

## BOOK REVIEW

# Climate change, justice and future generations

By Edward A. Page

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Review by Wilfred Beckerman

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It would be hard to be objective about a book that contains three references to me in the bibliography but misspells my name each time were it not for the fact that I have been guilty of a similar offence myself. Anyway, it is not difficult to find a lot of merit in Page's book.

First, it tackles an increasingly important issue in a very logical and well-structured manner. This issue is the growing long-run threat to the welfare of future generations posed by climate change. Clearly, apart from the scientific uncertainty surrounding this threat, policy reaction ought to take account of the ethical problem of how much sacrifice the present generation ought to make in order to mitigate the damage that climate change might do in the future. This ethical problem might appear to be a problem in intergenerational justice. A balanced assessment of the policy choices, therefore, requires both some understanding of the likely effects of climate change and their relationship to alternative theories of intergenerational justice. Page's book is one of the first to try to do just that.

The book begins with a broad-brush statement of the problem, and this is followed in chapter 2 by a summary of what is the consensus view of the science of climate change. Not being a scientist or a member of the British royal family I am not qualified to comment on the science of climate change, so I shall restrict my comments to Page's presentation of the ethical dilemmas posed if we accept the general consensus.

At an early stage in the book Page sets out his stall by making the controversial statement that "...for simplicity, ethics, equity and justice will be treated as interchangeable concepts". He then goes on to narrow down the scope of his inquiry by concentrating on *distributive* justice. In chapter 3, he sets out what some readers will find a very useful survey of the main candidates for what

many commentators call the 'focal variable' in theories of equality – i.e. what it is one wants equality of – such as welfare, resources, opportunities for welfare, and capabilities, as well as Rawls's well-known maximin proposal, and discusses the way that each theory impinges on the likely consequences of climate change.

Chapter 4 continues the good work by introducing some theories of distributive justice that are not strictly-speaking 'egalitarian'. These include 'utilitarianism' (which is, of course, not really concerned with equality at all except at an instrumental level as a means of maximising total utility), and 'prioritarianism' (associated chiefly with Derek Parfit and Roger Crisp). And again, he poses the interesting question of what the implications of each theory as well as of simple egalitarianism would be for the policies that ought to be adopted to deal with climate change, taking account of the different time-profile of welfare for each generation that different policies will produce. He highlights the different implications with the aid of carefully constructed numerical examples, which many readers may find very useful, although, in the end, they seem just to lead to the trivially obvious conclusion that utilitarians would follow the path that maximised utility over generations, prioritarians would follow the path that maximised the welfare of the worst off, and egalitarians would prefer the path that led to the greatest equality of welfare between generations. This is followed by a discussion of the 'sufficiency' view of distributive justice, of which Harry Frankfurt has been a leading exponent.

One of the crucial problems in any theory of intergenerational justice is what is known as the 'non-identity problem'. This is basically that since climate change will affect the precise identity of the people actually alive in the future it cannot be said that any actual individuals

have been harmed by it, since, in the absence of climate change, different people would have been alive in the future. In other words, nobody alive in the future can say that his welfare has been reduced as a result of climate change since if there had been no climate change he would not have existed. Conversely, if climate change is significantly mitigated our successors could not have claimed that *they* are better off than they would have been had climate change been allowed to take place, since in that event they would not have been born.

Page goes on to show how this view enters into the choice between different forms of Kyoto-type international agreements to mitigate climate change. But perhaps he ought to have discussed how it all turns on the crucial and highly controversial ‘person-affecting’ claim (which Temkin calls ‘The Slogan’), which, roughly speaking, is that no harm is done unless some actual person is harmed.

In the same chapter Page does rightly recognise the important role in the whole story played by the question of whether future generations can be said to have ‘rights’. And, again, he puts empirical flesh on the otherwise purely abstract philosophical problem by reference to predictions about the effects of climate change on inhabitants of some Pacific Islands. He shows a laudable scepticism (page 155) of how far future generations can be said to possess rights, and rightly challenges Edith Brown Weiss’s pathetic defence of the notion that they can, which consists really of just inventing a name for them (‘group-rights as distinct from individual rights’, or ‘planetary rights’) as if dreaming up new names makes sense of attributing characteristics and properties – such as having rights, or blond hair, or a taste for cream cheese – to non-existent entities.

All in all, therefore, many readers will find the book a very useful run over the main theories of distributive justice and their different relationship to the choice of policies to deal with climate change. Presumably, space limitations prevented the author from discussing more fully the main features that any theory of justice should exhibit and, in particular, how far they conform to Rawls’s acceptance of the Humean ‘circumstances of justice’, which rule out inter-generational justice from the outset. Also, Rawls’s repeated insistence on justice as a feature of institutions and societies that determine everybody’s rights and obligations makes it difficult to maintain that inter-generational justice can be invoked at all insofar as future generations (non-overlapping) cannot logically speaking *have* any rights. But to develop these themes might mean that I was letting myself be influenced by the author’s failure to spell my name correctly.