POL 2057 — Preliminary Thoughts on Rawls and Climate Change

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In considering the applicability of Rawls' theory of justice to the problem of anthropogenic climate change, it is necessary to begin by sketching some of the key features of the climate issue. The Earth has reserves of fossil fuels (coal, oil, and gas) in quantities that can be considered fixed from the perspective of human civilization. Most of the ways in which these fossil fuels are used produce greenhouse gases (GHGs) which affect the global climate by blocking outgoing infrared radiation and causing more energy to accumulate in the Earth system. There is a direct relationship between the total quantity of fossil fuels used across human history and the degree of climate change that will result. Climate change causes several types of harm for human beings. Some of these can be considered transitory, and can be essentially completely corrected given sufficient expenditures of resources and effort. For example, climate change may cause shifts in the most suitable location for cultivating a particular crop. Some changes are effectively permanent in their affect: these include the loss of species, permanent increases in sea level of ocean acidity, and permanent changes in the total quantity of land on Earth suitable for agriculture.[1] Taken to the extreme, climate change might render the planet as a whole profoundly inhospitable to human civilization, profoundly reducing the life chances of all succeeding generations, or even leading to human extinction.

The basic question which this paper will begin to address is whether climate change possesses special features that render Rawls' theory of justice incapable of addressing it. I will briefly consider the two most obvious mechanisms to address the problem through Rawls' perspective — via his discussion of externalities and his discussion of the just saving rate — and conclude by drawing attention to some enduring questions.

Rawls acknowledges the existence of 'externalities' — impacts from economic decisions which do not directly affect any of the parties to the transaction. He describes them as: "a divergence between private and social accounting that the market fails to register".[2] In response, he identifies the need for institutions and law and government to correct for them. Rawls also acknowledges the importance of a 'just saving rate' between generations, whereby each bears a moral duty to make some provision in their own lifetime for the benefit of those who will live in the future.[3] Rawls stresses how his conception of the just saving rate differs from the idea

[1] Rawls considers the issue of irreversible damages: Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*, S. 35 p. 6.
[2] Ibid., Section 42, paragraph 7.
[3] See: ibid., S. 42 p.12; S. 44 p. 3; S. 44 p. 7; S. 44 p. 14; S. 44 p. 15; S. 47 p.8; S. 47 p.10.

of maximizing the total utility of all generations, as well as how there is a limit on the degree to which any one generation can be asked to make sacrifices for the sake of future generations. In rejecting utilitarianism, Rawls also stresses the undesirability of making complex numerical interpersonal comparisons of utility.[4] Rawls' conception of intergenerational ethics might be characterized as a 'linked chain' understanding, in which a pattern of appropriate behaviour maintained between each successive set of generations produces a just pattern throughout the whole history of human civilizations.

Neither of these concepts is necessarily well-suited to the problem of climate change. The idea of a total global stock of fossil fuels which can be used in ways that create immediate benefits, but which add inexorably to the seriousness of climate change, seems to bear features that are distinct from those of externalities that do not endure over many human lifetimes, and for considerations of just savings as considered by Rawls.[5] Rawls assumes a kind of rough similarity in the moral positions of all generations, which may be at odds with the existence of the one-off stock of energy and raw materials represented by fossil fuels.

Another way through which climate change might be read into Rawls is through the notion of a 'social minimum'.[6] Clearly, producing climate changes of such a magnitude that they permanently diminish the degree of human flourishing that is subsequently possible can be interpreted as the undermining of the social minimum. It can likewise be interpreted as a violation of the requirement for equality of opportunity. If earlier generations had the benefit of making choices within a generally stable and habitable climate, while later ones must do so within the context of a world that is hostile and degraded, there are grounds for objecting to the morality of the conduct of the earlier generations.

Arguably, Rawls collapses the problem of intergenerational ethics too far in assuming that the only mechanisms required to correct intergenerational equalities are institutions to control externalities and the maintenance of a just saving rate. It may be that the physical circumstances of the Earth create a major special moral question about how the total stock of fossil fuels should be employed, and that clear answers do not arise from the broader Rawlsian framework.

[4]Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*, S. 44 p. 5.

[5]These points will need to be developed at greater length in future pieces of writing.

[6]See: Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*, S. 43 p. 4; S. 44 p. 2.

The total stock of fossil fuels before industrialization has been available for use in at least four potentially morally-relevant ways over the past 250 years and into the future. Fossil fuels can be used as a source of energy, either in a stationary or a mobile application. They can also be used as feedstocks for chemical manufacturing.[7] In both usage cases, they can either be employed in a system where waste GHGs are vented into the atmosphere, or they can be employed in ways where such gases are either not produced or not allowed to mix with the atmosphere.[8] We can consider what principles rational people in the original position might adopt for the use of fossil fuels in each of these ways.

Starting from the perspective of the original position, in which individuals stripped of knowledge about their personal circumstances will make choices about principles for the just operation of society, the first question is whether fossil-fuel-driven industrialization would be permitted to occur.[9] Some environmentalists argue for a major reversion from the pattern of production in society since 1750, and for a return to a pre-industrial civilization. Alternatively, fossil-fuel-driven industrialization can be taken as an interim stage between mass agricultural societies powered using crops and biomass and a future 'stable climate industrial' (SCI) society powered by energy sources that do not affect the climate. The empirical question of whether fossil-fuel-industrialization could have been entirely skipped as a stage of development is relevant here. We should also give some consideration to the possibility of using fossil fuels as chemical inputs only, rather than as sources of energy as well.

Practically speaking, it seems improbable that the just amount of fossil fuel to use for either energy or raw materials is zero. The harm associated with climate change has been identified as non-linear, with each additional degree of warming causing more harm than the preceding one. A societal choice to, for instance, use fossil fuels only as means for building global capacity for non-climate-altering forms of energy (establishing an SCI society) may be taken to be prudent and consistent with the fair treatment of all generations. The question then becomes at what point fossil fuel use should stop. This problem may be especially challenging within a

[7]The Iranian Shah noted that oil has 70,000 chemical derivatives, and questioned whether its use as a cheap energy input for wasteful applications was the most appropriate use for the resource.

[8]These options are likely to be unavailable to those at an early level of industrial development.

[9]Rawls discusses the possibility of 'stages of civilization' as being morally relevant: Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*, S. 44 p. 8.

Rawlsian framework that seeks to value all people as individuals and avoid moral comparisons between them. How are we to weigh the disproportionate impact of climate change on small island states against the usefulness of fossil fuels for reducing extreme poverty in much more populous areas, for instance? Even if such questions cannot be fully answered now, it does seem likely that moral deliberations on these questions will ultimately lead to a conclusion that the highly unequal patterns of fossil fuel use between people in different places and at different levels of wealth are hard to reconcile with principles of justice, and that rational individuals making choices about long-term energy policy in the original position would reject such a proposal.

One enduring question is the problem of incorporating uncertainly into our moral calculations. Rawls assumes that those in the original position will have access to all relevant forms of knowledge, including information about the physical state and characteristics of the world.[10] Despite an extremely strong body of scientific evidence about climate change, we cannot understand all of its future consequences and all of the scenarios associated with different choices about fossil fuels. The question of how to deal with this ignorance in the context of the original position is therefore outstanding.

Rawls' framework also assumes that only human beings are objects of moral considerability. Ecological critiques of political theory raise the question about whether some or all non-human animals can be the subject of claims about justice. Furthermore, there are some who allege that nature itself has a moral value independent of human beings. If these critiques are not totally rejected, some mechanism for building consideration for some or all non-human forms of life into a theory of justice is necessary.

[10]Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*, S. 24 p. 3.

References

Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.