

Is scientific climate policy advice paradoxical and undemocratic?

A reply to Pielke Jr. from a philosophical point of view.

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In his review of two books by James Hansen and Stephen H. Schneider (Nature 464, 352-353; 2010), Roger Pielke Jr accuses both authors of unjustifiably mixing political advocacy and objective science. On top of that, the positions of these authors are charged with criticising democracy and favouring autocratic forms of government. Pielke seems to imply, quite generally, that it is undemocratic for climate scientists to call for action against climate change in the name of science. Pielke's allegations strike me as highly misguided. In the following reflection, I'd like to explain why.

Let us step back for a moment. Our beliefs and convictions fall, roughly, into three classes. (1) Empirical beliefs about how the world is like. (2) Analytic statements which are true or false in virtue of the meaning of the words they are composed of, such as, e.g., "Bachelors are unmarried". (3) Beliefs about how the world ought to be like, i.e. normative beliefs which, for instance, mark a state of affairs as morally good or an action as permitted. As David Hume has famously observed, normative statements never follow from descriptive, non-normative statements alone. Philosophers have coined the term "naturalistic fallacy" for any attempt to derive a purely normative conclusion from purely descriptive premisses.

Empirical science strives to provide correct empirical descriptions, including explanations and predictions, of the system investigated. Policy recommendations, no matter whether in the field of climate policy or any other policy area, are, however, normative statements. They prescribe which policy measures ought to be taken. Therefore—and that's a correct thought underlying Pielke's reasoning—policy recommendations can never be *deduced* from scientific results alone without committing the naturalistic fallacy. But does this mean that scientists, qua scientists, are in no position to argue that their findings recommend specific policy measures? I don't think so. Arguments for climate policy measures typically instantiate the argument scheme of practical syllogism and, hence, rely on normative as well as descriptive premisses: The descriptive statements identify the consequences of alternative policy options, and the normative statements evaluate these different consequences. So, while scientific facts never predetermine a policy recommendation, they clearly can *support* arguments which

favour, given additional normative premisses, one policy response over another. But that means that there is, contrary to Pielke's allegation, nothing paradoxical about a position which claims to support (and not: proof) a policy measure based on scientific findings. This is even more so if the normative assessment of the expected consequences is largely agreed upon. Accordingly, the empirical finding that some substance is highly toxic represents a strong reason not to eat it because the implicit normative premiss—dying is bad—goes without saying. I suggest that Hansen, Schneider, and many other climatologist should be interpreted along these lines: They see that ongoing GHG-emissions might lead to immense and abrupt climatic changes on global and regional scales. This is an empirical, scientific result. They see, besides, that such consequences can be avoided at reasonable economic costs. This is an empirical, scientific result, too. And they presume that the vast majority of their co-citizens agrees that suffering caused by extreme weather events, famine and migration should be avoided if the economic costs for doing so are reasonable. Again, I don't see that this stance is paradoxical. And even if Hansen and Schneider were mistaken in implicitly presuming that their co-citizens share the underlying normative assumption, they may still claim that scientific findings support an argument for mitigation policies. Of course, it is important to remember that such arguments rest on normative assumptions as well.

Let's now turn to Pielke's second charge: Is the position by Hansen and Schneider undemocratic? On the background of the above analysis, this accusation strikes me as absurd. The contrary is the case. I take it that Hansen and Schneider have a certain hypothesis about the common moral sense and about the fundamental values democratically legitimized policy-makers rely on, that is a hypothesis pertaining to how their fellow-citizens normatively evaluate certain future states of the world. But instead of bringing about the most preferred world state, Hansen and Schneider observe, their fellow-citizens' current behaviour will have consequences nobody really wants to trigger. So why is that? Well, apparently, because the public is unaware of the consequences of its actions. Or, it is misled about what is going to happen as a consequence of its behaviour. Climatologists who intervene in the public discourse simply try to correct these misunderstandings. The idea here applies in general: A clear, unbiased, well-justified understanding of the consequences of one's actions is a precondition for rational deliberation of one's choices, and thence a precondition for democratic collective decision-making as well. Instead of being undemocratic, Hansen and Schneider, based on their scientific understanding of the consequences of current collective behaviour, try to establish the prerequisites for democratic decision-making. That's why they

disseminate the information democratically legitimized decision-makers have to rely on in order to steer policies in collectively desirable directions. Thus, it is uncharitable, if not malicious, to label Schneider and Hansen, and, by analogy, many other scientists which contribute to the public debate, as undemocratic.

I've said that the case for climate policy relies on descriptive as well as normative premisses. That's what Pielke's critique seems to boil down to—although that should have been clear right from the beginning. In any case, this truism gives not rise to a criticism of climate scientists' practice to call for policy action. At least not as long as it is clear that the argument depends on normative assumptions as well. Interestingly, these normative assumptions receive far less attention in the public debate than the scientific facts which fuel the policy deliberation. The public debate proceeds as if there were a common moral sense we can rely on when arguing about climate policy issues. Consequently, disagreement about the policy conclusions one arrives at is typically traced back to disagreement about scientific facts. This leads to the absurd situation that people who have no understanding of the scientific arguments whatsoever feel compelled to challenge the scientific results. I wonder whether it wouldn't be helpful to pay a bit more attention to the normative issues underlying the climate discourse (e.g. Gardiner 2004). So, for example, people seem to care in different degrees about suffering which is temporally and spatially far apart. And people seem to evaluate uncertain consequences of their actions in different ways, as well—some seem to include possible outcomes and even unlikely events in the appraisal of their behaviour, others don't. Don't get me wrong: These are not completely arbitrary issues. Normative beliefs, too, can be poorly or well justified. Still, the debate about these issues is a completely different one than the debate about scientific results concerning global warming. It is a moral debate.

Some people might simply not care—and those will not be convinced by any scientific result whatsoever. But some probably do care, at least to some extent. And this prompts my final suggestion: Many people, I suppose, know that their current behaviour and, more importantly, the values around which they have structured their lives, are, in terms of the consequences they give rise to, morally unacceptable. Wrong.—Provided, of course, that climate science is roughly correct. Causing catastrophic climate change would amount to a major moral failure of a whole generation. This results in a tension. Nobody wants to perceive her- or himself, nor the society with which she or he identifies, as morally bankrupt. And to resolve this psychological tension, different doxastic strategies, which range from plain denial of

scientific results to paying no attention, are employed. What does this tell us? Maybe, to study alternatives for alleviating these tensions. Besides an explication and a justification of the normative basis for climate policies, we should try to find ways for transforming the diverse conceptions of a good life so as to embed (i) our moral convictions, (ii) the scientific results about the consequences of our actions, and (iii) the personal aims and values around which we structure our lives in a coherent system.

References

Gardiner, S. M. (2004). "Ethics and global climate change." Ethics **114**(3): 555-600.