

2009

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Recommended Citation

Bryson, Devon (2009) "The Justice of Saving our World: Rawlsian Theory Applied to Environmentalism and Alternative Energy," *Global Tides*: Vol. 3, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol3/iss1/1>

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**The Justice of Saving our World:
Rawlsian Theory Applied to Environmentalism and Alternative Energy**

Devon Bryson

ABSTRACT

While respect for nature pervades contemporary thought, issues of environmentalism and alternative energy largely lack a place in modern global conceptions of social justice. A theoretical or philosophical defense of these issues is therefore necessary to reinforce intuitions about nature, and ground them upon some substantive justification. One can find this justification in the Rawlsian theory of justice, which already informs many modern liberal notions. Rawlsian justice relies upon the Kantian notion that humans are autonomous beings—beings that are “ends” in themselves (that have inherent value). Rawls’ theory of justice attempts to respect each of these “ends.” However, traditional Rawlsian theory only considers persons today in its attempt to formulate social justice. By expanding the scope of what one considers to be an “end” to include both aspects of nature as well as persons in the future, one can transform the implications of Rawls’ theory. If these new “ends” are incorporated into the Rawlsian schema, they will gain all the argumentative potency of the influential theory. This expansion of Rawlsian justice will give much needed theoretical support to the issues of environmentalism and alternative energy, assimilating them into conceptions of international social justice.

O rowan fair, upon your hair how white the blossom lay!
O rowan mine, I saw you shine upon a summer's day,
Your rind so bright, your leaves so light, your voice so cool and soft:
Upon your head how golden-red the crown you bore aloft!
O rowan dead, upon your head your hair is dry and grey;
Your crown is spilled, your voice is stilled forever and a day.

-The Lord of the Rings

The relationship between nature and mankind is a primordial one. J.R.R. Tolkien was not the first to praise nature for its beauty and lament its destruction, nor will he be the last. There is a clear value of the natural environment in the Romantic mindset, which makes up so much of contemporary thought. Yet it seems that this value has been lost in modern society. Society regards “tree-huggers” with a disdain for their radicalism, and views the environment as a passive set of resources to further the advancement of civilization. What happened to living in awe of the power of sublime nature? The awe is still there, buried in the human psyche and entrenched in human nature. What lacks today is not a Romantic value, but an intellectual conception of justice to reinforce intuitions about nature. Just as the modern world has applied justice to intuitions about human equality, theories of international social justice can be formulated to defend the environment. This is not to say that modern society disdains nature; it simply believes that the advancement of societies takes precedence over any feelings that might be held for the environment. Examples such as the Three-Gorges Dam in China illustrate the modern mania with industrial progress, even at the expense of the environment. By defending nature with social justice, a greater balance between the interests of global community and the natural world can be achieved. One of the primary modern conceptions of justice facilitates this

addition of environmentalism, as well as its sister issue of alternative energy, into the realm of social justice: the Rawlsian theory of justice. By integrating the issues into Rawls' Original Position, and the Kantian value system inherent in it, it will be seen that Rawlsian justice requires action in both environmentalism and alternative energy, particularly on the international stage. Indeed, the ends found in both environmentalism and alternative energy will demand their due respect and value as a moral requirement of Rawlsian justice.

Before applying these theories to environmentalism and alternative energy, it will serve to examine Rawlsian theory, as well as the issues, to establish definitions upon which the application can be based.

Rawlsian Theory Examined

John Rawls postulated a theory of justice grounded in the concept of social contract theory. Rawls advances his theory of justice through what is called the Original Position (a hypothetical situation in which all individuals are granted perfect equality and are asked to choose a principle of justice behind a veil of ignorance, which eliminates their biases). The hypothetical persons in the Original Position, ignorant of who and what they will be in society and perfectly equal to one another, are able to truly come to a consensus as to what a just society would be. In this hypothetical scenario, persons value and protect even the lowest member of society (from the simple fact that none of these persons know whether or not they will be that lowest member). By stripping individuals of what Kant would call their heteronomy— their selfish inclination to formulate morality around themselves or exempt themselves from moral laws— through the Original Position, Rawls believes that all persons can agree to a binding moral law and social justice. His theory asserts that a contract-like agreement in the Original Position will give a true theory of justice. Rawls sums this up well. He states, “The principles of

justice...are the object of the original agreement. They are the principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality” (Rawls, 1971, p. 10). In this way, Rawls clearly follows in the tradition of social contract theory. Justice is a matter of agreement between equal parties, toward the goal of protecting each and every individual.

Whereas some theories of justice act only as a tool to judge concrete actions, Rawls’ theory seeks after a concept of justice that is valued in itself. This theory has this inherent value in justice because it operates from an implicit Kantian background. Every “free and rational person” is to be considered in true justice: the multiplicity of Kantian ends that make up the end of justice. It may be true that Rawls rejects the foundationalism of Kantian universal moral law in favor of more flexible, practical moral principles, but he undoubtedly operates from Kant’s respect for the individual as an autonomous end. Rawls (1971/1999) connects his theory to Kant’s value of autonomy when he says, “Kant supposes that [the moral legislation for a kingdom of ends] is to be agreed to under conditions that characterize men as free and equal rational beings” (p. 221). This consideration of every free and equal rational being (every “end in itself”) is what gives Rawls’ theory of justice its power and its inherent value. This is accomplished through the mechanism of the Original Position, the hypothetical scenario that assures absolute equality. This process of discovering justice— the valuing of all human ends within the Original Position— is the most important aspect of Rawlsian theory and leads to many considerations about justice. Indeed, modern social justice, from international human rights to equal civil rights, is largely informed by this prominent theory.

Issues Examined

Environmentalism

The issue of environmentalism is as controversial as it is new to the public stage. While there are many diverse aspects of the issue, the central tenant is the idea that human civilization needs to alter its practices that disrupt habitats, damage ecosystems, and warp the order of nature. Stated positively, the issue is simply the assertion that humanity needs to protect the natural environment. Involved in this is the alteration of modern societal practices, the reversal of already perpetrated damage to nature, and the active protection and preservation of ecosystems.

There are two primary ways to see environmentalism. First, for many the pressures to accord with the demands of environmentalism are purely scientific and economic. The reversal of global warming to preserve human civilization is the most obvious of these economic concerns. But there are many other manifestations of this scientific viewpoint. The concrete benefits of biodiversity and ecosystems, particularly the recycling function of such systems, are all cited as scientific and economic reasons to adhere to the tenants of environmentalism. Failure to do so will result in a scientific catastrophe and an economic meltdown. The most obvious examples of these disastrous effects can be seen in the deforestation of Central and South America. Tropical ecosystems have broken down in Costa Rica and Brazil, for example. This has reached the point that weather patterns have been transformed and natural systems of drainage, recycling, and fertilization have been lost, to massive local detriment. Situations like these represent the concrete economic effects of ignoring environmentalism. Business thinkers Linda Descano and Bradford Gentry (1998) assert this economic role of environmentalism: “Strong environmental performance means strong financial performance...Environmental efficiency represents nothing more than simple economic efficiency --using fewer resources and generating less waste in the production of goods and services.” It is through this lens, looking at the concrete effect on business and society, that techniques such as cost-benefit analysis are

employed in order to determine the economic effect of damage to the environment. Such pragmatic and practical justifications for the protection of the environment appeal to members of the business and political community, but many others argue that this approach misses a fundamental aspect of environmentalism.

The second approach is a philosophical pressure to subscribe to environmentalism. Many believe that the natural world has an inherent value in and of itself. “To live within the laws of nature means to express our human intention as an interdependent species, aware and grateful that we are at the mercy of *sacred forces larger than ourselves*, and that we must obey these laws in order to *honor the sacred in each other and in all things*,” asserts William McDonough, a champion for sustainable development (Charter, 1997). To continue wantonly disturbing and destroying the environment, as modern society does, is disrespectful to this value and thus immoral. Extinction of species is the cardinal sin of this philosophical perspective. In Costa Rica, the loss of the national emblem—the golden toad—has had a profound negative effect upon national morale and has stirred deep sorrow within the environmental community. This case is a paradigmatic example of the philosophical viewpoint at work. This viewpoint is the more historical of the two: the opening poet, Tolkien, and his fellow Romantics, as well as many modern environmental thinkers subscribe to this view. One such thinker, Aldo Leopold (2007), asserts this view explicitly: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (p. 664). Obviously this is the more metaphysical and abstract of the two arguments for environmentalism; however, it is given strength by the intuition to see beauty in the natural world, which seems common in human nature. By asserting this inherent value, these thinkers intend to lend a moral weight to environmentalism and to exhort society should it continue to ignore this value.

Alternative Energy

The sister issue to that of environmentalism is alternative energy. This issue is more contemporary because of the fact that it arose from environmentalism. Additionally, the technology that enables the issue to exist is cutting edge. There are many aspects of alternative energy; however, the basic idea is to develop means of producing energy that replace conventional industry. The issue seeks to eliminate the current methods of energy production and to replace them with the latest advances in technology, *viz.*, wind and solar energy, clean coal, hydrogen, and fusion technology.

As with environmentalism, there are two primary ways to view the issue of alternative energy. First, similar to environmentalism, there is the strong scientific and economic view of alternative energy. Rampant pollution and the progression of climate change are strongly cited reasons for the need of alternative energy. Situations of extreme urban pollution, such as that in Mexico City, are evidence of the danger of neglecting antiquated energy production methods. By developing the necessary technology to produce cleaner energy, proponents hope to combat these serious consequences of contemporary energy production methods. “Business has been mistaking eco-efficiency for sustainable design,” William McDonough argues (Charter, 1997). He distinguishes the contemporary practice of simply restricting negative side effects from the future practice of alternative energy, which pursues human production without *any* such negative side effects (i.e. sustainable production). Another empirical defense for the advent of alternative energy is the foreign economic situation of the Middle East. The modern world’s dependence upon oil as its primary source of power pours billions of dollars into the hands of unstable rulers. This further contributes to the destabilization of that region, as well as international affairs beyond the region. By freeing civilization from its reliance upon oil, arguers for alternative

energy hope to alleviate the volatility in the Middle East. These economic and political factors support the advancement of alternative energy science.

The other, more abstract, argument for alternative energy shall be referred to as the argument for the “Romance of Science.” This view holds that there is an inherent value in scientific advancement, as marked in history. In the same way that society now reveres the great achievements of science with Romantic awe— the splitting the atom, the moon landing, the polio vaccine, and the internal-combustion engine—proponents of alternative energy argue that this stage of science will have the same effect on the progress of civilization. An example of this can be seen in the innovative “green” skyscraper being built in Dubai. Hailed as the world’s first moving building, this wonder of architecture is powered by massive wind-turbines between floors, and its independently rotating floors allow it to reap larger amounts of solar power. This “first self-powered skyscraper” inspires the imagination and lets society look to the next great stage of scientific achievement, hurtling the world into the realm of science fiction. Referring to this inspirational effect of science, McDonough states, “One must begin to humbly imagine what an ideal might look like in order to measure progress toward it. Then it becomes a positive, creative event, not one that simply measures a negative progress relative to the status quo” (Charter, 1997). Just as society has been transformed through the scientific advances of history— introducing new technologies and services often in fields unrelated to the specific achievement— those who dream the “Romance of Science” look to alternative energy as the next step in scientific accomplishment, developed for the sake of human advancement.

Consider now the synthesis of these concepts, the application of Rawls’ theory of justice to the two issues.

Rawlsianism Applied to Issues

The essence of Rawls' theory is the valuing of every "free and equal rational being." Through the Original Position, Rawls hopes to look to each of these beings, honoring their needs and wishes. The underpinning concept is the Kantian notion of respecting every being as an end in itself (having inherent value). Rawls (1971/1999) himself admits his reliance on Kantian justice: "There is a Kantian interpretation of the conception of justice from which [Rawls' principle of equal liberty] derives. This interpretation is based upon Kant's notion of *autonomy*" (p. 221, emphasis added). This use of Kantian language and philosophy, consistently referring to his "free and equal rational beings" as "autonomous," directly connects to Kant's conception of the end in itself. According to Kant, (1785/1993) autonomy is "the property that the will has of being a law to itself" (p. 440). And the principle of autonomy is none other than Kant's Categorical Imperative—the respecting of every person as an end in itself. By referring to all persons (i.e., free and equal rational beings) considered through the Original Position as autonomous, Rawls implicitly asserts that they are all ends in themselves. Indeed, the formulation of Rawls' justice is an attempt to fully respect these ends. The Original Position allows consideration of autonomous ends, *viz.*, escaping heteronomy and selfish bias. Thus, Rawls' theory of justice seeks, through the Original Position, to respect every end, freeing them from heteronomous circumstance, and valuing them as merely an end in themselves. It is this value of ends within the Original Position that one must account for when applying Rawlsianism to issues.

Applied to Environmentalism

If Rawlsian justice is based upon Kantian ends, then one must consider expanding the sphere of those ends, in order to encompass not only all human ends but also non-human things with ends, if such entities exist. If it can be established that there are "non-beings" that

nevertheless are ends in themselves, it would seem that Rawls would support their consideration in formulating justice within the Original Position. It is clear that it shall be argued that nature is an end in itself.

To this purpose, consider Leopold's conception of the order of nature: the Land Pyramid. This system consists of the transfer and channeling of energy throughout all things. It is composed of thousands of food chains. These myriad chains, with each "link" connected to a thousand other chains, form a pyramid: a vastly complex, interdependent system of nature. Each of these "links" is a unique aspect of nature: from grass, to bacteria, to porcupines, to redwoods, to dirt. From the philosophical perspective on environmentalism, each of these "links" (not the individual objects themselves, but the categories), based upon their uniqueness and inherent value, is an end in itself. This shall be referred to as the "Lord of the Rings" argument. Any close reader of the Tolkienian masterpiece will know the value that is placed upon various aspects of nature. The "link" of horses is valued in Rohan, the "link" of trees is valued by the elves, the "link" of stone and metal is valued by the dwarves; all "links" of nature are valued by the hobbits, who are not accidentally the heroes of the novel. This love for the various unique aspects of nature pervades the novel (while the absence of such love characterizes the novel's villains); and it fills the human mentality as well. Lions are regarded as the "king of the jungle." (It is important to note that humanity does not view one particular lion this way, but the species as a whole.) Few creatures are viewed with the same bittersweet beauty as that of the nightingale and its song. Even the topography of the land— mountains, valleys, rivers and oceans— is rife with Romantic power. All of these are things that humanity undoubtedly values in and of themselves. It seems evident in human respect for the diversity, and wonderful majesty, of life that each of these "links" is, in fact, an end in itself.

From the “Lord of the Rings” argument, it can be seen that the “links” of nature are all ends in themselves. Thus, from a Rawlsian perspective of justice, they are worthy of inclusion in social justice and human protection. One might then be tempted to conclude that, since all “links” are valued in and of themselves, the “link” of bacteria would be as valuable as the “link” of *homo sapiens*. It is true that all “links” have an equal value— they are all unique aspects of nature that contribute to its diversity. However, the case of humanity is an exception. True, the “link” of humankind has no greater value than any other. But, *in addition* to their collective value as an aspect of nature, individual humans are also ends in themselves. This is quite unlike the rest of nature, where each individual organism or object is not an end in itself, having no conception of self. As autonomous “free and equal rational beings,” humans are each an end in themselves; and as a “link” of nature humanity is collectively an end. Thus, humans have a vastly greater value than the rest of nature, as they are ends both as a “link” and as individuals.

Within the Original Position, all ends, both individuals and “links” of nature, must be considered. It is contradictory to conclude that a justice could be agreed upon in which the ends of individuals were respected while the ends of the “links” of nature were disrespected. But how would this justice be made manifest? It seems quite obvious that the best way to value each “link’s” end is to preserve the order of nature— the Land Pyramid— that sustains it. Leopold (2007) asserts this relationship between the “links” and the whole of nature: “The pyramid is a tangle of chains so complex as to seem disorderly, yet the stability of the system proves it to be a highly organized structure. Its functioning depends on the cooperation and competition of its diverse parts” (p. 662). Just as all individuals’ ends are respected in the kingdom of ends, so all the “links’” ends are respected in the order of nature. Thus, Rawlsian justice, in its valuing of all ends, demands the preservation of the environment, for its protection of its system of “links.”

Applied to Alternative Energy

The expansion of the sphere of ends considered by Rawlsianism is applicable in the case of alternative energy as well. There is another group of ends that is often overlooked in formulating Rawlsian justice, which has an enormous impact on the way justice is formulated in the Original Position with regard to alternative energy. That group of ends is individuals who have *yet* to come into existence.

Surely those living today are not the only individuals who have a say in justice; those who will live in the future will also be ends in themselves and deserve respect and value through justice. Just as Rawls' theory seeks to eliminate bias and heteronomy between genders, nationalities, and social classes, should it not also seek to eliminate the same hindrances to justice between generations? Think of it in terms of the Original Position: behind the veil of ignorance one does not even know *when* one will live. What justice will one now conceive, justice that serves a particular generation over another? It seems not the case. Consider the scenario that will be deemed "Paradise today, Calamity tomorrow." Imagine that one could establish a utopia today, in which every individual's end is respected. However, the creation of this society comes with a caveat: by the next generation, when all those living today are dead, the world collapses in social ruin. Would one call this society just? Again, from the human intuitive sense of justice, it seems not. It must then be the case that true justice requires the consideration of not only all individuals today but also all future individuals. While admittedly knowledge of the future is limited (Rawls himself proposes limiting the consideration of future ends to three generations for the sake of practicality), it seems that one ought to consider the justice of every action with a future consequence that one *can* predict. (Discovering the future consequences of actions should therefore be a moral imperative.) If one were to take some action that one *knew*,

beyond any doubt, would destroy the world in 10,000 years that would certainly be an injustice. That is to say, if a consequence is predictable, one has no reason to not consider it. Rawls is hesitant to take on this process of prediction and distribution of justice over history; he conceded the difficulty of predicting and of formulating ideas of distributive justice throughout generations. But this does mean that one must concede more abstract, ethical considerations? As Rawls (1971/1999) states: “How the burden of capital accumulation and of raising the standard of civilization and culture is to be shared between generations seems to admit no definite answer. It does not follow, however, that certain bounds which impose significant ethical constraints cannot be formulated” (p. 286). Alternative energy is one such ethical constraint. Ignoring the issue has severe and foreseen consequences. The melting of the polar icecap is surely the most obvious example of this; its impending destruction is a testament to the pressing nature of the alternative energy issue. The predictability of such scenarios, combined with the cataclysmic proportion of their results, lends an ethical impetus to consider these consequences and work toward their prevention. To do otherwise is surely both socially careless and ethically reprehensible.

Therefore, consider future persons’ opinions on alternative energy. From the above examinations, such as “Paradise today, Calamity tomorrow,” it is clear that these persons are ends in themselves, and thus worthy of inclusion in the Original Position. What form of justice would they decide on? There are many purported economical, political, and philosophical consequences of current energy production methods (*viz.*, pollution and climate change, the situation in the Middle East, and the failure to hold up the “Romance of Science”). If any of these are viable, it would seem that future persons would disapprove of the energy status quo. These consequences will affect the future society, and thus be deemed unjust by future persons.

On the other hand, the sciences of alternative energy, which lead to the betterment of future society, will be within their conception of social justice. Consider oneself. If one were in the Original Position and did not know if one would live today or in a world victimized by global warming, one would undoubtedly support alternative energy in contemporary society to prevent warming in future society, if for no other reason than to protect oneself. Therefore, Rawlsian justice, for the protection of future persons' ends, supports alternative energy.

Application of Rawlsianism Concluded

In making Rawlsian judgments, agreeing to justice within the stipulations of the Original Position, it is imperative to consider all ends. The purpose of Rawlsian theory would be lost if it were to only consider the needs of *some* people while abusing others—that is precisely what Rawlsianism aims to stop. The thirty years of conflict in Afghanistan, in which civilian and environmental ends have not been considered, is paradigmatic of this failure of justice. Thus, every end must be considered to achieve true justice. As has been shown, this goes beyond the sphere of ends of every individual today. Aspects of nature and future individuals are also ends in themselves, and they demand value and respect. Such value is the only way to achieve fair, contractual justice. If one fails to respect those ends, one is merely bogged down in heteronomy, and that is no justice at all. If, however, one does as Rawlsian theory requires and includes the ends of “links” of nature and future individuals, it is clear that both environmentalism and alternative energy are defensible components of social justice.

Conclusion

Despite Tolkien's efforts to defend the environment through his literature, the natural world continues to be abused by modern society. The contemporary industrial paradigm must be displaced by a new conception of justice, which accommodates environmental justice on an

international level. The debate is whether the issues of environmentalism and alternative energy are morally compulsory or merely the whim of an ideological minority. Yet, through the application of one of today's most common schema of justice, the Rawlsian theory, one can see that these issues are invariably part of social justice. The application of this theory gives a strong defense of both environmentalism and alternative energy. By considering ends beyond oneself, one is able to see that both the "links" of nature and future persons defend the two issues. These two groups of ends, when considered in Rawls' Original Position, would push toward the inclusion of the environment and the science of alternative energy within the realm of social justice. It is essential to take the views of this important theory to heart and work to include environmentalism and alternative energy in society's understanding of justice.

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