

A Sustainable Legacy: Navigating Climate Change through the Lens of Intergenerational Justice



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ABSTRACT: Finding a fair balance between present needs and the rights of future generations is a fundamental ethical challenge caused by the increasing threat of climate change. Titled "A Sustainable Legacy: Navigating Climate Change Through the Lens of Intergenerational Justice," this paper delves into the complex connection between climate action and intergenerational justice, drawing attention to the moral duty of present-day societies to protect the social and environmental conditions that future generations will need to thrive. This paper offers a critical examination of the responsibilities of current generations in reducing climate risks and ensuring sustainability for future generations. It draws on ethical frameworks such as John Rawls' theory of justice, the capabilities approach by Amartya Sen and the precautionary principle.

This approach revolves around the idea of intergenerational justice, which states that we have an ethical obligation to ensure that future generations have access to healthy ecosystems, abundant natural resources, and a predictable climate. Using arguments from deontological and consequentialist theory, the article contends that the right to life, health, and wellbeing of future humans will be violated if we do nothing to combat climate change. Applying Rawls' "veil of ignorance," the study shows that decision-makers would prioritize long-term environmental sustainability without knowing which generation they belong to, therefore promoting a fair allocation of risks and resources across time.

Furthermore, the capacities approach lends credence to the moral imperative to combat climate change by stressing the importance of preserving fundamental human rights and opportunities, which are in grave danger from the effects of climate change. In addition, the report takes into account the precautionary principle, which states that strong climate measures should be implemented regardless of the level of scientific confidence, because failing to do so could result in permanent damage to generations to come. An everlasting dedication to sustainability as a foundation of justice is highlighted by this confluence of ethical theory and environmental governance.

Modern climate policy, global accords such as the Paris Accord, and the inadequacy of present economic systems in addressing environmental consequences over the long run are all examined in the article. It argues that political and economic systems are too focused on the here and now to think about the planet's long-term viability. By combining policy analysis with ethical discourse, the study urges national and international governing bodies to recast climate change as a justice concern, with obligations that go beyond generations.

Finally, this study concludes that if we want to leave a lasting legacy, we must tackle climate change from an ethical perspective of intergenerational justice. In order to leave the earth habitable for generations to come, it says that our generation must put aside its narrow interests and enact comprehensive policies. In order to take ethical climate action, the report recommends rethinking society values with an eye on intergenerational equality and moving towards sustainable development and long-term climate governance.

KEYWORDS: Intergenerational justice, Climate change ethics, Sustainable development, Environmental sustainability, Climate governance

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Climate change represents one of the most pressing challenges of our time. It is a phenomenon that transcends national borders, affecting ecosystems, economies, and populations globally. However, the ethical dimension of climate change, specifically the responsibility that current generations bear toward future generations, has often been sidelined in mainstream policy discussions. This issue, encapsulated in the concept of intergenerational justice, poses significant questions about how we

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manage our environmental resources today to ensure that future generations can thrive. It is clear that current generations must act to mitigate climate change to preserve the planet for future generations. Still, the complexity of this issue requires examining it through multiple lenses: philosophical, ethical, economic, and political. This article explores these perspectives, providing a comprehensive analysis of how intergenerational justice can inform climate policy and action.

Since the Industrial Revolution, human activities such as fossil fuel combustion, deforestation, and agricultural practices have significantly contributed to global warming and climate change. These actions have led to a range of environmental impacts, including rising temperatures, altered rainfall patterns, more frequent and severe weather events, and rising sea levels. These changes pose severe threats to both natural ecosystems and human societies, with many scientists warning that climate change could become an existential threat to human civilization. Despite the urgency of the issue, global efforts to address climate change have been slow, highlighting the complex relationship between science and society, challenging global governance, and sparking new social movements. Additionally, climate change raises profound ethical questions about intergenerational justice, emphasizing the moral responsibility of the current generation to protect the rights and interests of future generations by ensuring a sustainable planet.

1.1.1 Overview

Climate refers to the average weather conditions at a specific location on Earth, typically described by expected temperature, rainfall, and wind patterns based on historical data. Climate change can occur naturally due to factors like changes in the Earth's orbit, solar energy output, volcanic activity, and the distribution of land masses, leading to periods of cooling (ice ages) and warming throughout Earth's history. The current warm and stable climate period, known as the Holocene, began around 11,700 years ago and has supported the development of human civilization.

However, the current climate change, known as anthropogenic climate change, is driven by human activities. Burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and agricultural practices release greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere. These gases trap heat, leading to the "greenhouse effect" and resulting in global warming. Global warming, a subset of climate change, causes a rise in Earth's average temperature and leads to other climate changes, including altered rainfall patterns and more frequent extreme weather events. Scientists warn that these changes could have devastating impacts on natural and human systems, posing an existential threat to human civilization.

A central question for sociologists, as posed by (Giddens, 2011), is why societies often ignore the significant threat of climate change. Giddens introduces the "Giddens Paradox," which suggests that because the dangers of climate change are not immediately visible, people are reluctant to take action. However, by the time these dangers become apparent, it may be too late to act due to the delayed impact of greenhouse gas emissions. This paradox presents a major challenge for sociologists seeking solutions.

Climate change is deeply intertwined with human social life, as everyday activities like eating, working, and heating our homes contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. The causes and impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed, with wealthier countries typically producing more emissions, while poorer countries are more vulnerable to its effects. Additionally, proposed solutions to climate change can have unequal social impacts, making climate change a global social dilemma that has proven difficult to address at various levels of governance.

1.1.2 The science of climate change

Human senses are more attuned to short-term environmental changes than long-term climate changes, necessitating reliance on climate science for understanding climate change. This field uses long-term climate data, past climate reconstructions, and future projections to analyze climate shifts. The 19th century saw the foundation of modern climate science, with the discovery of past glaciation indicating Earth's climate instability. In 1896, Svante Arrhenius hypothesized that human CO₂ emissions could enhance the greenhouse effect, raising Earth's temperature. By the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of anthropogenic climate change gained momentum, aligning with the rise of environmentalism. By the 1980s, global warming became widely accepted in scientific circles, leading to the formation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988 (Stocker et al., 2013).

The IPCC has since produced five Assessment Reports, summarizing the state of climate science, impacts, and mitigation strategies. Its Fifth Assessment Report concluded that global warming is unequivocal, driven mainly by increased CO₂ levels, with human influence being "extremely likely" the dominant cause since the mid-20th century (Stocker et al., 2013). Climate change poses risks such as threats to ecosystems, extreme weather events, and disproportionate impacts on disadvantaged communities (IPCC, 2014). Human activities, such as fossil fuel combustion, livestock-related methane emissions, and deforestation, are primary contributors to climate change. Rising global temperatures have led to more frequent and severe heatwaves, threatening human health and straining energy resources. Melting ice caps and glaciers have contributed to rising sea levels, which endanger coastal

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communities (IPCC, 2014). Extreme weather events, such as prolonged droughts, intense rainfall, and hurricanes, have become more common, causing widespread destruction and economic losses.

To address climate change, both adaptation and mitigation are essential. Adaptation involves adjusting to climate shifts to minimize negative effects, while mitigation focuses on reducing greenhouse gas emissions (Cook et al., 2016). Strategies include transitioning to renewable energy sources, enhancing energy efficiency, carbon capture and storage, reforestation, and promoting sustainable transportation. Adaptation efforts include building climate-resilient infrastructure, improving agricultural practices, and integrating climate considerations into policymaking. Despite scientific consensus on human-caused climate change, dissenting views persist, particularly among non-scientists, sparking policy debates. The disproportionate response to climate threats outlined by the IPCC has led to accusations of fabricated results for funding (Jasanoff, 2010). Sheila Jasanoff argues that knowledge is co-produced, emphasizing the role of social sciences in bridging the gap between scientific representations and social responses to climate change (Jasanoff, 2010). Addressing climate change requires a comprehensive approach, combining mitigation, adaptation, and global cooperation for a sustainable and resilient future.

1.2 FOUNDATIONS OF INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The concept of intergenerational justice is rooted in moral philosophy and ethics, referring to the responsibilities present generations have toward future ones. The crux of the issue is whether we have an obligation to conserve resources and protect the environment so that future generations can enjoy the same opportunities and quality of life. Climate change introduces a specific and urgent context to this discussion, as the environmental consequences of today's actions will disproportionately affect those who come after us.

1.2.1 Historical Perspectives on Intergenerational Justice

The Brundtland Report (1987), which introduced the concept of sustainable development, emphasizes the need to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. This principle is central to discussions of intergenerational justice, suggesting that current generations must balance their consumption with environmental preservation. However, the report also highlights a challenge: what constitutes "meeting the needs" of future generations is open to interpretation (Brundtland, 1987).

From a philosophical perspective, the notion of intergenerational justice dates back to the Greek philosophers, particularly Plato, who proposed that society has a responsibility to maintain harmony across generations. In more modern contexts, John Rawls's theory of justice presents a more structured approach. In his "just savings principle", Rawls asserts that present generations should save a portion of their resources for future ones, ensuring equity across time. This principle, however, faces practical difficulties, as determining the "fair" amount of resources to leave for future generations is inherently subjective. The "veil of ignorance" concept also plays a critical role in Rawls's framework, urging policymakers to make decisions as if they did not know which generation they belonged to, thus promoting impartiality and fairness.

Weiss (2021) offers a broader ethical framework, arguing that intergenerational justice should be rooted in both secular and theological ethics. This hybrid model provides a more inclusive moral basis for action, particularly in societies where religious traditions emphasize stewardship of the Earth. Integrating theological perspectives with secular ethics allows for a richer, more culturally sensitive approach to the issue, which is particularly relevant in regions where religious narratives hold significant sway in shaping public opinion and policy (Weiss, 2021).

1.3 ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE

The ethical dimensions of climate change extend beyond mere environmental concerns; they delve into the heart of how societies value the future and allocate resources across generations. Several ethical frameworks offer different perspectives on how best to approach climate justice, each with its strengths and limitations.

1.3.1 Utilitarianism and Climate Justice

Utilitarianism, as advanced by thinkers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, focuses on maximizing the overall happiness or welfare of the greatest number of people. In the context of climate change, utilitarian ethics would support actions that reduce harm for the greatest number of people, especially when considering the vast numbers of people who will live in future generations. Climate policies such as carbon pricing, emissions trading, and investment in renewable energy can be seen as utilitarian measures because they aim to minimize global harm in the long run.

However, utilitarianism has significant limitations when applied to climate justice. One of the central critiques is its reliance on temporal discounting—the tendency to value present benefits more than future ones. This bias makes it challenging to fully account for the long-term consequences of environmental degradation, as policies that impose costs on the current generation for the benefit of future generations may not be politically or socially popular. Furthermore, utilitarianism often

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overlooks questions of equity, failing to account for how the costs of climate action or inaction are distributed across different populations.

Cowen Derek, Parfit (1992) and Broome (2012) have critiqued utilitarian approaches for their inability to address the deeper ethical implications of climate change, particularly regarding rights and identity. Future generations cannot express their preferences or advocate for their rights, which complicates the utilitarian calculation. A purely utilitarian approach may also justify actions that, while reducing overall harm, disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, both in the present and the future (Watson, 1992); (Broome, 2012).

1.3.2 Libertarian Perspectives on Climate Action

Libertarianism, as championed by thinkers like Robert Nozick, prioritizes individual rights and minimal government intervention. In the context of climate change, libertarians might argue that individuals and businesses should not be forced to bear the costs of climate action, such as carbon taxes or government regulations, unless there is clear and direct harm to others. Libertarians often support market-based mechanisms like green technologies that arise from consumer demand rather than government mandates.

However, the libertarian approach to climate change faces substantial criticism. First, climate change is a collective action problem—the actions of individuals or small groups contribute to global environmental harm, and voluntary, market-based solutions are often insufficient to address the scale of the crisis. Furthermore, Nozick's framework, which emphasizes compensation for harms, struggles to apply to climate change, where the harms are diffuse, long-term, and affect populations that may not yet exist (Salahuddin, 2018).

Critics like Sunstein (2007) argue that libertarianism's focus on individual rights overlooks the collective nature of climate responsibility and the moral obligation to protect the global commons. In this sense, libertarianism fails to offer a robust framework for intergenerational justice, as it does not adequately address the ethical responsibility current generations have toward future generations (Cassam, 2023).

1.3.3 Rawlsian Egalitarianism and Climate Change

John Rawls's theory of justice, particularly his principles of justice as fairness, offers one of the most compelling ethical frameworks for addressing climate change. Rawls's original position and veil of ignorance encourage decision-makers to consider policies as if they did not know which generation they belonged to, promoting impartiality and fairness across time. This approach is particularly relevant to climate change, as the actions of current generations will have long-lasting impacts on future ones.

The "just savings principle", which Rawls outlines, provides a specific guide for intergenerational justice. According to this principle, each generation has a duty to save enough resources so that future generations can enjoy a fair standard of living. In the context of climate change, this would mean limiting the use of nonrenewable resources, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and investing in sustainable technologies.

However, Rawls's framework also faces challenges. Critics argue that the just savings principle is difficult to operationalize, as it is not clear how much savings is "enough" for future generations. Moreover, Rawls's focus on fairness does not fully address the urgent, immediate nature of climate change, where delayed action could lead to catastrophic outcomes. As Gardiner (2011) notes, Rawls's theory may need to be supplemented with more specific, actionable guidelines for addressing environmental crises (Gardiner, 2011).

1.4 THE MORAL IMPERATIVE OF CLIMATE ACTION

The global climate crisis presents a profound ethical challenge that requires immediate and comprehensive action across political, economic, and social systems. Beyond technical solutions and policy interventions, the core question revolves around our moral obligation to address climate change. As the adverse effects—ranging from rising temperatures to environmental degradation—become more pronounced, the ethical necessity of climate action becomes undeniable. Scholars have argued that climate action is not merely a scientific requirement but also a moral imperative, rooted in our duty to future generations, global justice, and the ethical principle of stewardship (Gardiner, 2011); (Jamieson, 2014).

1.4.1 Ethical Responsibility to Future Generations

A critical ethical argument in favor of climate action is the principle of intergenerational justice. Future generations, who will inherit the consequences of today's actions, have a right to a planet that remains livable and stable. Current practices of environmental degradation and unsustainable resource use threaten their well-being, raising fundamental questions of fairness and justice. As Thompson highlights, there is a moral duty to ensure that future generations are not left with an irreversibly damaged environment, a burden that they had no role in creating (Thompson, 2011).

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Intergenerational justice is supported by multiple ethical theories. For example, utilitarianism advocates minimizing suffering over the long term, which extends to future generations. Similarly, Kantian ethics argues for the intrinsic value of humanity, including those who are yet to be born. According to Caney (2005), neglecting climate change violates these ethical standards by prioritizing immediate economic benefits at the expense of future human survival and well-being (Caney, 2005).

1.4.2 Global Justice and Inequity

Another strong argument for climate action stems from the inequitable distribution of its impacts. While the effects of climate change are global, they disproportionately affect the world's most vulnerable populations—those who contribute least to the problem. Studies show that countries in the Global South, particularly in Africa, Southeast Asia, and island nations, are already experiencing the harshest consequences, such as food shortages and rising sea levels (IPCC, 2022). These populations face the dual injustice of suffering from a crisis they did not significantly cause.

The moral issue of global justice is central to climate ethics. Historical emissions from wealthier nations have disproportionately contributed to the problem, placing a greater moral burden on these nations to lead in mitigating climate change and supporting adaptation efforts. The principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities," as articulated by Shue (2014), reflects this inequity, arguing that wealthier nations have a moral obligation to take greater action in addressing the climate crisis (Shue, 2014).

1.4.3 Stewardship of the Earth

The concept of stewardship is a deeply rooted ethical principle in many philosophical and religious traditions, asserting that humanity has a responsibility to care for and preserve the Earth. This concept is emphasized in Indigenous worldviews, which see humans as caretakers of nature, responsible for maintaining its balance (Whyte, 2017). Similarly, many religious teachings, including Christianity and Islam, advocate for the protection of the natural world, viewing it as a trust given by a higher power (Jenkins et al., 2017).

Climate action is aligned with the ethical principle of stewardship, recognizing that the Earth and its ecosystems have intrinsic value beyond human utility. Allowing unchecked environmental degradation and biodiversity loss is not only a practical failure but also a violation of our moral duty as stewards. Norton (2005) argues that safeguarding the environment for future generations and for non-human life is an ethical necessity that transcends purely anthropocentric concerns (Norton, 2024).

1.4.4 The Precautionary Principle

Another ethical framework that supports climate action is the precautionary principle, which emphasizes taking preventative action in the face of uncertainty. While there is strong scientific consensus on the reality of climate change, there remains uncertainty regarding the timing and severity of specific impacts. Nonetheless, the potential for catastrophic outcomes, such as ecosystem collapse and mass displacement, compels us to take precautionary measures to prevent irreversible damage (Gardiner, 2006). As Attfield (2015) asserts, inaction in the face of potential harm is ethically indefensible, given the potentially catastrophic risks involved (Attfield, 2015).

1.4.5 Collective Moral Agency

The concept of collective moral agency is essential to strengthening the moral argument for climate action. Climate change is a global problem that transcends national borders, and its solution requires coordinated efforts across various sectors and regions. According to Jamieson (2014), collective moral agency emphasizes the idea that moral responsibility does not rest solely on individuals or specific nations but is shared across global institutions, governments, corporations, and civil society. The global nature of the climate crisis requires a collective response that aligns with the principles of fairness, cooperation, and shared responsibility (Jamieson, 2014).

The Paris Agreement, for instance, exemplifies the role of collective moral agency by bringing nations together to set targets for reducing emissions and adapting to climate impacts. However, as Hickman argues, the success of such agreements depends on the willingness of all actors to contribute to the collective effort, particularly those with the greatest capacity to make a difference. Strengthening the moral argument for climate action involves recognizing that the burden of responsibility is shared across all levels of society, and each actor has a role in addressing the crisis (Hickman, 2020).

In conclusion, expanding the scope of responsibility, addressing global inequalities, considering the long-term consequences of inaction, and invoking the precautionary principle, the moral argument for climate action becomes more robust and urgent. Climate change is not merely a technical or economic problem; it is a profound ethical challenge that calls for justice, fairness, and collective responsibility. Strengthening the moral argument highlights the ethical imperative of taking action now to protect future generations, correct global injustices, and safeguard the planet.

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The failure to address climate change is not just a failure of governance or policy—it is a failure of morality. As Gardiner and other scholars argue, the time for moral courage is now. By acting on climate change, we not only mitigate environmental harm but also fulfill our ethical duties to one another and to the planet (Gardiner, 2011).

Additionally, framing climate change as a matter of intergenerational justice can make the ethical argument more compelling. When people consider the welfare of their children, grandchildren, and future descendants, they are more likely to feel a personal connection to the issue. Highlighting the specific impacts of climate change on future generations—such as food scarcity, displacement, and health risks—can make the moral stakes clearer and more tangible.

1.4.6 Psychological Barriers to Moral Engagement

Despite the clear ethical dimensions of climate change, many individuals and societies struggle to engage with the issue on a moral level. Several psychological factors contribute to this disconnect:

- **Abstractness:** Climate change is often perceived as an abstract, diffuse problem. Unlike immediate crises, such as natural disasters or pandemics, the effects of climate change unfold gradually over time, making it harder for people to grasp the urgency of the problem.

Perception of Unintentional Harm: Many people view climate change as an unintentional byproduct of modern life rather than a deliberate harm caused by specific actions. This perception reduces the sense of moral responsibility for addressing the issue.

- **Guilt Avoidance:** Confronting the moral implications of climate change often invokes feelings of guilt or helplessness. To avoid these uncomfortable emotions, individuals may downplay the seriousness of the problem or rationalize their behavior.
- **Spatial and Temporal Distance:** The effects of climate change are often seen as distant—both geographically and temporally. People living in wealthy nations may not feel the immediate impacts of climate change, and the most severe consequences are projected to occur decades or even centuries in the future.

1.4.7 Strengthening the Moral Argument

To overcome these barriers, it is essential to strengthen the moral case for climate action. This involves reframing climate change as an immediate ethical crisis that demands urgent action. As Pope Francis's encyclical "Laudato Si'" argues, climate change is fundamentally a moral issue, as it disproportionately affects the poor and vulnerable—both present and future. He said "**I ask you, in the name of God, to defend Mother Earth**" (Pope Francis). By emphasizing the justice dimension of climate change, we can help shift the narrative from one of technical or scientific concern to one of moral responsibility (Francis, 2019).

The moral argument for climate action hinges on principles of justice, responsibility, and stewardship, which provide a compelling ethical foundation for addressing the climate crisis. However, it is essential to further strengthen this argument by considering the nuances of responsibility, the depth of global inequality, and the long-term implications of inaction. In doing so, we can build a robust ethical framework that underscores the urgency of climate action and the moral duties we owe to both current and future generations.

1.5 EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF RESPONSIBILITY

A key aspect of the moral argument for climate action is the concept of responsibility, particularly the responsibility to mitigate the harm caused by human-induced climate change. Traditionally, this responsibility has been seen as primarily belonging to governments and corporations. However, scholars have argued that responsibility should be viewed as shared by multiple actors, including individuals, civil society, and global institutions (Gardiner, 2011). According to Young (2011), this "shared responsibility" framework encourages collective action and fosters accountability across all levels of society (Young, 2011).

Individual actions, while seemingly small in isolation, contribute to larger systemic change. For instance, Caney argues that individuals in affluent societies have a moral obligation to reduce their carbon footprints and support policies that mitigate climate impacts. The cumulative effect of individual actions can create societal pressure for political and corporate actors to adopt more sustainable practices. This distributed responsibility strengthens the moral argument by showing that everyone, regardless of their position in society, has a role to play in addressing climate change (Caney, 2010).

1.6 ADDRESSING GLOBAL INEQUALITIES

Climate change exacerbates existing global inequalities, disproportionately affecting the poorest and most vulnerable populations who have contributed the least to the problem. This unequal burden is a critical component of the moral argument for climate action, as it raises issues of fairness and justice. Scholars such as Shue emphasize that wealthier nations have a heightened responsibility to lead in reducing emissions and supporting adaptation efforts in less developed countries. This is not

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only because of their historical contribution to greenhouse gas emissions but also because they possess the resources to do so (Shue, 2014).

Moreover, climate justice advocates argue that the moral responsibility extends beyond financial support to include technological transfer and capacity-building initiatives (IPCC, 2022). By assisting vulnerable nations in adapting to climate impacts and transitioning to low-carbon economies, wealthier nations fulfill their ethical duty to correct the injustices caused by their disproportionate environmental impact. The recognition of these global inequalities strengthens the moral case for climate action by framing it as a matter of rectifying historical and ongoing injustices.

1.7 THE LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF INACTION

Another critical dimension of the moral argument for climate action is the long-term consequences of inaction. The impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and ecosystem collapse, pose existential threats not only to current populations but also to future generations. The principle of intergenerational justice, as outlined by (Thompson, 2011), asserts that current generations have a moral duty to ensure that future generations inherit a stable and habitable planet.

The failure to act on climate change today would constitute a profound moral failure, as it would leave future generations with a degraded environment, limited resources, and increased vulnerability to natural disasters. As Gardiner notes, climate change creates a "perfect moral storm" where the delay in addressing its impacts magnifies the ethical stakes. This long-term perspective strengthens the moral argument by highlighting the irreversible consequences of inaction and the ethical obligation to act now to prevent future harm (Gardiner, 2011).

1.8 THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE AND ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

In ethical decision-making, the precautionary principle plays a crucial role in strengthening the moral argument for climate action. This principle suggests that when there is a risk of significant harm, such as the potentially catastrophic effects of climate change, action should be taken even in the face of uncertainty (Gardiner, 2011). The scientific consensus on climate change is robust, yet uncertainties remain about the exact timeline and severity of its impacts. However, these uncertainties do not diminish the moral obligation to act. On the contrary, they amplify it (Gardiner, 2011).

By invoking the precautionary principle, scholars like Norton (2005) argue that failing to take preventive measures against climate change is ethically indefensible, given the potentially catastrophic consequences. The precautionary principle thus strengthens the moral argument by asserting that the ethical response to uncertainty is not inaction but proactive and preventive measures (Norton, 2024).

1.9 CLIMATE CHANGE AS AN ETHICAL AND ECONOMIC ISSUE

While the ethical arguments for climate action are compelling, they cannot be separated from the economic realities that shape public policy and decision-making. Climate change is both an ethical and an economic issue, and finding solutions requires addressing both dimensions.

1.9.1 Economic Costs of Inaction

The economic costs of climate inaction are staggering. The Stern Review, one of the most comprehensive studies of the economics of climate change, estimates that without significant action to reduce emissions, the global economy could shrink by up to 20% by the end of the century. These costs are not evenly distributed; developing countries, which are often the least responsible for emissions, are likely to bear the brunt of the damage (Moffat, 2010).

Furthermore, economic inequality exacerbates the ethical issues surrounding climate change. Wealthy countries and individuals have more resources to adapt to the effects of climate change, while poorer nations and communities are left to face the consequences with fewer options for mitigation or adaptation. This creates a profound moral injustice, as those who contributed the least to the problem are the most affected by it.

1.10 POLICY APPROACHES TO CLIMATE JUSTICE

Ethical principles of intergenerational justice must be integrated into national and international climate policies. A combination of carbon pricing, green technology investment, and international cooperation will be necessary to mitigate the impacts of climate change on future generations.

1.10.1 Carbon Pricing and Green Technology

Carbon pricing—whether through taxes or cap-and-trade systems—offers a direct way to internalize the environmental costs of carbon emissions. This policy tool aligns with utilitarian ethics, as it encourages the reduction of emissions in the most

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economically efficient way. By placing a financial cost on carbon emissions, governments can incentivize businesses and individuals to reduce their carbon footprint, invest in cleaner technologies, and adopt more sustainable practices.

However, carbon pricing alone is not enough. Governments must also invest in green technologies that can help transition the global economy to a low-carbon model. This includes research and development in renewable energy, electric vehicles, energy storage, and sustainable agriculture. Public funding for these technologies is essential, as private markets may not provide sufficient incentives for innovation in areas where the returns are uncertain or long-term.

1.10.2 Global Cooperation and the Paris Agreement

Global cooperation is essential for achieving meaningful progress in climate justice. No single country can solve climate change on its own, and wealthier nations, which have historically been the largest contributors to global emissions, have a moral responsibility to lead the effort. The Paris Agreement of 2015 represents a step forward in this direction, as it encourages countries to set ambitious climate targets based on common but differentiated responsibilities (Armstrong, 2015).

The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), which is enshrined in international environmental law, acknowledges that while all nations share the responsibility for addressing climate change, not all countries are equally capable of taking the same level of action. Wealthier nations, which have benefited the most from industrialization and have contributed the most to historical emissions, are expected to take a leading role in reducing their emissions and providing financial support to developing countries. This support, often referred to as climate finance, is essential for helping vulnerable nations adapt to the impacts of climate change and transition to low-carbon economies.

1.10.3 Equity and Burden Sharing

Equity is a critical consideration in climate policy. Developing nations, which are often the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, are also the least responsible for historical emissions. As a result, policies like climate finance, where wealthier nations provide financial support to help developing countries adapt to and mitigate climate change, are essential for achieving global equity.

Moreover, within countries, climate policies must be designed to ensure that the costs of transitioning to a low-carbon economy do not disproportionately burden low-income communities. For example, while carbon taxes are an effective tool for reducing emissions, they can also increase the cost of energy and goods, which may disproportionately impact poorer households. To address this, governments can implement policies such as rebates or subsidies for low-income families, ensuring that climate action is both effective and just.

1.11 PROMOTING ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS: STRATEGIES CONNECTED TO INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Promoting ethical implications for climate change requires a nuanced understanding of intergenerational justice, rooted in various ethical theories that recognize the responsibilities of the present generation to future ones. Climate change, as a long-term global issue, demands that we consider how the choices we make today will impact future generations. This concern is central to the concept of intergenerational justice, which seeks to ensure that the benefits and burdens of environmental policies are distributed fairly across time.

One foundational framework is John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, particularly his idea of the "veil of ignorance." This principle suggests that just policies should be formulated without knowledge of one's own position in society or time, ensuring impartiality. Applying this to climate change, we can argue that policies should be designed as if we don't know whether we will be among those affected by the worst consequences of global warming in the future. Thus, climate action becomes not only a practical necessity but a moral and ethical imperative, ensuring fairness to all generations. Rawls's Liberty and Difference Principles further emphasize that current generations should not monopolize environmental resources, leaving future generations with fewer opportunities for well-being.

Theories like *intergenerational equity*, as articulated by scholars such as Edith Brown Weiss, emphasize the idea of maintaining the Earth's resources and environment in a condition that allows future generations the same opportunities for development as the present. In this context, the principle of sustainability is closely tied to ethical responsibility. Climate action must strive to balance the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. By embedding this notion of equity in climate policies, the present generation can be held accountable for safeguarding the natural environment, ensuring that future generations inherit a world capable of sustaining life, health, and prosperity (Weiss, 2021).

Another relevant perspective is Amartya Sen's *Capabilities Approach*, which frames justice in terms of expanding people's freedoms and capabilities. Sen's theory suggests that climate change poses a direct threat to future generations' capabilities—undermining their freedom to live well, be healthy, and have access to essential resources. This approach underscores the ethical

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importance of preventing climate degradation as it directly limits the potential for future human flourishing. Therefore, policies and strategies that combat climate change can be seen as ethical obligations to expand the capabilities of future generations, preventing the erosion of their basic freedoms and well-being (Crocker & Robeyns, 2009).

From a broader perspective, Thomas Pogge's *Global Justice* theory challenges us to consider the global dimensions of climate change, recognizing that its effects are disproportionately felt by vulnerable and disadvantaged populations, both now and in the future. Addressing climate change, therefore, involves not only intergenerational justice but also cross-border justice. Developed countries, historically responsible for the bulk of greenhouse gas emissions, have an ethical obligation to support mitigation and adaptation efforts in less developed countries. Pogge's view highlights the need for climate justice that includes reparations and equitable resource distribution to ensure that vulnerable populations, especially those in future generations, are not left to bear the brunt of environmental degradation (Midtgaard, 2012).

These ethical theories collectively stress that climate action must be framed within the broader context of justice. Whether through Rawlsian fairness, intergenerational equity, Sen's capabilities, or Pogge's global justice, the message is clear: current generations have a moral and ethical responsibility to address climate change in ways that protect the rights and opportunities of those yet to be born. Each of these frameworks offers a pathway for shaping ethical climate policies—ensuring sustainability, fairness, and global equity in the fight against climate change.

This ethical foundation also highlights the need for public education and policy advocacy, grounded in these principles of justice. Encouraging widespread understanding of intergenerational ethics can foster a culture of responsibility, where individuals, communities, and governments make decisions that protect future generations. Furthermore, it calls for collaboration at every level—local, national, and global—aligning efforts to mitigate climate change with the ethical obligation to preserve the planet for future inhabitants.

1.12 CONCLUSION

The challenge of climate change is not just scientific or technical; it is fundamentally a question of ethics and justice. Current generations face a moral imperative to act on climate change, not only to protect their own interests but also to safeguard the well-being of future generations. Ethical frameworks such as utilitarianism, Rawlsian egalitarianism, and deontological ethics all point to the same conclusion: we have a responsibility to take bold, decisive action to mitigate climate change and ensure that the planet remains habitable for future generations.

Addressing climate change requires a comprehensive approach that integrates ethical principles with economic realities. Policies such as carbon pricing, green technology investment, and international cooperation are essential for reducing emissions and promoting sustainability. However, these policies must also be designed with equity in mind, ensuring that the costs of climate action are fairly distributed both within and between nations.

The future of the planet depends on the choices we make today. By embracing the ethical principles of intergenerational justice, we can create a sustainable, equitable future for all generations to come.

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