

Edward A. Page, *Climate Change, Justice and Future Generations*

Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK—Northampton, MA, 2006, 224 pp,
Hardback, ISBN 978 1 84376 184 6

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Accepted: 19 November 2007
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The core contention of *Climate Change, Justice and Future Generations* concerns the intergenerational ethical issues raised by climate change. The author's main aim, in fact, is to investigate the "intergenerational responsibility argument" (p. 9): given that anthropogenic climate impacts threaten the well-being of future generations and that this is unjust and unethical, human-induced changes in the climate system are unjust and unethical as well. But in achieving this primary goal, Page's contribution broadly articulates his line of reasoning, and thus offers much more than a simple ethical analysis of intergenerational responsibility. In spite of its apparently circumscribed aim, the book in fact confronts and ultimately unravels numerous complex ethical issues that characterize global climate change, and herein lies its major strength.

The book can be divided into four parts. The first one (Chapters 1 and 2) introduces the central themes of the volume, and offers an overview of the scientific bases of climate change and of the distribution of its foreseeable social, economic and cultural impacts. The main merit of these two 'preparatory' chapters is the demonstration that climate change, no matter how much we can mitigate emissions and adapt to its impacts, will modify the distribution of benefits and burdens both across space and time: it is expected, in fact, to increase inequalities between the developed and developing countries, and to undermine the well-being of future generations.

To grasp the authoritativeness and the richness of the book, however, it is more fruitful to concentrate closely on its subsequent parts, for it is here that really important issues of international and intergenerational justice in the climate domain are thoroughly and convincingly examined. The second part (Chapters 3 and 4) investigates the main elements of theories of distributive justice in order to highlight which theory provides the most advantageous approach to climate change. The third part (Chapters 5 and 6) presents two serious challenges raised by the extension of theories of distributive justice to future generations owing to the lack of reciprocity between persons belonging to different

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generations, and to the fact that current actions that will undermine future generations' quality of life are at the same time necessary conditions for future human beings' existence. Finally, the concluding part (Chapter 7), besides summarizing the book, scrutinizes the question of who bears responsibility for justice in the context of climate change.

Climate change, maintains Page, alters the distribution of benefits and burdens, both within the current generation, and between it and future ones. Distributive justice involves ethical analysis of the distribution of benefits and burdens in society, broadly conceived so as to include non-monetary elements as well: goods, bads, power, education, shelter, social duties, and more generally those related to climate change. In Chapters 3 and 4 the author thus explores the main issues that characterize theories of distributive justice when applied to the climate change context. The fundamental question that Page seeks to answer is: "*who should get what and how much?*" (p. 51, emphasis in the original). More specifically, he intends to investigate: (1) the scope of justice, i.e. who are the legitimate recipients of benefits and burdens?; (2) the shape of justice, i.e. what is the principle, or pattern, of distribution of benefits and burdens?; (3) the currency of justice, i.e. what kinds of benefits and burdens are to be justly shared?.

This part of the book is almost entirely devoted to scrutiny of the currency and shape of justice, whilst its scope is, partly, investigated later. Page has a consequentialist standpoint and takes a broad egalitarian approach, so that his exploration of the currency of justice is conducted within theories of justice with a tendency to equality that aim to improve the lives of the badly-off. He is thus sympathetic to sufficientarian and prioritarian patterns of distribution and rejects the historical principles of Nozickian libertarianism, on the ground that they basically refuse any distributive claim by virtue of procedural justice in the acquisition and transfers of resources. The aim of Page's analysis of the metric of justice is to evaluate a number of possible alternatives that might be applied to intergenerational justice in the context of climate change. His general answer to the famous question 'equality of what?' is that, given the humanist standpoint of the book, whose choice is however not exhaustively motivated, the currency of justice ought to be strictly linked to the concept of human well-being, i.e. "what it is for a person to lead a good life *from that person's perspective*" (p. 54, emphasis in the original). From this standpoint, neither welfarism (i.e. the idea that actions should be evaluated in terms of their consequences on human welfare) nor resourcism (i.e. the view that justice is concerned with the distribution of the value that resources have in society) provide the right currency of justice. The former in fact does not offer any sound argument for the preservation of the climate system because it focuses only on the contribution that climate stability gives to utility, the welfare of human beings, and ultimately to their desires. Resourcism, whether personal or impersonal, is similarly dogged by a major failure: it overshadows the different capacities of individuals to turn resources (means) into effective responses to climate impacts (ends). In the climate context, especially in regard to the impacts of climate change on current and future generations, the metric cannot be the availability of goods and services or the analysis of the outcomes of their use according to the yardstick of personal utility. This approach suffers from the fetishist handicap because it is not concerned with what these goods do to human beings. In this regard, Page claims that a more promising approach to the 'equality of what?' problem and to international and intergenerational justice in climate change ought to draw on Amartya Sen's notion of 'basic capabilities egalitarianism', a conceptual space focused on 'midfare', a state of the subject (of justice) lying midway between the resources it generates and the utilities thereof, i.e. something in-between primary goods and utility. The particular suitability to climate justice of Sen's currency consists mostly in its broader informational basis, whose focal personal features are

substantive freedoms, i.e. ‘beings’ and ‘doings’, or ‘achieved functionings’ that people have reason to value. The ability to enjoy freedoms varies over time for individual, social, institutional reasons: the capability approach, by capturing these differences, thus provides a more solid metric for grounding both international and intergenerational climate justice.

Chapter 4 analyses the shape of climate justice, i.e. the selection of an appropriate distributive pattern that specifies the amount of a given currency of justice to which subjects are entitled. In brief, among the patterns considered, egalitarian ones require that justice be concerned with equality in the distribution of the currency of justice. Prioritarian patterns claim the importance of distributing specific benefits to the least advantaged subjects. Sufficientism holds that every subject must have a sufficient, yet not equal, share of the specific currency of justice. The author thoroughly reviews the scholarly debate on this issue, largely unresolved in the literature, but does not provide any conclusive argument against or in favour of any pattern. He, however, raises three points. First, any distributive pattern acknowledges that activities producing dangerous climate change are unjust also because they threaten the well-being of current and future generations. Second, every distributive pattern is vulnerable, so that none of them is intrinsically superior to the others. Third, each pattern can increase its fit with moral convictions through the use of hypothetical examples, as the state-of-the-art literature makes clear.

The ensuing part addresses two arguments that may narrow the scope of distributive justice in regards to its intergenerational span.

Chapter 5 discusses the non-reciprocity problem, that is, the assumption that only mutually beneficial interactions imply duties and rights of justice among individuals. On this view intergenerational justice would not be conceived, for there are no direct, mutually advantageous interactions between different generations. Specifically, Page delineates the essence of the non-reciprocity problems and explores three possible defences of intergenerational justice, the most convincing one of which in the climate change context seems to be that represented by the ‘stewardship model’. This standpoint maintains that existing individuals bear duties of indirect reciprocity to protect environmental and human resources for posterity in return for the benefits inherited from past generations. To be noted is that the perspective of intergenerational stewardship differs from other defences of international justice in the environmental realm rooted in communitarians, for the latter characterize their ethical claims through membership of a community, which owing to the global dimension of climate change may be reductive. The stewardship model on the contrary implies that the present generation has the duty of passing to future generations an acceptable climate system independently of any consideration as to where members of future generations will live.

The second argument, analysed in Chapter 6, relates to the well-known question raised by Parfit concerning the non-fixed identity of future individuals. The non-identity problem maintains that issues of justice do not pertain to future generations because present acts that might be considered harmful or beneficial to them are at the same time necessary, yet remote, conditions for their coming into existence. In other words, since the intergenerational span of issues of justice is blurred by a myriad of negligent choices and actions that determine future lives, future generations cannot claim that their interests or rights have been violated by past actions since, in their absence, they would never have been born. This is not the place to go into the complex ethical debate on non-identity, which is far from being concluded. However, Page seems to offer a realistic rationale for extending justice to futurity in the context of global climate change. He states that, despite the moral soundness of the non-identity problem, all ethical paradigms dealing with climate change seem: “to generate at least some duties on the part of existing persons not to damage the

environment that our remote descendants will inherit from us” (p. 158), for the unborn are fully humans with human needs.

Chapter 7, besides summarizing the book, addresses one particular aspect of the scope of justice, namely the question of who bears the responsibility for justice in the climate context. Page focuses exclusively on the responsibilities of the developed countries, a key principle of the Framework Convention on Climate Change, and not on those of subjects that operate within their boundaries. The focus on states pertains to the realist tradition of international relations which views international governance solutions as the outcomes of voluntary collective action among states, and where ethical issues are mainly resolved among states themselves. Specifically, Page analyses the problems raised by two prominent accounts that support the view that developed countries are the duty bearers in the climate arena: ‘contribution to the problem’ and ‘ability to pay’. He interestingly concludes that considering the developed countries to be the primary duty bearers of climate justice is a pragmatic decision, not an ethical one. The ‘contribution to problem’ argument ignores, in fact, that it is unjust to attribute responsibility for past wrongdoing to existing individuals or groups of individuals, who did not have any role in past climate injustice; and it is also unjust to deem them responsible for the benefits that they have inadvertently received from their ancestors. To be ethically justifiable, the ‘ability to pay’ argument, though potentially relevant for climate policies, should not focus on the traditional view that parties who have the most resources should be held responsible; it would become ethically sounder if it were grounded on a sufficientarian view according to which parties with more than enough resources should be considered the most proper duty bearers.

Page concludes, in the light of the arguments that he has convincingly analysed throughout the book, that climate justice requires for the post-Kyoto period a pretty revolutionary and indeed very ambitious global climate policy inspired by the approach known as Contraction and Convergence, even though this important point is addressed concisely and a bit cursorily.

Climate change, Justice and Future Generations is a valuable contribution to the debate on both theoretical and applied justice in climate change, and it fills a manifest gap in the current literature. It is, however, a pretty demanding reading, for Page’s arguments are sometimes grounded in difficult and rather abstract philosophical foundation. But the exceptional ethical problems posed by global climate change need a sound theoretical basis to gain scientific credibility, political acceptability and, ultimately for the development of a comprehensive ethics-based global climate policy. Considerations of justice including the intergenerational dimensions imply, implicitly claims the author, greater legitimacy and can persuade parties with conflicting interests to cooperate more closely on collective actions. Justice should consequently play a major role as a unifying principle which facilitates collective actions against climate change: the more climate negotiations are informed by principles of justice, the more numerous the participants will be, and the more a global manageable solution can in principle be achieved.

Other strengths of the book are the depth and richness of the notes to each chapter, an inexhaustible mine of insights and suggestions for further readings, and the comprehensiveness of the index. These features enrich the authoritativeness of the book and greatly augment its usefulness for scholars and, more generally, for those concerned with the human dimension of climate change in the identification and grasp of its thorny and multifaceted ethical aspects.