudent persons would clearly opt for low stabilization levels. This option is a rational "minimax-regret strategy".
23. *Aristotelian ethics* argues that a broad agreement of different groups of experts counts as a presumption in favour of practical reason. There is broad agreement about a 2°C GMT target, a 0.2°C/decade objective and a 450-500 ppmv CO₂ objective (see overview in Ott et al. 2004). (To Aristotelianism, it seems acceptable to entail some general assumptions about political feasibility in such objectives.)
24. All approaches in *physiocentric environmental ethics* converge strongly towards low or very low stabilization levels because such levels can be derived from obligations toward natural beings.
25. In cases of global and unique environmental problems, the choice of criteria of risk evaluation should be independent from one's personal degree of risk aversion. Most ethicists agree that in such cases society should better err on the side of caution. If so, more precautionary ("tutoristic") criteria should be chosen (Jonas 1979). Tutoristic criteria speak in favour of low stabilization levels (Schröder et al. 2002).
26. *Result of ethical analysis*: Most current ethical theories (utilitarianism, welfarism, Kantian deontology, Aristotelianism, Rawlsian approaches, Hans Jonas' ethics of responsibility, physiocentric environmental ethics) suggest low (or very low) stabilization levels. There is a strong and remarkable convergence in "*climate ethics*".
27. *Hypothesis*: This overall ethical picture would not change if it would be enlarged to the realms of different religious ethics.
28. Who wishes to opt for higher stabilization levels *on ethical grounds*, has to favour *either* contractarianism *or* neoclassical economic ethics. If one makes such choice, one is committed to these theories as a moral person. (Seen as ethical theories, both approaches have severe moral shortcomings and flaws.)
29. All things considered, 450 ppmv CO₂ (or even less) seems to be a reasonable (political) number for an upper limit. Upper limits ("ceilings") are not states of affair which should be reached. There is nothing wrong to keep some distance to such ceilings, if possible. (*Notice*: This number is not entailed in the UBA-report (Ott et al. 2004). It is Konrad Ott's personal proposal.)
30. If one wishes to be sure to reach a 2°C target GMT-increase one has to opt for lower numbers since 450 ppmv CO₂ in conjunction with medium or high climate sensitivity would result in 2.5-3°C increase in GMT.
31. The requirement in Art. 2 to secure *food production* should not only focus on the dimension of global harvest but also on the dimensions of local or regional food security. If so, we should carefully consider impacts for tropical and subtropical regions. (There is new evidence that rice yields are to be affected negatively from rising temperatures.)
32. Freshwater is food!

33. The ongoing combination of a) destruction and fragmentation of natural habitats and b) ecosystemic impacts of climate change which put an additional threat on such natural systems is regarded wrong by all current approaches in environmental ethics. Thus, the interpretation of the “*ecosystem-adaptation*“-constraint of Art. 2 should be taken into account the general objectives and values of the international conventions for protection and conservation (Convention on Biological Diversity, Ramsar Convention, Convention on Migratory Species and others).
34. There are different interpretations of the “*sustainable-development*“-constraint of Art. 2 due to different approaches in the “sustainability“-spectrum (weak, intermediate, strong). There are sound reasons to adopt strong sustainability (Ott & Dörig 2004). (A general elasticity of substitution of no less than unity between man-made and natural capital is not an “educated guess” (Solow 1974) any more.)
35. To “enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner” (Art 2) means that economic development (growth, trade, investment) is to be restricted by a supreme constant natural capital rule, a rule to invest in natural capital, and by well-known management-rules for renewables, non-renewables, and natural sinks.
36. The wording of Art. 2 does not exclude the option to prevent a dangerous level by means of *adaptation*. The ecological, cultural and social dimensions of adaptation should not be underestimated by using simple examples as paradigm cases (as building dikes or growing different crops). (*Ceterum censeo*: The USA probably are more vulnerable than US-economists believe.)
37. It seems possible to judge different emission scenarios morally. The SRES-“story lines” can be made objects of ethically informed choice, as WBGU has done recently (WBGU 2003). From the SRES report, different emission paths are conceivable. There are clear advantages of *Scenario B1* (Ott et al. 2004). (WBGU does not favour A1T, but uses A1T for an “existence proof” that a 450 ppmv CO₂-target is possible even under conditions of high economic growth.)
38. If there is a low stabilisation level, future emissions are finite. If so, remaining emission entitlements are to be distributed among parties. There are ethical and political questions about burden sharing and allocation schemes (Shue 1992). There are different *equity-principles* to be applied to emission entitlements (IPCC 1996).
39. An argument for *egalitarian allocation principles* can be made as follows:
 - The atmosphere is a global sink for GHG.
 - This sink has to be regarded as being a global common pool good.
 - (It is not adequate to zone the atmosphere (as zoning oceans) or to model it as distinct “bubbles”.)
 - Industrialized countries have used this sink in the past and, thereby, made the remaining sink capacity scarce. There is some historical responsibility.
 - There is a *presumption in favour of equality* in most theories of distributive justice (f.i., Rawls’ “*Theory of Justice*”). This presumption can be applied to the case of common pool goods.
 - Under this presumption the *burden of proof* falls on the side of unequal distribution of emission entitlements. It is fair to shift the burden of proof that way.
 - Unless this burden can be met by argument, egalitarian principles hold.
40. No. 29 and no. 30 in conjunction with no. 39 gives you “*Contraction and Convergence*” (C&C, Meyer 1999).
41. If the argument given so far is considered to be sound, C&C has been justified on ethical grounds. (The argument allows to disagree precisely. Which claim(s) one would like to refuse?)
42. The following principles provide moral persons which *orientation* in climate ethics and politics:
 - $x \leq 450$ ppmv CO₂
 - $x \leq 0.2^\circ\text{C/decade}$ increase of GMT to allow for natural adaptation of ecosystems
 - Scenario-line B1
 - Strong sustainability (entailing a set of rules)
 - Egalitarian (per-capita) emission entitlements as long-term objective
43. Orientation allows to perceive barriers and obstacles as such.
44. C&C must be negotiated by COP. How can C&C become feasible under political real-world-conditions? Some tentative proposals of how to do *agenda setting* in this respect:
 - Don’t let C&C run parallel! We need different tracks, different stages and different speed. There is a Kyoto-track, a decarbonisation-track and an adaptation track (CAN 2003).

- Split contraction from convergence! First things first! Contraction should be first. Focus on more stringent targets for the second commitment period of KP (Kyoto-track).
- Stabilize and even intensify the pioneering role of the EU on all three tracks!
- Try to establish a body for another attempt to reach common moral ground in COP and WG II of IPCC!
- Consider a system of incentives for rapidly developing countries to accept restrictions on their emissions (Kyoto-track)!
- Strengthen the impulse from the Bonn Renewables Conference (decarbonisation track).
- Consider “clean coal” options carefully.
- Explain to the broader public that the true costs of climate change could be a loss of a tiny fraction of future annual GDP only (if the transition period will be properly managed).
- Don't try to resolve all problems of poverty inside of climate negotiations.