

Don't Slack, Carbon Tax!
By Vincent Law

“‘Alright then,’ answered the cabin boy. ‘These issues are not petty and trivial. Kicking the dog is cruel and brutal and it is humiliating to be called a fruit. But in comparison to our real problem — in comparison to the fact that the ship is still heading north — your grievances are petty and trivial, because if we don’t get this ship turned around soon, we’re all going to drown.’” - Ted Kaczynski in *Ship of Fools*

Our planet’s rising temperatures cannot be ignored for long. Each year, 37 billion tons of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere (as stated in class lecture). That gas remains there indefinitely. A tax on carbon emissions would be an excellent step in the right direction to help our proverbial ship not sink and drown. One solid reason to support a carbon tax is that sin taxes have been proven to help curb consumption. Secondly, the brunt of the tax would be faced not by everyday Americans of median socioeconomic status, but by the corporations that make their money with fossil fuels. I back this up with a rights theory perspective. Lastly, it would help elucidate the threat that climate change poses to our lives and future generations, and start the clock in the race to figure out a better alternative.

A ‘sin tax’ is an excise tax on a product or service that has been deemed harmful to its consumers or broader society. This is commonly seen in the sale of tobacco, alcohol, lottery and scratch-off tickets, and recently, recreational marijuana. A carbon tax would be another sin tax in the same vein as taxing cigarettes. It would be a Pigouvian tax, which is imposed so that “individuals who engage in behaviors that increase costs to society in the form of increased medical costs [...] bear an increased individual responsibility for funding these costs” (Perry). In essence, caring for preventable lung cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, and other accidents is

expensive. A Pigouvian tax grapples with this by taxing the things that tend to create costs later. As a bonus to helping pay for damages, increased costs have been shown to work in helping curb the use of alcohol and tobacco.

The impact of carbon emissions on the planet, if not stopped soon, will make the economic burdens from alcohol and tobacco seem miniscule. Most people today support some kind of sin tax when it is imposed thoughtfully, like on cigarettes. After all, treating tobacco-induced lung cancer is not cheap. On the same token, building sustainable energy plants is not cheap, either. If we support sin taxes at all, then we should support a carbon tax even more than the tax on cigarettes, because our carbon footprint will cost us much more down the road.

Sin taxes are a compromise between not encroaching on people's rights to use a destructive product and not allowing its negative ramifications to step on non-users' freedom, either. We are still indeed dependent on fossil fuels, so outlawing emissions outright is not possible now. But its consequences are still massive, and are only going to be more pronounced in the future. That is why a carbon tax would be viable, and completely fair. It's simply a compromise that protects our rights.

Speaking of rights, we do have a right to not suffer the consequences of overconsumption of fossil fuels. The rights of corporations to cast tons of CO₂ into our shared air does not reign over the common good. To extrapolate, our future children and their children have a right to play outside in the summer, and to play in the snow in the winter. Further, the vulnerable ecosystems on both sides of the equator like the tundras in the Arctic Circle, and the tropics of Oceania, have a right to exist. To give up on polar bears, coral, fish, bees, penguins, turtles, elephants, and the rest of the amazing vibrancy of our world is shameful, inhumane, and cruel. Protecting life is

potentially the most important part of a carbon tax. Why should animals have to bear the burden of global warming?

The carbon tax would help tip the scale of the ethical rights theory's idea of rights vs. responsibilities. As it stands, corporations have a right to expel fossil fuels into the environment. Rights should come with responsibilities, according to proponents of rights theory (as stated in class lecture). Therefore, it is not out of the question to ask corporations to pick up the slack: to claim responsibility for their actions. I am specifically referring to megacorporations. "70% of global emissions are caused by the same 100 companies, yet those companies rarely if ever are held accountable." (Campanie).

It is unfair to point fingers at the consumer, as the mainstream climate change narrative often does. Slogans like 'reuse, reduce, recycle,' 'do your part,' and 'go green' are known by all. The famous Crying Indian commercial from the 1970s' also comes to mind. As provocative as that commercial was, it screams inauthenticity and greenwashing when finding out that the firm behind the ad, Keep America Beautiful, was founded by bottling companies American Can Co. and the Owens-Illinois Glass Co., which would later be supported by Coca-Cola and Dixie Cup Co. (Dunaway). The power to lessen carbon emissions lies in the hands of corporations, as "individual actions are almost negligible compared to the large-scale impacts of corporate oil and gas pollution." (Campanie).

In line with my earlier complaints of the mainstream climate change narrative, a carbon tax existing would also outline that carbon emissions are a real problem. Many Americans still doubt the threat of climate change, insisting that it is not induced by humans. While everyone is entitled to their own opinion, hopefully the introduction of a carbon tax would help change minds and reiterate that climate change is the biggest threat in our horizons currently. In addition

to people ignoring the facts of climate change, there are also people who know that climate change is happening, but think its impact is much farther in the future than it is.

A carbon tax would ideally make the impending threat of climate change known to all. No doubt, it would add fuel to the fire in terms of prompting conspiracy theories about climate change. But it would help take fossil fuels out of the fire. The money earned from taxing would ideally be used to help spawn viable alternatives to fossil fuels. In the long-term, nuclear plants would be built, and in the short-term, wind and solar infrastructure. Perhaps even ad campaigns could be produced that bring even more awareness to the issue.

In addition to the benefits relating to public consciousness previously mentioned, a carbon tax would set a precedent for other countries to follow, and it would unofficially start the clock in the race to beat climate change. In 2012, the Washington Supreme Court ordered the legislature to work on providing more funds to schools and set a deadline, promising sanctions if their request was not met in 3 years. Lawmakers didn't do enough to provide school funding despite the generous amount of time given, so in 2018, the Supreme Court began fining them \$100,000 a day. The state's daily fines were what prompted a focused re-allocation of funds to go towards schools. Fining the lawmakers was successful. (O'Sullivan). This example mirrors what a carbon tax could do. With this in mind, it is not unreasonable to think that taxing corporations will produce good results, much more quickly than waiting for them to come around. Money talks.

In conclusion, a carbon tax would be a fantastic asset for us in the present as well as future generations. A carbon tax fits the definition of a sin tax, much like the ones imposed on alcohol and tobacco, because carbon emissions hurt our planet. To many economists, sin taxes are necessary measures to offset costs of destructive behaviors, which is exactly what carbon

emissions do. In addition, taxing corporations is completely justified in the eyes of rights theory. It also falls on corporations the most because they are the ones doing the polluting. Finally, a carbon tax would raise awareness, which would then prompt a conversation and other countries to follow suit. A carbon tax would start the clock in the race to beat climate change.

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