

Guest-Editors' Introduction

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Symposium: Intergenerational Justice and Natural Resources: Introduction

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There are a variety of contexts in which problems of intergenerational justice become practically relevant. Without doubt, currently the most important and urgent of these is climate change. This importance is evident in the papers of this symposium, all of which place (to varying degrees) their discussions within the context of climate change. The two most important practical questions in this context are simple to state. First, what should be done about climate change? Second, who should bear the burdens of doing it? In order to arrive at ethically defensible answers to both questions one must necessarily address issues of intergenerational justice. For instance, answering the first question requires understanding what, if anything, we owe future generations, and an account of the weight of our duties towards future generations relative to other obligations of justice we have. And again as illustration, answering the second question requires understanding what, if anything, the relevance is of past action that contributed to causing anthropogenic climate change: should, for example, states with high levels of historical emissions bear more of the burdens involved in responding to climate change?

These two practical questions are easy to state, but, as the ever-growing philosophical literature on climate change testifies, answering them satisfactorily requires addressing a variety of complex theoretical issues. Indeed, one of

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the satisfactions of working philosophically on climate change is precisely this dual aspect – on the one hand, one is working on and hoping to contribute to solving one of humanity’s most important problems; on the other, doing this requires one to enter very abstract and difficult theoretical debates. This symposium reflects this dual aspect. All the papers in it are clearly state-of-the-art contributions to answering the two basic practical questions, and at the same time all of them engage with important and enduring philosophical debates, such as the nature of justice and the background conditions necessary for its applicability; the conditions of moral responsibility; the importance of motivation to normative prescriptions; how to understand property rights of individuals; how to understand territorial rights of groups. The easiest and most helpful way of showing this is simply to introduce the papers, and it is to this we now turn.

In this symposium’s first article, ‘Historical Responsibility, Harm Prohibition, and Preservation Requirement: Core Practical Convergence,’ Henry Shue directly tackles the second of the two basic questions, namely who should bear the burdens of responding to climate change. As Shue points out, the debate on this question often coalesces into a debate over which of three principles to adopt: the ability to pay principle, the beneficiary pays principle and the polluter pays principle. Shue argues that this list is incomplete and proposes a ‘triple hybrid principle of historical responsibility’ that incorporates aspects of the three principles, and in addition offers two further neglected but important moral considerations that support action on climate change – the ‘pure imperative not to do harm, and the pure duty not to threaten the physical pre-conditions of human life through indefinite climate disruption.’ He claims that the practical implications of all the considerations converge, and in fact ‘yields initial duties that are unconditional and over-determined.’ That is to say, the policy implications – Shue talks of the duties of the United States in particular – for immediate action are clear despite the debate over the three principles, and the US government ought to robustly act to lead the effort to reduce or eliminate global emissions.

Shue argues, in other words, for certain duties of intergenerational justice that arise because of anthropogenic climate change. But as Eric Brandstedt points out in the second paper of this symposium, ‘The Circumstances of Intergenerational Justice,’ it is possible to doubt whether the value of justice is applicable to intergenerational relations at all. Owing to certain non-contingent features of the relations between non-contemporaries, most importantly the impossibility of reciprocity and the power asymmetry between non-contemporaneous generations (currently living people can affect future generations but the reverse does not hold), one may argue that the

circumstances of justice do not obtain in the intergenerational context. Instead of giving up on the claim that the circumstances of justice must obtain for the value of justice to be applicable, Brandstedt argues for a reinterpretation of the idea of the circumstances of justice. Instead of thinking of them as unchanging necessary and sufficient conditions for the applicability of justice, says Brandstedt, we should think of them as describing the problem to which justice is an answer. Once we do this, we are able to see that the problem may change, which would then require a change in the description of the circumstances of justice. Brandstedt's contention is that the problem to which justice is an answer has indeed changed, and in ways that necessitate intergenerational justice – for instance, currently living people now not only act in ways that require the consumption of fossil fuels, and so come with high emissions, but they are also aware of the highly likely impact of this on future generations, and they care about at least some of those impacts.

Brandstedt's paper attempts, then, to secure the theoretical possibility of intergenerational justice against the objection that intergenerational relations are not the appropriate kind of circumstance for the application of justice considerations. In the next paper of the symposium, 'What Can I Hope about the Earth's Future Climate? Affective Resources for Overcoming Intergenerational Distance, Kantian and Otherwise,' Diane Williamson tackles a different kind of difficulty when it comes to the duties of currently living people with respect to future generations, and in particular in the context of climate change. As is by now well discussed in the literature, there are reasons to think that there are severe motivational problems when it comes to currently living people discharging those duties. This motivational gap is an important problem (practical and/or theoretical, depending on one's background meta-theoretical convictions) for accounts of duties of intergenerational justice. In her paper, Williamson attempts to defuse this problem. She identifies four types of 'distance' that seem particularly relevant in the case of motivation to discharge one's duties with respect to climate change – spatial, epistemological, group and temporal distance, respectively. She argues that there are strategies that can be employed for each that help bridge this metaphorical distance, and thereby contribute to strengthening the motivation to do something about climate change. Moreover, she argues that in fact the temporal distance may, rather than reducing motivation, actually serve to increase it. She does this by offering a distinctive account of 'Kantian hope,' which she grounds in Kant's philosophy of history, and uses this to argue that 'hope about the future [is] a natural state.'

Though this was of course not the intention of the authors, in a sense the first three papers of the symposium can be understood as together being a sustained argument that provides and defends an answer to the question of

who should bear the burden of responding to climate change. Shue's paper gives us a positive proposal about how those burdens should be distributed and why; Brandstedt defends this proposal – and all proposals that claim there are duties of justice to do something about climate change – against the objection that justice is simply not applicable to intergenerational relations because the circumstances of justice do not obtain in that context; and Williamson offers us reasons to believe that currently living people will be sufficiently motivated to actually discharge those duties despite the various kinds of distance that currently living people have to the problem of climate change.

In similar vein, the last two papers of the symposium can be understood as contributing to the first practical question identified above, namely what we should do about climate change. In the fourth paper of this symposium, 'Territory Lost. Climate Change and the Violation of Self-Determination Rights,' Frank Dietrich and Joachim Wündisch focus on territorial rights. Given that climate change that will cause a rise in the sea level and that this rise threatens with great likelihood to flood some low-lying islands and coastal regions, we can hold that in at least some cases climate change threatens the territorial rights of island states (e.g. Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Maldives). Dietrich and Wündisch use a distinction made in the literature between property rights over land on the one hand, and jurisdictional rights over territory. They argue that when the second kind of right is violated, the nature and significance of the good that has been lost – the good that is associated with or constituted by the ability of members of a group to 'freely shape their political future,' i.e. the good of collective self-determination – means that the compensation has to be in-kind. That is to say, when territorial rights are violated, it is not enough to merely resettle the individual members in a different place, but it is necessary to offer the harmed group a piece of territory that allows them to exercise the right to collective self-determination. Further, they argue that this compensation in kind is owed by those high emitters without whose emissions (since 1990, which they take as the cut-off date after which the appeal to excusable ignorance is no longer valid) the island states would not have vanished; that is to say, they link the duty to address the rights violation to the causers of the rights violations. Having argued for the theoretical claims, they then provide an account of how territorial compensation could be implemented – they propose a negative auction – and the conditions under which a territory is to count as a sufficient compensation for the lost territory.

In the final paper of this symposium, 'Property Rights, Future Generations and the Destruction of Natural Resources,' Dan Dennis attempts something that is in a sense analogous to the attempt in Dietrich and Wündisch's paper, but for individual rights to natural resources. He first defends the claim that every

individual is entitled to an equal share of natural resources, and then extends this claim to include future generations on the basis that the temporal location of any given individual is an arbitrary factor that is irrelevant to this entitlement and should not affect it. Members of future generations have the same entitlement as members of the current generation. This entitlement is to what he calls the ‘commonwealth,’ which is a basket of natural resources and primary goods, with the latter element necessary to compensate for the natural resources that currently living people use up and thereby deprive future generations of. As with Dietrich and Wündisch, having established the theoretical claims, he then suggests a method of implementing it, namely by ‘taxing activities that destroy and degrade natural resources,’ and sketches how this method might work in practice. He concludes by arguing that one of the implications of his account is that it is necessary to revise the standard account of property rights, and particularly the idea that a right to property includes the right to ‘destroy, waste or modify’ that property, because given that we have a duty to hand on to future generations ‘a Commonwealth which is as useful to them as the Commonwealth of the current generation would be,’ we do not have a right to destroy those things that are part of this commonwealth.