**Ask the philospher**

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**WITHOUT presuming that claims about climate change must be immune from scrutiny, the science appears, in my humble opinion, to be persuasive enough. Yet much within the climate change debate remains unsettled.**

As the delegates gathered in Copenhagen are finding out, it is one thing to agree there is a threat of catastrophic climate change.

It is another thing to agree on who must bear the responsibility of taking action.

In the eyes of many, the burden must surely fall to developed countries to cut their greenhouse gas emissions most dramatically. Not only that, it is argued that developed countries must offer financial assistance to poorer ones to mitigate and adjust to climate change. At the time of writing, the Group of 77 bloc was threatening to walk out of a Copenhagen agreement, claiming that rich, industrialised countries were trying to "shift responsibility" for addressing climate change on to developing countries.

Most of us will sympathise with such arguments. Historically, it has been developed countries that have generated the most greenhouse gas emissions. Whether we apply a polluter-pays principle or a beneficiary-pay principle, it is developed countries that seem most accountable.

Largely for this reason, the doctrine of "common but differentiated responsibility" continues to dominate much thinking about global environmental justice.

As affirmed in the 1992 Rio Declaration and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, developed countries have acknowledged that they bear a particular responsibility "in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command".

On balance this seems about right. Developed countries do owe a special obligation for the reasons above.

Imagine if we were to make no accommodation of the fact different countries are at different stages of economic development. Calls for climate change action would then amount to calls from rich Western countries to poorer ones to put their economic aspirations on hold.

Still, we shouldn't be hasty. We shouldn't heap all responsibility for climate change action on the shoulders of the developed world.

It is important to distinguish between two types of responsibility. According to political philosopher David Miller, there is a difference between "outcome responsibility" (the responsibility we have for gains and losses resulting from our actions) and "remedial responsibility" (the responsibility we have to relieve harm when we are able to do so).

As Miller reminds us, "There is a large normative gap between identifying a state of affairs as intolerable and identifying agents, individual or collective, who have a responsibility to remedy it."

This is becoming all too apparent as the Copenhagen conference enters its second week. Developed countries may indeed have historical outcome responsibility for climate change and its effects.

Yet do they bear a special ethical burden?

Before we can allocate remedial responsibility, we must first determine whether countries have exceeded their fair quota of natural resources. This is, for many reasons, a much more difficult proposition.

Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering.

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