



Fossil Fuels: The Moral Case

Kathleen Hartnett White

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Current policies to supplant fossil fuels with inferior energy sources need to incorporate a deeper understanding of the transformative role of energy in human society lest they jettison the wellsprings of mankind's greatest advance.

The thesis of this paper is that fossil fuels, as a necessary condition of the Industrial Revolution, made modern living standards possible and vastly improved living conditions across the world. Humanity's use of fossil fuels has released whole populations from abject poverty. Throughout human history, elites, of course, have enjoyed comfortable wealth. No more than 200 years ago, however, the lives of the bulk of humanity were "poor, nasty, brutish and short," in the words memorably used by Thomas Hobbes.

This paper aims to articulate and explain some startling, but rarely acknowledged, facts about the role of energy in human history. Energy is so intimately connected to life itself that it is almost equivalent to physical life. Virtually everything needed to sustain the life of a human individual—food, heat, clothing, shelter—depends upon access to and conversion of energy. Modern, prosperous nations now access a seemingly limitless supply of energy. This cornucopia, however, is a very recent advance in mankind's history. Fossil fuels, methodically harnessed for the first time in the English Industrial Revolution, beginning in the 18th century and taking off in the 19th century, have been a necessary condition of prosperous societies and of fundamental improvements in human well-being.

Adequate treatment of this topic is a daunting task for anyone. The unprecedented stakes in today's contentious energy policy debates about carbon, however, make it a morally necessary topic. As a former final decision-maker in a large environmental regulatory agency, I urge current officials and concerned citizens to reflect on energy policies within a broad but fundamental context: human history and the physics of material lives.

My research was initially inspired by a comprehensively researched monograph by Indur Goklany titled "Humanity Unbound." His paper took me to a dozen books and twice as many academic papers. With gratitude, I acknowledge the books listed below as the most enlightening, persuasive guides on the topic. And I highly recommend them for more thorough analysis than allowed by the confines of this paper. May those policymakers entrusted with the authority to make binding decisions about energy consider these books as "a look before an unreflective leap" that could unravel mankind's greatest achievement—the potential enjoyment of long, comfortable, healthy lives without the gnawing hunger of subsistence poverty.

The Improving State of the World, Indur Goklany.

Energy and the English Revolution, E.A. Wrigley.

Farewell to Alms, Gregory Clark.

The Rational Optimist, Matt Ridley.

The Great Divergence, Kenneth Pomeranz.

The Bottomless Well, Peter W. Huber and Mark P. Mills.

Knowledge and Power, George Gilder.

Energy and Society, Fred Cottrel.

Energy Transitions, Vaclav Smil.

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Karen Schanz:

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