

Theories of Intergenerational Justice

Ever since Greek antiquity, the notion of justice has been in the centre of intense philosophical debates. Nevertheless, systematic concepts and theories of justice between non-overlapping generations have only been developed in the last few decades. This delay can be explained by the fact that the impact of man's scope of action has increased. Only since the twentieth century has modern technology given us the potential to irreversibly impair the fate of mankind and nature into the distant future. In Plato's or Kant's days, people did not have the same problems with regard to the environment, pension schemes, and national debts as we have today. Therefore, there was no objective need for theories of justice that were unlimited in space and time. According to Hans Jonas, the new territory man has conquered by high technology is still no-man's-land for ethical theory which still lives in the Newtonian age in this regard.

The paper presented at SOPHA2009 is meant to contribute to exploring that no-man's-land of our duties to posterity. First, it deals with the most important arguments against all theories of intergenerational justice. The non-identity problem coined by Schwartz, Kavka, and Parfit says that we cannot harm potential individuals if our (harmful) action is a precondition for their existence. According to this argument, we would not harm future people by using up all resources, because these particular people would not exist if we would preserve the resources. Several arguments are discussed which, in their totality, show that the non-identity paradox is irrelevant for the kind of problems that are usually discussed in the intergenerational context such as wars, environmental pollution or national debts.

Next, the axiological question of what is ultimately the valuable good that should be preserved and passed on to the next generation is examined ('What to sustain?'). 'Capital' and 'wellbeing' (in the sense of need-fulfillment) are two alternative axiological objectives of societal arrangements. Capital is divided into natural, real, financial, cultural, social and knowledge capital. The many facets of 'wellbeing' are also discussed, and subjective methods of measuring it are compared with objective ones. It is concluded that the axiological objective 'wellbeing' is superior to 'capital'.

In the last part, answers are sought as to how much we owe future generations for reasons of justice. The part focuses on three concepts of justice that are established in the intragenerational context and asks whether they can also be applied to the intergenerational context: 'justice as impartiality', 'justice as the equal treatment of equal cases and the unequal treatment of unequal cases' and 'justice as reciprocity'. The core of this presentation is the use of Rawls' 'veil of ignorance' for determining principles of justice between generations. Rawls himself did not complete this train of thought. I conclude that the individuals in the 'original position' would not opt for all generations to be equal, as it would mean that later generations would have to remain on the low level of earlier generations. In this context, the 'autonomous progress rate' is of particular importance: Later generations will inevitably benefit from the experiences, innovations, and inventions of earlier ones. There is no way earlier generations could benefit from future technology and medicine, because time is one-directional.

On account of the 'autonomous factors of progress', each generation has a different initial situation. The initial situation of later generations is normally better than that of earlier ones. So, opportunities are never equal in an intergenerational context. No generation has the right to spoil this initial advantage of its successors with reference to an ideal of equality. Instead of a savings rate in the sense of sacrificing consumption, a 'preventive savings rate' should be imposed on each generation, i. e. an obligation to avoid ecological, societal, or technical collapses.

The normative setting of our ethical obligations must not be confused with the empirical prognosis of whether future generations will have an equal or even higher welfare. The normative and empirical level must be strictly distinguished. To cut a long story short: while our normative obligations to future generations are greater than we commonly assume, the empirical probability that we will leave behind a world with better or at least equal opportunities for future generations has dropped over the past decades. Today's generation lives in a particularly decisive age. Just now, more and more states have nuclear weapons, there is man-made global warming, and we have huge amounts of toxic waste. So today's generation has the potential to irreversibly reduce the wellbeing of numerous future generations. We have a great responsibility to avoid this.