

Marcus Düwell, Gerhard Bos and Naomi Van Steenberg (eds)

Towards the Ethics of a Green Future: The Theory and Practice of Human Rights for Future People

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Climate change not only endangers present persons but future people as well. The present decisions to emit carbon put the people of tomorrow at risk, since many of the effects will occur in the future. *Towards the Ethics of a Green Future* presents a collection of loosely connected essays and arguments. Using a rights-based perspective, each author offers an original contribution to different topics in the climate change debate: risk, economics, legal representation, and models and scenarios. Given the nature of this anthology, I summarise six of (what I took to be) the most interesting essays, although all of them are essential to anyone interested in climate ethics, intergenerational ethics, or building a greener future.

In the first paper, Düwell and Bos attempt to ground that future people possess rights. This foundational assumption underlies the entirety of the book. Their primary argument is a condensed version of the ‘chain of value’ argument. The argument states that we must respect the rights of present people throughout their entire lives. As we continue to respect these rights, new people are born with rights that must be respected throughout *their* lives as well. Thus, there is a chain of rights that must be respected throughout these people’s lives. However, the full argument is not presented in *Towards the Ethics of Green Future*, so I suggest that readers consult Bos (2016).

Risk is an essential feature of the climate ethics debate, because rising temperatures have the potential to harm future persons; however, many moral theories do not deal with risk. Lukas Meyer et al. elaborate on risk in the context of a rights-based framework. First, Meyer et al. highlight the strengths and weaknesses of various rights-based accounts of risk, which is a helpful survey of the literature on this topic. They then move to policy-making, where they criticise the application of the precautionary principle. Since this principle is likely too restrictive for practical application, the authors propose acceptability thresholds that take human rights seriously but that are not ‘too restrictive, too permissive, nor too biased’ (p. 41). They then propose that if risks are imposed, good reason must follow those decisions.

Next, Joachim Spangenberg argues that ‘deterministic’ models offer largely inaccurate representations of the future events. Since these models do not account for spontaneous events or human decisions, they are virtually useless for predicting the effects of present policies. The author argues that scenarios with ‘plausible, fact-based, and coherent’ storylines align to reality better than the deterministic models (p. 59). These scenarios offer ‘families’ of possible outcomes, which are useful for decision making. Finally, Spangenberg underscores the importance of these scenarios for our current ‘post-normal’ situation. That is, the world of ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’ casts scepticism upon scientific inquiry; scenarios, as Spangenberg construes them, offer vital guidelines for decision-making in our current situation.

Danielle Zwarthoed provides a fascinating discussion exploring political representation for future generations. She argues that justice and democracy normatively justify future people’s representation. Since coming generations (presumably) have interests, it is clear they have rights, and justice demands that present people must secure these interests. Moreover, the author argues that democracy includes future people, since future people’s interests are affected by our present decisions. After answering some objections to her two arguments, Zwarthoed explores and criticises previous proposals for representing future people. Moreover, she notes that Israel,

Hungary and Finland all have institutions that represent future people's interests. Zwarthoed's essay precisely summarises and surveys the literature on this topic.

Klaus Steigleder questions a claim from many climate economists: 'global warming should be limited to no lower than 3°C' (p. 131), i.e. that 3°C is a justifiable temperature increase. Steigleder helpfully summarises neoclassical environmental economics and negative externalities. Climate change is a negative externality, i.e., an unintended, yet dangerous effect from industry. Economists discount negative externalities whose consequences occur in the future. However, economists must determine a number to use when discounting future harms. Our author, following Nicholas Stern (2007), urges that economists use a much lower discount rate (1.4%), than they do currently. He then addresses three criticisms of Stern (2007): (1) the lower discount rate is 'paternalistic', i.e., it assumes a moral perspective and then imposes it on economics; (2) Stern's discount rate is based on utilitarianism; and (3) we naturally care more for those nearest us, rather than those who far away (through time or space). Steigleder first points out that economists assume a moral position because their maxim 'maximise social welfare' is a moral claim. Next, he points out that Stern's assumption is that all persons are of equal value, which is not (solely) a utilitarian claim. Lastly, he claims that Hume's analysis has changed with the times, as our actions have much farther-reaching impacts than they did in Hume's time.

Lastly, Dieter Birnbacher analyses a practical issue of climate ethics: 'the motivational problem'. The motivational problem is the problem of not acting on the moral norms that one accepts. In the context of climate change, people frequently identify the problem and accept responsibility but nevertheless fail to carry out the appropriate actions. The author identifies the psychological problems, (threats to habitual lifestyle, non-reciprocity, uncertainty, etc.) and then proposes several motivating resources. Among these psychological, motivating resources are intergenerational care, preservation of culture and art, a feeling of responsibility for future people. The author then proposes institutional motivating resources: contracts which inhibit individual autonomy for the benefit of future people. The author calls this 'self-paternalism', which is 'an agreement made [with an institution] to restrict one's own freedom for the sake of rational self-interest' (p. 162).

Towards the Ethics of a Green Future is essential for anyone interested in intergenerational or climate ethics. It is also suitable for upper division or graduate level courses on climate ethics or intergenerational justice. Because of the wide range of topic covered, it offers a clear 'lay of the land' of the intergenerational ethics literature.

References

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