

Reading response assignment #4 (critical thinking)

Pick one of the two prompts listed below for your assignment. Your response should be **500–700 words**.

OPTION 1 (the nonidentity problem)

Suppose that we (the United States) together with other developed countries are deciding between the following two policies:

The Risky Policy: The developed countries do nothing to reduce their current greenhouse gas emissions. Instead, they use some of the money that they would have otherwise lost reducing emissions to help both developed and developing countries adapt to the immediate consequences of climate change *within* the next century (*but not after*).

The Safe Policy: The developed countries take action to reduce their current greenhouse gas emissions to below the absolute maximum that most scientists believe is compatible with avoiding future catastrophe.

Suppose that:

- Most (if not all) of the people who will live at least a century from now do not currently exist.
- The Risky Policy won't have a negative impact on the economy over the next century. Rather, it will result in an *overall higher standard of living* over the next century.
- The Risky Policy will have *catastrophic* consequences for people living at least a century from now (such as our future descendants) and result in a *radically diminished standard of living* for these future people (when compared to the standard of living for people living over the next century if we adopt the policy). However, the vast majority of these future people will still have lives worth living.
- The Safe Policy will have a negative impact on the economy and result in a *slightly lower standard of living* over the next century.
- The Safe Policy will prevent the catastrophic consequences from occurring that will otherwise occur if we adopt the Risky Policy.

These assumptions are meant to make it extremely difficult to object to the Risky Policy by appealing to its effects on *currently existing* people!

Given these assumptions—together with Derek Parfit's claim (in "Energy Policy and the Further Future") that "[o]ur identity in fact depends partly on when we are conceived" (112)—each of the following claims seems plausible:

- (A) It is wrong to adopt the Risky Policy, because it will wrong future people.
- (B) If adopting the Risky Policy will wrong these future people, then it will harm them, or make things worse for them than if we had adopted the Safe Policy instead.
- (C) It is not the case that the Risky Policy will harm these future people, or make things worse for them than if we had adopted the Safe Policy instead—if anything, it will (all things considered) *benefit* them!

These three claims form an *inconsistent triad*, because if any two of them are true, then the third *must* be false. The *nonidentity problem* is the challenge of explaining why one or more of these claims are false, even though many share the intuition that each of them is true.

Use the following questions as the basis for your submission:

1. According to Parfit (in “Energy Policy and the Further Future”), why is (C) almost certainly true? (This question shouldn’t take more than a paragraph or two to answer.)
2. In your view, which of the three claims—(A), (B), or (C)—should we reject and why? (Explain your answer and provide at least one reason to accept it.)

OPTION 2 (principles of fairness)

In “One Atmosphere” (pp. 28–31), Peter Singer provides a brief summary of the Paris Agreement, its history, and its intended purpose. At the time Singer’s book was published, the United States (under the leadership of then-President Barack Obama) was a signatory to the Paris Agreement. However, on June 1, 2017, President Donald Trump—despite objections from his then-Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson—announced that his administration planned to exit the Paris Agreement. President Trump claimed: “The bottom line is that the Paris accord is very unfair at the highest level to the United States.”

On pp. 31–46, Singer discusses four different *principles of fairness* that we might bring to bear on the question of which emitting countries (if any) should be required to take the lead on reducing their greenhouse gas emissions to address the threat of climate change. These include: the polluter pays principle (pp. 32–37); the equal per capita shares principle (pp. 38–42); the principle of aiding the worst off (pp. 42–44); and the greatest happiness principle (pp. 44–46). Given the empirical facts, these principles may have different implications for how different countries (including the United States) morally ought to respond to the threat of climate change.

Use the following questions as the basis for your submission:

1. Which of these four principles, or which combination of them, should we bring to bear on the question of how different countries morally ought to respond to the threat of climate change? If you reject all of these principles, which principle (or combination of principles) do you propose that we accept in their place? In answering one of these questions, you should (a) clearly define and explain your preferred principle (or combination of principles) and (b) provide at least one reason to accept it.
2. What does your preferred principle (or combination of principles) imply for the Trump administration’s decision to exit the Paris Agreement, and what does it imply that the United States government should be required to do about climate change moving forward? Why?