

Climate justice and
individual
responsibility
philosophy essay



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In the last couple decades, ethical debates have begun to shed light on climate justice. The big questions these ongoing climate justice debates tend to ask are whether or not the disadvantages of future generations as a result of climate change finds present and past generations culpable, as a society or as an individual, and who it is that must take responsibility for the compensation and conservation that must now occur. The two fallacies that I have thus far encountered in reviewing some climate justice literature are as follows: first, that the non-identity problem is a sound argument to deny that our present inaction on global warming and climate change harms individuals in the future, and second, the view that Walter Sinnott-Armstrong holds that our individual actions in the present will have no impact on future generations, and therefore we hold no individual moral responsibility to “go green”, but rather our governments hold that responsibility for us (Sinnott-Armstrong, 344). In this paper, I attempt to resolve these two fallacies with my own argument on an individual’s moral responsibility in the face of climate change, argued in part with Immanuel Kant’s deontology, and following some clarification on the nature of justice and ethical theories. I will come to assert that, assuming climate change is a grave issue that will harm many people in generations to come, individuals do have a moral responsibility to take action in regards to climate change in accordance with a moral duty, born of the rights of future generations.

This argument is based on the assumptions that climate change is an issue that will create serious problems for future generations living in parts of the countries that are not able to properly adapt to the rising sea levels and extreme weather conditions that climate change will cause (Gardiner). It also

assumes that climate change will cause harm to these future populations, as massive death and displacement will likely take place if adaptation measures are not taken. These are facts that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have studied and determined true, concluding in their research “ not only that ‘ the balance of evidence suggests discernible human influence on climate change’, but also that the long-term impact of climate change will have predominantly, if not uniformly, adverse impacts on the health, cultural life, and economic prosperity of future human populations,” (Page, 53-4).

One of the biggest issues fracturing the climate justice debate is how justice can be defined in regards of the responsibility involved with climate change. Climate change is not a standard moral problem, and thus cannot be judged like one. The paradigm of a standard moral problem is where one clearly identifiable agent intentionally harms another clearly identifiable agent, close to the former in space and time (Schinkel). However, because climate change happens so gradually, and it is impossible to determine the exact impact of present acts of greenhouse gas emission on future effects of climate change, there is no clearly identifiable criminal, victim or even crime. As James Garvey puts it, “ there’s no one standing red-faced next to a broken vase” (60). This means that determining the consequences and who is responsible for them is very difficult. Our justice system is so far only compatible with identity-dependent theories of justice, theories that aim “ to make particular human beings, or animals, healthier or happier or rescue people from harm or disadvantage, particularly if these disadvantages arise through no fault of their own,” (Page, 58). Because there is no identifiable

harm to these “ particular human beings” of generations to come, climate justice faces a problem of non-identity. The non-identity problem, explains Edward Page in his work “ Intergenerational Justice and Climate Change,” arises from the fact that conception and genetic identity is so “ highly sensitive to antecedent events” that “ after a few generations, and depending on which policy we choose, completely different sets of people will come into existence” (Page, 56-7). These different sets of people will owe their entire existence to the decisions and actions of past generations, Page explains. Thus, because we assume that these particular individuals’ lives will still be worth living under those necessary conditions of their existence, we cannot determine how they are helped or hindered by our present sacrifices (57). So, why sacrifice?

In my opinion, the non-identity problem is a convenient excuse to attribute no crime, and therefore no responsibility, to present generations. It takes advantage of the insufficient data available to decipher exactly how much harm wasteful greenhouse gas emissions in the present will cause to individuals in the future. Although the amount of harm is indefinite, panels like the IPCC have concluded that certain communities of future generations will be significantly disadvantaged and deprived if nothing is done about climate change (Page, 53-4). Edward Page offers a revised theory of identity-dependence in light of this that he claims will solve the non-identity problem (63). The “ group-centred” theory of climate justice states that “ the communities which future people will belong to are deserving of concern and respect in their own right; and if present actions have the result either that these communities die out altogether, or are damaged in the sense that

various communal practices are undermined, they are morally objectionable” (64). While this theory is a step towards moral progress on the climate justice issue, intuitively it does not feel sufficient enough. When it comes to intergenerational justice, what is the tipping point? How many people must be affected for a particular community to be “deserving of concern and respect in their own right” (64)? In light of this, I feel that this theory will still not do. Future populations will be affected, and thus future communities will be affected and future individuals will be affected; in my opinion, there should be no grand distinction between groups and individuals when it comes to harm and disadvantage.

While Page’s group-centred theory at least helps identify victims in the intergenerational injury, it still only recognizes our duty to future communities of people. While this may be sufficient enough to promote conservation methods, I still believe his theory does not go far enough in recognizing future individuals as victims to climate change. If the group-centred theory solves the non-identity problem by imagining victimized groups of people, why cannot the fact that there are individuals within that community that will be personally harmed by climate change negate the non-identity problem as well; individuals whose homes will be submerged or destroyed by hurricane or tsunami, causing them to be displaced or killed. Most would agree that a community’s risks of losing its culture or language are not as grave as an individual’s risks of losing his home or life. Naturally, there is more utility in a community than in a mere individual, however I fail to see the difference in moral worth between a community and an individual.

To us in the present generation, both entities are moral patients, with rights and duties owed to them.

Moral patient is a deontological term to describe a non-rational being with rights, such as an animal, a child or a person with a mental disorder (Gheaus). Because they are non-rational, they do not have moral duties, only duties owed to them by moral agents, rational beings who are capable of moral understanding (Gheaus). Those individuals that will be harmed by climate change in the future are currently very young or unborn, and therefore not yet rational. We have a duty to them to uphold their rights, and they have the right to the same conditions of life as their forefathers. However, while we can acknowledge that we have a duty to future generations, it is not as clear to us which actions are according to that duty.

As in most moral problems, it is helpful to consider tried and true moral principles to determine how we ought to act. While I don't see universal merit in absolute Kantianism, I feel that Kant's deontology is the right principle to consider for climate justice because it focuses not on consequences (which as I have explained is and has been unclear to present and past generations) but on duty according to the categorical imperative (Gheaus). The categorical imperative has two formulations: the first, to "act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law," and the second, "act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" (Gheaus) Sinnott-Armstrong denies that Kant's theory imposes a moral obligation to prevent wasteful greenhouse gas emissions, claiming that when he goes for a joyride in a "gas-guzzler" <https://assignbuster.com/climate-justice-and-individual-responsibility-philosophy-essay/>

on a Sunday afternoon, his maxim is to have “harmless fun”, and that does not make for a problematic universal law (338). However, Sinnott-Armstrong explains in detail earlier in the article that this gas-guzzling GHG-emitting joyride has no practical, emotional or clinical benefit for him (334). Therefore there would be little sacrifice involved in refraining from driving the gas-guzzler. Hypothetically if Sinnott-Armstrong’s maxim were adopted as a universal maxim, and if millions of others worldwide began driving gas-guzzling cars on a weekly basis, or began doing other acts of wasteful greenhouse gas emission because they also considered it non-profitable harmless fun, then that fun would not longer be so harmless. All of those wasteful emissions would go into the atmosphere and contribute to the Greenhouse effect, eventually leading to climate change and indefinite harm on future generations. However, Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument does shed light on the fact that using Kant’s deontological argument to defend climate justice is overly demanding of supererogatory duty. Who should say that we in present generations should never have harmless fun when it emits wasteful greenhouse gas emissions? After all, our environment needs some greenhouse gas emissions to operate (Garvey, 9).

This is where it is important to distinguish between the two types of duty in deontology. Perfect duty is to always act according to the two formulations of the categorical imperative, with absolutely no exceptions (Gheaus). A perfect duty is “thou shalt not kill”, for example. An imperfect duty on the other hand is to act such that we make other people’s ends our own (Gheaus). Imperfect duties are a little less clear, as the agent must choose when and towards what cause to perform these duties, since it is impossible

to perform them all the time to everybody (Gheaus). Preventing wasteful greenhouse gas emissions is an imperfect duty; we are not required to perform it all the time and at every opportunity. If we did, that would likely decrease our own benefits such as money, time and convenience in the process to ultimately ensure that the same benefits of future generations are not decreased. This does not make sense to do.

This leads me to the second formulation of the categorical imperative, to not treat any person as a mere means but also as an end. Sinnott-Armstrong rejects this formulation as well, claiming that “ for me to treat someone as a means implies my using harm to that person as part of my plan to achieve my goals. Driving for fun does not do that,” (338). However Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument is too narrow in its scope. Driving a gas-guzzling car is using the earth’s unlimited resources for one’s own pleasure, and is thus using the earth as a means to one’s purposeless ends. Of course, human beings are permitted to use the earth as a means to their ends and always have, but that is not to say we should treat the earth as a mere means and not an end at the same time. Even in an anthropocentric theory of intrinsic value, that attributes value to the earth only by virtue of its value to human beings, the earth’s ends are our ends (Page, 59). When the earth’s resources are exhausted or destroyed by climate change, humanity will be inevitably extinguished. Therefore we have a duty, though imperfect, to future states of humanity (as we in the present will not likely still be alive at the end of the world) to treat the earth’s ends as our own where it is not too overly demanding or costly.

Sinnott-Armstrong argues that individuals do not have a moral obligation to conserve energy but only to elect a government that will adopt conservation policies (344). “ Finding and implementing a real solution is the task of governments,” he argues (344). However, as a matter of the universalizability principle, this is not sufficient enough. Individuals have a moral responsibility to conserve energy where they can and when they can; I agree that electing candidates with conservation platforms is a proactive way to do something about climate change, but I also think the responsibility should be reflected in people’s lifestyle. Recycling, switching to energy-efficient appliances and lightbulbs and walking or biking instead of driving are all simple ways to modify one’s lifestyle to conserve energy and uphold the duty to future generations. Action starts with the individual.

While the theories of Page and Sinnott-Armstrong shed light on the issues surrounding climate justice, I feel that they do not go far enough in attributing moral responsibility to individuals to conserve. Looking to Kant’s deontology allows us to see that we do have a duty to future moral patients, and a responsibility to make the earth’s ends our own ends as well. I only hope that, for the future of our planet and generations to come, all these words exchanged over climate justice are followed by individual action.