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Climate Change and Distributive Justice: Scope, Integrationism and the Deferral of Costs

Questions about the distribution of the benefits and burdens of climate change have been central in debates about climate justice. For one thing, the stakes could hardly be higher when it comes to this issue. Climate change impacts will spread significant costs across generations far into the future. At the heart of concerns about climate justice is a conviction that it is incumbent upon the present generation to take steps to ensure that this climate change is limited to a tolerable threshold. Doing so, however, will require substantial mitigation, which in itself poses a moral hazard. The cheapest energy currently available is that provided by fossil fuels, and as a result many poor countries are reliant upon access to it to secure their basic rights. If we assume that mitigation requires us to reduce the availability of these fuels, then it seems that we have a weighty obligation to ensure that an affordable alternative is available. As Henry Shue (2014, 328) powerfully puts it, the deprivations that would be a consequence of our not doing so 'would be a result of a conscious choice by the rest of us to impose upon them a policy incompatible with eliminating the deprivations and would thus constitute about as straightforward and massive a rights violation as is imaginable'. At the centre of climate justice, then, there are questions about the distribution of benefits and burdens, and these questions relate to costs that could be of a potentially huge magnitude.

My project seeks to take up a number of issues surrounding these questions and to contribute to the growing debate about distributive justice and climate change. I am interested, in particular, in addressing three questions linked to this general topic. First, there is a question about the extent to which climate change, and our attempts to limit its development, has implications for how we think about the *scope* of distributive justice. Some theorists of distributive justice have taken it to be the case that duties of justice extend only as far as the boundaries of the political communities we live in, but we might think that this view is difficult to sustain in the face of climate change (Abizadeh, 2007; Maltais, 2008). Here we have a phenomena that places in novel sorts of relationships, where we seem to be significantly influencing the lives of those both spatially and temporally distant. Second, I will consider how widely theorists of distributive justice should cast the net when it comes to thinking about the topic. There has been a tendency to focus, when thinking about distributive justice and climate change, on mitigation and adaptation costs in isolation from other concerns. Such a narrow focus has been increasingly problematized, however, by a number of scholars who have sought to connect climate justice more explicitly with other issues relevant to global and intergenerational justice (Caney, 2012; Moellendorf, 2014). Finally, I am interested in how we should conceive of our relationship with future people when it comes to distributing the costs of mitigation. Recently a number of scholars have suggested that we ought to consider deferring some of these costs into the future (Broome, 2012; Rendall, 2011). This is a contentious proposal, though, and we will want to know whether it can be squared with a plausible view about distributive justice.

References:

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