

What is Intergenerational Justice?

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Suppose that nothing much is done to prevent global warming and that the build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere continues to increase. In 2070, according to the Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the average temperature in Australia will have increased as much as 6 degrees centigrade. Australia will be drier, although floods and cyclones will occur more frequently. Rising sea levels and storm surges will endanger coastal areas where 80% of Australians live, and the changing chemistry of the ocean will have ecological consequences that are not well understood but may be profound. Some environmental systems are likely to disappear. The Great Barrier Reef is in danger of being bleached out of existence, and low-lying wetlands will be inundated. Cold climate species will have to migrate — if they can. Destruction of species and prolonged drought is likely to result in further degradation of the environment, including environments that humans depend on for their existence.¹

These predictions about the future raise scientific, economic and political issues. They also raise issues of justice. Justice is about how benefits, burdens, responsibilities and entitlements should be distributed among members of a society — or among people of the world. It is about the rights people have, and what they owe to those whom they have harmed or could harm. Philosophers and others who put forward views

about justice focus most of their attention on interactions between existing people. But environmental problems like climate change make it imperative for a theory of justice to concern itself with the future wellbeing of children and of people who have not yet been born.

‘A society is intergenerationally just when each generation does its fair share to enable members of succeeding generations, both inside and outside its borders, to satisfy their needs, to avoid serious harm and to have the opportunity to enjoy things of value.’ Most people are likely to endorse this statement. It is closely related to widely accepted conceptions of sustainability, which insist that each generation ought to be able to satisfy its needs.² Although the definition is a mere formula that needs to be filled in by a more detailed account of justice, it provides a useful framework for thinking about the meaning of intergenerational justice and for posing the questions that create so much difficulty for philosophers and policymakers. The definition encourages us to think of ourselves as belonging to an intergenerational continuum that stretches indefinitely into the future. It reminds us that a society is not merely an association of contemporaries. It extends forward and backward in time. It encompasses people of the past who provided us with an inheritance, and people of the future who will inherit what we have achieved — good and bad. We cooperate with each other to provide social goods and to ensure that each of us can pursue his or her own good. The definition tells us that we should also cooperate through the generations to ensure, so far as is humanly possible, that people whenever they live will be able to flourish. We have an obligation to provide our successors with a favourable inheritance, and they are entitled to receive it. And perhaps we also have duties to past generations — for example, to remember their sacrifices and contributions.

The definition also reminds us that we have duties to people outside our borders, and that this includes duties to future members of other societies. Citizens of other societies also believe that they have obligations to their successors: to

provide them with an inheritance, or make it possible for them to live good lives. These are obligations that we should respect. Moreover, achieving sustainability and solving environmental problems that threaten future generations require global cooperation, and along with cooperation goes duties of justice.

The definition tells us how we should think about our relationship to future people. However, it does not tell us what counts as a fair share of responsibility. It does not tell us how much we should be sacrificing for the sake of future people, or what exactly we should be trying to do for them. It does not tell us how we should adjudicate between our interests and the interests of people in other countries. It is not much help when it comes to making policy decisions about climate change or other matters that affect the future. To arrive at a more useful account of intergenerational justice we have to deal with some difficult issues. So let us see if we can further develop our ideas about intergenerational justice by tackling some of these problems.

Justice and Distance in Time

One of the questions that any view about intergenerational justice raises is how far into the future our responsibilities extend. In the past people naturally assumed that they had a responsibility for the wellbeing of their immediate descendants — their children and grandchildren. The more distant future was not their concern. But we cannot afford to take this view. Our technology enables us to make changes to our environment that will have an impact on people living in the further future. Once global warming sets in, there is little that our successors can do about it. Even if they stop emitting greenhouse gases it could be hundreds of years before the effects of past emissions are no longer affecting the planet.

Moreover, actions that are not so likely to harm our children or grandchildren could nevertheless be harmful to more distant future people. Some experts think that the only feasible way to cut carbon emissions in Australia and other countries without harming the economy and imposing

hardship on poorer members of society is to replace coal power with nuclear power. Suppose that this is true. One of the problems with nuclear power is that the wastes that it produces will be harmful for many generations, and so far there is no way of treating them so that they become safe. They can be stored in safe places, and perhaps this will ensure that our children and children's children will not be harmed. But containers can eventually leak, or unforeseen geological events like earthquakes can destroy a storage place. One of the radioactive wastes, plutonium, remains dangerous for over 2500 years. A lot can happen in that period of time.

Economists adopt a convention of discounting harms that will occur in the more distant future. A harm that will occur 50 years in the future counts less in their calculations than the same harm occurring now, and if it occurs very far in the future then it doesn't count at all. Radiation poisoning caused to distant generations by our nuclear wastes would not be a consideration for them in planning for the future. A number of philosophers have, quite rightly, protested against this convention.³ To discount harms done to distant future people amounts to treating them as lesser beings. It offends against the basic moral principle that all individuals are of equal moral worth. People who will be living in the future will need unpolluted air to breathe and clean water to drink, and although they may be unlike us in many respects, they are not likely to be immune from radiation poisoning. Their interests ought to count. But once we admit that this is so we then have to face the difficulty of weighing the interests of ourselves and our immediate successors against the interests of more distant future people.

'We should avoid activities that we have reason to believe could do serious harm to either present or future people.'⁴ This principle, although well motivated, is not much help. If those who think that nuclear power is the only feasible solution to global warming are right, then not installing nuclear power plants could result in serious harm to present and future people. It might lead to economic collapse or the serious harm

from global warming. To make the morally right decision we have to determine which harm is more probable and which is more serious. But now we encounter another problem of doing justice to future generations. We don't really know what things will be like in 2020, let alone 2070 or 2270. There is no way of making such a calculation. Perhaps no one will be living in Australia in the more distant future. Perhaps our nuclear waste storage facilities will remain safe and no one will ever be poisoned by our nuclear wastes. Perhaps future people will have developed a technology that they can use to treat radioactive materials. Or perhaps not.

In our efforts to do justice to future generations we operate in a fog of uncertainty. Uncertainty does not mean that intergenerational justice is impossible or that it doesn't matter what we do. The answer to uncertainty is to be as rational as possible — to examine and act according to available evidence — and to do the best we can to alleviate known risks. Suppose we carefully examine the alternatives and come to the conclusion that for the time being use of nuclear power is the best way of mitigating global warming until other technologies are more fully developed (a lot of people would disagree with this conclusion, but let us assume for the sake of argument that it is true). Since climate change is an immediate danger that could have disastrous consequences for many people, our findings provide a good reason for adopting this option. We are left with the problem that nuclear wastes could seriously harm future people. Nevertheless, if we have reason to believe that they can be stored safely for at least a few generations then we and our immediate successors have time to do something about this threat. By putting distant generations at risk we impose on ourselves and our immediate successors the obligation of acting to mitigate this threat. Perhaps the best thing to do is to put money and effort into research aimed at transforming the wastes so that they will no longer be a danger. If we succeed, well and good; if we fail, then we pass this project on to our successors.

Many people are likely to protest that nuclear power is not the only feasible option and that nuclear developments involve dangers that I have not mentioned — proliferation of nuclear weapons, for one thing. But the discussion is supposed to illustrate some of the reasoning that we must employ if we are to be intergenerationally just. Future people count, but uncertainty about what the future holds and possibilities of acting to alleviate future harms make a difference. (This means that there is something right about the otherwise regrettable convention of discounting the future.) In general, we are justified in acting to avoid what we have reason to believe are immediate and serious harms to present people and our immediate successors, even when doing so could cause serious harms to more distant generations. But if we engage in actions that could seriously harm more distant generations then we also take on ourselves the duty of doing something to lessen the danger — to make it less likely that it will happen. This is our fair share of the responsibility for ensuring that people of more distant generations will be able to live good lives. The burden doesn't have to fall entirely on us. Our successors, who also benefit from our policies, can do their share, either by continuing a project to minimise the risk to more distant generations, or by paying a share of the public debt that we have incurred as the result of our risk-reducing activities.

Values for the Future

We now have a somewhat better idea of what it means to take our fair share of the responsibility for ensuring that people of the future will be able to enjoy things of value. But what exactly are these valuable things that they should be able to enjoy? At a basic level, the answer seems obvious. Our successors, near or distant, will not be able to live good lives and enjoy things of value if their health is undermined by pollution, or if they are desperately short of water, or if their agricultural land is destroyed by climate change. But the definition of intergenerational justice suggests that our duties are more extensive: it is not enough to ensure that our successors

have the necessities of life. They are also entitled to enjoy things of value. This means that they should have an opportunity to appreciate things that we have reason to regard as good.

Suppose that we fail to save the species that are now threatened with extinction. Instead we put our efforts into developing technologies that compensate for the harm caused by extinction — and as a result we are able to ensure that our successors enjoy a high standard of living (according to the way that this is commonly calculated). However, these people live in a world that is by our standards ugly and depleted. The species that we shared the world with are gone; there is no wild nature to enjoy, and environments are largely artificial. Perhaps people live under plastic domes and go for walks down streets lined with plastic trees. I think that most of us would not only regard this as a shame, but as an injustice. We have failed to give our successors the opportunity to appreciate nature — to come into contact with something that has been a source of value for people of many generations. Indeed, some people would say that by wiping out a species we are wrongly destroying something that is valuable for its own sake — quite apart from the values that humans get from experiencing it.

There are of course other goods that we think that our successors should have the opportunity to use and to value. We would be wronging our successors if we made it impossible or difficult for them to maintain democratic institutions, or if they no longer had the leisure or the opportunity to enjoy art, music and other achievements of civilisation. When we reflect on what our successors ought to inherit, we are likely to think of things like this. As many philosophers contend, justice to future generations requires that we do what we can to ensure that they have (at the very least) the same opportunity as us to appreciate and enjoy good and valuable things.

Some philosophers and others object that people of future generations are likely to have values that are different from ours. They may no longer value nature. They may prefer plastic trees. But this objection establishes only that people of each

generation are entitled to decide for themselves what is worthy of being valued. Given that we do think that something is worth valuing, we ought to make sure that our successors have an opportunity to value it. They are entitled to choose not to, but we should at least give them the choice.

Some people object that members of a society have different ideas about what is worth valuing. Some care about nature; others do not. Some appreciate art; others are indifferent. Some people value a consumer society. But if we can't agree about values, then how can we decide what we should pass on to future generations? Once again this objection misses the point. People who disagree about values are nevertheless likely to agree that future generations ought to have the opportunity to appreciate valuable things. So the issue is really how we as members of a society should decide which values to transmit through education and other forms of public support. Since people who think that something is worthy of being valued generally have reasons for their belief, the question of what we should strive to preserve can be addressed in debates that function as part of the decision-making process of a democratic society. A decision about what values ought to be fostered and maintained for future generations also has to take into account the effects of the pursuit of values on present and future generations. (We might have to admit, for example, that the pleasures of a consumer society, at least in its present form, are destructive of other things that we want future generations to be able to value.) It is helpful to remember that our legacy to future generations depends not merely on what governments do, but on the actions of other groups of people: ethnic and religious organizations, environmental groups and others who act to maintain a tradition, a heritage or other things that they regard as valuable for people of the future.

Global Justice

When we think of the values that we want to maintain for posterity our concern is generally focused on future members of our group: on people who will inherit our political institu-

tions or way of life. But climate change and many other environmental problems are global. They require us to take a global perspective and to look for a global solution. The requirements that arise from this perspective raise some of the most contentious issues of justice — the issues that are the sticking point for attempts to reach an international agreement about measures for alleviating and adapting to climate change.

Some people argue that the best strategy for dealing with global warming is to put our efforts into adaptation. They say that we should forget about lowering our carbon emissions, but should instead concentrate on building dykes to hold back rising seas, constructing desalination plants to overcome water shortages, and to prepare ourselves for rising temperatures.

One of the difficulties with this strategy is that it assumes that the effects of climate change will not be disastrous — that global warming is something that people can adapt to without great loss of life, agricultural failure, or massive destruction of eco-systems. Some climatologists believe that the build-up of carbon in the atmosphere, once it reaches a certain level, will cause sudden and catastrophic changes. If this happens then adaptive measures are likely to prove inadequate and it will be too late to adopt a different strategy. The evidence that such a thing could happen is far from certain. It might turn out that the predicted catastrophe will never occur. However, in this case it seems obvious that justice requires us to act to prevent the possibility of serious harm to our successors. Doing so requires that we accept the costs of mitigating global warming. But if we fail to act, then we could be condemning our successors to serious hardship or death. And since the danger is immediate, since it is something that could happen in the near future, there is no time to waste. We cannot wait to act until more evidence comes in.

Suppose, nevertheless, that we live in a country that is likely to be able to escape the worst effects of climate change and that we are confident that we have the resources and the technology to deal with any problems that might occur. People

who live in poorer countries will not be so fortunate. Many of them are located in a part of the globe that will bear the brunt of climate change. Anyway, they are too poor to embark on an adaptation strategy. They will not be able to hold back the rising seas; they will not be able to avoid destruction of valuable agricultural land or to protect themselves from extreme weather. Suppose, however, we take the view that this isn't our problem. We concentrate our efforts on protecting ourselves.

If the rich protect themselves and leave the poor to fend for themselves, they are acting unwisely. Desperation can cause people to do desperate things. If people start fighting each other for water rights and arable land, or if they flee their countries in large numbers, the political and economic outcomes could be bad for everyone in the world. But it is also obvious that a strategy that ignores the plight of the poor would be unjust.

The philosopher Henry Shue presents three reasons for this judgment. The first appeals to the reparative responsibilities of those who cause harm. The activities of the wealthy have created the problem of climate change. The poor have contributed virtually nothing. It is true that our ancestors did not know that they were creating a global problem when they built their factories and pumped carbon into the atmosphere. But nevertheless they did the damage, and as their heirs and beneficiaries the responsibility falls on us to clean up the mess. Shue is appealing to our sense of justice as members of an intergenerational society who inherit debts from our predecessors as well as benefits.

The second reason why it would be unjust to ignore the plight of people in poor countries is that wealthy people are at present using more than their fair share of the carbon absorption capacity of the planet. Although developing countries like China and India are increasing their carbon emissions as they increase their standard of living, the carbon footprint of the average person in a country like the United States or Australia

remains much higher than the carbon footprint of individuals elsewhere. And people from the poorest and most vulnerable countries are using very little. Given present technology, the poor need to use the emission capacity of the planet in order to develop their economies. But no absorptive capacity is left, because those of us in the affluent economies have taken it all (and much more). We are parked in their spaces, and no empty spaces exist.

The third reason is that in the framework of global efforts to deal with climate change, the wealthy are in the best position to take the leading role. Their effective action is necessary to make a difference and they have the resources and technology to help poor countries change their methods of production so that they can continue to develop their economies without contributing to the problem. When some people have less than enough for a decent human life, says Shue, and others have more than enough, then justice demands that the rich help the poor.

His discussion makes it clear that the injustice that would be done by ignoring the plight of the poor is not merely an injustice to present people. If their economies are destroyed by the effects of climate change or if their hope of development is thwarted, then this is a wrong to their successors. Their chances of living a good life will be diminished; their entitlements as the heirs of the traditions and products of their culture will be threatened.

The case is strong for making concessions to poor countries in agreements for limiting carbon emissions, and negotiators at Kyoto and Copenhagen have acknowledged it. The more difficult issue — one on which philosophers as well as leaders of countries disagree — is the extent of the sacrifices that the rich ought to make for the sake of the poor. What does justice demand? Shue thinks that we ought to act in a way that ensures that people of present and future generations are able to live decent human lives. Peter Singer puts forward a more radical conception of justice by advocating a system in which

each individual in the world is allowed an equal emissions quota. The allowance for a country would be equal to the sum of the shares of each of its members, and if wealthy countries want a greater share, he says, then they would have to buy it off others.

If carried out, Singer's proposal might create the perverse incentive of encouraging countries to increase their population. But apart from raising issues of practicality, his proposal forces us to consider whether justice requires that all individuals, present and future, obtain an equal quantity of resources — so far as this is possible to achieve. There are two reasons for thinking that this is not a requirement of justice. One of them is that people have different needs and different ideas about what is important for a good life. It could be inequitable to treat everyone equally. Another reason is suggested by the perspective embedded in the definition of intergenerational justice that I have been using. An intergenerational society is not just a collection of unrelated individuals. It is a cooperative association in which people labour and make sacrifices for their successors. What our predecessors achieved is our inheritance. Justice requires that we make sacrifices for the sake of the poor of the world; it requires that we make up for harm that we have caused. It requires that we enable them to provide a more hopeful future for their children and grandchildren. It does not require that we surrender a large part of our inheritance for the sake of achieving an abstract ideal of equality.

Nevertheless, policies that aim to preserve the American or Australian way of life at the expense of the lives and values of others are not compatible with standards of justice. The implication is that we will have to be prepared to make sacrifices and re-assess our values. The prospect is daunting and it might lead many people to wonder if justice is a practical possibility.

Is Intergenerational Justice Possible?

Some people think that we can avoid the worst effects of climate change and solve other environmental problems by becoming more energy efficient, by encouraging people to save

energy, and by converting to solar, wind and thermal power. They believe that we will not only save the planet by using more efficient and less destructive productive technology. We will also be able to maintain our high standard of living. And if this technology is provided to poor countries then they too will be able to develop their economies, become wealthier and preserve the things they value without overstepping planetary limitations. This view may be over-optimistic. Population growth may undermine savings achieved by more efficient production. Non-renewable sources of energy may never provide an adequate means of maintaining a society that encourages economic growth and consumption. Environmental problems may persist; species loss may continue. But let us suppose that the optimistic view is right.

Even so, things will not be easy. We will have to make large changes to our methods of production, and our customary ways of doing things are likely to be severely disrupted. Some industries that have played an important role in our industrial society will have to be phased out. We will have to get rid of our coal-fired power stations; we will have to change the way we transport goods and people. We will have to find new sources of wealth; our production methods will have to be altered. Some goods will no longer be available. Prices will rise, at least temporarily. Jobs will be lost, people will be forced to move, to retrain and to change their lives. If the optimistic projection is right then in the long term the economy will recover and people will find jobs in new industries. But in the short term some groups of people will suffer. This is likely to result in social disruption, discontent and political uncertainty. The prospect of a transformation to a sustainable economy and an intergenerationally just society — even if the result is a society where everyone is able to live a good life — is thus not appealing to politicians who want to remain in power, industrialists who profit from the old ways of doing things, and citizens and consumers who are accustomed to things as they are and fear that change will disadvantage them.

These reflections may lead us to wonder whether intergenerational justice is a practical possibility. Here is a resume of what some people might be thinking: ‘Self-interest is the predominate motivation in economic and political life. Given that this is so there is little prospect that justice will prevail in global or intergenerational affairs. Present people — at least those who have the power to determine policy — have no desire to undertake social and economic changes that threaten their profits, income or way of life. Future people can’t vote; they can’t put pressure on those who act against their interests. Poor people in other countries are relatively powerless to defend their interests and to influence the policies of people in wealthy countries. Since environmental harms will affect mostly the poor and people of future generations, people in wealthy countries who are in the position to make decisions have little or no incentive to adopt measures that could mitigate these harms. Intergenerational justice is a nice idea, but it is impractical because it has no motivating force.’

This reasoning depends on two assumptions: that people are mostly self-interested and that their interests do not give them reason to care about the fate of future generations or people in other countries. Both assumptions should be questioned.

Morality can be motivating. Many people care about justice and are sometimes prepared to make great sacrifices for the sake of protecting the human rights of others or to make their society more just. Parents are strongly motivated to fulfil what they regard as their obligations to their children and grandchildren. Being a fair and morally accountable individual is central to the self-perception of many — if not all — people in our society. But it is also important to recognise that the interests of individuals — even their self-interests — are not confined to the events of their lifetime. Most of us care about what will happen after we are gone. We care about how others will regard us, about the fate of our projects, the survival of the things that we value, about the well being of our children, and

the future of our community or nation. Implicit in the definition of justice that I am working with is an idea that most people find appealing: we have inherited or produced things of value that ought to be available for our descendants. And though this idea can encourage national selfishness, it doesn't take much of an effort of the imagination to recognise that people in other countries also have a desire to ensure that their values will survive and that their descendants will be able to appreciate them.

The problem, it seems to me, is not mainly a lack of moral motivation or a lack of concern for the future. Part of the problem is undoubtedly an uncertainty about what needs to be done and how to do it and the fear of those who think that they will be seriously disadvantaged. Part of it is due to inertia that results from international negotiations among nations that do not trust each other's intentions. And a far larger share is due to institutions that reward those who can achieve short term goals — earning a quarterly profit or winning an election — and often punish people who are willing to forgo gains or sustain losses for the sake of achieving a long term objective. Added to this is a consumer economy that emphasises the new and only truly thrives on growth. It is as if present societies were designed to undermine or suppress whatever motivations people have in regard to the fate of future generations. If this is right then the main reason for inertia is not a lack of morality or lack of concern for future generations. It has to do primarily with the failure of institutions rather than deficiencies of human nature. Recognising this may not make us more optimistic about avoiding environmental problems, but it can focus our minds on what needs to be done: to envision and bring about institutional changes that enable intergenerational and global concerns to be expressed and acted on.

Endnotes

- 1 Climate change in Australia': <http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/CE5D024E-8F58-499F-9EEB-D2D638E7A345/17397/ClimateChangeinAustraliareport.pdf>.

- 2 The Brundtland Commission of the United Nations defines ‘sustainable development’ as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’
- 3 For example, see T. Cowen, and D. Parfit, ‘Against the social discount rate’, in *Justice Between Age Groups and the Generations*, P. Laslett and J. Fishkin, (Eds.), New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992.
- 4 This principle is a version of the ‘precautionary principle’, which says that if we have reputable but less than certain evidence that an activity could cause a serious, irreversible harm, then we should not engage in the activity.



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