**CLIMATE CHANGE JUSTICE: GETTING MOTIVATED IN THE LAST CHANCE SALOON**

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Abstract: A key reason for pessimism with respect to greenhouse gas emissions reduction relates to the ‘motivation problem’, whereby those who could make the biggest difference prima facie have the least incentive to act, because they are most able to adapt: how can we motivate such people (and thereby everyone else) to accept, indeed to initiate, the changes to their lifestyles that are required for effective emissions reductions? This paper offers an account inspired by Rawls of the good of membership of ‘intergenerational cooperative union’ to achieve justice that provides a solution to the motivation problem.

Key words: climate change, intergenerational justice, shame.

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INTERVIEWER: Do you think you’ll ever give up flying?

SIENNA MILLER: I don’t think I can at the moment (laughs). I’d love to … with the amount I’ve been doing it would be lovely to not to have to do quite so much but, you know, I love my job, it’s wonderful to have a creative outlet, and I feel very lucky to be able to make a living out of what I love doing, but you know I can’t avoid flying … start building boats (laughs) … rowing myself around … No, I can’t see that in the foreseeable future. But I can start taking less baths.

 (Interview with the actress Sienna Miller, spokesperson for Global Cool, a charity whose aim is to get each person to commit to reducing their CO2 emissions by 1 tonne per year).[[1]](#endnote-1)

**§1 Introduction**

The political theory of climate change (CC) politics is burgeoning. The theoretical approaches of liberalism, utilitarianism, egalitarianism, rational choice, feminism, communitarianism and, of course, green thinking are all being used to fuel analyses of the harms of CC, and accounts of how the costs of addressing it should be shared between persons, states, corporations, and generations. And perspectives of distributive, corrective, and retributive justice, alongside techniques such as cost benefit analysis, and risk assessment, are being fruitfully adopted in the search for mitigation and adaptation solutions that deliver justice to current and future generations, and protection for the Earth’s other inhabitants. In the end, however, all roads lead to Rome: by 2050 we must lower global emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs) to (at least) the Stern Review’s recommended minimum stabilisation level of 550ppm (which would require a cut of 25% below current emissions), and ideally to 450ppm (requiring a cut of 70% below current levels) to have a chance of avoiding runaway CC.[[2]](#endnote-2) However, many influential thinkers calculate that higher reductions are needed sooner than 2050; for example, George Monbiot claims that global emissions must be reduced by 60% by 2030 in order to achieve stabilisation at 440ppm, which would require average cuts of 90% for rich countries.[[3]](#endnote-3)

If there are three facts about dealing with CC over which no serious scientists, policy-makers, or theorists (ought to) disagree, they are these.

(1) The nature of the CC problem means that action to achieve these ends must be taken now. We have a shrinking window of opportunity to make changes that will limit the temperatures rises that our forbears increased GHG emissions have already made inevitable. The Stern Review is unequivocal on the need for urgent action: ‘[t]he investments made in the next 10-20 years could lock in very high emissions for the next half-century, or present an opportunity to move the world onto a more sustainable path’.[[4]](#endnote-4) Consider also Amartya Sen, commenting on the Review: ‘What is particularly striking [about the Review] is the identification of ways and means of sharply minimising [the costs of climate change] through acting right now, rather than waiting for our lives to be overrun by rapidly advancing adversities’.[[5]](#endnote-5)

(2) Failure to take this action now will likely doom to failure action taken by future generations to limit global temperature rises to acceptable levels, for two reasons. First, we know that as GHG emissions rise CC is likely to accelerate in virtue of a variety of positive feedbacks which increase warming; for example, as various expanses of permafrost melt they release methane trapped below them, which adds to the GHG emissions total, causing more warming etc. Or, as the Amazon rainforest dies off and its vegetation rots it releases CO2 and thus the forest is transformed from being one of the Earth’s major CO2-sinks to a major CO2-source, exacerbating the problem of spiralling GHG emissions and causing further warming. Second, as warming accelerates the likelihood increases that the conditions we will bequeath to future generations through our failure to control emissions will be so hard for them – possibly catastrophic – that co-ordinated, concerted political action to achieve solutions (let alone just solutions) becomes less and less feasible. This is so because the size of the CC problem will be greatly increased for them, while their resources will be greatly diminished, both in tangible terms (in virtue of vastly increased number of demands on resources that runaway CC would create in an expanded population), and in less tangible, but possibly more significant, terms: there is little reason to be optimistic that people will retain a sense of justice in circumstances of extreme scarcity, with no hope in sight.[[6]](#endnote-6)

(3) Those not yet born cannot be held responsible for whether the current generation takes, or fails to take, this action; are powerless to affect this decision; and are vulnerable to its effects. In virtue of its timescale, the CC problem is essentially a problem of intergenerational justice. Those who will be most harmed by a failure to lower emissions will be those who had no part in the choice not to act to lower emissions.

What (1), (2) and (3) mean is that the current generation are uniquely placed in human history: the choices we make now – in the next 10-20 years – will alter the destiny of our species (let alone every other species) unalterably, and forever. Generations prior to us did not know the havoc they were wreaking, and it will be too late for those who come after us. The current generation is drinking in the last chance saloon of CC mitigation.

There is one further, crucial, fact about GHG reductions which adds the final layer of intractability to the CC problem: the changes required to meet the 60% target within five years are root and branch, and swingeing. These requirements bear most heavily on the people who have the most to lose, i.e. inhabitants of developed, industrialised nations who enjoy all the comforts of the modern world, and who have the most resources available for short-term adaptation to global warming.[[7]](#endnote-7) And by extension, their politicians have least incentive to enact measures to achieve these GHG cuts. This means that the most important question of CC politics at the present time – the question that dwarfs every technical debate about the details of policy, philosophical dispute about the source of value, and green tirade about the evils of Western consumerism – is this: how can we motivate the rich to accept, indeed to initiate, the changes to their lifestyles that are required for bottom line GHG emissions reductions? I shall refer to this as ‘the motivation problem’.

We might think that merely pointing out the harm that would be done to future generations by a failure to reduce emissions should be sufficient to motivate the current generation, including its subset of richest, to make these reductions. Indeed, it should: imposing these avoidable costs on the unborn is a paradigm case of injustice insofar as it constitutes exploitation of a powerless and vulnerable group.[[8]](#endnote-8) However, if experience to date is anything to go by, merely pointing this out to the current generation – especially its wealthiest members – is unlikely to have sufficient motivating force to generate the required changes. To take a parallel case from the realm of global justice, we – the rich – already know that the world’s poor are suffering unnecessarily and through no fault of their own as a result of many injustices. In spite of the fact that most people would agree that it is wrong that children in Darfur, Sudan, and Ethiopia are starving to death, and that something should be done, the unjust global distribution of advantage that makes this possible remains entrenched. Making poverty history requires more than stroking the egos of Knighted rock stars, and wearing Red Noses, but acknowledging the injustice of poverty never seems to take us any further than this. If an appeal to impartial principles of justice per se lacks motivating force in the intragenerational global case – where the misery of those who suffer injustice can be viewed on our TV screens while we eat our dinner – then it is likely to be even less successful in motivating people to genuinely effective action with respect to intergenerational injustice, given that we will never see the suffering caused to those by our unjust actions, and never run the risk of coming face to face with their pain.

An objection to this way of presenting the intergenerational scenario will introduce the first approach I shall consider. This is that the current generation *will* see the suffering of future generations caused by their unjust actions because they will – most of them – watch their children and grandchildren grow. In some circles this sort of appeal is taken to solve the motivation problem with respect to GHG emissions reductions. In the next section I shall consider it as presented in early Rawls, and then endorse his later rejection of it. In sections 3 and 4 I shall expand on the alternative account he offers so as to make it more promising as a solution to the motivation problem. Section 5 concludes.

**§2 A Family Affair?**

Rawls reasons for his principle of intergenerational justice – the ‘Just Savings’ principle (JSP) – as follows. Parties behind the veil of ignorance are to be thought of as contemporaries: they belong to the same generation (and know this) but they do not know which generation this is. Rawls calls this the ‘present time of entry’ interpretation of the original position.[[9]](#endnote-9) Assuming, as Rawls does, that the parties in the original position are motivated by mutual disinterest (i.e. they take no interest in one another’s interests), for them to agree on a principle of just savings would be for them to gamble with their interests in a way that maximin rules out:[[10]](#endnote-10) it would be for them to gamble on being in a generation that benefits from the savings of previous generations, rather than in a generation that saves in a way that will only benefit future generations. Maximin rules out such a gamble because the mutual disinterest of parties in the original position, in combination with their conception of themselves as ‘trustees … responsible for citizens’ (unknown) determinate and complete good’,[[11]](#endnote-11) means that they focus on improving the position *not* of those who would benefit most from the principles they choose, but rather on those who would be least advantaged by these principles, because the principles they choose as trustees must be justifiable to all those they act in trust for.[[12]](#endnote-12) In the case of intergenerational savings, those who would be least advantaged by a JSP are ‘the least fortunate first generation’.[[13]](#endnote-13) Because time’s arrow points in one direction – i.e. because ‘[w]e can do something for posterity but it can do nothing for us’[[14]](#endnote-14) – if the least fortunate first generation are required to save then they make sacrifices for which they receive no return: only future generations will benefit from their savings. Because the position of the least fortunate first generation would be improved if they were not required to save, it follows that – given the present time of entry interpretation, and holding fixed the motivation assumption of mutual disinterest - maximin reasoning requires that the parties in the original position reject the JSP.[[15]](#endnote-15) The worst off generation will be made as well off as possible if it does not save for future generations. Call this the ‘Hang Posterity’ problem.[[16]](#endnote-16)

The Hang Posterity problem generalises to all intergenerational sacrifices, and iterates beyond the first or worst off generation to all generations: the complaint at its heart is ‘why should we be the ones to bear the costs when only future generations will see the benefits?’. The same thought (albeit shored up by self-interest rather than a commitment to impartial justice) generates the motivation problem outlined in the last section. My strategy here is to mine Rawls’ approach to the Hang Posterity problem (qua wrinkle in the account of impartial justice) for resources to tackle the motivation problem qua partial and self-interested obstacle to the delivery of intergenerational justice. In subsequent sections I shall isolate and refine Rawls’ approach to the problem in order to generate an account of reasons for action fit to solve the motivation problem with respect to CC politics.

In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls approaches the Hang Posterity problem as follows. Preserving the present time of entry interpretation of the original position, parties (1) (know that) they ‘represent family lines … who care at least about their more immediate descendants’[[17]](#endnote-17) (i.e. Rawls changes the motivation assumption for the original position), and (2) are required to adopt a principle of savings ‘such that they wish all earlier generations to have followed it’.[[18]](#endnote-18) These modifications to the original position mean that the parties consider not only relations of justice between persons at any given point in time, but also such relations as they stretch backwards and forwards in time. Rawls describes their reasoning as follows:

[The parties] try to piece together a just savings schedule by balancing how much they would be willing to save for their more immediate descendants against what they would feel entitled to claim of their more immediate predecessors. Thus imagining themselves to be fathers, say, they are to ascertain how much they should set aside for their sons and grandsons by noting what they would believe themselves entitled to claim of their fathers and grandfathers.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Thus, the parties do not choose a JSP in the name of intergenerational maximin or distributive justice. Rather, the JSP is the institutional expression of the natural concern parents have for their children, and their children’s children, and the natural expectations offspring have of their parents. The reason for any generation to save for future generations no longer expresses impartial *equality* between generations, but rather natural bonds of kinship, which are divested of any partiality through the present time of entry interpretation, and translated into expectations about the resources one generation ought to bequeath to the next.

Prima facie this provides an attractive vision of intergenerational motivating reasons, and works to counteract the motivation problem: we love our kids and don’t want them to suffer. But there are at least two good reasons to be wary of the ‘family lines’ approach.

(1) Unless we are to build parenthood into the conception of the person upon which justice is premised – perhaps by adding this status to the list of things people know about themselves when choosing principles in the original position – then the family ties approach is stymied. The point of this list is to specify the features of persons in virtue of which they are all equally deserving of justice. But why think that being a parent is such a feature? Unlike all the other features of parties in the original position of which they are aware – possession of the two moral powers, knowledge that they have a conception of the good without knowing its content, knowledge of the list of social primary goods of which they prefer more to less – this feature is not universally shared by all persons insofar as they claim justice, and the lack of it does not render a person unable to participate in social co-operation on terms of reciprocity.

(2) The ‘family lines’ amendment to the original position is unsatisfactory both on Rawlsian, and on its own, terms. It is out of kilter with the spirit of the veil of ignorance insofar as it takes a highly culturally specific expression of familial bonds, i.e. inheritance, to be the definitive institutional reflection of the sentimental ties that constitute these bonds. The impartiality of the veil of ignorance is supposed to deliver principles that enable justice-based critique of such contingent and historically particular practices; building such a practice into the architecture of justice makes such critique impossible.[[20]](#endnote-20) Furthermore, making kinship the basis of intergenerational duties undermines the status of justice as the first virtue of social institutions,[[21]](#endnote-21) whereby justice is supposed to regulate kinship relations, rather than be derived from, limited by, or reflect the content of them.

If we want to avoid this result, there are at least two ways forward. First, pace Rawls, we could deny that the Hang Posterity problem is insurmountable without adjustments in assumptions about the motivation of parties in the original position; second, we could replace the ‘family lines’ motivation assumption with a different one that does not threaten to undermine the impartiality of the original position. The first approach is developed by Gaspart and Gosseries; the second – I shall argue – builds upon the Gaspart/Gosseries strategy by making good a defect at its heart through adjusting the motivation assumption in a way that does less violence to the original position, and which is made possible by Rawls’ comments about the justification of the JSP in *Political Liberalism* and *Justice as Fairness*. It is in this second adjustment that the most promising solution to the Hang Posterity – and thus the motivation problem – is to be found. However, let me lay out the Gaspart and Gosseries argument as a prelude to this.

Gaspart and Gosseries argue that the reason parties in the original position have for endorsing the JSP is exactly the same as the reason they have for rejecting a basic structure which denies them basic liberties in order to deliver greater income and wealth to the worst off. The priority the parties in the original position give to liberty over other goods supplies the reasons in each case. Here is the key paragraph:

[O]n the one hand, accumulation can be justified in the name of reaching a level of wealth enabling a society to minimally guarantee the protection of basic liberties. On the other hand, accumulation would in principle violate maximin once applied intergenerationally. Yet, given the lexical priority of the principle of equal liberty over the difference principle, Rawlsians are able to defend such an accumulation phase [i.e. a positive rate of savings – CM]. Admittedly, not the *same* people will both suffer from the violation of maximin (earlier generations in the accumulation phase) and benefit from society’s ability to protect basic liberties (generations beyond the end of the accumulation phase). However, this is also the case in the intragenerational case … those who could benefit from redistribution (the least wealthy) will not necessarily be the same as those benefiting from a ban on significant violations of freedom of expression (*ex hypothesi*, the most wealthy members of society).[[22]](#endnote-22)

This interpretation makes no appeal to family lines or kinship. Does it address Rawls’ worry about how time’s arrow would lead parties in the original position using maximin reasoning to hang posterity? The argument is that the justification of sacrifices by the worst off by reference to the priority of liberty in the intragenerational case also applies to such sacrifices in the intergenerational case. The success of this argument depends on an analogy between the group of people in the intragenerational context, and the group of people in the intergenerational context, who are made less well off than they would be otherwise by distributions of – let us say for simplicity - economic goods according to principles over which the principle of equal liberty takes priority. In the intergenerational case this group is the worst off in the least advantaged – say the first – generation (call them ‘the serfs’); in the intragenerational case this group is the worst off in any time slice (call them ‘the have-nots’). However, there is the following crucial difference between the two groups. Ex hypothesi, the have-nots enjoy a just distribution of a fully adequate scheme of basic liberties (albeit at the cost of fewer economic goods than they would otherwise have): the sacrifices they make are required by the existence of just institutions which they have before their eyes, and the benefits of which they enjoy. However, the serfs do not have these institutions before their eyes, and do not enjoy the benefits of them: the sacrifices they make are in order that future generations can achieve these benefits. And knowing this justifies the parties’ rejection of the JSP and their decision to hang posterity.

This disanalogy means that the strong arguments for the priority of liberty that support the sacrifice of economic benefits in the intragenerational case do not obviously carry over to support the case for savings in the intergenerational case. However, if the analogy can be preserved by showing how the serfs and the have-nots both enjoy the same good in virtue of sacrifices they make of economic goods, despite their different lived experiences of justice, then perhaps the argument for savings in the accumulation phase will go through. Fleshing out – at this level of abstraction – a revised Rawlsian solution to the motivation problem will reveal a rich seam of considerations for political argument in the real world that is inspired by Rawlsian ideal theory, and that provides suggestions worth pursuing as to how to frame arguments that could solve real-world motivation problems.

**§3 Intergenerational Co-operative Union**

The key question is: what, if anything, do the serfs and the have-nots share, despite the fact that the latter enjoy a fully adequate scheme of liberties distributed by a set of just institutions that the former do not? Some later remarks by Rawls suggest a feature of their respective societies (that is related to, but not identical with, the priority of liberty) that I will build upon in strengthening the analogy so as to supply reasons fit to solve the motivation problem.

[W]henever there is a shared final end, an end that requires the co-operation of many to achieve, the good realized is social: it is realized through citizens’ joint activity in mutual dependence on the appropriate actions being taken by others. Thus, establishing and successfully conducting reasonably just (though of course always imperfect) democratic institutions over a long period of time, perhaps gradually reforming them over generations, though not, to be sure, without lapses is a great social good and appreciated as such. This is shown by the fact that people refer to it as one of the significant achievements of their history.[[23]](#endnote-23)

A just society is an end that requires the co-operation of many to achieve, and thus qualifies as a social good. It is this good, I propose, that the have-nots and the serfs have in common: both groups, albeit it through different forms of activity, engage in co-operation through time to achieve a just society. For the serfs, their enjoyment of the social good of co-operation to achieve justice takes the form of saving (at the appropriate rate) so that later generations have resources sufficient to create just institutions. For the have-nots, their enjoyment of this social good takes the form of sustaining, and passing on, just institutions. Hence it is incumbent on the have-nots to accept, if necessary, fewer economic goods for the sake of the priority of liberty, because the institution of this priority rule is part of what makes a society just. Preserving the present time of entry interpretation, and keeping fixed the motivation assumption of mutual disinterest, it is nevertheless the case that parties would agree to a positive rate of savings for generations lacking resources sufficient for them to achieve justice for themselves in virtue of the significance they attach – whatever their generation - to the social good of co-operation to achieve justice: ‘all citizens give high priority to the end of cooperating politically with one another on terms that the representative of each would endorse in a situation in which they are all fairly represented as free and equal, and reasonable and rational’.[[24]](#endnote-24) Parties in the original position would *not* agree to hang posterity on the grounds that those they represent could be serfs, because to do so would be to deprive these people of a great good: the social good of co-operation to achieve a just society.

I shall explore how these reflections affect the motivation problem in the next section. For now, and in no particular order, let me anticipate and reply to some objections to the idea of intergenerational co-operation to achieve justice as a social good.

(1) The idea of intergenerational co-operation makes no sense because it is transhistorical: only contemporaries are in a position to co-operate.

There are two replies. (i) The idea of intergenerational co-operation does make sense, and is used without objection in other forms of discourse. Consider people involved in intellectual and creative activities in some way dependent on the achievements of their predecessors, and in some way setting agendas for their successors: physicists, painters, or philosophers, even. In different ways, such people very often conceive of themselves, if not quite in community with those before and after them, at least as making a contribution to the same pursuit or tradition; and they very often take great pride in this fact. And even if they do not so conceive of their activities, it may nonetheless be the case that this is what they are doing. Of course, the achievement of justice is a very different pursuit than painting, philosophy or physics, but the point is that if transhistorical co-operative activity is possible in these cases it is prima facie then possible with respect to the pursuit of justice. However – and this takes me to the second response – (ii) if it is somehow insisted upon that the pursuit of justice differs from other forms of co-operative activity such that it cannot be transhistorical then I am happy to simply choose a word other than ‘co-operation’ to describe the different activities of generations spread out in time all of which contribute to the creation of a just society; ‘collaboration’, ‘alliance’ or, perhaps, ‘tradition’ or, better, ‘union’.

(2) Granting that saving by the serfs, and foregoing greater economic benefits for the sake of equal liberty by the have-nots, delivers to each of them the same good of co-operation to achieve a just society, there remains a disanalogy between the groups: the have-nots actually live in a just society whereas the serfs do not.

In reply, as I stated in my objection to the Gaspart/Gosseries argument, it is true that this disanalogy holds. Because the have-nots are lucky enough to live in a time of justice (or of greater justice than the serfs) they get (or at least have available to them) what Rawls elsewhere identifies as two further aspects of the good of a just society: phenomenological (the experience of living in a just society) and objective (the delivery of justice to members)).[[25]](#endnote-25) But the claim I am defending is not that the serfs and the have-nots are identically well-off; clearly they are not. The have-nots are lucky to be living later than the serfs. Rather, the claim being defended is that parties in the original position have justice-related reasons for imposing requirements on both the serfs and the have-nots that they accept, if necessary, fewer economic goods (either through saving, or through prioritising liberty) for the sake of achieving a just society. The form of activity for each group that might be so required will differ: the serfs are required to save, whereas the have-nots are (inter alia) required to institute and preserve the priority of liberty. And members of the have-nots, even though economically worst off in their society, will receive (phenomenological and objective) goods related to living in a just society that are lacked by the serfs, who forego economic benefits but do not experience justice. Nevertheless, there is commonality in at least one benefit delivered to both groups who make such sacrifices for these reasons: receipt of the social good of co-operation to create a just society.

(3) The serfs can have no certainty that their saving will achieve justice: their co-operation may turn out to be futile if subsequent generations squander their inheritance or abandon transhistorical co-operation to achieve justice.

In response, this is true, but it does not defeat the argument, which is supposed to provide parties in the original position with justificatory reasons for imposing requirements to save on the serfs, rather than provide the serfs with motivating reasons for doing what they are required to do. In other words, the argument so far is located in ideal theory, where we assume that people comply with the requirements of justice.[[26]](#endnote-26) Of course, in the non-ideal real world of partial compliance the serfs may well be suspicious of the good intentions of their successors, and may decide on that basis to hang posterity. But if the argument I have made so far holds good, any such decision by a generation so situated would be unjust. Parties in the original position will know that no generation has a crystal ball, or can bind the hands of its successors. But this does not detract from the significance they attach in the original position to the social good of co-operation to achieve a just society: even if such co-operation by one generation failed to achieve its objective in virtue of the actions of later generations, that co-operation is not thereby rendered worthless (as we tell children, ‘it’s the taking part that counts’).

(4) The serfs may have no awareness that they are receiving the social good of co-operation to achieve a just society, and it stretches credulity to claim that a good received of which one has no awareness provides justifying (let alone motivating) reasons to make sacrifices to the extent that could be required of the serfs.

In response, it does not stretch credulity to make this claim: many goods are received irrespective of the knowledge of that fact by the receiver. It is a good to be protected, to be lucky, or not to be lied to: but a person can be in receipt of these goods without any knowledge of the fact. The serfs, and indeed the have-nots, may have no sense of themselves as co-operating to achieve a just society;[[27]](#endnote-27) nevertheless, they do, and they receive the good associated with this activity.

In sum, the argument that addresses the Hang Posterity problem by providing parties in the original position with a reason for imposing a requirement to save on the serfs is that such saving delivers to them the important social good of co-operation to create a just society. Let me now suggest how this argument generating justifying reasons can also generate motivating reasons.

**§4 Getting Motivated**

The account of intergenerational relations as co-operative delivers justifying reasons to support principles of intergenerational justice. However, reasons which justify but are not fit to motivate make for an impoverished political justification. Successful justifying reasons must be fit to motivate people to act for these reasons; they must be action-guiding. Justifying reasons must be motivationally adequate because political justification is a practical activity: it ultimately aims to convince people that either they ought to restrain themselves according to its principles, or that the coercion used to restrain those who do not restrain themselves is legitimate. A reason which was not fit to motivate people to act could not be a practical reason. The construction of political justifications must have an eye both on the question of whether people *could* act for the reasons it offers, and on the question of what it would take for these reasons to become reasons upon which people *do* act.[[28]](#endnote-28)

The account of intergenerational relations as co-operative delivers justifying reasons for principles of intergenerational justice upon which people could act, and elaboration of why this is so reveals a (Rawlsian) moral psychology that tells a plausible story about how these reasons could become reasons upon which people do act. It is this feature of the account that leads us back to the motivation problem with which I started. In brief, the argument will be that co-operative relations of intergenerational justice in general serve as a social basis of self-respect in two ways:

(a) for the person who co-operates;

(b) for future persons benefited by this co-operation insofar as it is a condition of their being in a state of progress with respect to pursuit of the social good of intergenerational justice.

Failure by a person to do their part in securing these bases through the pursuit of their own self-interest provides the following motivating reasons:

(a) shame at her failure to make some contribution to the achievement of intergenerational justice;

(b) a desire not to make future generations ashamed of her.

I shall argue that these general considerations about intergenerational justice and motivating reasons have special salience in the last-chance-saloon circumstances of CC in which the current generation is situated.

Let me begin by saying something general about self-respect and its social bases in Rawls’ thought. Rawls claims that self-respect is ‘perhaps the most important primary good’[[29]](#endnote-29) and that,

[Self-respect] first of all ... includes a person’s sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of the good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out. And second, self-respect implies a confidence in one’s ability, so far as it is within one’s power, to fulfil one’s intentions. When we feel that our plans are of little value, we cannot pursue them with pleasure or take delight in their execution. Nor plagued by failure and self-doubt can we continue in our endeavours.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Self-respect is a natural primary good of fundamental importance: it combines self-value with self-confidence in a way essential for well-being and practical reasoning aimed at the good life, understood as plural in content but limited by non-subservience, and by congruence between self-conception and self-expression.[[31]](#endnote-31) The significance of self-respect as a natural primary good is registered in the inclusion of the social bases of self-respect on the list of social primary goods, which provide the currency of justice in Rawls’ theory.

[S]elf-respect depends upon and is encouraged by certain public features of basic social institutions, how they work together and how people who accept these arrangements are expected to (and normally do) regard and treat one another. These features of basic institutions and publicly expected (and normally honoured) ways of conduct are the social bases of self-respect.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Although self-respect cannot be provided directly with political measures,[[33]](#endnote-33) political and social conditions can present severe obstacles to it such that whole swathes of persons are systematically damaged. Caste systems, segregation, class divisions, and other forms of social hierarchies are the most obvious forms of social organisation that cause such harm, but more subtle forms of injustice related, in particular, to distributional inequalities can also have this effect through the social exclusion, and the inequalities of opportunity to develop and refine cherished conceptions of the good, that they cause.

Following Joshua Cohen, we can classify the social bases of self-respect as: ‘resource’ bases, which are practical means enabling people to develop themselves according to their non-subservient self-conceptions; and ‘recognitional’ bases, constituted by the attitudes of others towards the person that support and foster her self-respect. Both resource and recognitional bases of self-respect can be found either in the ‘associational’ or in the ‘framework’ conditions of society. The associational bases of self-respect are communities of shared interests in civil society providing conditions of reciprocal esteem, wherein our achievements are recognised by others whose talents we value.[[34]](#endnote-34) The framework bases inhere in the basic structure, and are constituted by ‘the framework of institutions and associated forms of public argument [which] support and foster the associational conditions’.[[35]](#endnote-35) The other social primary goods (basic liberties, freedom of movement and free choice of occupation, powers and prerogatives of offices and positions of responsibility in the basic structure of society, and income and wealth), and their patterns of distribution, all serve as social bases of self-respect either insofar as they provide resources in civil society or the basic structure for the pursuit of self-respect related activities, or insofar as they enable self-respect supporting mutual recognition between persons qua citizens or qua ‘private’ members of various communities of shared interests in which they participate, or both. For example, when guaranteed by the basic structure of society, equal freedom of association is a resource basis of self-respect because it enables persons to participate in any community of shared interest they see fit. It is also a recognitional basis because this guarantee symbolises citizens’ recognition of the validity of one another’s pursuit of conceptions of the good despite their deep disagreement with respect to the content of these conceptions, and because it gives persons qua private individuals access to the reciprocal esteem that can be found in the communities of shared interests in which they pursue their conceptions of the good.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Of most relevance to the motivation problem are the recognitional bases of self-respect as found in the framework conditions (basic structure) of society. A person who finds her self-respect in associational membership and the activities that go with it – in, as Rawls sometimes calls such communities, social unions – normally also finds her self-respect supported when those with whom she is not closely associated as a private person, but with whom she shares citizenship, include her in public justificatory debate about justice and the terms of social co-operation by offering her justificatory reasons in public reason, and by taking seriously the reasons she offers and sincerely takes to be presentable in public reason. This form of inclusion can serve as a further recognitional basis of self-respect. The reason why mutual recognition between citizens qua citizens can constitute a social basis of self-respect is that self-respect depends on a person’s conception of herself as worthy of being given justifying reasons by any other person capable of having expectations of her that she act in a certain way in social co-operation (this is how the non-subservience essential to self-respect is manifested in persons’ identities qua citizens). The fact that a person is in a political community means that her fellow citizens will have expectations of her that she act in accordance with principles they decide upon in justificatory debate, i.e. just principles of social co-operation. In other words, social union can consist in the private activities of individuals united in the pursuit of specific goals by a shared conception of the good, or it can consist in the joint pursuit of justice by citizens. As Rawls makes explicit in his final work: ‘[a] … reason political society is a good for citizens is that it secures for them the good of justice and the social bases of mutual- and self-respect’.[[37]](#endnote-37) And (less explicitly) in his first work:

[A] well ordered society (corresponding to justice as fairness) is itself a form of social union. Indeed, it is a social union of social unions. Both characteristic features [of a social union] are present: the successful carrying out of just institutions is the shared final end of all the members of society, and these institutional forms are prized as good in themselves.[[38]](#endnote-38)

When a person is excluded from justificatory debate about justice either by having her reasons ignored or by not being offered reasons by others at all, her status as a person worthy of giving and receiving justificatory reasons is undermined, and the recognitional bases of her self-respect as found in the basic structure come under threat. Furthermore, those who so deplete the bases of self-respect for others ipso facto damage their own bases of self-respect by destroying the possibility of a social union of social unions united in the pursuit of justice. Of course, in both cases – those whose bases are damaged by others, and those who damage their own bases – the harmed parties may be unaware of the harm they suffer, and may enjoy healthy levels of self-esteem. But the warm glow of self-esteem is neither necessary not sufficient for self-respect,[[39]](#endnote-39) and provision of its social bases is not the business of principles of justice.[[40]](#endnote-40)

The final – and crucial, for my purposes – part of the puzzle is to note that the social union of social unions providing recognitional bases of self-respect for citizens in the basic structure is intergenerational.

[A] just constitutional order, when adjoined to the smaller social unions of everyday life, provides a framework for these many associations and sets up the most complex and diverse activity of all. In a well-ordered society each person understands the first principles that govern the whole scheme as it is to be carried out over many generations; and all have a settled intention to adhere to these principles in their plan of life … Everyone’s more private life is so to speak a plan within a plan, this superordinate plan being realised in the public institutions of society.[[41]](#endnote-41)

The intergenerational co-operative pursuit of justice is central to an intergenerational social union of social unions providing a recognitional basis of self-respect in the basic structure of the society of each generation that participates in it. If self-respect is the most important primary good – the one without which ‘[a]ll desire and activity becomes empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism’[[42]](#endnote-42) – then delivering justice to future generations is in our interests as well as theirs.

Two questions remain, which can be stated as objections.

(1) Granted this account provides a powerful justifying reason for doing intergenerational justice, the motivating force of the reasons it identifies still remains unclear.

(2) There is no reason to think that this account gives especially powerful motivating reasons for doing intergenerational climate change justice over other forms of intergenerational justice.

I shall address (1) in the remainder of this section with some reflections on shame. (2) will be addressed in the next section by way of conclusion.

Rawls states that ‘shame is the emotion evoked by shocks to our self-respect’,[[43]](#endnote-43) and distinguishes ‘natural’ from ‘moral’ shame in terms of failures to exhibit different types of ‘excellences’ (qualities prized by people in social union with one another) related to self-respect. Natural shame is experienced in virtue of failings beyond our control which nevertheless matter to us from the perspective of the values etc. around which self-respect is built;[[44]](#endnote-44) for example, clumsiness, stammering, or obesity. It is arguable that natural shame is a corrosive emotion with roots in social practices that aim at stigmatising some in order to normalise – and thus empower – others, and that as such it should have no role in any liberal politics of mutual respect.[[45]](#endnote-45) In any case, this form of shame is not apposite to my argument here. Instead, I shall appeal to Rawls’ ‘moral’ shame: ‘someone is liable to moral shame when he prizes as excellences of his person those virtues that his plan of life requires and is framed to encourage. He regards the virtues … as properties that his associates want in him and that he wants in himself’.[[46]](#endnote-46)

The experience of moral shame is generally more painful than that of natural shame, and is for that reason more motivating. Experiencing natural shame, we can comfort ourselves with the thought that we are not to blame for the defect that causes it; and sometimes we can thereby overcome natural shame altogether. But no such comfort is available when we experience moral shame: ‘we are struck by the loss to our self-esteem and our inability to carry out our aims: we sense the diminishment of self from our anxiety about the lesser respect that others may have for us and for our disappointment with ourselves for failing to live up to our ideals’.[[47]](#endnote-47) Moral shame provides powerful motivating reasons for animals as social as we are. The strongest of us will, most of the time, do as we ought in order to avoid it, and the concomitant damage it does to our standing in the social unions we treasure as social bases of self-respect. The weaker of us will go to great lengths to hide our failures from fellow members of these unions, and as a result will experience constant anxiety at the possibility of being exposed, in the knowledge that the subterfuge will provide yet further reasons for moral shame. A tiny number of us simply lack the capacity for moral shame and, when discovered, are rightly treated with extreme caution, and are offered treatment, or at least partial quarantine. Most of us lie somewhere between the weak and the strong on this spectrum.

Given how co-operative union in the pursuit of intergenerational justice serves as a social basis of self-respect for persons in any time slice – from the serfs to the current have-nots – a failure to do justice to future generations provides reasons for moral shame that have the potential to be powerfully motivating. Such failures also provide justifying reasons for moral guilt insofar as we have failed to do the right thing but, as Rawls notes, the perspective in this case is different. Experiencing guilt, ‘we focus on the infringement of the just claims of others and the injury we have done to them, and on their probable resentment or indignation should they discover our deed’,[[48]](#endnote-48) whereas shame looks to the damage done to the bases of our own self-respect in virtue of how our failure will alter the attitudes of others towards us. It is easy for a person to overlook or ignore the likely resentment or indignation of others whose just claims she overrides, and to whom she does injury, especially if the latter are poor and powerless and she has a lot to gain from doing them harm. It is far less easy to stand apart and preserve self-respect intact in the face of the judgements of others that one is unworthy of respect, and should be shunned for that reason. Despite tales of honour among thieves etc., upon achieving sufficient affluence most wrongdoers seek assimilation and acceptance by those who at least appear to be just and legitimate, and not only because this makes it easier for them to continue to do wrong. (Think of Michael Corleone seeking redemption in *The Godfather Part III*: ‘Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in’).

When we fail to act according to principles of justice within any time slice we risk destroying the associational bases of self-respect provided by our co-citizens. But because the social union of social unions providing these bases is inter- as well as intragenerational, we also damage these bases as provided in the attitudes of future people - whom we injure through our failures - towards us; just as persons need not be physically present to us for the bases of self-respect they make possible to be destroyed by us, neither need they be temporally present.

**§5 Conclusion: For Shame**

Knowing that posterity will fail to respect us, will judge us as unjust, indeed, will be ashamed of being descended from us, gives powerful motivating reasons for doing intergenerational justice. But the failure to do intergenerational justice with respect to CC caused by the motivation problem described at the start of this paper has features that make it acute as a source of reasons for moral shame. Highlighting these features gives additional force to the thought that we have powerful motivating reasons to reduce our GHG emissions to levels that will make CC manageable for future generations. And this is particularly true of those who can make the greatest contributions to this intergenerational project, and who – in virtue of having most to lose – are often the least motivated among us.

Recall that the current generation are uniquely placed in human history: what we do in the next 10-20 years will change circumstances for future generations either so as to make CC a problematical, unfortunate but ultimately tractable fact of life, or so as to make it the biggest disaster ever to have hit the species. Those who make the most malleable contributions to global GHG emissions are rich individuals (and countries and corporations): the ‘Sienna Millers’ of the world. The motivation problem is most forceful with respect to this group because their wealth renders them most able to adapt (at least in the short term) to the conditions that CC could create. There are three facts about this group worth noting. First, they are in a position to make drastic cuts to their GHG emissions without reducing themselves to the level of the current and future poor, who will be hardest hit by CC: making these cuts is consistent with them remaining at the top of the global heap in terms of advantage. Second, these cuts could be effected immediately by relatively straightforward changes to lifestyle that are easily-made and impose little cost, e.g. ceasing to travel by air. Third, the reason for not making these changes is, at best, lethargy and wilful myopia, or at worst, self-interested exploitation of future generations and the current poor. Future generations who will suffer if the current generation – especially the rich of the current generation – fail to reduce their GHG emissions will know these facts, and will with good reason be ashamed to be descended from such people. If we fail to make the cuts required within the next couple of decades it is no exaggeration to say that we, the particular cohort of people alive now, will have failed to do justice to the whole human race. For shame.

1. *The Today Programme*, 2007. BBC Radio 4. Aug 22. 0836hrs. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Some experts believe that a stabilisation point of 550ppm is too high. At this level there is a 77%-99% chance of a global average temperature rise above 2˚C (*The Stern Review*, Executive Summary, p. iii), and temperature rises beyond 2˚C create severe impacts. For example, with this level of temperature rise melting of the Greenland ice sheet is irreversible and will raise sea levels by 6.5m, flooding many of the world’s coastal cities, and devastating regions such as Bangladesh. The Stern Review states that ‘the melting or collapse of ice sheets would eventually threaten land which today is home to 1 in every 20 people’ (p. vii). In addition, other experts are increasingly becoming doubtful that the 2°C threshold is appropriate. For example, Anderson and Bows argue that the 2°C target is ‘a dangerously misleading basis for informing the adaptation agenda’ because achieving the emissions reductions necessary for stabilisation at 2°C is so unlikely. See Kevin Anderson and Alice Bows, ‘Reframing the Climate Change Challenge in the Light of Post-2000 Emission Trends’, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, doi:10.1098/rsta.2008.0138. Available at: http://www.tyndall.ac.uk/publications/journal\_papers/fulltext.pdf. Accessed 8 February 2009. See also James Hansen et al, ‘Target Atmospheric CO2: Where Should Humanity Aim?’, Open Journal on Atmospheric Sciences, No. 2 (2008), pp. 217-31. Hansen et al argue for a CO2 stabilisation target of 350ppm, which is below current levels. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Monbiot, G., 2006. *Heat: How To Stop the Planet Burning*. London: Allen Lane, pp. 15-17. See also the IPCC’s Fourth Assessment Report, which recommends cuts in global emissions of CO2 of 50%-85% by 2050 so as to achieve stabilisation at 350-400ppm CO2 (440-490ppm of CO2-equivalent), with CO2 emissions peaking between 2000 and 2015, in order to have a decent chance of avoiding global warming of 2˚C and above (IPCC, *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report* (xxx), Table 5.1, p. 67). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *The Stern Review*, Executive Summary, p. xxii. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Comment available at http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/3DD/35/Postscript.pdf. Accessed Jan 10 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For discussion see my ‘Runaway Climate Change: A Justice-Based Case for Precautions’, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 40(2), 2009, 187-203. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Note the claim is not that the rich would be made *worst off* by global warming, or that its effects are *worse* for those with most than for those with least; clearly, a Bangladeshi who loses everything in a flood fares far worse than a Manhattan resident who loses her condo, car, and wardrobe of designer clothes, even though the former loses less in dollar terms than the latter. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Gosseries, A., 2004. ‘Historical Emissions and Free-Riding’. *Ethical Perspectives*, 11(1), 36-60, for discussion of the ‘parasitism’ of this form of exploitation. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Rawls, J., 1999. *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Rawls argues that ‘maximin’ is the decision rule that would be adopted by parties in the original position: it directs them to choose principles that govern a distribution of advantages wherein the worst off group is made as well off as possible. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Rawls, J., 2001. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed.), p. 131. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Rawls, J., 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 291. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 291. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed.), 254. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. It can be questioned whether this is indeed a problem, in at least two ways. First, because future people do not yet exist, we cannot be said to owe them anything, either as a matter of justice, or a matter of morality. And/or second, our priority should be to benefit currently existing people, many of whom lack the bare minimum for a decent life. For a sophisticated articulation of some worries that touch on the first response see Steiner, H., 1983. ‘The Rights of Future Generations’. In D. MacLean and P. Brown, eds. *Energy and the Future*. New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 151-65. The second response can be read in two ways. First, that we ought to prioritise current people because justice is not intergenerational in scope. And second, that even if justice is intergenerational in scope, we will make the worst off across all generations as well off as possible if we limit redistribution to *intra*generational contexts. For a nuanced discussion of this approach see Gaspart, F. and Gosseries, A., 2007. ‘Are Generational Savings Unjust?’. *Politics, Philosophy and Economics*, 6, 193-217. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed.), p. 255. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed.), p. 255. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed.), pp. 255-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For a different critique – that focuses on how this modification creates problems for thinking about justice within the family – see English, J., 1977. ‘Justice Between Generations’. *Philosophical Studies*, 31, 91-104. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. x [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Gaspart, F. and Gosseries, A., ‘Are Generational Savings Unjust?’, p. 198. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Rawls, J., 1993. *Political Liberalism.* New York: Columbia University Press, p. 204. This passage is repeated, almost word for word, in Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, p. 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness,* p. 202. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 202-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. A disanalogy between them is that the have-nots has available to it, whereas the serfs does not, the phenomenological good of being aware of living in a just society; but I have discussed this disanalogy in (2) above. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. For more detailed discussion see McKinnon, C., 2002. *Liberalism and the Defence of Political Constructivism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp. 14-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 440. Rawls repeatedly stresses the significance of self-respect throughout his work. See also *A Theory of Justice* pp. 92, 107, 443, 543-45, and *Political Liberalism* pp. 106, 203, 318, 319. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 440. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See McKinnon, *Liberalism and the Defence of Political Constructivism*, chapter 3. See also Hill Jnr., T.E., 1991. *Autonomy and Self-Respect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, esp. chapters 1 and 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 319. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, p. 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 444. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Cohen, J., 1989. ‘Democratic Equality’. *Ethics*, 99, 727-751, p. 737. See also McKinnon, *Liberalism and the Defence of Political Constructivism*, chapter 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. For more on freedom of association as a social basis of self-respect see McKinnon, C., 2000. ‘Exclusion Rules and Self-Respect’, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 34(4), 491-505. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, p. 200. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed.), p. 462 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Argument for this claim can be found in Sachs, D., 1981. ‘How to Distinguish Self-Respect from Self-Esteem’. *Philosophy and Public Affairs,* 10(4), pp. 346-60. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Rawls caused some confusion on this point by mistakenly using the terms ‘self-respect’ and ‘self-esteem’ interchangeably in *A Theory of Justice*. This conflation is absent from all the later works. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed), p. 463 [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed), p. 386 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed), p. 388. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed), pp.389-90. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. See Nussbaum, M.,2004. *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed), p. 390. Nussbaum calls this ‘constructive shame’ and exempts it from her general critique of shame in politics. See Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, pp. 211-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed), p. 391. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. ed), p. 391. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)