

# Introduction—Intergenerational Justice and Its Challenges

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Issues of intergenerational justice have long fascinated philosophers and political thinkers. Already at the end of the eighteenth century, Thomas Jefferson (1789) and Thomas Paine (1791) had a dispute with Edmund Burke (1790) on the intergenerational fairness of having a constitution, focusing on a concern for generational sovereignty. Although the reader will see traces of that old debate in this volume,<sup>1</sup> the current philosophical debate focuses less on generational sovereignty than on intergenerational justice. It is informed by a general context comprising concerns for e.g. the long-term consequences of climate change and for the survival of social security schemes as we know them. This debate draws on contributions from major authors in philosophy who seriously began to re-consider these issues in the second half of the last century, including most importantly Rawls (1971: esp. § 44), Barry (1978, 1989), and Gauthier (1986), as well as Jonas (1979), Parfit (1984, part IV), and Heyd (1992). Today there is a highly specialised and ongoing discussion in the journals along with a good number of monographs, including Birnbacher (1988), Weiss (1989), de-Shalit (1995), Auerbach (1995), Visser't Hooft (1999), Arrhenius (2000), Gosseries (2004), Meyer (2005), Mulgan (2006), and Page (2006). There are also a number of edited volumes specifically devoted to issues concerning intergenerational justice, including Sikora & Barry (1978), Partridge (1981), Laslett & Fishkin (1992), Fotion & Heller (1997), Dobson (1999), Meyer (2004), Ryberg & Tännsjö (2004), and Roemer and Suzumara (2007).

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<sup>1</sup> See in this volume, the chapters by Thompson and by Muñiz-Fraticelli (Chapters 1 and 14).

The aim of the present volume is to offer a sustained discussion of intergenerational justice as seen by practical philosophers. Our aim here is specific. First, we want to broaden the focus beyond the mere non-identity problem (to which we come back below). This is not meant to downplay the significance of and the difficulties that arise with this dilemma. Indeed, it is conspicuous in this volume, and the non-identity problem plays a significant role in a number of the arguments presented here. Still, we think that far too little attention has been paid to other issues that strike us as being at least as significant from a strictly philosophical point of view, as well as from a practical perspective. It is this deficiency that led us to structure the volume into two parts. The first part focuses on the way in which various schools of thought in moral and political philosophy approach the domain of intergenerational justice, while the second part focuses on more specific aspects, such as how these theories address the question of motivation, how they deal with demographic fluctuations, or how they can be applied to real-world issues such as climate change.

In addition, we have also taken great care to emphasize the extent to which intergenerational justice raises issues that are distinct from, for example, international justice, which is often seen as another significant ‘extension’ of standard domestic justice. Whether it follows that *sui generis* principles are required for the intergenerational domain remains an open question. Yet, what is clear is that this question cannot be answered unless and until we first determine what can be made in the intragenerational realm of standard theories of justice as they generally apply to domestic justice issues. To this end, the chapters in Part I of this volume take up and discuss what contribution standard theories can make to our understanding of intergenerational justice.

## What’s So Special About the Intergenerational Realm?

It is often claimed that issues of justice between generations are special. Still, there remains a lot of work to do, namely, in identifying these special features and their normative implications. This is particularly important with respect to the possibility of intergenerational obligations and the content of such obligations. In this Introduction, we will simply adumbrate some of these features, inviting attention to some of their implications. The various chapters will then develop several of these points in greater detail.

The unique features that distinguish issues of justice between generations from other issues of justice are often at the heart of key challenges. For example,

some of these features potentially threaten the possibility of intergenerational obligations. Consider the fact, harmless enough at first glance, that future people do not exist today. The non-existence challenge implies that obligations can only make sense when they are owed to people who actually exist. People who did exist in the past or who could exist in the future would thus not qualify as rightful recipients of such obligations. Another distinctive and problematic feature is rooted in the fact that the composition of future generations (that is, whether it be Paul or John who comes into existence) depends in many cases on our own actions. This, of course, leads to the famous non-identity challenge. For those committed to a standard notion of harm necessarily involving a comparison between two alternative states of a single person (an actual state and a counterfactual one), the fact of non-identity can threaten the very possibility of harming future people. For those who claim that an obligation can only make sense if its violation can be associated with harming someone, then the fact of non-identity is a major challenge to the idea of obligations owed toward future people, as Meyer and Roser explain in Chapter 8.

## Part I: Theories

The first chapters of this volume provide alternative interpretations of intergenerational justice from the perspective of some of the most influential accounts of what we owe to each other: communitarianism, libertarianism, contractualism, contractarianism, marxism, reciprocity-based views, and sufficientarianism.

In arguing for intergenerational obligations from a broadly communitarian perspective, we will want to take into account the interests of people as members of groups that have a past and a future. Indeed, as Thompson argues in Chapter 1, nations are best described as transgenerational polities, and consequently theories of justice, rights, and political responsibility ought to reflect the importance of transgenerational relationships. Thompson contends that liberal theories, in general, fail to do this for reasons related to the non-identity problem, or due to the impossibility of contracting with people who do not exist. In short, she argues that the communitarian perspective can more successfully incorporate intergenerational obligations than can contract theories. Still, this view also faces problems. A strong communitarian view runs into familiar and persuasive objections, including the idea that citizens in a modern multi-cultural nation state are unlikely to have a common identity of the sort she describes. In contrast, weak communitarianism allows that identities can be complex, and in this way it escapes such criticisms as are levelled against strong communitarianism. Nonetheless, weak communitarianism faces the challenge of explaining why present generations ought to accept obligations with respect to the future or the past.

Thompson argues that weak communitarianism can avoid the aforementioned problem by relying on the idea of lifetime-transcending interests. Lifetime-transcending interests are those interests that have as their subject matter events, objects, or states of affairs that either existed before the lifetime of the person who has that interest or that will exist after her lifetime (or, at any rate, could exist after her lifetime). This idea is probably best illustrated by considering the concerns we have regarding how our children or grandchildren will fare in the future, our posthumous reputations, the fate of

projects we will leave behind upon our death, and the deeds of our ancestors. These special interests that Thompson describes play an important role in the lives of individuals and the formation of their identities for two reasons: they are essential for a meaningful life and required for making a rational plan for one's life. Furthermore, the existence of lifetime-transcending interests makes it likely that those who have such interests will be inclined to make demands on their successors. As a result, Thompson argues, one ought to meet certain morally legitimate demands created by other people's lifetime-transcendent interests. Moreover, members of communities have a moral interest in maintaining practices and institutions that enable legitimate lifetime-transcending demands to be made and fulfilled. This argument can be extended to include transgenerational obligations that people have as members of political societies. Transgenerational obligations arise in this context since members of political societies will have lifetime-transcending interests. As such, they will also have a moral interest in the maintenance of practices and institutions that facilitate the making and fulfilling of lifetime-transcending interests and that provide for the conditions that make the flourishing of these practices possible.

**Libertarianism** offers a very different account of intergenerational justice. Self-ownership and the moral powers to appropriate unowned external resources are the main components of libertarianism, as explained by Steiner and Vallentyne in Chapter 2. Most important for a libertarian interpretation of intergenerational issues is the applicable account of the appropriation and use of external resources. Steiner and Vallentyne take as a starting point a Lockean type of libertarianism. They also stress the relevance of the 'choice-rights' versus 'interest-rights' debate for libertarians, since the possibility of recognizing rights to future people will depend crucially on whether an interest-protecting conception of rights is adopted. The authors also explore what a Lockean proviso—that requires to leave enough and as good to others—would require if applied in the intergenerational context. In doing this, they first distinguish between a mere 'decent share' proviso and an 'egalitarian' one, considering the former as possibly necessary but not sufficient, and defending the latter. Steiner and Vallentyne argue that one of the implications of the egalitarian proviso (understood as a requirement that no one be 'left with less than equally valuable initial [lifetime] opportunities to use natural/external/all resources') is that an accumulation phase (that is, a phase during which more is produced than is consumed, while, simultaneously, more is transferred to the next generation than was inherited from the previous one), such as the one argued for by Rawlsians, would be indefensible. Another implication of this proviso is that in cases in which a natural degradation of resources can be expected in the future, it would not be enough to merely make sure that the coming generations are

no worse off than they would have otherwise been in our absence, as most libertarians may assume. Furthermore, it is not clear how practically to apply the proviso in the presence of generational overlap.

Steiner and Vallentyne conclude their chapter by discussing two intra-generational issues. First, since procreation is a (generally) voluntary act, who ought to have the responsibility for providing children with their fair share? Here, Steiner and Vallentyne argue that parents have a special responsibility while society at large acts at the same time as a default obligee. Second, what ought Lockean libertarians to think (and to do, if anything) about bequests and gifts? Respecting this second issue, the authors provide us with a fine-grained analysis, showing how an additional Lockean proviso on transfers (rather than on appropriation and use) is to be interpreted depending on whether the proviso applies to the transfer of natural goods, artefacts, and/or internal resources.

The problems of extending contract theories to issues of justice between generations is the subject of the Chapter 3. Gardiner first takes up challenges that both **contractarians and contractualists** (see also Chapter 9) face when they attempt to extend their approach to intergenerational relations, namely: Is cooperation beyond the overlap possible at all, and if so, will each generation have sufficiently strong reasons to engage in it? (Gardiner dubs this the ‘rationale challenge’). Another challenge has to do with what Gardiner defines as the ‘pure intergenerational problem’ (the ‘structural challenge’). The pure intergenerational problem differs in significant respects from a standard prisoner’s dilemma. First, within the confines of the pure intergenerational problem, the obstacles to cooperation are not contingent as in the case of the standard prisoner’s dilemma. Second, reducing, for example, current levels of pollution cannot be in everyone’s interest, in contrast to what can happen in an intragenerational setting with a uniformly mixed pollutant. Gardiner then discusses how contractarians and contractualists can respond to these two challenges and explores whether their responses differ.

So, how are contract theorists to respond to such challenges? Gardiner takes up and assesses three possible strategies of extension. In the first two strategies, he attempts to bring the intergenerational problem closer to standard intra-generational settings by relying on the ‘chain’ idea, understood as a succession of interconnected generations (also discussed in this volume by Birnbacher<sup>7</sup>). The first of these strategies rests on the idea of ‘local’ cooperation at the overlap of and on the succession to such cooperation. Here, Gardiner discusses in detail the limitations of this approach, and to this end he employs the ‘time bomb’

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 10.

test case, which involves the hypothetical case of a generation setting up a time bomb that will only explode in the hands of a generation with which it does not overlap. The second approach that Gardiner explores consists of modifying the motivational assumption underlying contractarian approaches. And the third approach turns on introducing knowledge constraints on the reasoning of contractors, as per Rawls's veil of ignorance. Gardiner discusses these strategies in a specific way, focusing, among other things, on two issues: the problem of the initial generation and the problem of the generation of extinction. If we are unable to successfully defend any of these three approaches, all of them aiming at extending contract theories where the contractors are assumed to be contemporaries, then, Gardiner submits, we would have no choice but to consider the idea of a properly intergenerational contract involving all generations.

In Chapter 4, Gosseries discusses the idea of intergenerational reciprocity. Using a narrow definition of reciprocity, namely, one that precludes any of the parties in a reciprocal relationship from being either net contributors or net beneficiaries, Gosseries examines three reciprocity-based accounts of our intergenerational obligations. The first account, the descending model, holds that generation 2 ( $G_2$ ) owes something to generation 3 ( $G_3$ ) because generation 1 ( $G_1$ ) transferred something to  $G_2$ , and so  $G_2$  owes at least as much to  $G_3$  as it received from  $G_1$ . The second account, called the ascending model, holds that  $G_3$  owes something to  $G_2$  because  $G_2$  has transferred something to  $G_1$ , with the proviso that this something is at least as much as what  $G_2$  transferred to  $G_1$ . Finally, the double model holds that  $G_2$  owes something to  $G_1$  because  $G_1$  transferred something to  $G_2$ , and  $G_2$  owes back at least as much as  $G_1$  transferred to it.

All these models, however, are confronted with a famous objection stemming from Barry: why does the mere fact of having received something justify an obligation falling on the receiver to give something back? To get around this objection, Gosseries argues that one strategy consists in extending the scope of the concept of free-riding and, further, that in the intergenerational context it could be claimed that by destroying (or failing to maintain) goods produced in the past, later generations are guilty of free-riding on the efforts of earlier generations. Understood as such, the obligation to reciprocate is grounded in the obligation to forbear from free-riding to the detriment of earlier generations. The objection from direction is also considered. That is, how is each model to justify the direction of reciprocity it upholds in each case? Gosseries dismisses this objection on the grounds that the alternatives for each model will force someone (person or generation) to be either a net contributor or net beneficiary, thereby violating the narrow reciprocity requirement.

Gosseries likewise considers the influence of the demographic variable (i.e. population fluctuations from one generation to the next) and asks whether the size of a population should affect the size and nature of changes in or the obligations that one generation has toward other generations. Gosseries argues that none of the three models can adequately deal with this question. If the models are insensitive to the relative size of populations (as the descending and ascending ones are), that leads either to counter-intuitive conclusions or to internal inconsistency. And while the double reciprocity model is indirectly sensitive to fluctuations in the relative size of populations, the incomplete nature of its material scope nonetheless gives rise to problems.

Bertram's aim, in Chapter 5, is to explore how the obligation to avoid exploitation, understood as a distinct type of injustice, can help us understand what we owe to future generations. The **Marxian** concept of exploitation turns on a discrepancy between the distribution of contributions requiring effort and the distribution of rewards in a co-operative scheme. This distinction is linked with discussions in other chapters, such as in the essays outlining the difficulties faced by contract theorists (Gardiner, Heyd, and Attas), and in the discussion exploring our understanding of intergenerational reciprocity-based requirements (Gosseries). Bertram invites the reader to envisage a temporally extended co-operative enterprise—a family-owned manufacturing business. With respect to such an enterprise he analyses three possible cases of exploitation. In the 'repair burden' case, maintenance work is not done. Instead, it is left for a later generation that, in some sense, can rightly be said to have been exploited by earlier generations. The same holds for the 'debts burden' case in which repayment obligations of credit are left at least in part to later generations, while the money from such credit is used for present consumption. The third case—the 'profligate generation'—is different from the first two. In this case, a generation acquires benefits from the hard work of its ancestors and decides not to do all that much itself. Bertram asks whether the conditions for exploitation are actually present in this situation. Specifically, he asks whether this generation, by failing 'to conform to the contribution/benefit pattern expected by its predecessors,' can be said to be exploiting earlier generations even though there is no 'experiential effect' on the now-dead contributors. He also points out the need to consider the fact that it can be reasonable to disagree with the work expectations of earlier generations. For these reasons, Bertram is skeptical about the appropriateness of characterizing the profligate generation case as a case of exploitation. Finally, he enquires into the broader implications of the three specific cases, in particular looking at the questions of when there can

be said to be cooperation and when fair reciprocity can be said to have been violated.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore the viability of Rawls's contractualist account of intergenerational obligations. Rawls's short discussion of the 'savings principle' in *A Theory of Justice* and his later revisions have been highly influential in defining the problems of how we can and should relate to future people. In

In Chapter 8, the last chapter of the first part of this volume, Meyer and Roser offer a specific defense of intergenerational **sufficientarianism**. Towards this end, they provide a detailed account of various ‘broadly egalitarian’ views. Strict egalitarianism (which focuses on the gap between more advantaged and less advantaged people) is contrasted with prioritarianism and maximin egalitarianism (which focus on the level of the badly off or least advantaged people in absolute terms). Two versions of sufficientarianism—weak and strong—are shown to be threshold-based views connected with prioritarianism and maximin, respectively. Next, Meyer and Roser identify specific reasons for adopting (strong) sufficientarianism in the intergenerational realm, even in those

cases in which a sufficientarian conception of justice in the intragenerational context would not be adopted. These reasons are broadly of two types.

The first reasons concern the non-identity problem. As already mentioned, some rely on the non-identity problem to argue that we do not have obligations of justice to future generations. Others have relied on it to argue for the superiority of specific theories (for example, communitarianism in the case of Page). Here, the idea is of the latter type. Meyer and Roser argue that along with reliance on a standard conception of harm, we additionally ought to rely on the threshold conception of harm at least (but not exclusively) in contexts where the non-identity problem arises. The non-identity challenge would thus be circumvented by relying on a normative baseline to determine whether harm is taking place. The key step in their argument turns on an attempt to show that the idea of sufficiency, at the heart of sufficientarianism, actually provides us with the contents we need to specify this threshold of harm. If their argument succeeds, it shows that sufficientarianism makes it possible for us to defend obligations of justice in a non-identity context.

The second set of reasons for adopting a sufficientarian conception of justice in the intergenerational realm relies upon an interpretation of the normative significance of issues of various types, some of them also arising in the international realm. Here, Meyer and Roser discuss special features of intergenerational relations such as the asymmetry of power between generations, problems of measuring relative differences in well-being, uncertainties not only about the future effects of our present actions, but also about future people's way of life, and the impossibility of interacting beyond the overlap. Of course, some reasons for equalization (such as a concern for envy) do not plausibly arise in the intergenerational context, nor at any rate beyond the overlap. What is of special interest here is that since these reasons for adopting an intergenerational sufficientarianism reflect special features of intergenerational relations, they do not necessarily speak in favour of sufficientarianism outside the intergenerational context.

## Part II: Specific Issues