

The Duty to Imagine

It's easy to get overwhelmed by climate change. After all, climate change is the ecological breakdown of the Earth's complex systems with modeled effects reaching into all aspects of human life. Given the immensity of the issue, it is even harder for a person to grasp a way in which to address this crisis. In fact, as philosophical and environmental scholars like Dale Jamieson have written in recent years, the problem of climate change is incredibly hard for humans to theorize specifically because the human mind has not evolved to think on the timescales and in the dimensions required to articulate climate obligations.¹ It is difficult, for example, for a person to fathom that driving their car to work emits an invisible gas that when confounded with the other trillions of particles of gas in the atmosphere, refract heat back onto the Earth's surface, trapping heat that otherwise would escape, leading to miniscule increases of temperature that in a few hundred years will contribute to the warming of the planet in such a fashion that the Earth will see dramatic alterations in its normal climate patterns--even that sentence is hard to follow.

Carbon usage, furthermore, is so entrenched in the functioning of our society, that this complex web of cause and effect would have to be considered when undertaking almost any given task in a modern person's daily existence. Even the most righteous environmentalist finds it challenging to hold all this in their mind and consistently make decisions to negate their carbon impact. If a person is aware of the climate crisis and is still going about their day to day life in the United States, there must exist a disassociation between their thoughts and their actions. To better understand what is meant by disassociation, let us consider the example of eating meat.

¹ Jamieson, Dale. *Reason in a Dark Time*, "Introduction" (2014).

Biting into a juicy steak, a person is unlikely to envision the same young cow skipping across a green field. Eating meat requires dissociation in one's mind between one's action and the actual full implications of the same action. All day, every day, in nearly every decision we make as Americans, we are contributing to an ever growing carbon footprint that one day will be translated into further ecological breakdown and the displacement and death of millions--humans, animals, and plants. Thus, we have acknowledged several points. First, climate change is an intangibly large problem because it is a systematic problem. Second, currently humans deal with this intangibility through disassociation. Dissociation is inherently about the future--the impacts of a person's current action. Third, disassociation allows the problem to persist.

How do we address and combat disassociation? In his essay titled "Justice and Posterity," Simon Caney addresses disassociation by constructing a theory of justice that assigns current obligations based on the impact to future persons of current actions. Yet, I will argue that his understanding of justice actually implies an underlying duty, necessary to make the theory function: the duty to imagine. It is only through imagination that one is able to grasp how they as a member of a society acting within a system produce climate change. It is only through imagination that a person will be able to comprehend the systematic changes and transformative way of thinking that Caney articulates.

Caney postulates the following core principle which he calls "The Principle of Justice to Future People": "X (roughly, those alive at one time) should leave others, Y (those born in the future), no worse off than themselves."² From whence comes this moral obligation to future

² Simon Caney, "Justice and Posterity." In *Climate Justice: Integrating Economics and Philosophy* *Economics and Climate*, ed. Ravi Kanbur and Henry Shue (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 159.

people? Caney succinctly argues that if future peoples were to be left *worse* off than current peoples, those people would suffer only because they happen to be born at a different time. Penalization for date of birth certainly does not seem just.³ Even this most basic foundation of Caney's argument requires imagination. One must imagine a multitude of different possible future worlds: ones in which the people living at that point have the same amount of resources available to them and thus equal opportunity and ones in which they have varying degrees of fewer or even greater resources available to them. It requires imagination to recognize that the current state of the world in which a person is living is not here by predetermined plans but rather is a consequence of contingent decisions made by those who came before them.

It is necessary to clarify Caney's terminology as well. Why does Caney choose to formulate his principle at the individual rather than generational level? Caney recognizes that people living within the same generation have different resources and capabilities which he argues translates into different responsibilities. Those who are more well-off are expected to sacrifice more than those with fewer resources. In the same vein, those with more power are expected to take stronger actions than those with less.⁴ Caney also articulates a second reason for writing at the individual level: it is important to consider not only the overall standard of living of future generations but also the distribution of wealth which inherently must be examined at the individual level rather than at the generational level.⁵ Drawing on Rawl's argumentation of a natural duty to support just institutions, Caney points out how "The policies adopted by one generation can leave a distribution of capital skewed in favor of a minority, and they can bequeath a political system that is unresponsive to the needs of the poor and vulnerable. These

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 159-160.

⁵ Ibid, 162

can be very difficult—perhaps impossible—to undo.”⁶ This notion of unsettling the perceived legitimacy of current wealth distributions--between people, nations, races, genders, and generations--is fundamental to attacking the system which perpetuates the climate crisis. The inequalities of our current system are so firmly baked into our perceived understanding of the world that is surely only through the force of imagination that one can undermine its legitimacy.

Take for instance university endowments. It is rare that one questions the existence of an endowment: money from alumni, invested in various ventures, to produce more money to allow a university to flourish. It appears legitimate enough. However, if one ponders the history of the universities with the largest endowments, from their establishment by elite white men to their dependence on slave labor to function, one begins to comprehend how the very fact that a university has wealth that has accumulated over time is not necessarily a given ethical OK. Without the suppression of people and the exclusion of others, that wealth would not have begun when it did and it would likely not have grown to the same extent today.⁷ This idea, of course, is easily extended to the disparity in wealth between nations. Historically colonized nations that endured decades of resource extraction are today less wealthy than colonizer nations like most European states and the US who accumulated the wealth extracted from colonized nations. The idea that one country is wealthier by virtue of better development or human ingenuity is thus delegitimate when considered from a historical perspective. It is through imagining what historical contingencies came before that one can grasp the effects of inherited inequitable political and economic systems--both the inequalities of those systems that they inherit and of future systems that they will leave to others to inherit.

⁶ Caney, 162

⁷ “Unsettling the Endowment teach-in slides,” Yale Fossil Free, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1sza04qCXepac3SyYH7nJwYGc6B20YxUiGtE9BPZSzs/edit?usp=sharing>

Caney's core principle, that those alive at one time should leave others born in the future no worse off than themselves, further requires defining what is meant by "no worse off." Here he relies on the work of Nussbaum and Sen to adopt the "capabilities approach." The capabilities approach recognizes that, while resources themselves are what are directly impacted by climate change and environmental degradation in general, it is the capabilities that said resources present that are important for humans. It is the possibility for "'life,' 'bodily health,' 'bodily integrity,' 'senses, imagination, and thought,' 'emotions,' 'practical reason,' 'affiliation,' 'other species,' 'play,' and 'control over one's environment'" that resources provide that must be preserved for people to come.⁸ Thus, Caney identifies a new measure for standard of living defined as a set of capabilities available for future people. It is important that this baseline be established as a moralized baseline rather than a "nonmoralized" baseline. A "nonmoralized" baseline would entail examining the current standard of livings that exist in the present world and selecting one of these as that which to compare future people's standard of livings too. Yet, choosing one of the existing baselines is arbitrary and may result in a standard that is either too resource-intensive and thus unsustainable or a standard that is too low for what could be reasonably expected for future generations. Instead, one must *imagine* a set of Maximal Equal Standard of Living criteria which demands current people to enjoy resources (or rather the resource's capabilities) only to the extent which would leave future people with an at least equally good set of capabilities--a moralized baseline based on a concept of justice rather than arbitrary circumstance.⁹

Caney concludes with the implications of his principle. First, in order to stop the transfer of unequal structures to future people, current inequalities must be eradicated--the most obvious

⁸ Caney, 164-165.

⁹ Caney, 165-166.

and absolute example of this being global poverty. Second, the duty to promote an absolute (or moralized) standard of living in the future as well as the duty to prevent future exacerbation of inequality necessitates an ambitious mitigation plan in the present. In order to maintain a commitment to global equality in the formation of a mitigation plan, Caney argues “any burden involved in mitigating climate change and thus honoring duties to future people [must] not come at the cost of inequality now.” Furthermore, to continue development without compromising the rights of the poor, requires clean technology transfer and more generally an “egalitarian ownership of clean technology.”¹⁰ Integral to all of these implications is that pursuing justice in the current moment, including in the production of well-functioning political institutions, is in part doing justice to future people. By identifying how alternative futures are created through decisions in the present and linking this process with a moral framework, Caney imagines a world which acts in the present to ensure justice in the future.

If one were to suggest Caney’s implications to current policy-makers, it is likely that their response would be that his demands are too great--if that is the duty posited by justice, so be it, but it will never happen *politically*. A utilitarian, hearing this, might then argue that a better understanding of justice would be one that would produce implications which are actually implementable--which may be why the United States has witnessed decades of stagnation on climate policy. This is where the power of imagination really comes to bear fruit. The truth of the matter is that Caney’s vision and its implications are no less feasible than any others, they just more holistically confront the deranged system that currently exists and thus, by being counter to the current system, seem unworkable. In fact, already people today are beginning to

¹⁰ Ibid, 169.

awaken to a new sense of the profound change that needs to transpire in order to confront the climate crisis. The Green New Deal--a package of legislation introduced by Congressional representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ed Markey meant to address the climate crisis while tackling national and global economic inequality--essentially is Caney's implications more thoroughly fleshed out for the US situation. The Green New Deal seeks to fundamentally address all of Caney's concerns from providing equal capabilities to future peoples to ensuring that future justice does not come at the cost of current inequalities--it is a recognition that unjust institutions and structures have created the current crisis and it is only through the transformation of these institutions and structures in a just way that will allow an actual confrontation with the climate crisis.

And how is the Green New Deal being sold to the American public? Through imagination. In 2019, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez partnered with Naomi Klein and the *Intercept* to produce a video introducing and explaining the Green New Deal to the world. This video was revolutionary in the environmental world in the sense that it framed that climate crisis not only as an existential threat to the world, but as an *opportunity* to create a better world. The video prompts the reader to imagine a world in which the climate crisis is addressed through a social and economic justice lens and how their life could actually be *better* for it.¹¹ Sunrise, the youth movement that works to promote a Green New Deal, has also adopted imagination as a technique in organizing. Members are taught to tell true stories to others--coworkers, friends, politicians, people on the street--about why they are involved in the movement as a real way to make climate change a pressing issue for people and to eventually make actual political gains. Moreover,

¹¹ "A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez," *The Intercept*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9uTH0iprVQ>.

actions themselves are filled with art and song. The focus of the movement is not only on what we have to lose but also what we have to *gain* from working together to address the crisis now.¹² By using imagination and creativity, Sunrise helps people to break down dissociation, recognize how old ways of thinking have led to the current catastrophe and to visualize a better world in which to live. Once people can truly imagine a new world--and imagine why and how that new world must differ from the current world--they can actually work towards that visualized goal. Thus, with imagination comes agency, the ability to actualize a response to the climate crisis.

Imagination is hard in today's society. It is not valued. Art and music programs are the first to be cut when budgets get tight in education systems. Since the Scientific Revolution, Western people have prided themselves on being rational creatures able to think through any problem that comes our way. This is not to say that science is unimportant. Of course, the first calls to action on the environmental front were led by scientists who have long been the bearers of the evidence that we truly are facing a climate crisis. The point is that facts only take us so far. We need creativity to analyze those facts and turn those facts into a vision for a better world. It takes effort and practice to imagine, like a muscle being flexed for the first time since childhood. Yet, it is the duty underlying all others. Justice requires that we not be blinded by the current state of the world but rather imagine an actual just world.

¹² "About", *Sunrise Movement*, updated 2020, <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/about>.