

INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE: BALANCING PRESENT NEEDS WITH FUTURE OBLIGATION

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Abstract

Climate change poses significant ethical challenges, particularly in regards to intergenerational justice. As the world grapples with the consequences of climate change, decisions made today will have far-reaching impacts on the future generations. This paper explores the ethical considerations surrounding the balance between meeting the needs of the present and fulfilling obligations to the future. The paper will examine the tensions between short-term necessities and long-term sustainability, and discuss potential solutions for navigating this

complex ethical landscape. The paper concludes that we can achieve a more just and equitable response to climate crisis by considering the perspectives of both present and future generations.

Keywords: Intergenerational Justice, Climate Change Ethics, Sustainability, Future Generations, Environmental Justice

Introduction

The world today is faced with a lot of challenges, one of which is the problem of climate change. The challenges associated with climate change have continued to endanger not just the human race, but species of all living thing in our planet. Another dimension to the problem is that the risk associated with climate change has far reaching effect that even the future generations are not exempted. When we consider the problem of climate change *vis a vis* the causes, it is a truism that climate change is a product of human activities. United Nations Secretary General Ban KI-Moon in August 2008 while celebrating the success of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) after 20 years declared: “after 20 years of the work of the IPCC, we have the science. We know what needs to be done.” His emphasis was that, we have come to know the genesis of the problem. He was pointing that the root cause of climate change have become obvious. In the same vein, Sharon Benzoni and Jerald Schnoor (2009) posit that “scientists around the world agree that climate change is real, that it is caused by human behavior, and that major changes in how humans inhabit the planet are required both to mitigate some impacts and adapt to those that cannot be

undone". This position is also corroborated by Olaniyi O. A et al (2019, p92). The point is that human activities are greatly responsible for climate change.

Since factors responsible for climate change can be narrowed to human activities, it becomes an ethical imperative to interrogate these activities of humans. Humanity in the quest to conquer the world and maximize present benefits, have gone to alter natural flow of things, which in return has led to climate change. This problem of climate change shall be considered in the light of intergenerational justice. What is the responsibility of the present generation to itself and to the future generation? We are faced with the dilemma of resolving the problem of how to satisfy our present need without sacrificing the interest of the future. Climate change challenge is a trans-generational problem. There is interconnectedness of activities; activities exhibited by a particular generation has a way of not just affecting the generation in question but also affecting the future generations. It is on this note that we would be deploying the concept of intergenerational justice.

In this paper, we would first analyse the concept of intergenerational justice, after which the climate change debate will be considered. Finally, we would argue on the place of intergenerational justice in climate change debate. The fulcrum of our argument is that the debate on climate change can be best understood in the light of intergenerational justice. Justice is not just about balancing or

satisfying the needs of the present, rather there is a dimension of justice which must consider the future generation. Another serious issue of concern is the historical fact that, what might be of interest to a particular generation, might be meaningless to the preceding generation. How do we reconcile the fact that a generation might deny itself certain pleasure in the interest of the next generation, only for that next generation to consider such interest as meaningless? We would also make effort to expose the logical weakness of the concept of intergenerational justice. The concept of justice hitherto has been considered as a perennial problem in philosophy, adding intergenerational helps in compounding the problem. This notwithstanding, the concept of intergenerational justice pushes us to the possibility of conceptualizing ethics of the future.

The concept of Intergenerational Justice

What is intergenerational justice? We would like to begin by stating that the concept of intergenerational justice though a core philosophical issue of concern, it has multidisciplinary outlook. It is about sustainability, it relates to ecology, environmental philosophy, politics and so on. Our idea of intergenerational justice is anchored on the view that one should make use of the planet earth in such a way and manner that others after him/her can still make use of the same. That is, live with the consciousness that you are not going to be the last person. Justice in this sense is an act which takes cognizance of the need of the present and future generation without compromising or sacrificing the need of any group. Is it possible for one to perfectly

fit into this view? Put differently, is it possible to achieve a conception of justice which can satisfy the need of the present and the future generation? The needs of the present generation is not fully known, while that of the future generation is still unknown. Epistemologically man (humanity) is not all knowing, hence, it seems logically impossible for a being with such epistemological limitation to conceptualize futuristic justice. This we see as a logical weakness in the formulation of intergenerational justice. In the context of this research, we consider the need of both the present and future generations in the light of ecological sustainability. Both the present and future generations need ecological sustainability, as everything concerning these generations are dependent on it. Intergenerational justice, is that justice which upholds this sustainability both in the present and future generations.

One of the famous definitions or positions on intergenerational justice was given by Edith Brown Weiss (1989) in her work *Fairness to Future Generations: International Law, Common Patrimony and Intergenerational Equity*. She argues that intergenerational justice is when each living generation conserves options for future generations by not unduly restricting the options available to the future generations in solving their problems and satisfying their own values. For her, there are three principles of intergenerational justice and they are: conservation of options, conservation of quality and conservation of access. It is the responsibility of the present generation to conserve these things in the interest of future

generations. On the conservation of options, her argument is that in relation to whatever options received by present generation from the previous generation, intergenerational justice mandates the present generation as an obligation to maintain these options and possibly increase it rather than diminish it. The same is applicable to quality; they should enhance whatever quality they receive or maintain it. In the case of access, they should increase, enhance or maintain status quo rather than diminish it. My challenge is that though this definitional approach seems satisfying, there are certain philosophical questions the position has failed to address. How is the present generation going to conserve these options, quality and access? What if their present interest conflicts with these options, which one should come first? Are they going to sacrifice their interest in the interest of the future generations, considering the fact that their survival to a large extent guarantees the possibility of the future generations? What if the future generations later become uninterested in those things that were conserved for them? This later question will lead to a further question; how would the present generation know the right options, quality and access to be conserved for the future generation?

Still on intergenerational justice, Weston and Bach (2009) argued on the possibility of how current laws can conceptualize and codify the ethical duties and rights that exist between current generation and future generations. Their major interest is on how to use legislative instrument to guarantee intergenerational justice. They were faced

with questions such as: Is it possible for law, whether local or international to define rights of future generations? Also, on what basis can law impose a duty on current generation concerning the future generations? On the latter question, one may argue that, if the present generation received from the previous generation an ecosystem conducive for their survival, they owe it as a duty to transfer to the future generations an ecosystem capable of guaranteeing their survival. The major challenge is on the enforceability of this law and my next scholar addressed the challenge adequately.

On the concept of intergenerational justice Clark Wolf (2009,p.518-519) refers to it as a set of “obligations the members of one generation may owe to people of other generations, past or future” Wolf pointed out that this obligations are a special group of moral obligations, because they are connected to the rights and interests of others, violation of which is considered injustice. Because these rights and interests are connected to others, it is usually considered appropriate to enforce it using law or social policy. Here, we see Wolf logically establishing the basis for the enforcement of intergenerational justice. One may ask, is it possible for legal enforcement to correct intergenerational injustice and how? This is a difficult line of argument, and this line of argument though important but it is outside our focus in this paper. Our focus is on preventive measures, the argument here is that, non-adherence to intergenerational justice will definitely lead to injustice and we need

legal enforcement to prevent injustice. Wolf (2009,p.521) acknowledges a counter argument to this position; the argument which states “because future persons do not now exist, they cannot be contractual partners, nor can we incur obligations to them”. This position (no obligation to future generations) is embedded in the works of Wilfred Beckerman and Joanna Pasek (2001) and David Gauthier (1986). In addressing this challenge, we would like to state that the fact that future persons do not now exist is not enough to deny them obligations. The focus should be; can our present actions or inactions in any way negatively affect the future generations? If the answer is yes, then it is unjust for us to allow that to happen as such will amount to injustice against them.

The climate change debate

Pielke, (2004) argues that the two varying and incompatible definitions of climate change given by Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC) and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have continued to shape climate change debate. FCCC defines climate change as “a change of climate that is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity, that alters the composition of the global atmosphere, and that is in addition to natural climate variability over comparable time period” (Pielke, 2004:p.515). This definition narrows the problem of climate change exclusively to human activity and does not give room to the possibility of any other option. On the other hand for IPCC, climate change is “any change in climate over time whether due to natural

variability or as a result of human activity" (Pielke 2004:p.515). The second definition, gives room to possibility of climate change as result of non-human activity. These two definitions have led to several unending questions concerning climate change and have continued to influence approaches to climate change.

There are series of questions associated with climate change debate. These questions revolve around key issues in the global climate change discourse, and we would like to add that these two definitions have greatly influenced or shaped these questions. These questions are what shape the nature of the debate. Questions like; is climate change primarily caused by human activities (anthropogenic) or natural factors? To this kind of question, we can deduce from the two definitions above two answers. FCCC will answer yes, while IPCC will answer no. Hence, the scientific conclusion that climate change are products of human activity is influenced by FCCC definition. One may possibly ask further, is climate change exclusively a product of human activities? There is a whole lot of difference in saying that climate change is a product of human activities and saying that it is exclusively as a result of human activities. In the first instance, there is the possibility of other factors supporting human activities in generating climate change. But in the second instance, human activities are solely responsible for climate change. The implication of the second is that once human activities are properly adjusted, climate change will also be positively addressed.

What are the potential consequences of climate change for ecosystems, human health, and the economy? Who is responsible for addressing climate change (governments, corporations, individuals)? What actions should be taken to mitigate and adapt to climate change (e.g., transition to renewable energy, carbon pricing)? How will climate change policies affect economic growth and development? What are the political implications of climate change action or inaction? How certain are climate change projections and predictions? Are there any uncertainties or controversies in climate science? In other words, how exact is climate change science, especially when considered in the light of probability associated with scientific predictions? How can global cooperation be achieved to address a global problem like climate change? Who bears the costs and benefits? How can communities adapt to the impacts of climate change? What strategies can be employed to build resilience in the face of climate change? These debates often involve various stakeholders, including scientists, policymakers, corporations, and civil society organizations, each bringing their perspectives and interests to the discussion.

Our effort in this work is to establish and consider how we can arrive at intergenerational justice. To a large extent, there is nothing much one can do if climate change is a product of non-human activities. Our argument would be narrowed to reflect what humanity has power over or what humanity can control. FCCC definition attributes climate change to be exclusively a product of human

activities, while IPCC definition which some considered as more robust captures both human activities and other factors. There is no much thing humanity can do with regards to other factors (factors responsible for climate change), except if those factors are influenced by human activities, which invariably will still narrow everything to human activity. Since justice is a human affair, it will be logically appropriate to focus on it in the light of human activities. On this note, the debate on whether climate change is exclusively a product of human activities or if there are other factors will no longer be necessary. The focus will be on those human activities capable of causing or leading to climate change. Just as in ethical considerations, moral or ethical assessment is done on those activities that are products of human deliberate action/s. When we argue for intergenerational justice, our focus should be on human activities. Let us now focus on the place of intergenerational justice in climate change.

The place of intergenerational Justice in Climate change debate

At this point, we are focused on the concept or idea of intergenerational justice in relation to climate change. Considering our background (philosophy), there is no need listing instances of climate change and the meanings of climate change as there are myriads of scholarly publications on that. One fact has been established, climate change is real, and it is a product of human activities. Though there are perceived non-human factors but our focus is mainly on human factors. There is no position or definition

on climate change that has failed to acknowledge the place of human activities in climate change. On the concept of justice, there are also myriads of philosophical definitions and unending debates on what should constitute justice. The unending debate in the conception of justice is associated with its abstraction. In a simple term John Rawls' definition of justice as fairness suffices. Justice as fairness, we would like to deduce implies that we achieve justice when we are fair to all concerned. The next question would be, how can we achieve this fairness to all concerned persons? Who are these 'all concerned persons'? In our context, we are looking at the present generation and the future generations.

In intergenerational justice, we are looking at justice with regard to different generations both past, present and future, being fair to all these generations. The question is; how is this possible? How do we balance our responsibility to the past generation, meeting of the needs of the present generation and our obligation to the future generations? If we relate these questions to climate change, one can infer this way; having received an ecosystem good enough for our sustenance from the previous generation, there is a moral burden on us to pass the same ecosystem or a better one to the next generation, justice demands that we do so. The problem is, how do we balance the responsibility of meeting the needs of the present generation and fulfilling our obligations to the future generations? Again, philosophically speaking, what is the 'why' behind those human activities responsible for climate change? Were those activities

performed just for the sake of performing them; example activities that lead to greenhouse emission? Just as gases released through greenhouse emission lead to global warming, it is important to also note that the present generation needs the automobile, and the industries to enhance their effectiveness. Intergenerational justice cannot be said to mean justice for the future generations alone. It is an all-encompassing kind of justice. It means justice for the future generations without sacrificing the needs of the present generation.

Pulido (1996p. xv-xvi) argued that it was the poor and the marginalized of the world who often bear the brunt of pollution and resource degradation – whether a toxic dump, lack of arable land, or global climate change. This is because they are more vulnerable and lack alternatives. The rich or the privileged will always have alternative. Pulido's argument could be said to be concerned about intra-generational justice, which is justice within a generation. We can pick few points from that argument. One is that once the issue of justice is raised, there is always one or a set of people or group who stand a better chance than others. In the words of Pulido, they have alternatives. Deducing from this, when we talk of intergenerational justice in relation to climate change, we have two sets of people; the present generation and the future generations. Among these groups, which group could be said to be more vulnerable and possibly without or with lesser alternative? The idea of disparity between the rich and the poor in relation to climate change can be likened to Ezeogu's view that unequal social structure has been part and parcel

of human social existence. He calls it “epistemic imbalance” (2021p.51). Put differently, it can also be called social imbalance. A situation where certain set of people are better placed in the society with numerous options available to them while others are with little or no options. In this context, we have the present generation and the future generation.

Before we would further on this argument, let us also be clear about the focus of our conception of justice. Our conception of justice aligns with Dobson's argument or position that “environmental justice does not mean justice to the environment but refers rather to a just distribution of environmental goods and bads among human populations” (1998p.20). This implies justice to people living within the environment. This position can be accused of being anthropocentric in nature and ecocentric scholars have accused it of being the bane of environmental degradation. The question we are faced with is, can we appropriate a conception of justice to none humans? The concept of justice has its foundational base on ethics or morality and it is only human acts (actions performed by human being) that can be adjudged in this light. Every other act or actions are adjudged morally neutral. Going by the aforementioned, we would like to maintain that our conception of justice is only appropriated to humanity. Justice to the environment is actually justice to humans, when such concept is properly analyzed. This is because the environment is meant to serve the purpose of humanity and not the other way round. In Kantian view, man is an end in itself

and not a means to an end. The same cannot be said of the environment.

Back to our argument, between the present generation and future generations, it seems that the future generations could be said to be more vulnerable and may likely have lesser alternatives. The after effect of actions capable of causing climate change may not likely manifest in the present generation. How do we appropriate justice between these generations with respect to climate change? The present generation is already known and are in existence, while the future generations are not known and are yet to exist. On this note, we can narrow intergenerational justice to represent justice we demand from a particular generation on itself concerning the future generations. What should be the right action of the present generation towards the environment? Climate change poses a threat to human survival, as humanity is the worst hit of every negative environmental changes, a good example is the case of flooding, earthquake, drought and famine which are as a result of climate change.

What kind of justice can serve intergenerational purpose? At this point, we would like to situate our idea of intergenerational justice with Peter Wenz's idea of justice as care. Wenz's argument goes thus;

I have benefited from another's kindness or help;
I am in a particularly good position to help the other; another person and I have undertaken a project together; the other person and I are

working to realize the same goal, foster the same ideal, or preserve the same traditions; I have unilaterally made a commitment to another; my actions have particularly strong impact upon the other; and I have perpetrated or benefited from a past injustice toward the other, or a past injustice which adversely affects the other (Wenz 1988p.316).

Wenz argument actually included care to non-human. But our concern is in this paper is specifically anthropocentric, and it is anchored on the view that justice is a moral concern and only human actions can be morally assessed. More so, the baseline is that, any harm against the environment will invariably affect humanity. In trying to protect humanity from such harm, every other thing within the ecosystem is taken care of. Intergenerational justice in relation to climate change is imposing moral responsibility on the present generation concerning the future generation. In this sense, the present generation acts within the purview of available episteme. Hence, doing whatever is considered to benefit the future generation within available knowledge is considered justice, and to do otherwise is injustice.

Conclusion

It is important to note that, man is not all knowing, and man has epistemic limitations. History has shown that what might be highly revered in a particular generation has been totally discarded in another. We advocate that in trans-generational or intergenerational

justice what should be seen as justice has to do with what is acceptable within the current and future epistemic purview. Humanity can make inquiry into the best foreseeable future but one cannot for sure predict what that would be.

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