

A philosopher at the IPCC
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Climate change is a moral problem. Each of us causes the emission of greenhouse gas, which spreads around the Earth. Some of it stays in the atmosphere for centuries. It causes harm to people who live far away and to members of future generations. Moreover, the harm we cause, taken together, is very great. As a result of climate change, people are losing their homes to storms and floods, they are losing their livelihoods as their farmland dries up, and they are losing even their lives as tropical diseases climb higher in the mountains of Africa. We should not cause harms like these to other people in order to make life better for ourselves.

It is chiefly for moral reasons that we inhabitants of rich countries should reduce our emissions. Doing so will benefit us – particularly the young among us – to an extent, but most of the benefit will come to the world's poor and to future generations. Our main reason for working to limit climate change is our moral duty towards those people.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recognizes that climate change is a moral problem or, to use its cautious language, it 'raises ethical issues'. The authors of the IPCC's recent Fifth Assessment Report therefore included two moral philosophers. I am one of them. I recently returned from the 'Approval Session' of IPCC's Working Group 3 in Berlin. This was one of the most extraordinary experiences of my academic life.

During the three years I have worked for the IPCC, I have had many experiences that are not typical in the life of a philosopher. There is the travel, for one thing. To fight climate change, the IPCC finds it necessary to hold meetings in remote corners of the world. Its own resources are small, so it goes wherever a government offers to fund a meeting. I have been to IPCC meetings in Lima, Changwon in South Korea, Wellington and Addis Ababa. In Europe, the IPCC has taken me to Vigo, Geneva, Oslo, Utrecht, Berlin and Potsdam. Kuala Lumpur and Copenhagen are still to come. I hope the other authors offset the emissions caused by their travel to these meetings; I am pleased to say that the British government pays to offset mine. All this travelling is not much fun; IPCC work is relentless, and I have had little time to enjoy the places I have been to.

Then there is the joint authorship. Before signing on to the IPCC, my only joint work was one brief article written with another philosopher. In Changwon I found myself in a room with fifteen other authors from various disciplines, with whom I was to write a chapter jointly. Many of them were puzzled at first by the presence of philosophers; they were unclear what our discipline had to do with their work. I expected some confrontations; I thought some economists in particular might resent my philosophical outlook on economics. But actually my colleagues were tolerant and willing to cooperate. We achieved harmony. I was able to put into the chapter several of the points about the ethics of climate change that I thought most important.

The writing process was exhaustive and exhausting. The report went through three full drafts before the final version. Each was sent out for comments to very large numbers of people, including academic experts and representatives of governments. We authors were required to take note of every comment, and to record what we had done about it. I myself dealt with about 600 comments in this way; Working Group 3 as a whole dealt with 38,000. The aim was to produce the broadest possible consensus, reporting on the state of knowledge about climate change. I think we did that. It inevitably meant we had to be conservative in

our judgements.

The outcome is a 2000-page report, which has already been published on the internet. Because no one will read a report of that size, our efforts in the last few months have gone into writing two summaries. A subgroup of authors from Working Group 3 hammered them out over the last eight months. The fuller and more reliable one has the unfortunate title of the ‘Technical Summary’. This name puts people off reading it, but actually it is not particularly technical. It is simply a summary of the main report. The shorter, 30-page précis known as the Summary for Policymakers (SPM) attracts more attention but is subject to political influence in the way I shall describe.

The degree of compression in the SPM meant that every sentence counts. In drafting it, we authors each found ourselves defending our favourite sentences. By the time the SPM was written, a firm alliance had formed between economists and me, the one philosopher still engaged in the process. We represented analytical disciplines concerned with value. Some scientists involved with the IPCC seem to assume that values cannot be subject to analysis, so that they have to be left to political processes. But economics and moral philosophy contain extensive analysis of values: moral philosophy at the level of fundamental ethical principles and economics at the level of application to complex situations. I was extremely pleased to find strong support for ethical analysis from the IPCC. This is one of the important respects in which the Fifth Assessment Report goes beyond the IPCC’s earlier reports. Several sentences about ethics survived successive stages of compression, and remained in the draft of the SPM that was presented to governments at the Approval Session in Berlin.

The whole idea of the Approval Session is extraordinary. Every single sentence of the SPM has to be either approved or rejected by delegates from governments. At the Plenary meeting, the draft is projected on a screen sentence by sentence. As each sentence comes up, the chairman asks delegates for comments on it and proposed amendments. Delegates propose amendments and the authors then consider whether they can be supported by the underlying main report. The rule is that a sentence is approved only if it is supported by the main report, and only if there is a consensus on approving it among the delegates. When the haggling on a sentence is concluded and a consensus obtained, the chairman brings down the gavel, the approved sentence is highlighted on the screen in green, and discussion moves to the next sentence. Very gradually, green highlighting spreads through the report. Five days – Monday to Friday – were set aside for approving the whole 30 pages by this means.

In effect, the text is edited by several hundred people sitting together in a big room. One hundred and seven countries sent delegations of varying sizes. Saudi Arabia is said to have sent ten or more. The delegates arrive with political interests. Many oppose each other diametrically. Moreover, their governments are already locked in negotiations preparing for the major climate-change meeting that is planned for Paris next year under the auspices of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The wording of the SPM matters to the delegates, since it may be quoted in the negotiations. At our IPCC meeting, they treated the SPM as though it were a legal document rather than a scientific report. It was flattering in one way to find so many governments giving our work such serious attention. But the effects of their attention were often infuriating. To achieve consensus, the text of the SPM was made vaguer in many places, and its content diluted to the extent that in some places not much substance remained.

Moreover, the delegates showed little self-restraint in proposing amendments, and little interest in getting the work finished. They seemed happy to waste the Plenary’s time. One delegation changed ‘peaking in the first half of the century’ to ‘peaking before 2050’, after provoking some minutes of discussion. This was at nearly midnight on Thursday, the fourth

day out of five, when three-quarters of the text was yet to be agreed.

It is hard to believe this process could ever reach a conclusion. To a philosopher, it was hateful. I try to write short, accurate sentences. I was delighted when a delegate from Sweden said, of one of my paragraphs: 'This has obviously been written by a philosopher who cares about language. It is clear and sharp, and we should not change it'. It got mutilated anyway, as did almost every sentence in the SPM.

Another time, the delegate from South Sudan spoke in support of the hard work of the authors. He said that the report was a careful and accurate record of knowledge about climate change, and that delegates should be very wary about changing it unnecessarily. It was pleasing that the young nation of South Sudan, with all its troubles, had bothered to send a delegate, and especially pleasing to hear him speaking such good sense. I wish he had been better listened to.

The section of the SPM that I was involved with came up early in the proceedings. It was quickly apparent that it could not be agreed in the Plenary Session where all the delegates sat. So we authors of that section were sent as a 'Contact Group' to a smaller room to negotiate the details with some tens of countries. We worked for three and a half days on one page. Meetings each day ran from 8am till midnight with hardly time to eat. The page grew to three. The delegates made comments, we authors went away to rewrite the text on the basis of the comments, the delegates made further comments, we rewrote again, and so on. Several delegates in the meetings were sending their governments photos of the text on the screen as it was negotiated, and taking instructions from their governments by phone.

Late on Wednesday evening, during a brief break, the delegates formed a huddle in the corner, trying to agree text between themselves. We, who would be named as authors of the final product, were left as spectators. The US called in a more senior delegate. The main issue was whether we should mention a 'right to development', as the developing countries wanted. Eventually we were presented with a few sentences that, we were told, the developed countries would reject, and an alternative few sentences that, we were told, the developing countries would reject.

As he left the room, one delegate privately advised us not to depart far from his version of the text, because his delegation was very close to deleting the whole section anyway. This was the moment when I began to enjoy the whole event. The threat was not frightening. We authors privately pointed out in return that, if our section was deleted, we would no longer be authors of the SPM. We would be free to go to the press and publish what we liked. Moreover, all the ethics would have been deleted from the SPM. That would be embarrassing to whoever had deleted it, since the IPCC had been making a big show of incorporating ethics into its report. Mentioning all this seemed to calm the delegates.

Wednesday evening's impasse was unblocked by behind-the-scenes negotiation during Thursday, and by Thursday evening the Contact Group had accepted a version of our whole section. We took it back to the Plenary. When it eventually came up at 1.20 am on Friday, it went through in a few minutes without opposition. There was applause around the room. It was the first bit of text to be approved without argument in the Plenary.

Some brief paragraphs on ethics survived all the way to the approved final version of the SPM. They have been mauled, and their content diminished, but they are not entirely empty. We were lucky. Some sections were cut to pieces because the different views of the delegations turned out to be irreconcilable.

The biggest drama developed during the last night over the deletion of some figures. The draft SPM presented to the delegates contained figures that showed emissions of greenhouse gas from countries classified by their 'income group'. They showed that the emissions of the

'upper medium income' countries soared in the last decade. This is obviously important information for policy makers. It helps to explain why, despite all the anxiety about climate change, emissions have grown recently at an accelerating rate. Nevertheless, a coalition of countries led by Saudi Arabia insisted that all figures where countries were classified by income group should be deleted from the SPM. Other countries strongly opposed the deletion, but could not prevent it because a consensus is required for everything in the SPM.

The figures nevertheless remain in the Technical Summary and the underlying main report. The authors proposed to the Plenary that references to those figures should be included in the SPM, at the point where the figures themselves were deleted. Saudi Arabia objected, and indeed wanted to delete all references to any part of the main report that mentioned income groups. In response, the Netherlands proposed that, if the reference to the figures were deleted, a footnote should be added to say 'The Netherlands objects to the deletion of references to the following figures: . . .', followed by a list of the figures. (Footnotes noting objections from individual countries are permitted.) I thought this a lovely idea, and it definitely added to the entertainment, but it got nowhere. The question of what to do with the references remained unsettled. Many countries opposed their deletion and many supported it.

The time by now was 4.15 am. A break was called, and delegates gathered in a huddle to sort out what to do. I hung around the fringes watching. Generally there were smiles, but I witnessed a decided lapse of diplomatic language just before Brazil presented a new proposal to the Plenary. This proposal was that a note should be attached to each chapter in the main report that mentioned income groupings of countries. The note would say that, although income groupings are relevant from the scientific perspective, they are not necessarily relevant from the policy-making perspective. This proposal could not possibly have been approved, since the IPCC's *raison d'être* is to provide information relevant for policy-making. It could not accept a suggestion that it was not doing so. Moreover, the underlying main report needed to be protected from political interference.

Compromises ran out, and in the end Saudi Arabia got its way completely over the references. All references from the SPM to any part of the main report that mentions income groupings were deleted.

By 7.30 am on Saturday green highlighting had spread across all the surviving text, and the meeting ended. The last session had started at 9.00 am on Friday, and had been interrupted only twice for meal breaks amounting to one and a half hours together.

The main report and the Technical Summary were not touched by the destructive process of the meeting. They remain exactly as the authors wrote them. They make publicly available all the information that was deleted from the SPM. Because of the way it is created, the SPM has to be regarded as partly a political document. It contains nothing that has not been approved by the authors, but it was prevented from giving a complete picture as we see it. The deleted information is needed as a basis for making good climate policy. There is no scientific error in the figures; they were censored for political reasons only. Other countries could not prevent it, but a long succession of countries expressed support for the authors, whose work was treated with such contempt by some delegations.

Could we authors have prevented the censorship? Possibly. The IPCC depends on our long, hard, voluntary labour, and it also garners some authority by using our names as authors. Had we jointly threatened to withdraw our names, we might have had an effect. But at 4.30 am, with authors scattered around the conference room and some not entirely awake, no united front of authors was organized.

I emerged from this process angry at the censorship, pleased about the mentions of ethics, and astonished by the process. I would not have missed it for anything.

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