

CLIMATE TALK

Carbon Emissions: A Moral Imperative

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On July 4, 1776 thirteen united states held, by unanimous declaration, that God created man with certain unalienable rights, among them being the right to life. This is a fundamental principle that has remained a part of the United States of America since its inception. This principle can be described as the sanctity of human life. Yet, I believe that environmental degradation is often overlooked as a threat to human life.

The tragedy is that while the U.S. has made such tremendous strides in creating a comfortable way of life for so many Americans, our abundance has become excess and our excess has become deadly.

Air pollution is just one of the myriad of environmentally degrading byproducts of the American way of life. The World Health Organization reports that air pollution is responsible for killing an estimated seven million people worldwide every year and that ninety percent of people breathe air containing high levels of pollutants.

Emitting carbon concerns the sanctity of life, but this is a perspective that has been jettisoned in American politics. If the basic role of government is to ensure the existence of its people, then it is incumbent upon the United States to take measures to ensure that human lives are not lost to pollutants. The loss of human life to (avoidable) emissions is a moral issue that requires decisive action and the upmost diligence.

Given this moral predicament, I have also come to realize one of the challenges to legitimate and positive environmental protection efforts. Environmentalists are often considered to be extremists. However, there are two issues with the premise that environmentalism is extremism.

The first issue is that unsustainable ways of life are resulting in the deaths of millions of people worldwide. *This* ought to be considered extremism—an extreme level of overconsumption. Gluttony and envy were once considered to be vices, but in their current renditions they have been framed as virtuous under the guise of abundance.

The second issue with the premise that environmentalism is extremism is that it is not a strong argument. To address this, I cannot think of better words than those of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the letter he wrote during his time inside Birmingham Jail, King wrote, “ But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label.”

King points out that people such as Jesus, Lincoln, and Jefferson were all once considered to be extremists. “So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists

we will be,” wrote King. Given the choice between the extremes of overconsumption and environmentalism, I would associate with the latter. Which one would you choose?

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