THE PROBLEM STRUCTURE OF CLIMATE CHANGE: OBSTACLES TO COOPERATION AND THE NEED FOR A DISCURSIVE TRANSITION

Author: Ronald B. Mitchell, University of Oregon, Department of Political Science and Environmental Studies Program, rmitchel@uoregon.edu

Abstract: The problem structure surrounding climate change creates material incentives for individuals and countries that generate a bias toward inaction. The existing rhetorical context is dominated by a logic of consequences frame that views it as legitimate and appropriate for actors to choose to continue or alter business-as-usual behaviors and emission trajectories based on the relative costs and benefits of alternative strategies. Within such an interest-based rhetorical frame, what action is undertaken is highly unlikely to be adequate to the task of addressing climate change. A discursive transition to a logic of appropriateness rhetorical context is needed to prompt aggregate actions that are adequate to address climate change. Experience with slavery, colonialism, landmines, and whaling demonstrate that self-conscious efforts by norm entrepreneurs can succeed in prompting such a discursive transition that, in turn, can prompt new international policies and relatively rapid behavioral change despite continuing interest-based incentives for actors to resist such change. Evidence of initial movement toward such a discursive transition is available in the climate change arena.

Draft of: Monday, March 30, 2015

DRAFT: NOT FOR CITATION BUT COMMENTS WELCOME.
The Problem Structure of Climate Change: Obstacles to Cooperation and the Need for a Discursive Transition

Ronald B. Mitchell, University of Oregon

Contents
Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 3
Two logics of action ............................................................................................................................... 5
  Differing decision logics ...................................................................................................................... 6
  Differing discursive logics .................................................................................................................. 7
The problem structure of climate change: an interest-based perspective ........................................ 10
Incentives and the predisposition to inaction ...................................................................................... 11
Power and contestation ....................................................................................................................... 14
Problems with a “logic of consequences” framing of the climate change problem ..................... 16
  Limits on population and economic growth excluded from consideration ..................................... 16
  Technological solutions are insufficient .......................................................................................... 18
  Incentives for most actors are non-existent or weak ....................................................................... 21
  Capacities and resources preclude mitigation or adaptation by many ............................................ 22
Is a discursive transition possible? .................................................................................................. 25
  Slavery ........................................................................................................................................... 26
  Colonialism .................................................................................................................................... 27
  Landmines ....................................................................................................................................... 28
  Whaling ........................................................................................................................................... 30
Case summaries .................................................................................................................................. 31
What would a discursive transition look like in the climate change realm? ................................. 32
Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 36
References .......................................................................................................................................... 38
Introduction

Climate change poses a problem that humans and human institutions are unlikely to address adequately from within a logic of consequences frame. Although some response to human-caused climate change may be possible within a logic of consequences frame, achieving the long-term and sustained emission reductions that typical emission goals imply will require a “discursive transition” to a logic of appropriateness frame. Such a transition would reframe how we talk about, think about, and take action on climate change in terms of whether actions under consideration fit with normative values held by individuals and the community and institutions within which they exist rather than whether they promote the interests of those individuals and institutions.

Recently, Keohane has argued that none of four extant framings of climate change “solves the problem” (2015. 23). Whether climate change is framed as mitigation, adaptation, infrastructure development, or solar radiation management, the attendant political dynamics generate “a malign politics of too little action” (Keohane 2015, 20). Keohane seeks a frame that would generate more action within existing “incentives facing political actors,” excluding from his search framings that “rely on altruism or concern for future generations” (emphasis in the original, Keohane 2015, 20, 24). This paper agrees with Keohane’s argument that climate change cannot be solved within those interest-based frames. But I argue that the interests and incentives that inhere in the problem of climate change are such that adequate action is precluded from within an interest-based framing of the problem. Politics is not always nor exclusively based on incentives but also reflects values, both with respect to what actions are deemed illegitimate and inappropriate and with respect to whether actors can, legitimately, explain their behavioral choices in terms of interests or values. I argue for the alternative rhetorical frame which
delegitimizes the failure to take climate action as “wrong” and foregrounds the harms our decisions impose on others, both now and in future generation, and that adopting such a frame is a prerequisite to adequately addressing the climate change problem. The “discursive transition” to such a logic of appropriateness frame at the international level is both necessary and possible, as evidenced in realms including slavery, colonialism, landmines, and whaling. In those realms, significant political progress was blocked within a rhetoric of interests and only became possible once norm entrepreneurs succeeded in developing persuasive ethical arguments that prompted a discursive transition, the institutionalization of new ethical norms, and eventual behavioral change.

The argument proceeds as follows from here. The first section below reviews the theoretical foundation for the argument in the distinction between a logic of consequences and a logic of appropriateness, both for decision-making and rhetoric. The following section makes two connected arguments: first, that the dominant rhetorical frame for discussing climate change is rooted in a logic of consequences and, second, that the nature of the material interests at stake in the climate change problem mean that individuals and institutions will not adequately address it within such a logic. Just as arguments against slavery and colonialism and for various human rights have not and cannot be made from within a logic of consequences, so too climate change. The subsequent section provides evidence from various realms to argue that a discursive transition from a logic of consequences to a logic of appropriateness is possible, that it can be initiated by norm entrepreneurs, and that, when achieved, such a shift can lead to significant changes in behavior that would have been unlikely absent such a shift.
Two logics of action

This paper builds on March and Olsen’s distinction between a logic of consequences and a logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1998). Two aspects of their distinction are relevant here. The first is that individuals’ decisions follow a logic of consequences, a logic of appropriateness, or some combination of the two, depending on the decision and decision context. The second is that the discourse in different social arenas also follows one, the other, or both of these logics. I argue that a) public discussion of and individual decisions regarding greenhouse gas emissions and climate change are currently dominated by a logic of consequences and b) that the problem structure of climate change is such that individual and collective decisions made within a logic of consequences necessarily will be inadequate in number and magnitude to the task posed by climate change. A discursive transition/rhetorical shift to discussing climate change in logic of appropriateness terms would create more propitious conditions for taking significant climate action. I briefly delineate four examples of discursive transitions that occurred and moved issues in which rhetoric had been dominated by a logic of consequences to being dominated by a logic of appropriateness, leading to subsequent, significant movement toward the goals of those advocating behavioral change. Put simply, it may not be in the material and instrumental interests (narrowly-defined) of powerful individuals or powerful states to take action on climate change; the terms of debate have to switch from whether climate-protecting actions are “in our interests or not” to whether they are “consistent with our values or not.” It requires a shift from a discourse conducted in terms of costs and benefits to one conducted in terms of right and wrong. Experience with slavery, human rights, and landmines all demonstrate that such transitions are rarely easy or quick but are possible.
Differing decision logics

Many individual and collective decisions and much of social discourse reflect a logic of consequences. In essence, March and Olsen equate a “logic of consequences” with the standard model of rational economic decision-making. Individuals (and collectivities) are assumed to choose behaviors by calculating the relative costs and benefits of available alternatives, given their exogenous values, preferences, and interests. By contrast, they use “logic of appropriateness” to refer to decision-making in which “behavior in a specific situation is said to follow from the rules that govern the appropriate course of action for a given role or identity” (Balsiger 2007, 538). Rather than evaluating the consequences of alternative actions, people and institutions evaluate the appropriateness of alternative actions for themselves in a given social situation. Although social norms and rules, individual roles and identities, and social contexts play large roles in such decisions, they often do so in the background because these aspects of the decision context assume a “taken for granted” quality (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

These alternative logics influence not only how we model the internal decision-making processes of individuals but also our expectations regarding the social interactions surrounding such decision-making. And, although it proves heuristically useful to think of these as dichotomous ideal types, many decisions can be best understood as reflecting a combination and interaction of the two logics. A logic of appropriateness often serves more to exclude actions from consideration rather than to dictate the choice among those under consideration. Such a logic prunes “inappropriate” alternatives from those that are nominally available, while the calculations characteristic of a logic of consequences determine the choice among the resultant subset. In some cases, this pruning process may occur through a non-conscious process in which certain actions are simply not considered, without any assessment of or regard to the costs and
benefits of taking such an action. Thus, some actions are considered so inappropriate or illegitimate for almost all actors in almost all settings, that they are not even considered unless unusual circumstances prompt conscious calculation of whether actions that are generally “off the table” might nonetheless be appropriate in the present context. At times, however, a logic of appropriateness can influence decisions through two more conscious types of mental processing. In one type, a logic of appropriateness can influence actors who accept extant normative structures but still must assess which available alternatives best match a) relevant norms of behavior for the given context and b) that actor’s existing (or desired) identity. In the other type, a logic of appropriateness can influence those actors who have yet to fully accept extant norms by requiring them to consider the social repercussions of their choice between socially appropriate and socially inappropriate alternatives. This mechanism involves the “calculation” considered characteristic of a logic of consequences but, here, the calculation is weighing the social consequences of violating social norms (disapproval, etc.) rather than the material consequences that are central to the logic of consequences paradigm.

Differing discursive logics

The logic of consequences and logic of appropriateness paradigms make different assumptions about—and derive different observable implications—for social rhetoric as well as for individual decision-making. Differences in social rhetoric are best understood in the context of efforts at persuasion within an institution, i.e., in the social shape that arguments take (Risse 2000). Within a social context or international institution dominated by a logic of consequences, efforts at persuasion are likely to reflect certain discursive norms. A silent “meta-norm” of such contexts is that it is deemed appropriate for an actor to choose between supporting or opposing
action based on their private calculation of the relative costs and benefits of their available options. For example, states typically have conducted international negotiations on overfishing or transboundary pollution in terms of a tradeoff between the economic costs of action and the environmental costs of inaction, with the stringency and type of regulations dependent on balancing those concerns. Equally in such contexts, efforts to persuade an actor to alter their position are dominated by arguments regarding those costs and benefits, highlighting to targeted actors that the information they have on the options available to them or the respective costs and benefits of those options are inaccurate, incomplete, or uncertain. That is, persuasion in such contexts largely takes place in terms reflective of, and consistent with, a logic of consequences.

In arenas dominated by a logic of appropriateness, by contrast, the silent meta-norm is that it is illegitimate to derive one’s position in support or opposition to action from how that impacts one’s material interests. One’s position is expected to reflect normative commitments, and to be made in terms of what is “right” vs. “wrong” (rather than what furthers or impedes self-interested material gains). Likewise, arguments to induce others to alter their positions—and those designed to resist pressures from others to alter one’s own—are expected to derive from higher-order norms. An extensive literature exists on the notion of rhetorical entrapment, in which actors must support self-interested positions with norm-based arguments because of the terms of debate deemed legitimate within the institution or context they find themselves (Risse et al. 1999; Schimmelfennig 2001). Standards of legitimacy oblige actors “to justify their political goals” by reference to “institutionalized identity, values, and norms” (Schimmelfennig 2001, 63). Rhetoric influences outcomes in such settings because certain positions are relatively easy to support by reference to (“resonate with”) larger and broadly-accepted norms while other positions are difficult or impossible to support in such terms.
As states increasingly defend their interest-based choices through verbal support for certain norms, that norm gains strength; this, in turn, makes it yet more difficult for those who oppose institutional action to do so in socially-legitimate rhetorical terms. As Schimelfennig argues with respect to opposition to European Union enlargement, states found it “difficult to attack the pro-enlargement arguments on legitimate grounds” (Schimmelfennig 2001, 73). “This strategic use of norm-based arguments in pursuit of one’s self-interest is rhetorical action” (Schimmelfennig 2001, 63). Rhetorical action “has the potential to modify the collective outcome that would have resulted from constellations of interests and power alone” (Schimmelfennig 2001, 64).

Specifically, a shift from a discourse associated with a logic of consequences to one associated with a logic of appropriateness “changes the structure of bargaining power in favor of those actors that possess and pursue preferences in line with, though not necessarily inspired by, the standard of legitimacy” (Schimmelfennig 2001, 64). Such shifts in rhetoric, therefore, foster the negotiation of collective policies that are not merely the codification of existing power and interests expected by realists but, instead, reflect a collective aspiration to reconstruct—rather than to reproduce—existing outcomes.

A discursive transition from a logic of consequences to a logic of appropriateness can influence not only individual states’ negotiating positions and collectively-negotiated outcomes but can also influence subsequent behaviors through the mechanism of “naming and shaming” (Chayes and Chayes 1993). As Schimmelfennig notes, “The shaming mechanism is not only compatible with but also logically depends on the assumptions that actors possess and pursue selfish, norm-violating interests and that they do not follow a ‘logic of appropriateness’ except under social pressure. Finally, shaming through rhetorical action does not equal persuasion. The actors under social pressure (usually) do not change their interests; they only refrain from
illegitimate behavior. Successful rhetorical action silences the opposition to, without bringing about a substantive consensus on, a norm-conforming policy” (Schimmelfennig 2001, 65). Yet, these forces can, if slowly, prompt significant behavioral change.

The transition itself consists of an initial stage of “rhetorical commitment,” a second stage of “rhetorical argumentation,” and a third stage of “rhetorical entrapment” (Schimmelfennig 2001). To the extent pro-change actors adopt such strategies and succeed in execution them, a discursive transition occurs that, over time, makes it increasingly difficult for anti-change actors to voice rhetorical commitments opposed to the dominant rhetorical frame. Further, once the previously-dominant interest-based frame has been replaced, opponents of action find themselves pressed to pay lip-service to, and frame their own behaviors in terms of, norms. This provides the rhetorical lever for pro-change actors to identify the disconnect between their behavior and their voiced rhetorical commitments, providing the impetus for behavioral change.

**The problem structure of climate change: an interest-based perspective**

Prior scholarship has provided a strong basis for categorizing climate change as a “wicked” problem, a problem that has certain features that make it particularly challenging to resolve (Rittel and Webber 1973; Brown et al. 2010). Indeed, one contribution to this debate argues that climate change is a “super-wicked” problem in which time is running out, those seeking to end the problem also cause it, no central authority exists, and policies discount the future irrationally (Levin et al. 2012). Those authors derive from their analysis, much as does Keohane, an interest-based argument that we must “find our future selves” through “applied forward reasoning” that will prompt policies characterized by lock-in and self-reinforcing characteristics that prove sticky once adopted (Levin et al. 2012). Although they mention the role that changes in values
and norms could play in addressing climate change, they do so only briefly. Here, I argue that altering the discursive framing is actually a necessary condition for making the changes requisite to adequately addressing climate change. The present section documents various ways in which the causes and impacts of climate change create a constellation of material interests that predispose almost all actors, but particularly powerful actors, either to oppose any response or to take actions that fall far short of an adequate response to the climate change problem. In addition, this section delineates the set of backgrounded normative assumptions in the climate debate as well as various features of human psychology that reinforce the incentive-based bias toward inaction inherent in climate change.

**Incentives and the predisposition to inaction**

Put bluntly, the costs and benefits of taking action on climate change relative to not taking action favor the latter. In economic terminology, climate change arises from a negative externality in which those engaged in burning fossil fuels reap the benefits of doing so but displace much of the associated costs onto others. That displacement is both temporal and spatial. It is temporal in that reductions in carbon emissions require incurring a certain cost in the present to reap an uncertain benefit in the future. Economic theory clarifies the financial rationality of discounting future and/or uncertain benefits. Psychology theory further clarifies that people actually engage in “excessive discounting of the future” because they attend more to their “present self” than their “future self” (Ersner-Hershfield et al. 2009; Swim et al. 2009, 42; Ersner-Hershfield et al. 2011). The temporal displacement relevant to climate change involves a requirement for “investments” in reducing emissions that will generate environmental benefits that will “not become apparent for at least several decades” (U.S. Global Change Research
Program 2009, 15). Yet, this bodes poorly for climate action because people regularly underinvest in their own future, whether with respect to their retirement or, in the environmental realm, in insulating their homes.

Climate change couples temporal displacement with both spatial and social displacement. The global mixing of greenhouse gases (GHGs) mean that their effects are dispersed globally, creating a disconnect between where GHGs are emitted and where their effects are felt. Even absent temporal displacement, in the effort to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of their behaviors, people commonly displace environmental damage spatially, whether that involves individuals putting their trash out at the curb or industrialized countries shipping their wastes to developing countries. Not surprisingly, the flow of such spatial displacement follows channels generated by social and resource inequities, with richer countries and social strata displacing their pollution on poorer ones, as highlighted by the environmental justice literature (e.g., see Wapner 1997, 2002; Anand 2003; Pellow 2007).

Tragedy of the Commons aspects of climate change introduce strategic considerations that further inhibit mitigative action. Strategic considerations lead actors to see actions as not only costly but risky. Whether understood as a public good or as a Tragedy of the Commons, the fact that other actors benefit independent of their contribution to climate change mitigation creates well-understood incentives for shirking and free-riding (Cornes and Sandler 1986). These would create problems if only reciprocal spatial displacement of climate change effects were involved. But many benefits of climate change mitigation will accrue to future generations who, even if they were willing, cannot offer a Coasean bargain to present generations to internalize the climate externality they are generating (Coase 1960). And present generations—even if they were sincerely concerned about future generations—cannot identify how much future
generations would value such benefits and, hence, how much effort and money to devote to such efforts.

Climate change also may resemble a Tragedy of the Commons less than many scholars contend. A Tragedy of the Commons involves actors who consider mutual restraint, if it could be achieved, to be preferable to the status quo (Hardin 1968). Central to the Tragedy is the assumption that the actors involved would consider themselves better off even if they were forced to contribute to resolution of the problem, i.e., that their benefits from mutual restraint exceed their costs of restraint. But climate change may not meet these conditions. Claiming that climate change will impose large environmental costs on most countries and the planet is simply not equivalent to claiming that the discounted benefits of averting climate change exceed the current costs of contributing to averting it. The perceived value of averting climate change depends on a host of factors that vary significantly by country, and evidence to date suggests that many states concerned about climate change consider the costs of action to outweigh the benefits. In addition, many, particularly developing, states consider other concerns more pressing, resulting in the climate problem having little political salience. Thus, climate change may be better characterized as a blend of a Tragedy of the Commons among concerned states and an upstream/downstream game between concerned and unconcerned states (Mitchell and Keilbach 2001). If true, then the lack of progress on climate change may reflect Deadlock among nations as much as a failure to cooperate (Oye 1986, 7).

The discounting of future costs (i.e., temporal displacement) discussed above is exacerbated by the epistemological uncertainty characteristic of climate change. The time-value of money dictates that discounting and delaying action makes sense even if future costs are certain. If future costs are uncertain, people will (rationally) discount even more and hence be even more
predisposed to delay action. In the case of climate change, the benefits to a state of an emissions reduction strategy depend not only on the strategies adopted by other states but also on how nature responds to the sum of those strategies. Thus, a predisposition toward inaction on climate change arises not only from considerations of the strategic interactions among states but also from the additional uncertainties introduced by the “game against nature” that is involved. And, in a strategic setting, a belief by only some relevant countries that benefits are uncertain can foster inaction: as Richard Cooper has noted generally, “so long as costs are positive and benefits are uncertain, countries are not likely to cooperate systematically with one another; and so long as sharply differing views are held on the relationship between actions and outcomes, at least some parties will question the benefits alleged to flow from any particular proposed course of action” (1989, 181).

**Power and contestation**

Not surprisingly, overlaying these considerations of interests with considerations of power generate political contestation. “Victims” who face few costs but expect large benefits from climate action will be pushers while “perpetrators” who face large costs to take action but expect few benefits (or discount those benefits) will be draggers (Sprinz and Vahtoranta 1998). Incentives not only influence positions on an issue but also—given the power of those with various positions, both domestically and internationally—influence the terms in which an issue is debated. In the case of climate change, the intersection of power and interests have generated significant epistemic and normative contestation in some key countries. In the United States and some other countries, an epistemic debate exists regarding the validity of descriptive, causal, predictive, and prescriptive claims regarding climate change. Normatively, political
disagreement exists about whether we should avert climate change, its appropriate priority relative to other social goals, and the costs and tradeoffs we should be willing to make to avert it. Internationally, an additional normative debate has ensued over which countries should be expected to engage in mitigation and, if they do, whether they or others should pay the associated costs.

These conflicts both arise from and feed back into the disincentives for action just described. Epistemic conflict between the “scientific consensus” of the IPCC and “climate deniers” leads to uncertainties in the political and policy realms being perceived as larger in size and different in type than the acknowledged scientific uncertainties about various claims (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004; Oreskes 2007). Especially in the US, “politically motivated think-tanks” and “corporations with a large stake in the issue” have sought to increase perceived uncertainties and the perception that “climate science was far too uncertain to warrant action” (Oreskes 2007, 78). Journalistic norms lead to “balanced” reporting that creates the perception that scientists are split “down the middle” on climate change, rather than that climate deniers are relatively few in number and have weaker claims to scientific credibility (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004). These normative and epistemic questions interact with incentives for action: assessments of environmental benefits and economic costs depend on views regarding obligations to future generations and responsibilities for paying costs; views regarding obligations to future generations depend on assessments of benefits and costs and views on responsibilities for paying costs. And these questions are influenced by what we know and what we think we know about the science of climate change.
Problems with a “logic of consequences” framing of the climate change problem

Central to extant climate change policy discussions is a rhetorical frame dominated by norms that legitimize decision logics and discursive logics that are interest-based rather than value-based, i.e., that are consistent with a logic of consequences rather than a logic of appropriateness. Both individual and state actors consider it legitimate—both for themselves and for others—to choose whether to take climate action and what action to take based on a logic of consequences, by calculating whether their assessment of costs are greater or less than their assessment of benefits. Equally important, the rhetorical context makes it socially legitimate to explain and defend one’s actions in interest-based terms and privileges interest-based discourse in the persuasion of others over value-based discourse. The discussion of climate action in interest-based, logic of consequences, terms creates a context which precludes identification and adoption of an adequate solution to the problem for several reasons, developed in the balance of this section.

Limits on population and economic growth excluded from consideration

The grounding of the rhetorical context of climate change in interests and calculations of costs and benefits predisposes actors toward inaction and also makes it legitimate and appropriate for actors to discuss that choice in terms of interests. But also, as pointed out by various constructivist scholars, we should attend to how outcomes are shaped by what is “taken for granted” in a discursive context (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). By way of metaphor, consider that what constitutes a picture is determined as much by what the frame excludes as what it includes. In the climate change context, interests and incentives are the rhetorical concepts that are included. The rhetorical context assumes certain values while, clearly-but-implicitly,
excluding discussion and debate about those values. In the climate context, assumptions regarding population and economic growth stand out quite clearly as having a “taken for granted” quality and “are no longer a matter of broad public debate” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 255).

Consider Ehrlich and Holdren’s (1972) IPAT identity, in which our environmental impacts (I) are driven (by definition given the mathematical units) by population (P), affluence (A: $/person), and technology (T: emissions/$; “carbon intensity”). Clearly, greenhouse gas emissions are driving by these three drivers but, within the existing rhetorical context, only policies addressing the last of them is open for debate. Economic growth is considered an unalloyed good, limitation of which cannot be reasonably discussed, let alone negotiated. Even scholarly treatments take economic growth as a given. Typical in this regard are arguments that “because sustainability includes a better life, humanity’s steady ambition for income must be accepted” (Waggoner and Ausubel 2002, 7864) and a recent argument in *Nature* that felt no need to support an emissions reduction goal that assumed that “policy should focus on the technological drivers” because “policy-makers are understandably reluctant to use population or economic growth to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions” (Galiana and Green 2009, 570).

Equally, while “passive” support exists for the proposition that the leveling off of global population would be a good thing, proactive policies to foster such stabilization or decline have been notably absent from the climate debate (Revkin 2009). Indeed, numerous countries have policies that encourage reproduction, very few have policies that discourage it, and it is rhetorically rare for the former to be praised or the latter to be condemned. It deserves note that a quiet rhetorical transition with respect to population has occurred in many industrialized countries, although that transition has been the result of economic, social, and cultural forces
rather than explicit and self-conscious policy efforts. Family size in industrialized countries has declined significantly to an average approaching 2 children per family and this change, although the result of non-normative and non-policy forces, has become increasingly reinforced by a dominant discourse that communicates to individuals that the “appropriate” size for a family is 2 children rather than 6.

Technological solutions are insufficient

The implicit “taking off the table” of limiting population or economic growth to limit emissions growth not only constrains policies to those involving technological solutions but, in addition, locks in certain emissions growth because of the exogenous drivers of population and economic growth. Global population growth exceeded 1.4% per year until the early 1990s and remains above 1.1% per year today. Economic growth (the product of population (P) and affluence (A) in the IPAT identity) since 1980 averaged 2.8% per year, exceeded 2% per year in 27 of 35 years, and declined in only one year (2009) (International Monetary Fund 1987). Indeed, policy responses to the global economic recession in 2009 and thereafter confirms the notion that policy-makers (and the publics they respond to) remain deeply committed to the assumption that economic growth is an unalloyed good. If we assume a future leveling off in population growth rates for non-policy reasons, then we might expect pressure from the P*A portion of the IPAT identity to prompt emissions growth of 2% or more per year.

The implicit removal of policies addressing population and economic growth from discussion leaves us with the question of whether technological change alone holds the capacity to deliver the 80% emission reductions by 2100 that IPCC reports suggest will be necessary to avert the worst impacts of climate change. Put differently, the question is whether technological
improvements can generate *continuous declines* in carbon intensity (CO2 per dollar) of ~2.0% per year to stabilize emissions at current levels and of ~4.0% per year to achieve the reductions most scientists see as necessary.

Notably, a “technophilic optimism” informs much of the current climate debate. Articles note that “deeply ingrained in the patterns of technology evolution is the substitution of cleverness for energy” (Socolow and Pacala 2006, 52). The *Nature* piece suggests that, although it has not yet started, “a tripling of the average annual rate of decline in carbon intensity” is possible (Galiana and Green 2009, 570). Others argue that “an annual 2–3% progress in consumption and technology over many decades and sectors seems a robust, understandable, and workable benchmark for sustainability” (Waggoner and Ausubel 2002, 7865). But there are reasons to doubt such improvements are achievable in the short term, let alone sustainable over the long term. Past global reductions in carbon intensity have been closer to 1% and have rarely exceeded economic growth. And, between 1990 and 2007, none of the 34 OECD countries reduced CO2 per dollar faster than 5% per year and only 7 reduced faster than 3% per year. In short, reducing carbon intensity consistently over the long term appears either very challenging or unachievable.¹

¹ These relatively small technological improvements do not appear to reflect a lack of effort. First, the UNFCCC was signed almost 20 years ago and, at least nominally, OECD countries have been attempting to reduce emissions per dollar. Neither exogenous forces nor the climate regime itself have fostered progress at anywhere near the levels needed to meet the 80% by 2100 reduction goal. Second, it has proved quite hard to improve energy efficiencies even in the face of strong economic incentives to do so. For example, although energy is a major cost of the “server farms” that underpin much of the Internet and reducing energy use has become a “top concern” among information technology executives, “performance per watt has remained roughly flat over time, even after significant efforts to design for power efficiency” (Barroso 2005; Scaramella 2006; Koomey et al. 2009, Table 3, p. 39). Likewise,
Figure 1: Changes in carbon-intensity for OECD countries (7-year moving average, 1990-2007). Source: (author calculations based on World Bank 2012).

The empirical evidence that such rates have not been achieved in the past is consistent with theoretical arguments for why they may be hard to achieve in the future. First, only some constraints on technological progress are susceptible to human effort and ingenuity. Sought-after breakthroughs may take decades to arrive or may not arrive at all. The server “performance per watt” efforts provide one example. Second, the availability of a technology also does not ensure its widespread adoption or optimal use. Many existing energy-efficient technologies are not widely adopted due to costs, inconvenience, or other factors. Third, technological improvements can be “slow, costly, and insufficient in scale,” “often shift our impact rather than remove it,” and often increase our impacts (the “Jevons paradox”) (Ehrlich and Holdren 1971, 1215, emphasis in original; York 2012). In sum, various forces are likely to mean that “in use” carbon existing technologies and materials impose barriers to improving the efficiency of conversion of solar radiation into electricity beyond approximate 20% (U.S. Department of Energy and University Center of Excellence for Photovoltaics Research and Education 2011).
intensity improvements will be less, and perhaps significantly less, than those improvements on paper. Clearly, technology must be an important, indeed crucial, lever in efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But, equally clearly, it seems unlikely that technological solutions alone will be adequate to the task.

**Incentives for most actors are non-existent or weak**

As noted above, the costs and benefits of inaction relative to those of any possible action leave many powerful actors—and particularly actors who structure the global economy in ways that channel the incentives of other actors—with strong incentives to continue their business-as-usual behaviors. Those actors will tend to resist both behavioral change and efforts at discursive transitions that would require those that continue business as usual to explain that behavior in non-interest-based terms.

Of course, there may be some actors that see the costs and benefits of action as exceeding those of inaction. Unfortunately, even for this group, material incentives are likely to be such that they will prompt action that falls far short of what is needed to fully address climate change. We should expect certain actors to find it in their interest to take certain actions because of economic co-benefits of such action or because of their own non-contingent commitments to climate protection but there is little evidence that those actions would be large enough to collectively meet the climate targets that seem necessary.

These self-conscious and “rational” considerations of incentives that predispose actors against action are exacerbated by numerous psychological barriers to climate action (Swim et al. 2009). Psychological barriers exist to *believing* that action on climate change is warranted. Public perceptions of risk diverge significantly from scientific perceptions nonscientists tend to rely less
on “analytic processing” and more on “associative and affective processing,” resulting “in less concern than is advisable” (Swim et al. 2009, 38; Weber 2006). And barriers exist to converting belief into action (Swim et al. 2009, 131). People have a consistent “single-action bias,” taking only the first of several steps necessary to address the risks of serious, imminent, and personal threats (e.g., heart disease), let alone more distant problems like climate change (Weber 1997). Single-action bias is likely to be evident in the climate change realm in policies that harvest “low-hanging fruit” and “no regrets policies” that are compatible with actors’ short-term incentives but fall far short in magnitude of what is required to address climate change. People are known to be predisposed toward choosing the smaller and less-effective of the alternatives available to them. And policy-makers are often biased against psychological insights that tend to run counter to the dominant “economic rationality” paradigm. Thus, strong evidence shows that how “similar others” behave can alter behavior more than economic incentives (“smiley faces” trump cost increases in prompting energy conservation), yet very few energy companies have adopted the practice (Schultz et al. 2007).

**Capacities and resources preclude mitigation or adaptation by many**

A rhetorical context based on incentives and interests also ignores questions of capacity and incapacity. Interests and incentives motivate action only within constraints imposed by resource availability and other social, political, and economic capacities. Yet, many actors likely to experience the costs of inaction (that provide incentives for action) lack the capacity to take action. Considerable evidence suggests that those countries (and those people within countries) that are least powerful and have the fewest resources will experience the greatest climate impacts. And, to the extent that powerful segments of society are exposed to such impacts, those
actors will have both the incentives and resources to adapt, at least to some degree, which reduces the pressure to mitigate. By contrast, the less powerful and less resource-capable elements of international and national societies are unlikely, despite their incentives, to respond to that threat. The richest countries in the world tend to be the major sources of emissions but have few incentives for action because they are less likely to experience the impacts of climate change and have options for reducing their vulnerability by dedicating their resources to self-interested and incentive-compatible adaptation rather than to mitigation. By contrast, the promise inherent in the incentives for mitigation action that should be prompted due to poor countries’ vulnerabilities to climate change goes unrealized because a) those countries do not tend to be major contributors to the problem, b) their poverty leads to other concerns (including economic growth) being granted policy priority, and c) their lack of resources/capacity inhibits actions that they might have incentives to take.

Incapacity issues and resource constraints also have implications for adaptation. The resources available to rich countries undercut their incentives to take mitigative action. By contrast, the lack of resources among poor countries means that they cannot act on their incentives to respond by adapting to climate change impacts that cannot be averted. Therefore, adaptation policies that do not address incapacity issues will exacerbate existing inequalities in the world, with rich countries and rich segments of society capable of reducing their costs of unaverted climate impacts while others must simply bear them. Adaptation policies that include financial and other resource transfers to address incapacity issues face the inherent political obstacles that any transfer from rich to poor entails, namely, the resistance of the rich to make significant-in-magnitude contributions that benefit others rather than themselves. Lastly, certain climate change impacts will be truly impossible to avert or adapt to, including sea level rise that
will eliminate several small island atoll states and inundate large swaths of many coastal
countries; salt-water intrusion and droughts that reduce freshwater availability; and increased
rainfall and flooding that may destroy large sections of river basins. In short, whatever adaptation
strategies might be available are likely to be a) inadequate because of resource constraints and b)
ethically problematic because they exacerbate existing inequalities based on the economic status
of individuals and countries.

Lastly, most discussions of climate change adopt a human-focused frame of reference, with
impacts on non-humans being considered, if at all, in a “shallow ecology” frame of concern for
plants and animals only to the extent that they are beneficial to humans. But there are a range of
predictable and largely-unavoidable climate change impacts on non-humans. No animals or
plants can adapt proactively in anticipation of climate impacts. Very few animals or plants can
even adapt responsively to climate changes once they begin to be felt. And, finally, those that are
capable of some degree of adaptation may not be able to do so on the time scale and to the extent
required by climate change impacts. The ways in which a discursive focus on the impacts on
humans of climate change precludes considering the impacts on plants and animals is evident in
proposals for solar radiation management and other geo-engineering options that would allow
atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations to increase while trying to reduce their climate
impacts: such solutions ignore the numerous plants and animals that would be endangered or
made extinct by ocean acidification, simply because its first order effects are not directly felt by
humans.
**Is a discursive transition possible?**

The foregoing argument has highlighted how the dominant discursive context of climate change is interest-based and, indeed, self-interest-based. Democracy itself is based, in no small part, on a similar discursive logic in which it is legitimate and appropriate for individuals to vote—and representatives to reflect—self-interested arguments. People “vote their pocketbooks” and aggregate their preferences through interest groups, whether corporate or not. In a world increasingly dominated by democratic polities, then, we should expect an interest-based discourse to lead only to policies that voters’ consider as in their interests, generally defined in material, narrow, and short-time-horizon terms. In addition, democratic governance also tends to assume that policies should be *shaped* by voters’ interests rather than *shaping* those interests. The normative context of most democracies views efforts to alter people’s underlying values or to induce fundamental normative change as an inappropriate role for government.

And, yet, both at the domestic and international levels, we sometimes see policies adopted that reflect a more expansive, longer term, less material, and more altruistic basis. In the environmental realm, various scholars have made normative calls for action, from Carson’s *Silent Spring* through Brown Weiss’ *In Fairness to Future Generations* to Gardiner’s *A Perfect Moral Storm* (Carson 1962; Brown Weiss 1989; Gardiner 2010). But there is also considerable empirical evidence that democratic domestic governance and international governance can produce policies that reflect normative commitments even when such commitments are unambiguously costly in material terms. Altruism, for lack of a better word, is possible. And, equally important, a transition is possible from a discursive context that privileges self-interested, interest-based, and incentive-compatible policies that reflect a logic of consequences to one that privileges more value-based and altruistic policies that reflect a logic of appropriateness.
I have argued that a discursive transition is necessary to address climate change. This need not imply that it is possible, however. To determine the answer to that question, we need evidence that such transitions have occurred previously in situations that looked as challenging (and bleak) as the climate change situation looks today. In what follows, I provide preliminary evidence that such transitions have occurred with respect to four challenging historical problems: slavery, colonialism, landmines, and whaling and, hence, that a similar transition may be possible with respect to climate change.

**Slavery**

At the end of the 18th century, slavery was a widespread practice that was strongly supported by economic interests and by a discursive logic that framed slavery as “an immutable part of human nature” (Ray 1989, 439). Within a century, however, it had been “effectively abolished” (Ray 1989, 406). Arguments have been made that slavery’s demise occurred because slave labor became relatively unproductive generally, leading countries to abandon the practice in the 19th century as market forces made its continuance “economically irrational” (Ray 1989, 412). But considerable evidence runs counter to this “economistic” explanation of slavery’s decline, showing that slavery was abolished while it was still “a productive, apparently efficient mode of production” and in the face of considerable opposition from and considerable cost to slave owners (Ray 1989, 415). At the same time, available evidence suggests that “moral progress, or changes in ideas about ethics and morality, played an important role in bringing about the demise of slavery” (Ray 1989, 439).

Central to any story of slavery’s demise are the efforts by abolitionists (norm entrepreneurs) and others to alter the terms of debate and to find a rhetorical frame that, eventually, resonated
with broader norms regarding the equality of all people. The evidence from the case of slavery suggests an economically-robust practice was eliminated, in no small part, by efforts to generate moral/ethical arguments that made the practice socially illegitimate regardless of the economic benefits that would have flowed to many powerful actors from it being continued.

**Colonialism**

Crawford makes an extended argument, similar in nature to that about slavery, regarding the demise of colonialism. She argues that “persuasive ethical arguments changed the economic and political context for colonialism: by making slavery illegitimate, … increased the costs of colonialism and decreased its profits; and by making aspects of colonial rule illegitimate, … decreased the willingness of domestic populations in the metropole to support colonialism” (Crawford 2002, 389). In her detailed study, Crawford compellingly argues that “persuasive ethical arguments” made it increasingly difficult to make certain, interest-based, arguments (Crawford 2002, 391).

Crawford defines ethical arguments as being “about how to do good in a particular situation” (Crawford 2002, 19). Such arguments eventually succeeded in trumping “practical or instrumental arguments” by changing how colonizing governments conceptualized their interests and by promoting a “normative revulsion for empire and its constitutive practices” that led to increasing resistance to the practices of colonization (Crawford 2002, 389). Crawford contends that these arguments worked because they resonated with higher order norms (the standard causal mechanism) and also because they fostered the development of “emotions, specifically empathy and identification” that made the continuation of colonization increasingly abhorrent (Crawford 2002, 391). Of relevance to the climate change context, Crawford also contends that
the eventual success of decolonization efforts depended on “institutionalizing normative beliefs in international treaties and the procedures of international organizations” (Crawford 2002, 391). As with slavery, arguments have been made that colonialism collapsed in response to its decreasing economic profitability. But here too, Crawford argues that “if one takes a narrow interpretation of interests as economic or strategic, there is some evidence that normative beliefs and ethical arguments on occasion trumped material interests” (Crawford 2002, 397).

Again, a widespread practice that generated strong economic benefits for a set of powerful actors and that was bulwarked by a strong normative sense of its appropriateness became normatively illegitimate and behaviorally rare in a relatively short period of time due to efforts at normative reframing that induced a discursive transition from an interest-based, logic of consequences discourse in which countries could legitimately choose to maintain their colonies if they saw it as in their interests to a norm-based, logic of appropriateness discourse in which countries increasingly came to see it as in their interests to decolonize (despite there being no significant change in economic circumstances) or were pressed by others to see retaining their colonies as illegitimate.

**Landmines**

Landmines also illustrate rapid state policy change in response to a discursive transition from a discourse dominated by interest-based arguments to one dominated by value-based arguments. Until the 1990s, numerous powerful governments were using landmines for military purposes, had strong interests in continuing to do so, and considered their use legitimate and appropriate. Yet within a short time, norm entrepreneurs shifted the terms of debate away from an interest-based discourse (are they effective in achieving military objectives) to a norm-based discourse
(are they inhumane in their eventual effects). Both Price (1998) and Rutherford (2000, 94) contend that the rapid and dramatic shift in government positions and behaviors on landmines were driven by self-conscious efforts by NGOs—led by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines—to induce a rhetorical or discursive transition. The goal of NGOs and of pro-landmine-ban governments was to avoid the interest-based discourse of “landmine-utility arguments” and keep the discursive focus “strictly on the humanitarian and legal aspects of the debate” (Rutherford 2000, 95; see also, Price 1998).

NGOs rejected the dominant discourse’s focus on the military and security costs and benefits of adopting or rejecting a landmine ban and, instead, “primarily focused on the humanitarian aspects of the mine issue, addressing the plight of victims” (Rutherford 2000, 112). Notably, this ran counter to traditional arms control and disarmament debates, in which the consequences for victims were rarely a focus, let alone the dominant one. NGOs succeeded in prompting a discursive shift by making strong and persuasive arguments, but arguments that reflected a logic of appropriateness frame rather than the extant logic of consequences frame. Central to the success of these efforts were moral entrepreneurship, “moral persuasion, and the social pressure arising from identity politics and emulation” (Price 1998, 616). The acceptance of a norm against the use of landmines that was based in their moral illegitimacy rather than their military disutility reflected the moral entrepreneurship of NGOs in shifting the terms of debate. They did so by making it more difficult not only for governments to maintain the position that landmines were a good policy option but even for them to discuss the choice of such a policy in instrumental terms. Governments found themselves under increasing social pressure to explain their decisions to keep or eschew landmines in terms of humanitarianism, morality, ethics, and right and wrong rather than in terms of their military and security costs and benefits.
Whaling

The adoption of a moratorium on commercial whaling in the 1980s provides an environmental example of a similarly-rapid policy shift in response to successful and self-conscious promotion of a discursive transition by concerned NGOs. By the early 20th century, whalers understood that they were collectively exhausting the whaling stocks because of dynamics that Garrett Hardin would, decades later, label as a Tragedy of the Commons (Hardin 1968). Starting in 1931, countries signed a series of agreements seeking to regulate international whaling (Mitchell 2014). Each of these was intended to reduce collective pressure on whale stocks so that those stocks recovered and, thereby, allowed for “the orderly development of the whaling industry” (ICRW 1946). In short, the collectively-accepted framing of the problem through the 1960s was in the standard interest-based terms of a Tragedy of the Commons, i.e., as an effort to address the collectively-suboptimal benefits of individually-rational decisions. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, anti-whaling NGOs began a campaign against whaling that rejected this dominant logic of consequences framing of whaling as an economic activity faced with an overfishing problem. They shifted the terms of debate by offering an alternative logic-of-appropriateness framing in which whaling was painted as the killing of sentient beings (Mitchell 1998). This framing quickly replaced the pre-existing framing and led to adoption of a moratorium on commercial whaling in 1982. The evidence refutes the argument that the moratorium was adopted because *whaling states* accepted the new, normative, framing of the problem (Mitchell 1998, 284-285). However, the new framing does appear to have led other, *non-whaling, states* to join the International Whaling Commission and vote for the moratorium. Obviously, such action was costless for states that had no economic interests in whaling in the
first place. That said, there would have been no reason for these states to join the IWC and participate in support of the moratorium (the moratorium would have been unlikely to be proposed) absent NGO’s successful efforts to frame whaling in moral rather than interest-based terms (for an extended discussion of this case, see Epstein 2008).

**Case summaries**

These cases provide evidence that self-conscious efforts by advocates can transform contexts dominated by interest-based rhetoric into contexts in which value-based rhetoric becomes accepted enough that previously-impossible policy changes become possible. Slavery, colonialism, landmines, and whaling were all stopped at a point in time in which powerful actors engaged in those activities still saw themselves as reaping significant economic (or, in the case of landmines, military) value. Within an interest-based rhetorical domain, it is hard to imagine that states would have brought those activities to a halt. They came to a halt only because transnational activists, working with supportive governments, were able to shift the terms of debate toward a value-based discourse.

Nor are these the only such cases. The development of international human rights generally, and most extant human rights regimes individually, reflects similar dynamics: norm entrepreneurs drawing attention to an existing social practice, prompting an explicit discussion of that practice, and doing so via a discursive strategy and framing that reflects a logic of appropriateness rather than a logic of consequences. Considerable research has discussed the process by which advocates put issues on the international agenda (Carpenter 2007). My focus here has been on the choice and implications of how those who put issues on the agenda frame
them, whether in interest-based logic of consequences terms or in more value-based logic of appropriateness terms.

What this section shows, therefore, is that activists can succeed at prompting discursive transitions and that such transitions can lead to adoption of previously-unavailable policy outcomes that, in turn, can lead states to stop engaging in behaviors that are still in their short-term self-interest to engage. Put differently, these cases show that the sort of discursive transition that I have earlier argued is necessary to addressing climate change is possible and, if it occurred, could be effective in prompting states to adopt stronger collective climate change policy and to take more aggressive steps to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

**What would a discursive transition look like in the climate change realm?**

What would a discursive transition toward a logic of appropriateness rhetoric look like with respect to climate change? To what extent can we see evidence of efforts in that direction? And to what extent is there evidence regarding the prospects that those efforts will lead to the discursive transition that I have argued is needed if we are to succeed in addressing climate change?

A discursive transition with respect to climate change would have at least two crucial aspects. First, advocates would need to succeed in gaining progressive support for a framing of taking action to mitigate climate change as a moral imperative and failing to take such action as illegitimate and inappropriate. Notably, the major obstacle to such an effort is rejection of the underlying and implicit assumption that it is legitimate and appropriate to trade off environmental protection—and particularly climate protection—against economic growth. This is no small obstacle, given the centrality of an economic growth imperative to modern conceptions
of the state (Daly 1996). As Crawford notes “persuasive ethical arguments that change complex social systems must first reframe the dominant practice. Reformers’ arguments must denormalize and delegitimize the dominant practice. Activists must also propose an alternative and work to change the balance of political power that supports the dominant practice. But ultimately their success depends on gradually institutionalizing new normative beliefs. This is hard work, it may take decades or even centuries, and the ripple effects of argument and change may go in directions unanticipated by reformers” (2002, 398). The change requires “rhetorical action” involving “some sort of moral appeal” and the “strategic use of norm-based arguments” (Schimmelfennig 2001, 62).

Second, as part of and as a consequence of that discursive transition, those engaged in such activities would need to feel a) increasing pressure from others to explain their failure to reduce their emissions and b) to explain such failures in value-based, rather than interest-based, terms. A firm that continued business-as-usual with respect to emissions or a government that continued to reject climate-protection legislation would need to find itself, increasingly, faced with three alternatives: a) explicitly rejecting the normative assumption that climate protection is a moral imperative, b) claiming that such policies reflect incapacity issues rather than incentives (and, thereby, implicitly accepting the advocates’ normative assumptions), or c) accepting the advocates’ normative assumptions and shifting toward more climate-protective behaviors and policies.

This transition would likely depend on two types of discursive strategies. Advocates would need to put explicit pressures (“naming and shaming”) on specific emitters by identifying them on white-lists or black-lists (or both) and engaging them in an institutional forum in which actors continuing business-as-usual strategies felt social pressure to explain themselves and to do so in
logic of appropriateness rather than logic of consequences terms. In addition, they would need to create a broader, if diffuse, discursive context in which all actors came to perceive it as necessary to reevaluate their climate-harming behaviors and to move from business-as-usual trajectories to emission-reducing trajectories. This shift would be likely to start in the NGO and transnational advocacy community but, subsequently, build alliances with supportive national governments, as evident in the examples above. Taken together, these would create three types of pressure on governments and firms to take action: bottom-up pressure from domestic actors (particularly in democratic states with strong and vocal environmental civil society groups), pressure from transnational advocacy networks (particularly in non-democratic states and democratic states with weaker environmental civil society traditions), and pressure from other governments (particularly among otherwise-similar sets of states, for example, by greener European/Islamic states on less-green European/Islamic states).

Equally important, the evidence from prior cases suggests that such discursive transitions do not occur unless there is some set of relatively-powerful actors who support policies consistent with those being promoted by advocates for short term self-interested reasons. That is, a discursive transition cannot occur in the absence of support based in the self-interested preferences of some states. At the same time, the rhetorical context pushed by norm entrepreneurs must prompt a process of rhetorical entrapment in which self-interested arguments are framed in norm-based, logic of appropriateness terms that make it more difficult over time to explain policies in interest-based terms and more difficult to adopt policies that run counter to the policies preferred by norm entrepreneurs (Keck and Sikkink 1998). As Schimmelfennig documents in the case of EU enlargement, the discursive transition to a more logic-of-appropriateness-dominated rhetorical context starts with norm entrepreneurs efforts to reframe
existing practices, followed by initial outcomes that reflect states self-interested “preferences based on mainly material conditions and … the distribution of material bargaining power,” that then leads to “an eventual policy outcome based on the collective identity and the social norms of an international community” (Schimmelfennig 2001, 64). That is, policy outcomes that are initially consistent with the dictates of power and interests and norms become increasingly distant from the former two while remaining consistent with the latter.

Efforts have been made in the direction of such a discursive transition in environmental affairs generally, though with limited success to date. Advocates have established increasing acceptance of “environmental justice” and “environmental rights” frames as part of the debate on climate change. Scholars and others have begun discussing the ethics surrounding climate change (Gardiner 2010; Garvey 2008). What was originally the rhetoric of advocates has been incorporated in international legal instruments. Some progress has been made in linking environmental protection to, and framing it in terms of, human rights. That linkage was made explicitly in both the 1989 ILO Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries and the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The latter declares: “Indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources.” The preamble of the 1998 Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters states that “adequate protection of the environment is essential to human well-being and the enjoyment of basic human rights, including the right to life itself” and that “every person has the right to live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being, and the duty, both individually and in association
with others, to protect and improve the environment for the benefit of present and future generations.”

With respect to climate change in particular, the UN Human Rights Council adopted an initial resolution on the relationship of human rights and climate change in 2008 and has steadily built upon that base with additional resolutions, studies, discussions, and seminars. To be sure, the framing of environmental protection as a right is not yet the dominant framing. But such a framing has become part of the discussion.

**Conclusion**

The extant debate on climate change is dominated by a rhetorical context based in a logic of consequences. States (and individuals) view it as socially legitimate and appropriate for themselves and for others to decide whether, and what, action to take on climate change based on calculations of the short-term, individual, and material costs and benefits of their alternatives. And they also view it as socially legitimate and appropriate for actors to explain and defend their choices in interest-based terms. However, the nature of the relative costs and benefits of action and inaction on climate change are biased toward inaction and will likely generate aggregate levels of action that fall far short of what is needed to address climate change. Without a discursive transition to a rhetorical context dominated by a value-based, logic of appropriateness, the prospects of addressing climate change successfully are nil. Such a discursive transition is possible theoretically. And empirical examples exist of such transitions that were prompted by the self-conscious efforts of norm entrepreneurs. Slavery, colonialism, landmines, and whaling may be exceptions to the rule of interest-based international policy-making but they are not exceptionally rare.
Such transitions can occur when norm entrepreneurs are able to identify rhetorical strategies that resonate with extant meta-norms and that, initially, promote policies that are also consistent with the interest-based preferences of some actors. Over time, the use of normative rhetoric by such actors to justify their interest-based policy preferences reinforces the norm and, thereby, increases the difficulty and/or cost of choosing interest-based policies that run counter to norm-based policies. A discursive shift that places increasing demands for actors to explain their policy and behavioral choices in value-based terms of “right” and “wrong” rather than interest-based terms of “good for me” or “bad for me” makes it increasingly difficult to choose policies that are “good for me” when they run counter to what is “right.”

In the realm of climate change, such a discursive transition appears possible and some “baby steps” toward such a transition have begun. Whether those initial efforts will continue and whether they will become “persuasive ethical arguments” that are broadly accepted and dominate the rhetorical context remains to be seen. It is clear that continuing interest-based arguments within a rhetorical context that sees such arguments as legitimate and appropriate is unlikely to help us address the climate change problem we have created for ourselves and future generations. Achieving a discursive transition to a value-based rhetorical context appears to be a way out. Making that transition happen is—to be sure—challenging. But, however unlikely its prospects, it holds more promise for adequately addressing the climate change problem than the existing context.
References


