

## Finding the 'Right' Moral Tone Regarding Climate Change and Travel

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This essay arose in response to an especially rich dialogue between Evelin Lindner and Neil Ryan Walsh on the challenge of finding the "right" moral tone in formulating a statement for our website in response to a writer's email noting that our annual conferences involve air travel: Doesn't that involve us in activity that works counter to concerns about climate change? What should the Network's statement on the subject be? I was delighted by the invitation to comment on their joint writing endeavor. How could I not find the issues they so elegantly raised both fascinating and illuminating?

### A Question of Tone: Welcoming Others

Neil wrote on behalf of crafting a statement that would be gracious, welcoming and calming. He sought language that would not hit hot buttons, that would not automatically evoke mental schemas organized around who's right and who's wrong, who's good and who's bad, or who's in conflict and shouldn't ever forget it.

In matters of ecology, we step into a social drama already in progress, where sides have been taken and are readily attributed to each other. Judgment and contempt are commonplace. Readers coming upon a statement have to wonder at the outset how their thinking will be regarded, given that so much moral judgment is in the air. They look for signs as to how they'll be viewed as carefully as pundits parsing every word of political leaders. Phrasing that puts us at ease says in effect: "This is not about contempt and humiliation. We're not into that kind of drama here. You don't have to transfer experiences with other people into this one, people who viewed your thinking with contempt."

Neil demonstrated that all of this can be nicely conveyed without explicitly belaboring the point. Tone can accord welcome to all: We're presumed to be on the same side unless proven otherwise. By avoiding humiliation-triggering phrases, the focus can be kept on the values and tasks before "us" -- not on having to worry about what "side" an author may be all too ready to consign us to. If our statement does not signal feelings of suspicion and readiness for resentment toward our readers over what they do or don't think, readers are likely to feel less inclined to become defensive in anticipation of an argument. We can avoid conjuring up a sense of being the object of contempt and anger at being so treated. As readers we're freer to think about the subject at hand when authors view themselves and us as on the same side. When the tone presumes we're already working together, it is easier to slip into doing just that!

### Re-Finding the Disappeared

But what of the positive value of a moral tone in our statement? What of the position that, given what we are about, we cannot discuss the impact of air travel on climate without including the question of who can afford to engage in travel and who cannot? Who can be excluded from international conferences

simply because they cannot get there, and who can easily take part? Evelin raised the question of these realities that can easily become invisible, overlooked and disappeared: poorer peoples can be humiliated by worthwhile global agendas, richer peoples can be unaware of what's going on in non-rich parts of the world. How can we discuss the role of air travel in climate change as if such realities don't exist?

Addressing those realities as part of any statement on air travel and climate change would be part of the larger human rights discourse dedicated to making visible the whole spectrum of human life in our larger, hierarchically-organized world. It can serve as a reminder of the subtext of privilege and under-significance that threatens to pervade anything we try to do, given the world we've all grown up in. A statement on air travel and climate change can be a reminder that people can be overlooked in the name of ideals. And that we can think we're taking the whole human world into account without realizing we're not.

This reminds me of the challenge faced in individual cases of dissociation in psychotherapy: "Can 'I' be aware of very disturbing experiential realities that have been put far from my consciousness? And if I become aware of them, will connecting with them make for a helpful outcome, or only for suffering, conflict, depression and/or hatred?" The dissociated and disturbing parts of self have their own questions: "Can 'we' finally stop being viewed as a disturbance and become valued as part of the normal, the ordinary, the successful, the good whole person?" These same questions pertain to the parts of humankind often dissociated from the business-at-hand of the "successful" world. The world that does not "see" the "unimportant" can fear that coming into contact with them may be dangerous, may bring on humiliating accusations, may lead only to upheaval. The dissociated have to wonder whether they can be effectively integrated together into one whole world that works well for all of us. To raise the issue of the "disappeared" is to raise the question of hopefulness on all sides as to whether we can work together to make something good of our shared existence on this planet.

#### Misperception Can Connect Us to Our Shared Humanness

Bringing the left-out into a statement on air travel/climate change can also serve as a reminder of something Evelin highlights about the human rights transition from rankism to egalization, that we are all on the same side in that we all have something by way of flaws in dealing with each other. It is inescapable that we overlook things about each other, are vulnerable to feeling left out in a given moment if we are chronically left out, and at risk of assuming we're all equally empowered when we very definitely are not. This, as Evelin argues, is not terrible: It's human.

We do misperceive in relation to each other, and that is part of the value of coming together. Together we can perceive more of what our shared human fate includes: vulnerability and effectiveness, optimism and finiteness. That line of thinking reminds me of George Soros's idea of the radical fallibility involved in being human. Bringing in the reality that issues of air travel are not only issues

of impact on climate but issues of who can afford to travel speaks from the position that "we're all in this together" in a very interesting and unexpected way: The word "this" refers to our shared experience of misperception and oversight as a result of being human with each other, and their value in being used to enrich our connections rather than rupture them.

A clearly moral tone about climate change is often thought of as capturing a sense of the urgency of ecological tasks. But when the unspoken is being spoken as part of a statement, I think that very tone of urgency sometimes expresses a lingering fear that the disappeared will stay disappeared, an anxiety to make sure to get this on the table. I am reminded that for the disappeared there is often an overcompensation of making sure to be heard, because it can seem so unreal that "we" actually are being heard at all. To be "heard" entails the re-working of an entire sense of the world, an experience not readily encompassed. A statement on air travel and climate change can be a champion not only of ecological care but also a champion of the disappeared: A large "don't forget these important realities!" As I treasure the welcoming of all that dissipates the spirit of contempt in our dealings with one another, I also treasure the integration of the disappeared into the world of the visible and important!

To Indict or Not to Indict: Where Lies Virtue?

And yet how to reconcile the two? For us to champion the overlooked that re-appear through the human-rights lens expects our readers to know that we at DHS are accepters of human fallibility and do not impute moral disrepute for overlooking this or that if we use those disjunctions as springboards for connection and richer understanding of the human condition. For those who do not know this about us, a statement that brings those issues to attention can be read as containing linguistic hot buttons about "causing" global warming, "blindness" to suffering and to "long-overdue" changes, that can make for feeling consigned to one group or another (the blind or the seeing, the timely or the laggards) despite readers' own inner identifications of themselves as good-intentioned and practical. And that risks triggering being offensive and prompting a defensiveness that gets in the way of thinking-together and working-together. I see the care to be taken to ensure any statement we make embodies our most important message, the message of that we want to avoid humiliating people. How sensitive we have to be when existing conflicts so predispose us to hear each other as "enemies" or allies, on the right side or the wrong.

I find the opportunity to comment in this essay comes at an opportune moment for me, as I struggle with just these issues in writing about nuclear weapons. How to talk about matters with enormous moral import while not being assimilated in the minds of readers into a drama they already know too well, a drama of humiliation/superiority overlaid with threat/danger/power -- which would mean their reactions would eliminate possibilities for fresh perceptions.

I find myself gravitating toward being a voice for the realities of the weapons themselves, as the shame and power dramas seem to leave too little mental space for really noticing the weapons, what they do, or asking what they mean to us about our relationships. And gravitating toward being a voice for the

felt experience that I think is often disappeared, the ordinary questions about who we are to each other, what the answers do to our capacity to imagine and to make good futures together. What it means to try and go forward without having spoken about what we have already put each other through. I ask myself: what is the place for moral indignation, for indictments? Is it virtuous to speak from those places, or does speaking from those places only reinforce the cycles of dehumanization I wish to see dissolve into something better?

And so of course I have been taken with these two positions and what they embody together: The combining of bringing in the disappeared, and fostering a mental space in which coming together makes for working well together. I think about how Neil and Evelin worked together to produce a 'final' statement on climate change and air travel to conferences, and what that working together says about process. The version going on the website could not have emerged without the original challenger who questioned our use of plane travel to get to conferences, without Evelin responding by charting the outline of an integrated set of values and beliefs, and without Neil picking up on the linguistic pitfalls and reworking the piece to be carefully welcoming. Three parties, all playing vital roles in the creation of the statement: I read in that a microcosm of the DHS process we are striving for -- and hopefully of global process. In thinking together about our language, intentions, and what-to-do, while keeping the positive human experience we want to foster central in our focus, we transform ourselves and maybe also a bit more of the world.