



**2023-2024 Undergraduate Ethics Essay Prize  
Honorable Mention**

**How Just is the Just Transition?  
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## How Just is the Just Transition?

The topic of climate change has quickly gained international attention over the past twenty years. Specifically, the call for a ‘just transition’ has risen in popularity among governments as a path to a lower carbon future. This transition has many implications, two of the most noteworthy being the effectiveness of the transition as well as the fairness and justness of the transition. This paper focuses on the latter implication, as there are many philosophically normative questions surrounding how confronting climate change from a justice perspective will work. Who will pay for the transition? Who determines what is just? Will existing environmental inequalities be worsened? These reflect some of the few quandaries of this just transition, and because this transition affects the entire world, a lot is at stake. Many major economies such as the United States, European Union, China, and India have all begun implementing some of the policies envisioned by the just transition. (Newell and Mulvaney 134) However, a lot more work needs to be done, as this transition only succeeds if everyone plays a part in it. I contend that this transition is not only a pragmatic necessity, but also a moral imperative rooted in essential ethical principles.

Transitioning from a fossil-fuel based economy to a sustainable one poses many profound moral problems, such as issues of distributive, intergenerational, and environmental justice. Examining who bears the costs of environmental degradation and who reaps the rewards of sustainability unveils an ethical mess, as marginalized communities often disproportionately bear the largest impacts of ecological harm. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency mentions that certain communities “experience disproportionate impacts [of climate change] because of existing vulnerabilities, historical patterns of inequity, socioeconomic disparities, and systemic environmental injustices,” highlighting the already existing issues with the status quo (EPA).

John Rawls, a popular American philosopher, posits the idea of the Difference Principle, which includes the theory of the Maximin. Connecting his philosophy to the just transition, nations should work to maximize the well-being of the least advantaged in society, as the position of the least well-off should be of highest priority. (Lieberman “Rawls” 3) This theory helps ensure that the *worst* outcome of this just transition is still maximized, so a successful just transition must ensure that marginalized communities end up in a better place. (Nell 674)

Next, this transition poses issues of intergenerational justice, as many effects of this transition won't be seen until many years from now. The choices made today in transitioning the economy will profoundly impact the opportunities and challenges faced by future generations. In his article entitled “Climate Change Justice,” Mathias Frisch explains how the “main beneficiaries of [carbon dioxide] abatement measures will be future generations.” He continues, emphasizing that “the question of to what extent present generations have a duty toward future generations is one of intergenerational justice.” (Frisch 227) Additionally, the switch to a just transition includes burdening future generations with the consequences of past actions; how can we reconcile human interest with broader environmental concerns?

Continuing with the issue of intergenerational justice, issues arise of how to distribute the costs associated with a just transition. A principle of fairness, proposed by Henry Shue, suggests an obligation for affluent nations: “Among a number of parties, all of whom are bound to contribute to some common endeavor, the parties who have the most resources normally should contribute the most to the endeavor.” (Shue 537) As a result, wealthier nations carry a specific responsibility to ensure that future generations do not suffer from the impacts of climate change. Frisch goes on to explain that unlike those in global poverty, wealthy nations are able to bear the costs of climate change mitigation without jeopardizing their own rights. (Frisch 237) Thus, the

question of intergenerational justice is a tricky one, as it forces richer economies to consider how much they must help those in need.

Last, a just transition involves concerns with environmental justice. The transition demands a reevaluation of humanity's relationship with the environment; humans must move past resource exploitation and find a way to live more symbiotically with the environment. (Ewing 2) Our moral considerations should extend beyond human interest, as many non-human factors such as ecosystems, wildlife, natural beauty, and more are very valuable to our world. Lawmakers should re-assess both "existing and planned structures that alter [ecological] systems in light of the predicted climatic impacts," because while certain structures may have utility, they can also disrupt natural patterns and contribute to irreversible damage. (Ewing 3) Thus, this transition is very layered and requires a deep analysis to understand who all is at stake.

After learning about the moral problems surrounding a just transition, I believe this switch is not merely a practical necessity, but a moral imperative grounded in fundamental ethical principles. Although there are many hurdles to overcome in achieving a just transition, that alone should not be the reason to shy away from the challenge. I believe that every nation should be enacting policy change to begin a transition to combat climate change. Various philosophical traditions tout justice as a primary element in ideal societies; the ethos of this justice demands a transition that is fair, equitable, and considerate of *all* stakeholders.

This call for a just transition certainly begins at the political level, but extends all the way to the individual level as well through collective action. At the political level, policymakers and governments bear the responsibilities of enacting system changes. At the personal level, individuals bear the responsibilities of embodying and promoting the value underpinning a just transition. Suppose a world in which there are comprehensive climate change laws, but no

individual respects them. In this scenario, the political sphere has upheld their side of the deal in enacting just transition laws, but the general population has not. Here, the whole concept of a just transition has essentially died. What is the point of public policy if nobody follows them? This question is one that Marion Hourdequin seeks to answer in her article entitled “Climate, Collective Action, and Individual Ethical Obligations.” Hourdequin strongly believes in integrity as it relates to supporting causes, as integrity is the main way to establish your identity. For Hourdequin, “integrity... requires a kind of synchrony between personal and political action;” there must be cooperation between both parties. (Hourdequin 462) For a just transition to work, it must be adopted by both lawmakers and the public; Hourdequin argues that when this commitment “is fully integral, the individual typically honors it without deliberation.” (Hourdequin 461) Thus, a commitment to a just transition by the individual is just as crucial as that of the government.

Aristotle’s virtue ethics additionally emphasize the importance of individuals contributing to a just transition, as they are called to cultivate virtues such as environmental responsibility. A just transition reflects virtuous behavior by acknowledging the interconnectedness of humanity and the environment; in this way, the Aristotelian notion of eudaimonia, or “full flourishing,” becomes highly relevant. (Grant 390) To Aristotle, eudaimonia is the ultimate good for humans; it is the state of complete and optimal human flourishing. This concept aligns with a just transition, as fostering a sustainable and equitable society contributes to the necessary conditions for eudaimonia. In the context of individual responsibility, Aristotle’s teleological perspective emphasizes that the good for a particular kind of thing is fulfilling its function or purpose. (Barnes and Kenny 316) For humans, Aristotle argues, “rational activity of the soul in accord with virtue” is the distinctive function (Lieberman “Aristotle” 1). Thus, individuals must actively

engage in activities that align with virtues like environmental responsibility to fully pursue eudaimonia and a just transition.

A possible objection to the necessity of a just transition may be rooted in global feasibility and economic disruption. Critics of the just transition may assert that achieving it on a global scale is nearly impossible due to the myriad of challenges faced by nations, along with the many pressing issues worldwide (war, hunger, poverty, etc.). One may argue that while the concept of a just transition is theoretically possible, the complex nature of global politics, competing national agendas, and diverse economic reliance on fossil fuels may make it exceptionally challenging for every nation to commit to such a transition (ChatGPT). In countries heavily reliant on fossil fuel industries, the jobs of millions of workers could potentially be at risk. In the case of the United States, where fossil fuel extraction and use play a pivotal role in the economy, a just transition implies a substantial shift in economic investment away from traditional industries. The United States energy mix is still comprised of around three-quarters of fossil fuels, so major shifts will need to happen to allow for a just transition. (Piggot 4) The main argument in this objection is that a just transition may lead to job losses and economic upheaval in regions dependent on the fossil fuel sector. Many countries dependent on such fossil fuel industries are still developing, so transitioning off of that may cause more harm than good.

This objection further prompts philosophical inquiry on the ethical considerations of economic transitions. It raises interesting questions about the balancing of environmental objectives and the well-being of individuals and societies whose livelihoods depend on the fossil fuel industry: how can a just transition be ethically designed to minimize the economic impact on

workers heavily reliant on the fossil fuel industry? Thus, there is philosophical merit to this question.

Now, this objection does rightfully point out the multitude of challenges faced by nations globally, as well as the economic significance of fossil fuel industries. However, a just transition does not exist in a vacuum; it can be part of a broader global initiative for collective well-being. The just transition invites nations working together to collaborate on ethical initiatives, which all help promote a more equitable world. Many entities have made this abundantly clear; the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) calls for a transition that “contribute(s) to the goals of decent work for all, social inclusion and the eradication of poverty.” (UNFCCC 19) The European Commission seeks to “boost the clean energy transition by bringing more focus on social fairness” (European Commission) and the Scottish Government is aiming for a just transition which “promotes inclusive growth, cohesion, and quality.” (Scottish Government) Philosophically, the shared responsibility for environmental sustainability and social justice initiatives invites nations to collaborate. As more and more nations sign onto some form of a just transition, further alliances will take place.

Next, the objection that emphasizes the current economic significance of fossil fuel industries fails to recognize their non-renewable nature. One of the main drivers for the just transition is the fact that fossil fuels will expire someday. As a result, it is crucial to adopt a philosophical perspective that simultaneously recognizes immediate needs but also warns of devastating long-term impacts that result from the overuse of fossil fuels. Many economies have begun ‘transition planning’ by adopting sets of policies and initiatives aimed at facilitating a smooth shift away from fossil-fuel dependent industries. The Stockholm Environment Institute illustrates the policies of many nations targeted at transition planning, such as Canada, Spain,

China, and Scotland. All of these policies support workers by retraining them for greener jobs, granting early retirement provisions, tuition vouchers, and more (Stockholm Environment Institute 2). Thus, just transition planning strives to balance immediate economic impacts with long-term well-being of workers and communities in the fossil fuel industry.

Thus, due to many factors regarding distributive, intergenerational, and environmental justice, I believe that addressing climate change through a just transition is a moral imperative that all countries must work together to solve. The first step is collaboration on a global scale to understand whose needs should be addressed, because progress will not be made if economies continue to work independently. In their book *Climate Change Justice*, David Weisbach and Eric Posner frankly explain that climate change is expensive, but it is an immediate need: “The climate change problem is the failure of international cooperation to create a public good. Environmental harm in the future can be mitigated through cooperation today. Cooperation involves costly action by diverse nations that benefit to a different extent from greenhouse gas reductions.” (Posner and Weisbach 96) The just transition ensures that all burdens and benefits associated with transitioning from fossil fuels to more renewable sources are shared in an ethical and equitable manner.



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