

WHAT IS INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE? A PRECIS¹

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The intention behind my book *What Is Intergenerational Justice* is to provide readers with some of the key findings that philosophical research about intergenerational justice has come up with over a bit more than half a century. It also aims at identifying the core questions that remain open. A significant amount of work has been done on theories of justice in general, both on principles and on the currency of justice. For instance, egalitarians ask themselves whether it is equalization and/or something else that matters (i.e., principle). They also ask themselves how to characterize *what* should be equalized, which includes potential currencies such as ‘opportunity for welfare’ or ‘basic capabilities’. Advances have also been made on how to articulate justice and democracy. All this has implications in the intergenerational domain.

The introduction sets the stage. Five chapters follow, forming three parts. Chapter 1 looks at a problem that has kept many philosophers busy while remaining relatively unnoticed in the general public: the nonidentity problem. Then chapters 2 and 3 look respectively at the principle and at the currency of intergenerational justice. Chapter 4 focuses on climate justice from an intergenerational perspective, partly applying what has been unearthed in the previous two chapters. After these three chapters on justice, I devote one to institutional design and the theory of democracy, again with a focus on the intergenerational dimension.

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Among the issues that the introduction focuses on, let me stress three. First, one feature that renders intergenerational relations special and complex is the constant interplay between our membership in a birth cohort and our journey across various age groups. Most issues with an intergenerational dimension raise interesting questions from both angles (i.e., justice between birth cohorts and between age groups). The book focuses on generations as birth cohorts and the introduction explains why. Second, another key feature of intergenerational relations is that we coexist during part of our lives with members of some generations while not coexisting at all with members of most of the other (more remote) generations. This is key. Yet, I stress that philosophical challenges are not limited to cases in which generational overlap is absent. Third, I justify the framing in terms of justice, against possible views according to which our duties to other generations are rather to be understood as nonenforceable ethical ones or as belonging mostly to concerns of legitimacy rather than justice.

Having set the stage, I devote chapter 1 to the nonidentity problem. What is at stake is the possibility of having duties to the future at all. Many of us may be concerned about not harming the future, or at least about not wrongfully doing so. The nonidentity problem challenges the possibility of such framing. It starts from the view that many of our actions have an impact on who will be born, in the sense of whether this action will lead to the existence of this very person or of another one. In such circumstances, the concept of harm becomes harder to handle. How can we claim that an action puts a person in a worse situation than the alternative if this alternative entails that this alleged victim will never exist in the first place?

This is the challenge. This first chapter explains the nature of this challenge. It explores three ways out. The first one consists in departing from the standard meaning of the concept of harm. The second strategy relies on a narrow path that goes through the generational overlap. While it entails that the scope of the nonidentity problem gets reduced, it also follows that the scope of the solution is limited to our duties toward generations that overlap with us. To me, it is the third avenue that is the most promising one (i.e., one that addresses the nonidentity problem without the concept of harm). I initially thought that it didn't make sense. Yet, a careful analysis of the relationship between harm and wrong indicates not only that wrongless harms are possible, but also that harmless wrongs can make sense too. Understanding the relationship between distributive justice and harm enables us to make sense of this possibility. And the importance of properly articulating distributive and corrective justice will also reemerge later in chapter 4.

Arguing that duties of justice to the future are possible despite the nonidentity challenge is one thing. Yet, doing so does not tell us anything yet about the *content* of such duties. Duties to the future are not limited to duties of justice. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the latter only. Therefore, it should be clear from the

outset that a lot of room is left to articulate duties of justice with other ethical duties. Chapter 2 pursues three tasks. First, using minimalistic language, involving the concepts of ‘generational savings’ and ‘generational dis-savings’, it proposes four different accounts of such duties. Comparing the properties of these four accounts allows us to grasp how they differ along the savings/dis-savings axis. One lesson is that their demands differ significantly.

What also becomes salient is that the way in which the respective views handle the relationship between equality related demands and demands of cost-effectiveness/efficiency has a major impact in the intergenerational domain. One reason is that productivity gains are likely to burden mostly the present and benefit mostly the future. Another is that the number of future people is also potentially massive. Hence, any departure from a strict concern for equality or a strict focus on the least well-off tends to open the gates to significant sacrifices of the present. We find ourselves in a surprising situation in which, while wearing our activist cap, we tend to fear not doing enough for the future; as theorists, we are struggling to come up with an account that does not sacrifice too much for the future.

Chapter 2 also includes two further conceptual explorations. One is about the extent to which our principle of intergenerational justice is *inheritance-ruled*. The idea is to contrast two ways of framing the content of our intergenerational duties. It is one thing to say, ‘This is the type of *X* that matters to us and we inherited, say, ten units per head on average of it. This amount should set the standard for what we owe the future’. It is another one to say, ‘This is the type of *X* that matters and people need five units per head on average for a decent or a good life. The standard should be five rather than ten’. The chapter discusses the properties of these two types of rules. What it also does is explore the articulation between the idea of sustainability and the one of intergenerational justice.

If we care about equality and how much weight we should give it, we should also care about defining *what* should be equalized. We want to know *how much* we owe the future (the principle issue) but also *what* we owe it (the currency issue). Specifying the former without the latter would be pointless. This is the task of chapter 3. It addresses two challenges, one that arises beyond generational overlap and the other linked with the fact that our preferences as a generation are affected by what the previous generation left us and how it educated us. The first challenge is the following. We may assume that one desirable property of a currency of justice is its liberal nature. It needs to have some bite while remaining open to people’s differing priorities in terms of conceptions of the good life. Yet, implementing such a currency involves some form of exchange of information, revealing what matters to each generation and how much it matters. Such an informational exchange is impossible beyond the generational overlap. I discuss what follows from that, taking Dworkin’s ‘resourcism’ as an example.

The other key set of challenges to defining a currency of justice has to do with preference dynamics. Here, I touch on a variety of dimensions. I discuss some of the proposals often found in the public debate, such as the idea of ‘keeping options open’. Not only should we be concerned about whether our choices leave enough room for different preferences to develop in the future. There is a related and intriguing dimension (i.e., the fact that we are not born adults with given preferences). We form the content of our preferences through interacting with the previous generations and with the state in which we find the world. Hence, one possible issue would be whether inculcating frugal preferences is not only the way to go but also one that would allow us to further degrade our legacy without violating the demands of justice. I show that the latter does not follow. And I argue that preserving a gap through education between the preferences we form and what the state of the world would allow to satisfy is something worth considering.

Chapter 4 looks at the climate dimension of intergenerational justice. I dig into four issues: the role of past emissions, whether a 2 degrees Celsius (35.6 degrees Fahrenheit) warming is defensible, whether early efforts can be justified, and how to approach the idea of a social discount rate. All four issues are key to the climate justice debate. As you will note from the debate with my critics, how we approach past emissions by properly articulating corrective and distributive concerns remains an open question. I address this at length in the book and in my reply to critics in this volume. On the 2 degrees Celsius issue, two things are worth stressing. First, justifications for it may involve either the choice of principle of justice or issues associated with our currency of justice. So, this is a perfect illustration of the importance of both matters. Second, the substantive conclusion is that while we may be very concerned about whether, as a matter of fact, we will manage not to go beyond the 2 degrees Celsius target, it is not even sure that sticking to it will be enough to satisfy the demands of intergenerational justice.

Besides the 2 degrees Celsius issue, there is also the idea of ‘early effort’ (i.e., that putting in effort now could make a huge difference in the future). I bridge this debate with the developments in chapters 2 and 3. Finally, the book looks at a practically very important dimension of climate policy scenarios: the social discount rate. Here, the key message is that any debate on this issue should specify *what* we are discounting exactly and for what *reason*. It is only once we know about this that we are able to ascertain whether the social discount rate we selected in our model is compatible with intergenerational impartiality. And the other message here is that some justifications of discounting are compatible with the idea of impartiality. In the end, the climate chapter illustrates both the possibility and the complexity of retranslating our general findings from chapters 2 and 3 into the details of climate debates.

The focus of the book is on justice. Yet, it devotes its fifth and last chapter to developments on institutional design and on legitimacy understood in a more procedural sense. Why? Readers should get a sense of how to approach the articulation between theories of justice and theories of democracy, when it comes to generations—understood as birth cohorts. Also, policymakers may often want to address problems on the justice side by proposing new decision procedures. We need to be clear about what we can reasonably expect from such procedures and whether they face equally serious legitimacy challenges as theories of justice.

We need to take seriously the fact that future people cannot participate in our votes and deliberations today. I argue that this has implications for claims of acting democratically *towards* the future or claims to *represent* future generations. We should be careful with our language here. These limitations are significant, and I think that we are often too hopeful on the institutional side. Yet, this leaves several things open. It is still essential to deliberate democratically among us, both about what we owe each other as overlapping generations and about what to do for the future given our differences in vision about what we owe it. Also, even though it is essential to be clear about how to label our initiatives, there are ways in which we can render our institutions more sensitive to the temporal dimension. One possible implication is that while it seems difficult to render deliberation less vulnerable to the lack of possible communication with the future, it is perhaps easier to some extent to render our currency of justice less vulnerable to it, through going partly more ‘objective’ in a sufficientarian manner. This suggests that beyond the overlap, even though we could not claim to act democratically toward the future, we can still aim at acting in an intergenerationally just matter.

In the end, not only is there room for duties intergenerational justice, despite the challenge of chapter 1. There are also ways of giving some flesh to such duties of justice, both on the principle side and one the currency one. This is content that bites, as developments in climate justice illustrate. The centrality of justice may even be further enhanced by the partly unsurmountable structural challenges faced by the search for intergenerationally fair decision procedures. This still leaves many questions to be answered, including by philosophers. Yet, nonphilosophers should not lose sight of the fact that philosophers are unable to claim more than what their assumptions and arguments allow and that more definite answers necessarily require inputs from other disciplines than philosophy alone.

Reference

Gosseries, Axel. 2023. *What Is Intergenerational Justice?* (Polity Press)