

## **POL 2057 — Rawls and Climate Change — Milan Ilnyckyj**

This paper will consider the degree to which climate change as a moral problem with special characteristics can be accommodated within Rawls' theory of justice. Some features of the climate problem complicate the application of the original position to the evaluation of what constitutes right behaviour. In particular, the one-off character and moral importance of the world's fossil fuel reserves seem likely to yield consequences for the decision-making of well-informed people behind the veil of ignorance.<sup>1</sup> Neither Rawls' treatment of externalities nor his discussion of a just saving rate seems capable of addressing all relevant aspects of the problem. Potentially, the obligation to combat climate change arises instead from the obligation to ensure a 'social minimum' for all people<sup>2</sup>, or as an extension of the obligation for fair equality of opportunity.<sup>3</sup> Environmental criticisms less easily addressed in a Rawlsian framework include the proper treatment of scientific uncertainty within a hypothetical social contract framework where we actually don't know some of the things which people in the original position really ought to.<sup>4</sup>

Addressing the particular features of climate change through an unmodified Rawlsian theory of justice seems impractical, at least through the two aspects of his theory most directly concerned with environmental issues: his discussion of externalities<sup>5</sup>, and his discussion of the just saving rate.<sup>6</sup> These mechanisms attempt to ensure fairness by treating all generations as morally equivalent. The fact that the Earth contains massive reserves of fossil fuels which can be used in a variety of ways (or not at all) has moral relevance. Before the Industrial Revolution, humanity was principally powered by sunlight embedded in crops. Since then, industrial civilization has made exceptionally widespread use of the world's total fossil fuel reserve, somewhat destabilizing the climate in the process. It seems unlikely that people in the original position would reject any human use of fossil fuels whatsoever — if only to construct a post-fossil-fuel economy that no longer needs to rely on them to provide adequate primary social goods to everyone.<sup>7</sup> It also seems impossible that people in the original position would permit the burning of a large total fraction of global fossil fuel reserves, given the likelihood that doing so would substantially impoverish and imperil members of many human generations. When it comes to the distribution of shares in fossil fuel use between generations, however, it seems clear that people in the original position would choose to allocate them more homogeneously between members of generations between about 1750 and the present and members of generations living before and after. The use of fossil fuels to alleviate extreme poverty also seems likely to be more justifiable than the use of them for purely discretionary activities like foreign travel for vacations.<sup>8</sup>

In order to attempt to situate it within a hypothetical social contract framework, we might consider how people in Rawls' original position might themselves consider the issue of climate change. The fact that we currently lack scientific certainty about the full consequences of different scenarios is a feature of the climate problem that must be incorporated if consensus between all possible generations is to be achieved. We should consider the hypothetical case where people in the original position have perfect knowledge of every possible greenhouse gas trajectory for humanity, as well as every detail of the impact of the associated climate change on the world. We should also consider the moral relevance of our concern that there may be disastrous climate change scenarios, in which burning a large fraction of the world's remaining fossil fuels profoundly impoverishes or imperils humanity for a large number of generations.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Section 24 paragraph 3 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>See: *ibid.*, S. 43 p. 4; S. 44 p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>S. 14 p. 1–12 *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Like the precise sensitivity of the Earth's climate to changes in the atmospheric concentration of CO<sub>2</sub>, as well as the thresholds at which potentially-powerful feedback effects within the climate system may compound the problem

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, Section 42, paragraph 7.

<sup>6</sup>See: *ibid.*, S. 42 p.12; S. 44 p. 3; S. 44 p. 7; S. 44 p. 14; S. 44 p. 15; S. 46 p.8; S. 46 p.10.

<sup>7</sup>Analysis of the essential energy-related questions involved suggests that an adequate level of human welfare can be produced using purely renewable sources of energy. See: David JC MacKay, *Sustainable Energy — Without the Hot Air*, 2008, <http://withouthotair.com/>.

<sup>8</sup>See: Henry Shue, “Deadly Delays, Saving Opportunities,” in *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*, ed. Stephen Gardiner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

## References

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