Middle Emissions: Climate Ethics and the Global Middle Class

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For years climate change ethicists have made a distinction between the pernicious “luxury emissions” of the wealthy and the morally permitted “subsistence emissions” of the poor. Yet, in light of shifts in global demographics this distinction reveals a crucial gap in our moral understanding of the problem of climate change. In this paper, I give an account of the moral significance of “middle emissions,” the greenhouse gas emissions of the global middle class. According to a Brookings Institute report, by 2027 60% of the world’s population will be in the global middle class. The global middle class earns between $11 and $110 (USD) per day —enough to have some discretionary income. Discretionary income is crucial to decrease vulnerability to poverty, but it is strongly correlated with increased emissions. I contend that several leading views in the climate change ethics literature do not adequately account for middle emissions. For example, theories that guarantee the poor a minimum threshold of access to emissions rights may inadvertently elide the moral differences between the discretionary income of the middle class and that of the wealthy. This is problematic because middle-class households face starker energy choices than wealthy households do. Also, middle-class households may have good reasons for choosing higher-emissions energy sources. For example, a middle-class household may favor cheaper fossil-fuel-based energy in order to spend more on food. As a way to start to fill the gap in the literature, I argue that some middle emissions are permissible when fossil-fuel technologies are the best available option to reduce a household’s vulnerability to poverty *and* improve their overall quality of life. In my view, the onus of reducing middle emissions falls on global and national institutions with the infrastructural capacity to decouple rising incomes from increasing emissions.

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Biography: Blake is a postdoctoral fellow in the Philosophy Department at University of Maryland, Baltimore County, working to shape a better picture of the moral landscape of climate change. From 2017 to 2019, he held the postdoctoral fellowship in ethics and climate change at Princeton University. Blake holds a PhD in Philosophy from Stanford University, an MA from the University of Montana and a BA from Northern Arizona University. Prior to pursuing graduate work in philosophy, Blake enjoyed a career in wilderness management and trail construction with the US Forest Service in Arizona and Alaska.