

Who Suffers the Injustice?

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by John Broome (2012)

In emitting greenhouse gas, we are acting unjustly unless we compensate the people we harm. But whom do we harm? First, we harm many presently living people. Those harms are clearly an injustice. But, although the harm our emissions do to presently living people is large, it is only a small part of all the bad consequences that will flow from emissions. Most of the bad effects of climate change will not be suffered for many decades from now, indeed not for more than a century from now. They will be suffered mostly by people who are not yet living. If we continue to emit greenhouse gas profligately, the lives of future people will be much worse than they would have been if we had controlled our emissions. That is the biggest reason we have for controlling emissions; the harm we do to present people is less. And it is not so clear that all that damage constitutes an injustice.

Why not? Why is there a difference between present and future people in this respect? There are two arguments that militate against the idea that we, the current generation, do an injustice to future people through our emissions. Neither argument is incontrovertible. But they do make an important moral difference between harms to present people and harms to future people. One argument is practical, the other theoretical.

The first, practical argument is that we are actually doing a lot for our successors. In various ways we are investing for the future. We are adding to the world's stock of many important resources, which future generations will be able to use to improve their lives. We are adding vastly to the stock of human knowledge, and we are adding to the stock of material resources too, from works of art and architecture to economic infrastructure.

At the same time, we are seriously damaging the natural environment that will surround our successors. However, the present prediction of economists is that future people will be richer than us in material terms. Climate change will slow economic growth but probably not stop it. Growth is not certain; if climate change is severe, it will very seriously damage the world's economy. But growth remains the best prediction. So future people will have a poorer environment than we have, but probably greater material wealth. We can hope that, on the balance of these two factors, they will be better off. If they are, although we as a generation are damaging their lives in one way, we are more than making up for it in other ways. We could therefore claim to be compensating future people for the environmental damage we are bequeathing to them. That gives us a case against the claim that we are doing them an injustice.

Call this the "compensation argument." It has serious gaps. One is that, although the present generation might compensate each future generation as a whole, we will not succeed in compensating each future individual. Some future people will be real

victims of climate change, and not be adequately recompensed by other resources that we leave them. But justice is a duty owed to individuals, and it requires each individual to be compensated. We, the current rich, are damaging the lives of both the future poor and the future rich. We may be compensating the future rich by the investments we are making, but many of the future poor will not be compensated. Some, for instance, will be killed by climate change, and they will not be compensated.

Another gap in the compensation argument is that an injustice is not necessarily canceled by compensation. It is plausible that people have rights to specific goods, such as an unpolluted environment. If future generations have a right to an unpolluted environment, we violate their right by leaving greenhouse gas in the air. We may do them good in other ways, but that does not necessarily cancel the injustice.

The second, theoretical argument against the idea that the current generation is doing an injustice to future people through emissions is known as the “nonidentity problem.” It was brought to prominence by the philosopher Derek Parfit.¹ Take a person who is alive 150 years from now; call her Sarah. Suppose Sarah’s life is not very good because we, the current generation, have allowed climate change to go unchecked. Could she claim we have done her an injustice? Could she say she had a right to a better life, which we denied her by emitting greenhouse gas profligately? She could not, for a reason I shall now explain.

Suppose we had instead taken the trouble to reduce our emissions. We would have lived lives of a different sort. The richer among us would have traveled about less by car and plane, and bought fewer consumer goods. The poorer would have found farming easier, and found less need to migrate to the cities; they would also have found less need to move to higher ground to escape from the rising sea. There would have been many other differences. Indeed, everyone’s life would have been different. Consequently, many people would have had babies with different partners. Even those who would have had the same partner as they actually do would have conceived their babies at different times.

The identity of a person depends on her origin, which is to say the sperm and egg she originates from. No one could have come from a different egg or a different sperm from the one she actually does come from. To put it differently: anyone who originated from a different sperm or a different egg would not have been her. Consequently, even the slightest variation in the timing of conception makes a different person. A very slight change in people’s lives means that they conceive different people. Had we significantly reduced our emissions of greenhouse gas, it would have changed the lives of nearly everyone in the world in ways that are more than slight. Within a couple of generations, the entire population of the world would have consisted of different people. Call this the “nonidentity effect.”

¹ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), ch. 16.

Our Sarah would therefore not exist at all had we taken the trouble to reduce our emissions. So she cannot plausibly claim she had a right to a better life, which we violated by emitting greenhouse gas. Had we not emitted that gas she would not even exist. We simply could not have given Sarah a better life by emitting less gas. It is therefore not plausible that we violated a right of hers by continuing to emit profligately. We can conclude that our emissions do no injustice to Sarah.

That argument was about the emissions of a generation together, and I find it convincing. The acts of a generation affect the identities of everyone who lives a couple of generations later. But the nonidentity argument is less convincing when applied to the emissions of a single individual.

The acts of an individual will also have a nonidentity effect, but a smaller and slower one. Suppose you as an individual continue to release greenhouse gas profligately. You could have released less. To do so, you would have had to alter your way of life. That would have affected the lives of people you come into contact with. In time, it would have affected the lives of people who come into contact with those people. The effects of your behavior would have rippled out from you to progressively more remote people. As they went, these effects would have changed the identities of babies who are born progressively more remotely from you. But I would not expect the ripples to have spread across the whole world in less than several generations. So for a long time, the identities of most people in the world would not have been affected by your reduction in emissions.

But meanwhile, the reduction would almost immediately have started to bring tiny benefits to people all over the world. All over the world, for several generations, many of the same people would have been born as actually are, and those people would all have benefited to a small extent from your reduced emissions. By continuing to release greenhouse gas profligately, you are harming all those people for your own benefit. If you do not compensate them, they have a case against you for injustice.

The conclusion of this section is that emissions of greenhouse gas constitute an injustice to presently living people, and perhaps to future generations. The compensation argument and the nonidentity argument constitute a case for doubting that injustice is done to future generations. In particular, the nonidentity argument is very convincing when applied to the emissions of a whole generation or even of a generation within a single nation. However, it is unconvincing when applied to the emissions of one person.