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Temporal Disparities in Intergenerational Justice: A Comparative Analysis of Nuclear Deterrence and Climate Change

Nuclear weapons and climate change put future generations in the wrong by externalizing potential long-term harm and constraining their freedom of choice through extended policy trajectories. Focused on nuclear weapons, this article conducts a comparative analysis of intergenerational justice concerns in both contexts. The principal argument emphasizes the distinct temporality of these challenges, revealing three crucial temporal disparities.

First, the externalization of intergenerational harm follows different timelines. Climate-related risks intensify across successive generations, while the risk of future generations navigating the aftermath of nuclear war accumulates over the long term, becoming more likely over extended periods compared to shorter ones. Second, the sustainability of present generations' incentives to prioritize immediate benefits over future generations' well-being varies. The appeal of fossil fuels is expected to wane over time in the climate context, whereas perceived benefits of nuclear deterrence are likely to endure. Third, while the visual salience of the intergenerational implications of nuclear weapons is diminishing, the gradual impacts of climate change are becoming increasingly evident.

Comparing how intergenerational injustice unfolds through continued reliance on nuclear deterrence and climate change not only highlights the oversight of intergenerational justice in nuclear ethics debates, but also carves out the distinct nature of intergenerational justice concerns in the context of nuclear weapons. Derived from this comparative analysis, a more nuanced understanding of intergenerational injustice in nuclear weapons facilitates a critical examination of mitigation and rectification strategies.

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