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An Ideal Approach to Global Warming

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research ARTICLE

An Ideal Approach to Global Warming

—**Hannah Lee Varn** (Edited by Kendra Nourie)

I am familiar with the old, not-so-funny question: *What are you possibly going to do with a philosophy major?* It comes from friends, family, and the occasional curious person in the grocery line. Philosophy is viewed as something purely academic, something for coffee shop talks and late night library sessions. I won't deny that we philosophy majors do a fair amount of these activities, but philosophy can be useful in many real world situations. It can serve as the forum for new ideas and different ways of approaching old problems. It can lay the groundwork for new attitudes and methods for real world problem-solving and avoid familiar arguments with new strategies. Because philosophers tend to think big, I decided to use my Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship from the University of New Hampshire to apply philosophical thinking to a really big issue, global warming .

Global warming is a very complicated issue, involving scientists, politicians, environmentalists, industry, and average citizens. The harmful emissions produced by industry and transportation have created a greenhouse effect, trapping heat in the lower atmosphere, which will harm the environment and our human population. Consequences of global warming could range from flooding, droughts, and violent storms to disease, hunger, and loss of life and biodiversity. No one and nothing will be untouched (Wake 1). Despite the magnitude of this threat, policy-making and change surrounding emissions have been slow and, in some countries, negligible. This is due primarily to the

multi-faceted nature of the problem, the required breadth of the solution, and the extraordinarily high stakes for everyone. It is hard to know where to start with an international challenge like global warming. I hope that a simple philosophical concept, the regulative ideal, will prove useful in bypassing some of the difficulties caused by conflicts of interest among different groups, so the discussion can turn, instead, to building solutions.



Immanuel Kant and Earth from Space.

Global Warming and the Regulative Ideal

The regulative ideal, first introduced by Immanuel Kant in 1781, can be useful today in the debate over global warming policy. Kant, often hailed as the greatest modern philosopher, contributed to a wide variety of philosophical studies, including ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, and philosophy of science. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant redefines what we can know and how we can know it. He shows how our observations of the world around us need to be tied together and organized by certain concepts and ideas. These ideas shape our understanding and our knowledge. Without concepts, such as cause and effect, our experience of the world would be a confusing mess of stimuli and sensations. In his *Critique*, Kant introduces the concept of the *regulative ideal*. An *ideal* is a specific, singular idea that embodies the perfection of a certain action, process, or object. For example, an ideal energy source would be renewable, efficient, and harmless to humans and the environment. It is impossible for an ideal to be realized in the course of actual events, and idealism has been scoffed at for its reliance on a state of affairs deemed inaccessible. An ideal is *regulative* when it is unachievable but nonetheless can balance, guide and mediate our actions in practical matters. A regulative ideal is an ideal to aim for, and by which to measure our progress (Kant 551-552). I propose the regulative ideal as a practical way to use an ideal without getting lost in a dream world.

Ideals are, by their very nature, unrealizable because, according to Kant, they are purely creations of our own mental activity and thus can never exist in the external world. Ideals are a product of our ability to take the facts we observe and, by reevaluating them, understand and judge our observed experience. We see several sphere-like objects and imagine what the ideal, perfect sphere would be. The fact that such a sphere does not exist does not make it any less real to us, or any less useful. Ideal models are used in science and mathematics to determine how we are to understand the physical world. In a similar manner, regulative ideals can be used in policy and decision-making. Much more depends on our conception of the perfect solution to global warming than on the perfect sphere. This is real world, high stakes.

Ideals and Goals

Unlike setting a *goal*, which entails an expectation of achievement, formulating an *ideal* demands no such commitment to realization. Goals, unlike ideals, are potentially achievable, but they can lead to underachievement and disappointment. Ideally, industrialized nations should cut their carbon dioxide emissions by more than half in order to curb global warming, but the goals set at the 1997 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Kyoto were a mere 6–8 percent (Dessler 14). The Kyoto Protocol was an international effort to curb global warming signed by 160 nations worldwide. (The United States, noticeably, did not sign the protocol.) Even if the Kyoto goals were achieved, which they were not, the threat of global warming would still persist. If those countries involved with the Kyoto Protocol had set a higher goal—say 20 percent—they would be disappointed and discouraged when this goal was not met. However, if an ideal were established, it would be used to prompt action in the desired direction, without establishing a specific goal. The use of an ideal instead of a goal is important because the focus remains on movement toward an ideal, unrealizable outcome rather than on an arbitrary endpoint, the goal.

In an ideal realm, Kant assures us in the *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* (1797), separate ideals would not contradict each other (24). This allows us to pursue a compound ideal, created when several ideals are combined. Such compound ideals allow diverse ideals to be negotiated simultaneously. We can strive toward a state of affairs more pleasing to all. But we do not live in an ideal realm, and conflicts arise among ideals all the time. Environmentalists and many scientists desire drastic cuts in global emissions, while many major manufacturing companies (and the leaders of the present United States government) believe an ideal economy is more important than an ideal environment. In situations like this, it is useful to remember that ideals cannot logically contradict each other. It is, therefore, possible and desirable to search for an ideal situation in which the needs of both sides can be achieved.

A possible solution, proposed in *Our Common Future* (1987) by Gro Harlem Brundtland, former chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development, is to make environmentalist policies beneficial to businesses as well as to environmentalists. Brundtland's report published conclusions from the 1983 World Commission on Environment and Development, organized to discuss possible solutions to many global problems (including global warming) and to promote sustainability worldwide. The conclusions reached at the World Commission suggested a form of ecological modernization: a blend of economic and ecological motivations, mutually beneficial to both groups. In an ideal situation, lower emissions would coincide with higher profits. This new ideal can be pursued by both parties, and discussions about policies can be geared toward it. In practice, there is compromise on both sides; but in theory (in the realm of ideals), there is no compromise: both ideals remain intact. When the discussion is expanded, there is new opportunity to "think out of the box": to envision a new, more creative solution. When a compound ideal is agreed upon that meets the previously conflicting needs of interested parties, it becomes possible to elevate the discussion above partisan and factionary arguments.

The justification for using regulative ideals in policy making will not come from an attainment of the ideal. Such a perfect state does not exist. The intention is to create an atmosphere of collaborative progress toward an ideal. Global warming policy that aims at an ideal agreed upon by both sides will be much more likely to succeed than strategies that adopt a single ideal or entirely lose focus on an ideal. This balance of ideals is what Nicolas Rescher, professor of philosophy at the University of Pittsburg, calls "optimization" in his book, *Ethical Idealism* (1987). Optimization involves cooperation and synchronization of ideals. However, Rescher stresses that ideals must be viewed as "simply one component within a system, which makes it possible to strike a reasonable balance between the different and potentially discordant values" (125). When an ideal is placed above practical and other concerns and pursued at all costs, it becomes counterproductive. Ideals cannot exist as our sole focus or we will undermine the frameworks we need in order to accomplish change. Constant readjustment and attention are required to make sure that the ideal is sound and the methodology for its pursuit is prudent and serious. The creation of an ideal also requires a strong commitment and a hopeful attitude toward its pursuit.

Hope for the Future

In order to change the way we act, we need to believe in a future, better world. Hope is an important aspect of Kant's philosophy. When scientists attempt to create models of future climate change and greenhouse effect, the most difficult variable for them to model is human action itself (Maslin 75). This is because we humans have the capability to change, to learn, and to adopt new paths for ourselves. Through the use of ideals and a strong policy and desire for change, *it is possible* to curb the effects of global warming. In the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant reminds us "even if the complete realization [of an ideal] always remains a pious wish, still we are certainly not deceiving ourselves in adopting the maxim of working incessantly towards it" (335). Progress toward an ideal of a sustainable and healthy earth that we, surely, all must hope for is far better than remaining immobilized by partisan interests.

In some states and countries, conversations like the one I am describing have occurred regarding global warming. In New Hampshire, for example, former Governor Jeanne Shaheen arranged a forum for businesses, environmentalists and government representatives to discuss collaboration towards a common ideal of emissions reductions (Maslin 132). The plans they made were for the mutual benefit of all parties. The University of New Hampshire has committed itself to being a leader in emissions reductions, installing a combined heat and power plant which will reduce campus emissions to 20 percent below 1990 levels and save the University \$30–\$40 million over the next twenty years (Wake 3). This is an excellent example of how environmentally conscious decisions can be beneficial to business as well.

It is important for such conversations to occur globally. Many people already understand that, while we cannot afford to wait, we also cannot naively disregard economic impact. Whether they realize it or not, these people have identified a compound regulative ideal made up of a healthy environment and a viable economy. As a global community faced with a global problem, we need to actively discuss and shape an ideal for the future of our planet and humankind. Once an ideal is developed, we need to pursue it prudently and enthusiastically. Change *is* possible.

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Author Bio

*In May 2007 **Hannah Lee Varn** will graduate from the University of New Hampshire with a Bachelor of Arts in philosophy and English and a minor in Spanish. She learned about Kant in a modern philosophy class and felt that his ideas could be useful in talking about global warming. This connection, she said, has never been made before. In her research project Hannah hoped to show that "philosophy can be practical." That goal required extensive reading, and she observed that there is "no chair in the [UNH] Library that is comfortable after six hours, and it impossible to sleep between the stacks in the Kant section." Hannah enjoyed talking to people about her project, especially while in Germany, where people know who Kant is and are interested in the environment. After graduation she hopes to work with environmental agencies in the field of environmental politics. Hannah has applied for a Fulbright, a German fellowship and for a position with Teach for America. Graduate school is also in her future.*

Mentor Bio

*Dr. **Willem deVries**, a professor in the Department of Philosophy, has been at the University of New Hampshire since 1988. He specializes in, among other subjects, German idealism. Philosophers like Hegel and Kant have shelves in his office devoted to their writings. His focus on German idealism made him the perfect mentor for Hannah Varn. He became involved with Hannah's project when she brought her idea to him after being in one of his classes. According to Dr. deVries, Hannah is an excellent and independent student, who needed relatively little help with her project.*