

DISCIPLESHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY—INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Analyzing the Justice Implications of Energy Systems in  
the Current Carbon Economy  
Convener: Erin Lothes Biviano, College of St. Elizabeth  
Presenters: Jame Schaefer, Marquette University  
Christiana Z. Peppard, Fordham University

In her paper, “Converting from a Carbon Economy: Why Resorting to Nuclear Generated Electricity is Imprudent and Unjust,” Jame Schaefer analyzed the current interest in building more nuclear-generated electricity plants in the U.S. to offset the perils of burning coal and other fossil fuels and concludes that this course of action requires cautious decision-making. Appropriating Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of the moral virtue of prudence that informs the virtue of justice, Schaefer offers a process of discernment that can be helpful. The application of this process to proposals that add more nuclear to the nation’s energy mix adds weight to arguments against constructing new nuclear power plants until a system is operating for accepting the highly radioactive spent fuel accumulating at existing facilities and isolating it from the biosphere. After overviewing Aquinas’s process of prudent decision-making (seeking counsel, making a judgment that achieves good and avoids evil, and commanding the decision in light of foresight, circumspection, and caution) and applying it to the option for building more nuclear plants, she concluded that permitting them at this time perpetuates the *vice of imprudence* because permanent disposition of the spent fuel is unavailable. She also characterized a decision to move ahead with nuclear while leaving the permanent disposition of its waste to future generations as constituting the *vice of intergenerational injustice* that has been ongoing for nearly sixty years. Following Aquinas, the motivation for prudent decision-making is love of one’s neighbor out of love for God.

In her paper, “Market Myopias in the Climate-Carbon-Water Nexus and the Pursuit of the Common Good,” Christiana Z. Peppard discussed the way economic globalization has amplified patterns of resource extraction, while trends in global capitalism include the expendability and substitutability of substances like carbon and water. In Catholic social thought, these are “goods of the earth.” Such goods will shape patterns of power, privilege, and poverty on all levels of scale in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Paying special attention to the technology of hydraulic fracturing (fracking), she showed how fresh water is a key resource that is being extracted in unsustainable and potentially dangerous ways within the current carbon-intensive energy systems found in the United States. The extractive dynamic is encouraged by narrowly economic value paradigms that contain morally significant “market myopias.” Catholic theology and social thought offer critically needed revisioning of fresh water’s value and society’s approaches to resource extraction more generally. A short response to Dr. Peppard’s paper from a sustainability engineer, Dr. Shahzeen Attari of Indiana University, who reviewed her paper before the conference was also handed out.

After these presentations, Erin Lothes reviewed the three-year plan for this Interest Group, which is to generate cumulative and targeted research toward a statement of climate ethics and energy ethics. The hoped-for outcomes are greater

moral clarity and ethical guidelines regarding ethical energy use, ascertaining the extent of personal and systemic complicity with systems that contribute to climate change, and identifying relevant ethical categories and theological symbols for this work. Categories discussed such as “substitutable” or “*sui generis*” to describe the value of water, and an intentional application of prudence to energy choices, are excellent examples. This agenda will require us to engage the new ecological virtue of complexity and embrace an interdisciplinary context. Erin observed the difficulty—and yet imperative—of discussing moral absolutes when choices seem to be about choosing the “least bad,” a term employed by Peppard.

In light of power systems controlling access to information about fracking chemicals, Andrea Vicinity suggested the need to use critical theory and also mentioned the value of Ignatian pedagogy when addressing energy issues. Jame affirmed its contribution by requiring reflection at every step of decision-making. Jane Russell mentioned the book *Whole Earth*, in which the author weighs the evils of nuclear waste against tons of CO<sub>2</sub>. In response, Jame negated having to choose either at this point, though some second generation nuclear plants under consideration may bridge the gap to an energy-efficient future for the Earth community.

Regarding the comments raised by Attari, Christine Firer Hinze spoke to the need to face reality, even if it involved loss or change. The false rhetoric of politics and economics can fall into the same trap of living beyond our means. In response, Peppard noted that indeed we need to face reality—and that the original mirage is about seeing water where it there is none. She linked the comments from plenary speaker Linda Hogan about the moral imagination to Attari’s suggestion to see oneself at 80. We need to see a future without water. Christiana also noted that value requires a broader discussion than price. Price is a short-term measure reflecting what matters to me right now. Pricing is affecting by the discount rate, an economic judgment about the income-generating potential a resource in the short-term versus the long-term. Usually, the discount rate reflects the assumption that immediate use of a resource (no matter how scarce or vital) is going to be of greater economic benefit because money made from extraction of that resource can be reinvested into the economy. Dawn Nothwehr called attention to the virtues of humility, poverty, obedience, and love as highlighted in the Bonaventuran tradition. David Cloutier commented that it is essential to address the “demand side” of the energy ethics problem: in short, the culture of luxury. Nancy Rourke noted that philosophical and Protestant traditions in many cases are already at a much more advanced level of discourse.

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