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# A fair path to the future?

– foundations for empirical research



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## ABSTRACT

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Looking ahead, the quest for environmental sustainability may turn out to be the most important political challenge of the twenty-first century. Though consensus is growing about some of the policy objectives like climate stability, political attitudes to these issues remain highly contested. Political parties seem to differ on both ontological assessments (how severe are the problems) and remedial strategies (what to do about them). Surprisingly, turning to empirical political research, few attempts have been made to study these variations in any systematic fashion. Simultaneously, in political and moral philosophy, environmental sustainability has emerged as a key issue of intergenerational distributive justice. With its advanced theoretical vocabulary, contractual conceptions of justice have successfully been applied to issues ranging from climate change to resource depletion.

By bringing these two scholarly approaches into contact, this paper explores how theoretical work on intergenerational justice can be used to inform empirical studies of party attitudes to environmental sustainability.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a renewed academic interest in our moral obligations to posterity (Mulgan, 2006; Tremmel, 2006). While early contributions (Barry, 1977; Parfit, 1984; Rawls, 1971) addressed a range of issues such as how to determine an optimal rate of savings across generations, later works have been dominated by the growing concern of dangerous climate change (Caney, 2005; Page, 2006). Today, the inquiry into the temporal bounds of justice has produced a rich philosophical landscape full of perplexing problems and paradoxes but also an advanced theoretical vocabulary capable of substantiating claims for intergenerational equity.

In this paper I want to explore to what extent theories of intergenerational justice, and then in particular contract-based accounts, can be used to inform empirical research on political parties. Focusing on issues of environmental sustainability, my ambition is to help bridging the gap between high-level normative analysis on one hand and the study of actual political attitudes towards the environment, technology, and social change on the other.

In line with a deontological understanding of contractualism, I will first present the notion of a hypothetical intergenerational meeting. Situated behind a veil of ignorance, the contractual device is used to find a sustainable path to the future, a path capable of providing a fair level of opportunity for both present and future generations (Norton, 1999). However, instead of working with the meeting as such, I will step back and explore what *input parameters* that would go into such a process of intergenerational deliberation. By mapping these parameters into indicators suitable for empirical research, I will in my doctoral dissertation be able to construct quantitative research instruments which can be used to survey attitudes held by real-world members of political parties.

## 2. The original position

Following the seminal work of John Rawls, the “original position” has become a favoured contractual device among contemporary theorists of justice. Though often subject to different misinterpretations, its primary function is to substantiate our ethical and political reasoning within a framework that would be acceptable to everyone from a position of equality. Turning to Rawls this is achieved by the “veil of ignorance” behind which none of us knows his or her particular place in society, natural abilities, assets, or liabilities. Deprived of such information, the parties of the original position are rendered unable to tailor institutional arrangements according to their own advantage. Knowing that any potentially unjust social order may backfire on themselves, they are likely to seek out impartial principles which treat everyone as an equal irrespectively of their gender, race or other contingent factors.

Intergenerational contractual justice tries to extend this notion of fairness beyond the present (Shrader-Frechette, 1991, pp. 67-81). By doing away with spatial and temporal limitations on who constitute our moral community it has a strong intuitive appeal (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 264). Instead of confining the contractual situation to a single society existing within the time horizons of one generation, theorists like Brian Barry have widened the scope of justice to include both present and future generations of all nationalities (Barry, 1977, p. 280). By applying the original position to the world as a whole over time it reflects the intuition that spatio-temporal location is a morally arbitrary category which should not be permitted to deform people’s fundamental life opportunities.

However, as many authors, not least Wilfred Beckerman, have been quick to note, intergenerational justice does not come without its own problems (Beckerman & Pasek, 2001). Already in 1971, Rawls was

aware of some of these difficulties when he wrote that the inclusion of future generations “subjects any ethical theory to severe if not impossible tests” (Rawls, 1971, p. 284). Familiar notions of justice, equality, and utility that yield “reasonable conclusions for fixed population sizes over short periods begin to produce bizarre results once cohort sizes or total population sizes or both vary over time” (Laslett & Fishkin, 1992, p. 1). This has led some, like Dale Jamieson, to argue that in order to address challenges like climate change, we need a fundamental paradigm shift in ethics (Jamieson, 1992). Even without going that far, it is clear that we have to watch our steps carefully as we begin to explore one possible interpretation of what a hypothetical intergenerational meeting could mean.

Prior to any discussion of the contract itself, I think it would be appropriate to give some general reasons to why we should follow a contractual approach when thinking about our moral obligations to posterity. It is obvious that future generations differ in at least one important aspect from present ones, they do not exist. Though many have argued with him here, I have come to believe that Beckerman is correct in his view that future generations cannot be said to have rights in the proper sense of the word. Rights, like any other property such as a taste for Starbucks Frappuccinos, “can be predicated only of some subject that exists” (Beckerman & Pasek, 2001, p. 15). Yet, the non-actuality of future generations and their rights should not be taken to imply that the lives of future individuals should have no ethical relevance to us. Barring a nuclear apocalypse or a major meteorite impact, we can be certain that there will indeed be future people. Even as we cannot identify any specific individual (and assign rights to that person) we know quite well that future people *as a class* will come into existence and that each future individual will eventually have the same moral standing as anyone now living (Partridge, 2002a, p. 81). However, until they come into existence, they are only virtually represented as far as our moral sentiments permit. This is why a

contractual theory aimed at enhancing those sentiments becomes a valuable pragmatic instrument. By constructing a hypothetical intergenerational contract we can imagine ourselves to be evaluating our present actions from a vantage point deep into the future. Obviously, a fundamental asymmetry is here at play. Though future generations may benefit or suffer from our political decisions they cannot hold us accountable nor do they possess any bargaining power when it comes to preventing us from taking unfair advantage of our privileged temporal position. This asymmetry makes contractual thought attractive compared to other ethical approaches such as utilitarianism. Since the contract embodies a strong conception of equality, it effectively imposes restrictions on what kind of actions that we are allowed to undertake. In the contractual situation “each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override” (Rawls, 1999, p. 3). As the contract is extended into the future, we become morally obliged to provide future individuals with everything that we ourselves would reasonably demand if we were to take up their position.

### **3. An intergenerational meeting**

Let us start by imagining that there is a meeting to decide on intergenerational affairs at which all generations are represented. According to Rawls, such a meeting would adopt something he calls the “just saving principle”<sup>1</sup>, a principle which states that each generation should contribute their fair share in accordance with our “natural duty to uphold and to further just institutions and for this the improvement of civilization” (Rawls, 1971, p. 293). This principle has come under severe criticism (Wall, 2003) and Rawls himself also made several modifications to it (Rawls, 1978, 1993, p. 273, 2001, p. 160).

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Rawls himself never favoured the “atemporal” reading of this theory in which all generations are represented in the original position. While he maintained what he called “the present time of entry interpretation” he none the less tried different means of achieving an ideal democratic outcome in which “all generations are virtually represented in the original position” (Rawls, 1971, p. 288).

In this paper I will follow a different track and, inspired by the work of Bryan Norton, argue that it is reasonable to think that *any* intergenerational meeting would first and foremost make it an obligation for present generations to “maintain options and opportunities for the future” (Norton, 1999, p. 118). Thinking about the currency of justice as options and opportunities will enable each future generation to pursue their own particular conception of the good. This is an attractive solution since we cannot know in any great detail what tastes our remote descendents will have. But it is reasonable to think that any intergenerational meeting would agree to the norm of maintaining a fair and non-diminishing level of opportunity for present and future generations, as far as ecological constraints permit.<sup>2</sup>

Since the past cannot be undone due to the time arrow, we should be able to initially modify the contractual situation so that only now living and future people are included. This does not mean we have to reject all notions of posthumous interests (Callahan, 1987; Page, 2006, pp. 124-128), only that we consider these interests to be irrelevant to our current quest for a fair level of opportunity.<sup>3</sup> Having done that we can turn in the other direction and ask how deep into the future we should reach? By doing so we are confronted with a formidable philosophical problem. Clearly, the choices made at the meeting will influence how long the human tenure of the planet will be and consequently how many people will come into existence and when. As Brian Barry lays out the puzzle:

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<sup>2</sup> Following Richard Howarth, I believe that defining the currency of justice as opportunities has several important advantages over other competing metrics such as welfare (Howarth, 1997). Though taking the present and the current level of opportunity as a baseline may invite a certain ethical relativism it still reflects the sustainability ethic (Goodin, 1999) that we, as temporary custodians of the planet, ought to pass it on in at least no worse shape than we found it (Barry, 1977, p. 284).

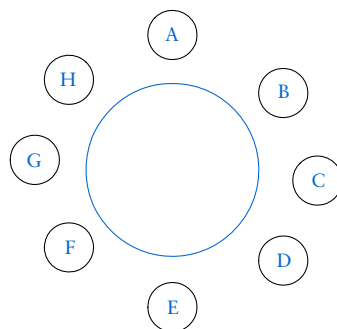
<sup>3</sup> The question of whether or not to include the past may seem to be trivial. However, the inclusion of past generations would risk leading to counter-factual reasoning, such as the non-existence of the present.



“Isn’t there something incoherent in combining the idea that people in the original position are choosing among policies which will produce different total numbers of people with the idea that they know at the outset that they are all the people who ever have existed or ever will exist? It is surely a curious sort of choice if the results of it are already instantiated in the composition of the group of people doing the choosing!” (Barry, 1977, p. 271)

The problem that Barry touches upon here is one, though remote, relative of what in the literature is referred to as the repopulation paradox (Partridge, 1990), the non-identity problem (Parfit, 1984) or the case of the disappearing beneficiaries (Schwartz, 1978). To approach this class of puzzles, it is important to first understand how intergenerational contractual situations differ from contractual situations limited to the present. To that end, I will first explore a contract solely among contemporaries.

Imagine that there is an isolated and self-sufficient island called *Atlantis* populated by eight humans (A-H). In the search for just principles of distribution, the islanders imagine themselves to be behind a veil of ignorance. In line with Rawls theory of justice, the islanders do not know their identity, their place in society, their position in respect to class, their income and so forth:



More generally, behind this thick veil of ignorance, the parties of the contract “are to be understood so far as possible solely as moral persons and in abstraction from contingencies” (Rawls, 1993, p. 273).

In fact, as the contract is specified, the parties in the original position are identical to each other, sharing the same thin conception of the good and having the same priorities. If we are to take this idea to its logical conclusion it means that “we may still say that the people in the original position reach an agreement, but this is entirely trivial since they are clones” (Barry, 1995, p. 58). The suggestion that the parties can be regarded as “clones” may seem to undermine the credibility of the whole contractual device. However, it is this very state of unresolved identity which is necessary if we are to “ensure that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances” (Rawls, 1999, p. 11). Finally, and this is important in relation to intergenerational constructions, the islanders do know that they are all people who live on the island at the present point in time.

Now, let us image that in the original position of Atlantis, the meeting has to choose between three different profiles of justice (1-3) which distribute utility accordingly:

	<i>Profile 1</i>	<i>Profile 2</i>	<i>Profile 3</i>
Individual A	20	5	3
Individual B	20	4	3
Individual C	1	5	3
Individual D	1	4	3
Individual E	1	6	3
Individual F	1	4	3
Individual G	1	4	3
Individual H	1	6	3
<b>Total utility</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>24</b>

The first profile is an apartheid-like scheme in which two individuals subject everyone else to slave-like conditions so that they can enjoy a high material living standard. The second profile is one of a moderately uneven distribution. The third profile is an outright

egalitarian distribution. The highest total utility (46) would be achieved if the first profile is chosen while the egalitarian scheme would produce the lowest total utility (24) due to its lack of incentives.

Clearly, the second profile would be the preferred choice in a Rawlsian contractual situation. Since the agreement reached has to be acceptable to everyone from a position of equality, the meeting would disqualify the first profile even as it maximizes total utility. In more general terms, a distributive profile is fair only to the extent that it would receive universal assent behind the veil. Turning to the egalitarian alternative, the second profile is once again preferable as long as all remaining inequalities are arranged so that they are to the benefit of the least advantaged. It is worth stressing that this is only indirectly dependent on the second profile's higher total utility. It is also worth pointing out that the choice of profile is independent of whether the islanders are risk-averse or not. Gambling will not emerge as a possibility simply because we are not concerned with individual odds but with the Kantian task of specifying a profile of justice which would be *fair* from everyone's point of view.

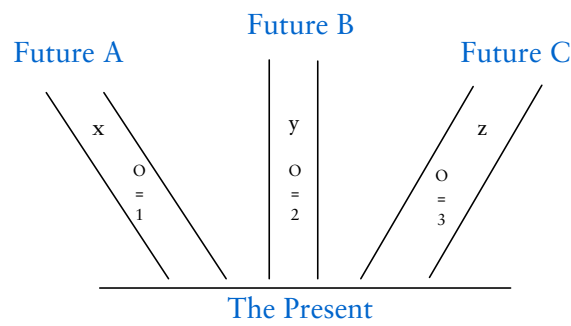
Keeping this in mind, let us bring forth the intergenerational meeting. Instead of choosing between different profiles of justice, we are now confronted with three different alternative futures or timelines, each corresponding to a particular path into the future. They are arranged so that the first future (A) has a level of opportunity (O) of 1 and a population of  $x$ , the second future (B) has a level of opportunity (O) of 2 and a population of  $y$ , and the third future (C) has a level of opportunity (O) of 3 and a population of  $z$ .

Let us define population size so that  $x < y < z$  with no population members in common. If this is all we know, it is reasonable to prefer future C. Now, let us introduce three more and rather crude parameters that constrain our range of options: (a) ecological space,

(b) potential of technological development, and (c) capacity for social change. *Ecological space* is defined as the available carrying capacity necessary to facilitate human activity, *potential of technology* is defined as the extent to which scientific and technological advancements can lead to environmental sustainability, and *capacity for social change* is defined as the ability to achieve environmental sustainability through changes in lifestyle, reproduction policies, and so forth. These parameters can assume three different values: Limited (L), Moderate (M), and High (H). The parameters correspond to the different futures in the following manner:

	Ecological space	Potential of technological development	Capacity for social change
Future A	L	L	H
Future B	H	L	L
Future C	M	H	L

The table should be interpreted so that Future A would be chosen if there is a limited ecological space and a limited potential for technological development but a high potential for social change. Future B would be chosen if there is plenty of ecological space but limited potential for either technological development or social change. Finally, Future C is the most preferable future, yet it requires both a high potential of technological development and a moderate ecological space to be sustainable (but only a limited capacity for social change). To recapitulate, this is what the three futures would look like:



What Barry was suggesting was an intergenerational meeting equipped with the task of deciding which future to pursue. Given the knowledge restrictions of the meeting (that is, to assume that we at the present do not know the correct parameter values) this is a choice under uncertainty. Even more intriguing, regardless of which future is chosen, the people living in that future (provided that they lead lives worth living) will themselves consider it to be preferable since they will owe their very existence to the “activation” of that future. As William Galston puts it:

“All long-run social policies affect the composition of the population to such an extent that after a relatively small number of generations (six to eight) the chances are infinitesimal that any individual who exists under the regime of a long-run policy would have existed if the policy had not been adopted, and conversely. We cannot then say that any individual would have been better, or worse off, given different policies since the policy populations have no members in common” (Galston, 1980, p. 252)

This perplexing problem has led some, like Thomas Schwartz, to argue that we have no obligations extending into the future, especially not into the remote future (Schwartz, 1978). What these theorists seem to overlook is the fundamental singularity of the future. We know for certain that there will be one, and only one, future as we move further along the time-space continuum. This means that whenever we fixate the timeline, there will indeed be one set of individuals to whom justice is due.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, when the future is kept open, each future will bring different individuals into existence, meaning that we hardly can make sense of an intergenerational meeting at which all possible future people are participating. Some may argue that it would suffice to extend the veil so that the parties do not know if they will actually

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, we cannot “fixate” the timeline. In fact, due to the quantum reality of the universe (and somewhat more controversial, due to our own free will), not even a Laplacian demon would have that ability. Yet, as discussed earlier, we share the intuition that each individual now belonging to the “class of future people” will eventually have the same moral standing as anyone now living (Partridge, 2002b, p. 81). It is that intuition that the contractual device tries to reflect as it embodies a conception of equality and spatial-temporal neutrality.

exist (Mulgan, 2006, p. 43) but since the original position is essentially a device for representation that does not seem to be an attractive solution. Instead, I suggest that we should return to the present. While an intergenerational meeting is incapable of deciding on which future to pursue (since the parties of the meeting will owe their existence to the activation of that future) *we* are definitely not. In fact, while acknowledging that the choice is to be made under certain ecological, technological, and social constraints, we are indeed free to choose between different futures. For each future we imagine, we can set up the contractual device anew and ask ourselves how well that path corresponds to our norm of a non-diminishing level of opportunity.

To some, this may seem like cheating. However, I believe it to be fully consistent with our pragmatic reasons for using contractual thinking at the first place, namely to expand our moral sensitivity beyond the present. By probing different futures and speculate about how the level of opportunity is likely to be distributed, we have constructed an instrument for policy-evaluation which, even as it remains undeveloped, allows us substantiate our obligations to posterity. We can then flip the coin around and turn to the input parameters that constrain the range of possible futures that we are to chose between.

#### **4. Futures, sustainable development and opportunities**

As I have read the literature on sustainable development, there are basically two ways of achieving environmental sustainability: (a) technological progress and (b) social and political change. This does not imply that it is certain that any of these will actually succeed in achieving sustainability nor does it imply that we know for certain that the current trajectory is indeed unsustainable.

Human beings, as all biological life forms, exist in interaction with their surrounding physical environment. That environment comes with a certain ecological space which effectively limits economical, political, and social activity. Confronted with these “limits of growth”, we can restate the choice as one between: (a) developing technology which relaxes the limits or (b) changing our social world, maybe by imposing strict reproductive policies, so that our ecological footprint is lowered to a level consistent with the available ecological space (Meadows, 2004, pp. 122-127).

Elsewhere (Karlsson, 2007, forthcoming), I have investigated these two options and argued that an advanced technological path to environmental sustainability is normatively preferable to traditional deep-green visions. In this paper, I will not further explore the normative dimension of the issue. Instead I will specify a basic theoretical model which can be used to collect data on how others estimate these key parameters in the quest for sustainability.

Using the intergenerational meeting as an ethical lens, we can imagine an ideal decision-making situation in which we probe the level of opportunity available in four different futures. Of course, these four futures do not exhaust the whole range of possible futures. However, for our current practical purpose, these four futures can be said to represent certain fundamental ideal types. Recalling the example with the three futures employed earlier, the labels I have chosen to describe the four futures should not (maybe with one exception) come as a surprise to any reader moderately familiar with the literature on sustainable development (Costanza, 2000):

- A. Mad Max; very low level of opportunity
- B. Ecotopia; low level of opportunity
- C. Business-as-usual; present level of opportunity
- D. Star Trek; high level of opportunity

In this theoretical model, it is assumed that the choice of which future to pursue is made exclusively on the basis of three, by this time, well-known parameters:

- A. Ecological space
- B. Potential of technological development
- C. Capacity for social change

With our objective defined as to choose a future which provides a fair and, as far as it is possible, also a non-diminishing level of opportunity for present and future generations, it seems clear that “Star Trek” (D) is the most preferable future. Industrial expansion into space would provide access to raw materials as well as unfiltered solar energy which in turn would dramatically increase the stock of resources and energy while providing unlimited sinks for pollutants; thus satisfying two of the determining factors of sustainability. However, it is possible that for all we presently know, Star Trek may indeed be *science fiction*. In order to be feasible, such a future would require a high potential for technological development and at least a moderate ecological space to support the aggressive innovation leading up to a state of post-scarcity.

The future labelled “business-as-usual” (C) has recently found a fervent advocate in the Danish statistician Bjørn Lomborg. Lomborg argues that the idea of a looming ecological crisis “does not seem to be backed up by the available evidence” (Lomborg, 2001, p. 4) and thus no problem of intergenerational distributive justice exists either. According to Lomborg, non-renewable resources are not limited at all since we always will find new deposits as prices increase (Lomborg, 2001, pp. 147-148). In line with earlier arguments presented by Julian Simon and Wilfred Beckerman, simple human ingenuity and economic growth are thought to be sufficient to secure that future generations enjoy the same or higher level of opportunity as we presently do



(Beckerman, 1996; Simon, 1996). Eager as many environmentalists have been to prove Lomborg and his supporters wrong, it seems safe to assume that a future of business-as-usual would require a considerable ecological space though it does not seem to depend on either radical technological development or social change.

Thirdly, we have the deep ecological alternative, the future called “Ecotopia” (B). It is a future in which humanity has proven to be utterly incapable of wisely wielding its techno-instrumental capacity. As David Pepper puts it “for many the direction of envisaged change appears to constitute a *retreat* from modernity rather than a development upon it” (Pepper, 2005, p. 9). With the industrial civilization being rolled back, the level of opportunity is likely to fall below the present. At first, this may seem to violate the norm of a non-diminishing level of opportunity. However, we have to remember that this objective was always subject to the available ecological space. If the ecological space turns out to be severely limited we are currently experiencing nothing but an “overshoot” which is bound to come to an end (as long as there is a limited potential for technological development). To be feasible, Ecotopia would however require a considerable capacity for social change. In fact, the visions found in many deep-green writings seem to be surprisingly dependent on some kind of quasi-mystical “inner change” of humanity.

The final future, “Mad Max” (A), is based on the assumption that such a capacity for social change does not exist and that humanity is in fact doomed to experience a string of devastating ecocatastrophes causing a downward spiral towards a new dark age (Costanza, 1999). The Mad Max future is different from the other futures since it will not at any time be a chosen path. It should rather be considered as a “worst-case scenario” which can come to pass if ecological, technological, and social constraints are as harsh as certain doom-and-gloom greens have occasionally argued.

	Ecological space	Potential of technological development	Capacity for social change
Mad Max	L	L	L
Ecotopia	L	L	H
Business as usual	H	L	L
Star Trek	M	H	L

Beyond this table and their relative positions, I will not try to create threshold values for each of the three parameters. Instead, I will in my doctoral dissertation translate these parameters into 7-point scales which, operationalized into multiple indicators (Bryman, 2004, p. 68), can be used to quantitatively study how real-world party members estimate the three parameters. If successful, my ambition is to survey members of political parties who take part in annual party conventions. Once the data has been collected, it will be possible to empirically assess how for instance green and liberal parties differ with regards to their images of the future.

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