

INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE

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Summary

The well-being of future generations has become an imperative goal of present-day society. Modern science and technology have given us an unprecedented power to change the environment extensively, lastingly, and, in part, irreversibly. Moreover, with the recent manipulation of genetic material, we can alter the gene pool of all forms of life on earth. Crucial questions about the future of humankind, previously asked by a few specialists, have become the concern of everyone. Does humankind have a future? If present trends continue, what kind of planet will be inherited by unborn generations? Who can guarantee the future of the human species? Do we have any obligation towards far-distant unborn generations? Can future generations claim anything from us as their right? Do we need a "guardian" to plead for future generations?

Fortunately, the international community is becoming more conscious of and conscientious about its responsibilities towards unborn generations. This new moral sensibility towards future generations has brought the topic of intergenerational justice into contemporary philosophical debate. Which ethical theory is adequate to underpin today's discussion on intergenerational justice? Does Rawls' theory of justice as fairness throw light on the moral issue of justice between generations? What insights does Whitehead's relational metaphysics offer to speak meaningfully and convincingly about intergenerational justice?

1. Introduction

At the close of the fifteenth century, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola prophesied that in the coming modern age, through science and technology, human beings would

determine their fate. This Italian philosopher of culture envisaged humanity's deepest aspirations to improve quality of life through science and technology. After so many centuries of science and technology, in the last few decades of the twentieth century we learned that our unrestrained economic and technological expansion, based on the nineteenth-century myth of progress, in many ways impoverished rather than improved the quality of human life. It is not science and technology, as such, that are to be blamed for environmental degradation, but rather those in whose hands these powers have fallen and the way they have been used in a short-sighted manner. For many years science and technology were used for personal, national, regional, and continental profit to the detriment of many born and unborn people. It is a shame that for many centuries science and technology were used as an instrument of rule over nature and of power over society and human beings, living both now and in the future.

Indeed, we are facing an irony that the cultural forces of science and technology, rather than “liberating” humankind, are now the greatest threat to the quality of life of present and future generations. Science and technology, which were expected to improve considerably the quality of human life, have increased hunger, poverty, war, and environmental hazards, and they have also created serious future risks and burdens. Now that the international community is convinced that science and technology offer both blessings and curses, many countries have adopted environmental policies designed to stem ecological degradation. Science and technology can work wonders only if they are put to the service of all humankind and are guided by the ethical principles of intergenerational solidarity, cooperation, sharing, justice, and equity.

2. Moral Sensibility for Unborn Generations

During the late 1970s the world community became more conscious of, and conscientious in, its moral obligations to posterity. At that time many began to realize that it was unrealistic to speak simply of progress, without taking very seriously into account the limits of natural resources, the ecological crisis, the dangerous consequences of modern technology, and the ever-growing double gap between some parts of the world and others and between present and future generations. The increasing awareness of the finitude and fragility of our earth has brought about a sudden and amazing upgrading of the theme of the “future” in almost every area of contemporary life. Questions previously asked by a few specialists have now become the concern of the public at large. What is the future of our earth? Does humankind have a future? If present trends continue, what kind of planet will be inherited by future generations? What quality of life will be enjoyed by posterity? Who can guarantee the future of the human species? Do we have any obligation at all to unborn generations? Can future generations claim anything from us as their right?

The three major documents on development and environment, signed by many heads of state in June 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit in Brazil, reflect the international community's deep concern about the quality of life of posterity. The *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, the *Convention of Climate Change*, and the *Convention on Biological Diversity* all endorse the concept of our responsibilities towards future generations. The Rio Summit was one of the most significant international negotiation processes in the creation of an elaborate program that could set the planet on a new

course towards global sustainable development that could guarantee a life of adequate quality for posterity. It was a manifestation of the new sense of solidarity among humankind and a clear sign of willingness to share the challenge of safeguarding the quality of life for generations yet to be born.

Moreover, the 1993 *Vienna Declaration and Program of Action*, adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights, endorses also the concept of the present generation's responsibilities towards future generations. UNESCO's General Conference, in its twenty-ninth session held in Paris in November 1997, adopted a *Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations towards Future Generations*. This declaration, which has a moral and ethical force rather than being a legal instrument, was the fruit of many years of discussions among experts and of consultations with member states. Furthermore, the *Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine* (known as the *Bioethics Convention*), developed by the Council of Europe and adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly in November 1996, affirms that progress in biology and medicine should be used for the benefit of present and future generations, and sets up safeguards that guarantee to protect the identity of the human species.

Two main factors underlie the contemporary ethical sensibility for future generations. First, it has now become evident that technological power has altered the nature of human activity. Whereas previously human activity was viewed as having a small effective range, modern technology has reshaped this traditional view. Modern technology has given us an unprecedented power to influence the lives not only of those now living, but also of those who will live in the far-distant future.

Second, today's apprehension about the future of humankind is the result of the discovery of the interdependence and interrelatedness of reality. This truth has been known for centuries, but it is only lately that we are experiencing it in all its complexity. Never before has human experience shown so clearly that absolutely nothing exists in isolation. Everything affects everything else. Every action, decision, and policy whatsoever has far-reaching consequences. Everything, from culture to genes, will be transmitted to posterity. It is therefore becoming more evident that our relations are not limited to those who are close to us, but extend to far-distant generations. This feeling of interdependence between generations is awakening a new vision of human community that encompasses all past, present, and future generations. The contemporary sense of solidarity with all the members of the human species is the result of this emerging broader perception of community.

3. Future Generations Are Disadvantaged

Future generations need to be protected because they are in a disadvantaged position with respect to the present generation, which has the power to affect badly their quality of life by overpopulating the earth, by spoiling the delicate balance of the biosphere, by storing nuclear wastes that are disastrous to the genetic heritage of posterity, by depleting the earth's natural resources, and by using genetic engineering to affect the unity of the human species. They are disadvantaged because they are downstream in time from us and thus subject to the long-term consequences of our actions. Even their very existence is threatened! The scope of their choices is restricted by decisions taken

by their predecessors. Moreover, future generations are inherently disadvantaged since they are mute, having no representatives among the present generation, and so their interests are often neglected in present socioeconomic and political planning. They cannot plead or bargain for equal treatment since they have no voice and nothing they do will affect the present generation (see *Economic Security and the Environment*).

4. Degradation in the Quality of Environmental and Cultural Life

The present generation has the power to prevent future generations from enjoying both natural and cultural resources. In the twentieth century we saw increasing degradation of the quality of the global natural environment, particularly air, water, forests, and soils, caused by pollution. Recent generations have used resources of air, water, and soil as a free resource for dumping their wastes, thereby passing on the costs of their activities to future generations in the form of degraded quality of air and water, with resultant harms to the planet and animal life and to human health. The choice of recent generations to reap short-term benefits from cheap disposal of wastes has created immense future risks and burdens.

Moreover, some actions of the present generation degraded environmental quality so badly that future generations will have less flexibility in using their natural resources. Certain areas are becoming so heavily polluted that certain uses are precluded, and there is depletion of plant and animal life. For example, toxic pollution of lakes damages not only fisheries but also destroys certain plant and animal life.

We, as a species, need for our survival not only a natural but also a cultural environment. Cultural resources are essential for our well-being. For centuries, communities have recognized that it is important to conserve cultural heritage for future generations. Cultural heritage includes the intellectual, artistic, social, and historical records of the human species.

It embraces both physical objects that we create or produce, as well as the non-physical, such as knowledge and social practices. Future generations need to inherit a diverse cultural resource base to enjoy an adequate quality of life. Cultural diversity provides each generation with a range of experience, ideas, knowledge, and instruments to help them to cope with the problems they will face in fulfilling their own goals. New developments in information technology are encouraging cultural homogeneity. New efforts are required to conserve cultural heterogeneity for the benefit of future generations (see *Population and Demographic Change*).

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Biographical Sketch

Reverend Professor **Emmanuel Agius** studied philosophy and theology at the University of Malta and at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, where he obtained an M.A. and a Ph.D. He pursued postdoctoral research in the field of bioethics at the University of Tübingen, Germany, as a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung; at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., as a Fulbright scholar; and at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. He is professor of moral theology and philosophical ethics at the University of Malta. Professor Agius is a member of the National Bioethics Committee and of the Medical Council of Malta. He is also the coordinator of the Future Generations Programme supported by UNESCO. Professor Agius is the author of three books and co-editor of five publications on future generations. His articles have appeared in a number of international academic journals.