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**Arguing about climate change : judging the handling of climate risk to future generations by comparison to the general standards of conduct in the case of risk to contemporaries**

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# General introduction

In the introduction to *Arguing About Slavery*, William Lee Miller describes the resistance to the abolition of slavery in the Southern United States in the mid-nineteenth century:<sup>1</sup>

“Slavery was integral to the life and culture, as John C. Calhoun kept saying, of an entire region, of eleven states (in 1835) of the Union – of almost half of the nation. When a “pecuniary interest” has that magnitude, it is a formidable opponent indeed. Rationalizations are supplied, positions are softened, conflicts are avoided, compromises are sought, careers are protected, life goes on. Don’t try to change what can’t be changed. Adapt to it.”

“Suppose today some dominant industry, built into the lives and fortunes of a great many people – to a degree of the whole nation – were found to be morally repugnant; what difficulties there would then be in extracting it from the nation’s life!”

In fact, we do have such a dominant industry today. The large-scale burning of fossil fuels, an energy source applied to *replace* human labour, is closely interwoven with almost every facet of modern production and consumption. Increasingly, the burning of fossil fuels is considered morally repugnant because we are passing on its costs – climate-change induced damage to health and property – to future generations. And as Miller anticipates, this industry is rationalised in public and political debate as slavery was one-and-a-half centuries ago.

Today, of course, the former rationalisation of slavery is easily exposed, while we must wait for a future time frame from which to effectively judge today's public discourse on global warming. “Errors that slumber peacefully through one age, may be instantly detected in the next, because they are looked at from other points of observation,” as the antebellum orator Tarbox noted in 1843. Still, I believe the validity of a wide range of arguments for or against climate policy can already be judged today.

The main objective of this thesis is not to champion why we should or should not care about future generations, though I will indeed discuss this topic. Although the moral worth of slaves was publicly questioned at the time of the abolition debates, the analogous question of why we should care

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, W.L.: 1996, *Arguing About Slavery, The Great Battle in the United States Congress*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, p. 11.

about future generations is virtually lacking in the present climate debate. Although highly debated among moral philosophers, our duties to posterity remain more or less uncontested in both public and political debate. The main target of this thesis is therefore the kind of rhetorical rationalisation of the status quo which gives the impression that we do care about future generations but nevertheless justifies business-as-usual. The objectives are the following:

- to argue that *in theory* the validity of arguments for or against climate policy depends upon their consistency with the general standards of conduct deemed acceptable for handling risks to others, as laid down in tort law, for example;
- to show by means of examples that *in practice* this consistency test is able to disqualify a variety of oft-used arguments in the climate debate.

### *Outline*

In chapter 1, I first sketch the circumstances that go to explain why the status quo – the continued burning of fossil fuels – is rationalised the way that it is. Apart from this chapter, the rest of this thesis is composed of articles that have already been published or submitted for publication in scientific journals. In chapter 2, I argue that in spite of theoretical problems governments are justified in addressing climate damage as *wrongful* harms to future generations, i.e. as violations of their rights to bodily integrity and personal property. In chapter 3, I argue that although it is more straightforward to handle the risk of climate change through regulation, the argumentation behind such regulation ought to be consistent with the reasonable man standard from tort law. In chapters 4 and 5, I apply the idea of handling risk to future generations according to the reasonable man standard to one topic in particular: the social discount rate, which is commonly used in cost-benefit analysis of climate policy. Chapter 4 is theoretical in nature, while chapter 5 adds concrete numbers. In chapter 6, I explore similarities between the rationalisation of slavery in the abolition debates and the rationalisation of ongoing emissions of greenhouse gases in the US congressional debates on the Kyoto Protocol.