

Treating Equals Unequally: Rhetorics of Responsibility in an Age of Global Climate Change

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How does one write about the “rhetorics of responsibility” and the “responsibilities of rhetoric” as they pertain to environmental issues? What can I contribute to the “conversation that gets at the heart of the first principles” of these important topics? My guess is I will be following a path very similar to my peers in attempting to offer only a brief sketch of a position that will be knowingly too short and underdeveloped. However, seeing that the intention of this roundtable is to engage these issues in a generative process rather than a presentation of fixed positions, I would like to begin by retracing some of my initial questions, thoughts, and reactions related to the panel rationale that might be pertinent to our discussion before I explore a specific case study.

When I first read the rationale for this roundtable, I immediately attempted to wrap my mind around the question: “How do we determine who is responsible for environmental problems?” The words “justice” and “equality” came to mind. Perhaps my thoughts wandered in this direction primarily because I am accustomed to associating environmental wrongdoers with conditions of injustice and inequality. More specifically, I thought of the traditional, philosophical approach to these terms. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle outlines the classic example of formal equality. For Aristotle,

the same equality will exist between the persons and between the things concerned; for as the latter—the things concerned—are related, so are the former; if they are not equal, they will not have what is equal, but this is the origin of quarrels and complaints—when either equals have and are awarded unequal shares, or unequals equal shares.¹

In other words, we should treat equals equally and unequals unequally. There appears to be something useful about Aristotle’s initial thought on the subject of equality and justice; it would be unjust to treat equals unequally and unequals equally. Very little intellectual effort needs to be spent to realize Aristotle’s notion can be linked to the idea of assigning responsibility for environmental problems. However, “responsibility,” “justice,” and “equality” are words that can “can serve any number of masters.”² These terms are rhetorically powerful. They are “god terms” and “virtue words,” each with an appropriate counter-part.³ Sometimes these terms are used explicitly in discourse, at other times our understanding is implicitly constructed. We can turn to two examples to see these words in action.

On December 11, 1997, 84 countries, including the United States (represented by the Clinton Administration) signed onto the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Just six months previous to the meeting, the U.S. Senate passed Resolution 98 by a vote of 95 to zero, telling the Clinton Administration it would not ratify any international agreement like the Protocol. President Clinton heeded the Senate’s advice and refused to send the Protocol to the Senate for ratification, thus keeping the United States from participating in the first international attempt to address the problem of global climate change. But *why* did the Senate vote so overwhelmingly in favor of Resolution 98? I believe a significant part of the answer can be found in the “rhetorics of responsibility” used during the hearings and debates. For many legislators, each nation should have been treated equal to another, especially in terms of trade. If the Protocol sought to make some trading relations unequal by imposing economic burdens on some nations and not others, many policymakers viewed the agreement as

¹ Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1006.

² Louis P. Pojman, *Global Political Philosophy* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 71.

³ Richard M. Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1985), 212; Peter Westen, *Speaking of Equality: An Analysis of the Rhetorical Force of ‘Equality’ in Moral and Legal Discourse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), xvii.

inherently unfair and unjust. Of course, the developing nations were blamed for the creation of these unfair conditions. An alternative rendering of the situation at the time was noticeably absent. Only a handful of those involved in the hearing process and the floor debate actually argued that the question that should be considered was one of responsibility about greenhouse gas emissions. If each person is seen as an equal, and the average citizen in the developed world releases a disproportionately larger amount of greenhouse gases, then this condition should be seen as unfair. The condition becomes unjust if those in the developed world would suffer more from the effects of the gas releases than those in the developing world. Many have argued this is the case. Although Aristotle's advice to treat equals equally and unequals unequally has aided us in analyzing this case, what Aristotle did not comment on was how we determine what is equal and just. With Kyoto, rhetorics of responsibility related to both economics and environmental questions needed to be addressed. The debates were clearly one-sided. It is no wonder the U.S. never signed onto the Protocol.

Based on this brief example, I believe we can begin to think about our roles as critics within society. Do we have a responsibility to understand how rhetorics of responsibility are constructed? A simple answer is "yes." However, do we have any real ability to respond? This answer is more complicated. Perhaps it is our charge to offer the alternative readings and positions that are not being articulated by dominant discourses. But to what effect? As island-nations continue to find their cultures threatened by rising sea levels and coastal communities are ravaged by storms, we, as critics, have at least some responsibility to make sure environmental issues are given as much weight as economic and political ones. Of course, these issues are not easily separated from one another and any attempt to offer solutions is bound to encounter difficulties. But perhaps we can find some solace in knowing that we can make specific suggestions about how to improve our material and created conditions.