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# Justice Between Generations

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## Summary

A wide range of issues in moral, political, and legal philosophy fall under the heading of “intergenerational justice,” such as questions of justice between the young and the old, obligations to more-or-less distant past and future generations, generational sovereignty, and the boundaries of democratic decision-making.

These issues deserve our attention first because they are of great social importance. Solving the challenges raised by aging, stable pension funding, and increasing healthcare costs, for example, requires a view on what justice between age groups demands. Climate change, resource depletion, environmental degradation, population growth, and the like, raise serious concerns about the conditions under which future people will have to live. What kind of world should we bequest to future generations?

Second, this debate has theoretical significance. Questions of intergenerational justice force reconsideration of the fundamental commitments (on scope, pattern, site, and currency) of existing moral and political theories. The age-group debate has led to fundamental questions about the pattern of distributive justice: Should we care about people’s lives considered as whole being equally good? This has implausible implications. Can existing accounts be modified to avoid such problematic consequences?

Justice between nonoverlapping generations raises a different set of questions. One important worry is about the pattern of intergenerational justice—are future generations owed equality, or should intergenerational justice be cast in terms of sufficiency? Another issue is the *currency* of intergenerational justice: what kind of goods should be transferred? Perhaps the most puzzling worry resulting from this debate translates into a worry about scope: do obligations of justice extend to future people? Most conventional views on the scope of justice—those that focus on shared coercive institutions, a common culture, a cooperative scheme for mutual advantage—cannot easily be extended to include future generations. Even humanity-based views, which seem most hospitable to the inclusion of future generations, are confronted with what Parfit called the nonidentity problem, which results from the fact that future people are mostly *possible* people: because of the lack of a fixed identity of future people, it is often impossible to harm them in the comparative sense.

**Keywords:** intergenerational justice, age-group justice, future generations, distributive justice, nonidentity problem, scope of justice

**Subjects:** Political Philosophy

### Introduction

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The field of intergenerational justice covers a wide array of topics and puzzles in moral and political philosophy. Can people who may or may not live in the future have rights, even though they do not exist yet, and may never exist? Do principles of justice that apply among contemporaries also regulate our obligations to future generations? And—if yes—what kind of means do we have at our disposal to get people to act in accordance with these duties?

Questions of intergenerational justice relate to pressing real-world problems. Take, for example, questions of sustainability and climate change: In what shape should we leave our planet? Other questions relate to pension funding or generational inequalities: Is it unjust if the old are richer than the young?<sup>1</sup>

### Justice Between Overlapping Generations

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We first need to disambiguate the term *generation*. The term is used to refer to *age groups* or to *birth cohorts*. Age groups are groups of people of a certain age, say all people between 20 and 30 years old. A birth cohort is a group of people born at a specific point in time (e.g., all born between 1945 and 1955). People move through age groups as they age, but one always remains in the same birth cohort. Questions that concern nonoverlapping generations (people living at different times in history) are always questions about justice between cohorts, but questions about justice between the young and the old may be about both.

Should distributive justice focus on how goods are distributed between cohorts, or on how they are distributed between age groups (or both)? This is the debate on justice over time. There are often large inequalities between people of different age groups. Older people tend to have more capital, for example. This raises the question of when—if ever—inequalities between the old and the young are unjust?

### Lifetime View

At the start of this debate, two prominent political philosophers, Thomas Nagel and John Rawls (Rawls, 1971), formulated and defended the *lifetime view*: we should take “individual human lives, rather than individual experiences, as the units over which any distributive principle should operate” (Nagel, 1979, p. 120). Suppose that our distributive principle is equality. Inequalities at a particular time are not unjust if they are compensated for later: inequalities between different age groups or inequalities that result from cohortal effects (such as war or crisis affecting one cohort) are unjust if and only if they lead to inequalities over whole lives. On this view, it is not unjust if the young have less than the old, as long as they will have had equal shares at the end of their lives. Given that *we all age*, inequalities between age groups do not necessarily lead to lifetime inequalities. This sets age-group inequalities apart from racial or gender inequalities (Gosseries, 2014b), which do lead to inequalities over whole lives.

Lifetime views face some difficult questions. For example, Derek Parfit (1984) raises a worry for welfarists. If they care *only* about how much well-being people aggregate during their lives, they are committed to the implausible claim that a life that contains some years of misery and some years of bliss is not worse than a life of being continuously reasonably well off as long as the total welfare is the same. Intuitively, the latter is preferable, so we need a view on which distribution of welfare over a particular life is preferable. Opportunity- and resource-focused theorists of justice face similar challenges. Granting that *some* form of compensation is possible, that sometimes having a bit less now can be compensated by having more later (Bou-Habib, 2011, p. 290), is justice indifferent about at what point in life we get things? Lifetime views seem to be neutral about how resources or well-being are distributed *within* a particular life, but is that plausible?

### Prudential Accounts

Norman Daniels has argued that we should not be indifferent about how resources are distributed *within* lives. Suppose that we live in a society in which equality over lives is realized, but in which there is inequality between age-groups:

*Old-Age Paradise.* The young (aged 20–40) in this society have it rough. They have low income, financial insecurity, and college debts; pay high rents; cannot afford to start a family and, as a result, are under psychological stress. The old (60-plus) are very well off: they have positive net wealth, own houses, and enjoy good, secure pensions. When young, they had it rough as well. The young will, once old, enjoy the same benefits as the old do now.

Those defending a prudential lifespan account would argue that although there is lifetime equality, this equal distribution is not just. Equality over whole lives is necessary, but it is not sufficient for a distribution to be just.

To find out what kind of distribution within lives we have reasons to accept, Daniels (1988, 2008) asked how a prudential planner, placed behind a veil of ignorance (not knowing her age) would distribute resources within a life? It is not completely clear what kind of distribution a prudential planner would opt for. Perhaps one thinks that she would not concentrate most wealth at the end of life, for example, to pay for expensive medical treatments, but rather that a prudential planner would concentrate larger amounts of wealth at the beginning of her life when she need it most: for example to study, see the world, buy a house, or start a family.

Ronald Dworkin (1993, 2002) defends a prudential account as well, on the grounds of his hypothetical insurance model. Arguably, huge medical expenditures for the elderly can on his view not be justified, because people (at the hypothetical insurance auction) would not be willing to sacrifice most of their other plans to purchase old-age medical insurance. Defenders of the prudential lifespan account (and related views, such as Dworkin's) think that lifetime equality supplemented with a view about distribution of resources *within* lives offers a more complete account of age-group justice.

There are several worries about prudential accounts. What about cases where it is questionable whether people retain personal identity over their full lives, for example, if they suffer from dementia (Brock, 1988)? Can these accounts include people with disabilities, unable to plan prudentially, under their scope (Jecker, 2013; but see Bidadanure, 2013)?

## Priority, Sufficiency, and Relational Equality

Like lifetime views, prudential accounts imply that large inequalities between age groups at a given time are not, as such, unjust. Dennis McKerlie (2013, p. 154) argues that this cannot be right. For one thing, prudential accounts are compatible with letting people die at old age, not because there is no way to extend their lives or because it is particularly expensive to provide medical treatment, but because the prudential planner (as well as Dworkin's insurance buyer) would allocate very few resources to old age. McKerlie argues that prudential accounts fail to provide a satisfactory answer in cases where tremendous synchronic inequalities (i.e., inequalities at a particular point in time) arise. He defends a prioritarian view for synchronic inequalities: the less well off someone is, the greater the moral reason to improve that person's position, *regardless* of resulting lifetime inequalities.

Juliana Bidadanure (2016a) argues that McKerlie fails to provide a convincing explanation of *what* makes these inequalities unjust. She proposes a hybrid account that integrates a concern for synchronic (i.e., between age groups at a particular time) relational equality as a complement to diachronic (i.e., over a lifetime) equality, and argues that synchronic inequalities are unjust if they are violations of *relational* (as opposed to distributional) equality. In other words, at all points in their lives people should be able to relate to others as moral equals. If inequalities at a given time undermine what, for example, Anderson (1999) has called people's capacity to relate to each other as equals, they are unjust.

One could also supplement the lifetime view and the prudential lifespan account with another principle to prevent the troublesome implications McKerlie points out, for example, by arguing that justice requires that people remain above a sufficiency level at any point in life (Gosseries, 2011). Such a sufficiency constraint could also be defined in terms of protecting people's capacity for autonomous decision-making at all points in their life (Bou-Habib, 2011), aimed at preserving people's dignity continuously.

## Three Questions of Justice Over Time

A complete view of justice across time, then, needs to answer three questions:

1. *What kind of synchronic distribution (i.e., at a given time) is compatible with justice?* For example, continuous sufficiency, social standing, or the protection of autonomy.
2. *What kind of diachronic distributions (i.e., over time) are compatible with justice?* For example, equality, sufficiency, (leximin-)efficiency, priority.
3. *What kind of distribution within a life is required by justice?* For example, following the prudential planner, individuals' discretion (anti-paternalism), continuous sufficiency.

Sometimes it may not be possible to contain equality between age groups without creating a lifetime inequality. How do we deal with clashes between the answers to these questions? A strict egalitarian may argue that lifetime equality is more important than diachronic equality. A relational egalitarian may claim that we should aim to distribute resources equally (say) according to the prudential lifespan account if, and only if, this is compatible with relational equality.

The Rawls–Nagel view was taken as a starting point, and subsequent views as attempts to improve this view were presented. However, it is unclear that Rawls's lifetime view is vulnerable to McKerlie-type worries (that it fails to take synchronic inequalities seriously). There are several thresholds in Rawls's theory of justice (Casal, 2007), like a basic needs principle and the first principle of justice protecting people's status as free and equal citizens takes priority over the principles of distributive justice. A Rawlsian could argue that the first principle applies *continuously* (it answers question 1); whereas the second principle of justice regulates which inequalities are compatible with justice over whole lives (question 2). Finally, Rawls's efficiency principle—the difference principle—may be thought to provide an answer to question 3: primary goods have to be distributed so as to maximize the position of the least well-off (seen over whole lives).

## Justice Between Nonoverlapping Generations

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Having discussed issues of justice between people of different ages living at the same time, we can now turn to justice between people living at different times in history. What—if anything—does the current generation owe to people who will live long after they are gone? This question raises many issues, most of which we cannot discuss here.<sup>2</sup>

One issue that briefly needs to be discussed is the benefit and harm in coming into existence. Future people do not exist before creation. Is coming into existence *good for* the created person; that is, do we benefit her by creating her? Some think it is neither good nor bad for the person coming into existence (if the life is worth living): in the counterfactual situation, the person does, after all, not exist. Others think creation can benefit those created (Arrhenius & Rabinowitz, 2010; Holtug, 2001) because they believe existence (at least a good existence) is better than nonexistence. Yet others defend procreative asymmetry (McMahan, 2009) and argue that it is bad for someone to come into existence if she will lead a life not worth living (Shiffrin, 1999), but not good for (or neither good nor bad for) the resulting person if she would lead a good life.<sup>3</sup> The following discussion proceeds on the assumption that, at the very least, coming into existence is *not bad for* those who have lives worth living, but remains neutral on whether it is *good for* or *neither good nor bad for* to people to be created.

Any account of intergenerational justice will have to deal with the question of the moral status of future generations, before it can move on to filling in questions about the grounds and content of intergenerational obligations. This is where we will start.

## The Moral Status of Future Generations

Let us define future people as people who do not now exist but will exist in the future. One may think that *existence* is a necessary condition for having moral status. This is the *nonexistence challenge*: does the nonexistence of future people exclude them from the scope of moral concern? If the answer to this question is yes, this would be an unsettling conclusion. After all, our actions do affect the lives of future people. People who *will* exist can be harmed by things we do now. For example, if Ben gives defective toys (which will injure any child playing with them) to a friend who plans to conceive soon, Ben risks harming her future child. Her child would have been better off without the dangerous toys.

But harming people is not always wrong. Perhaps we harm future people without wronging them. Can future people have moral rights? If one conceives of rights as a relation between a right holder and a duty holder, the relation cannot exist if one of them does not exist (Preda, 2016). Those who do want to maintain the language of rights for future generations have argued that future people can have moral rights: *future rights* (Gosseries, 2008a), which we can violate now.

Suppose that we accept that future people are the kind of beings that can have moral standing. Would that show that we have obligations to remote future generations? No. Most members of future generations are not *future* people, in the sense just defined, but *possible* people, defined as people who exist in some, but not all, possible future states of the world. We could only have been conceived at the time we were by the people who conceived us (Parfit, 1984): at a different time, or with different people, a different sperm cell would have reached an (different) egg, and a genetically different person would have resulted. This is the *time-dependency claim* (TDC). This may seem like a trivial fact, but an example will show its implications:

*Depletion vs. Savings.* We are deciding on two policies: we either *deplete* resources over the next decades, which will have no effect on living standards for 300 years but in 400 years' time will cause all alive to lead barely worthwhile lives; or, if we go for a *saving* policy, people living in 400 years will lead good lives.

Nobody who exists under *depletion* exists under *savings* in 400 years. Perhaps because fossil fuels were banned under *savings* and without cars and planes, people procreate at different times, or with different people. Intuitively *depletion* is worse than *savings*. But *depletion* is not bad for anyone in the future generation: people alive under depletion do not exist under the counterfactual scenario.

We have encountered the *nonidentity problem* (Parfit, 1984; Woodward, 1986): it is impossible to harm someone if the supposedly harmful act is a necessary condition for her existence. The nonidentity problem is a challenge for all moral theories that rely on the *person-affecting principle*: something can only be bad (or good) if it is bad (or good) for someone (Narveson, 1967). If this is right, does that mean we cannot have obligations to future generations consisting of merely possible people?

There are three families of responses to the nonidentity problem (for a more detailed catalogue of different possible responses, see Roberts, 2015): retain the person-affecting principle in its narrow form, attempt to widen the person-affecting principle to include possible people, or give the principle up (at least partially). If one takes the first route, it seems to come at the cost of having to accept that present generations cannot have duties to remote future generations: we can, after all, not harm them (as long as they have lives worth living). Defenders of this view might appeal to impersonal obligations to bring ethical obligations back in (Heyd, 2009).<sup>4</sup>

Defenders of a threshold notion of harm (Meyer & Roser, 2009) think the person-affecting principle does not exclude obligations to future people. They define harm not (merely) as comparative notion, but as a threshold concept: people are harmed if they live below a to-be-specified threshold (e.g., defined in terms of basic capabilities or minimal welfare). Woodward (1986), for example, argues that it can be a *harm* to create people with a flawed existence.

The second response to the nonidentity problem consists in retaining the person-affecting principle, but rephrasing it in such terms that *possible* people do fall within its scope. Parfit refers to these as *wide*, as opposed to *narrow*, person-affecting principles (Parfit, 1984, pp. 396–401). He himself adopts such a principle (Parfit, 2011). Raoul Kumar argues that the nonidentity problem would only undermine obligations to future people if harm is a necessary condition for a wrong, which it is not: there can be harmless wrongs (Kumar, 2003). And, on a wide person-affecting view, wrongs to possible people are possible, even if harms are not.

The wrong to future people is not directed at a *particular* person, but it appeals to wrongs committed to “general persons” (Parfit, 2011). Perhaps some actions could be thought to violate principles people have a generic *reason to reject* (Finneron-Burns, 2016). Perhaps creating people in certain conditions fails to show respect for them (Vrousalis, 2012) or for the humanity in them. Consider an example:

*Alfred or Betty.* A couple wants to have a child. They suffer from a rare condition, which will cause the child they would conceive now (Alfred) to lead a life barely worth living. If they wait one week, the condition will have passed. They would have a different child, Betty. She would have an excellent life (by your preferred standard). The couple knows this, but they procreate now. Alfred is born.

Intuitively, the couple acts wrongly. Why? Alfred is not harmed. Defenders of the threshold notion think Alfred is wronged if his life falls short of the threshold. Defenders of a wide person-affecting principle claim that the couple wronged Alfred by failing to respect the humanity, or dignity, in Alfred, or by treating Alfred according to principles he could reasonably have rejected.

Although these replies are intuitively plausible, the exact nature of Alfred’s complaint is difficult to grasp: what, exactly, does the wrong committed against Alfred consist in? Heyd (2014) argues against Parfit—but the worry applies more broadly—that switching to a wide person-affecting view

inevitably slides down to impersonalism. For ultimately, the only way to justify the preference of creating the happy child . . . to the less happy child . . . must be that the world will be better, i.e., there will a larger amount of overall happiness. (p. 1)

To put the objection more generally, one may think that the wrong-making features in wide person-affecting views are best seen as impersonal wrongs: life above the threshold, with dignity, or in accordance with principles generic people could not reasonably reject is better, even if it is not better for anyone. If that is right, there is no middle ground between personal and impersonal principles.

The third strategy exists in embracing impersonal values, letting go of the person-affecting principle and embracing that something *can* be better without it being better for someone. Impersonal total utilitarianism, the view that we should create a world with the largest amount of aggregate utility, does so. But this view leads to what Parfit has labeled the *repugnant conclusion* (Parfit, 1984, p. 388); that is, the world with the highest level of aggregative utility might be one where a very high number of people lead very bad lives: “greatest mass of milk might be found in a heap of bottles each containing only a single drop” (Parfit, 1984, p. 388).<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps we could appeal to a principle of procreative beneficence on the macrolevel (Savulescu, 2001), and argue that *if* people create new generations, they have an obligation to create people with the best lives. People having better, rather than worse, lives might be impersonally better. Others may appeal to other impersonal values, such as *equality* within future generations (Temkin, 1995) or across different generations (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2015, pp. 156–161), although this view is vulnerable to the leveling down objection (Parfit, 1997).

Maybe the domain of morality is not exhausted by either personal or impersonal obligations; hybrid views are possible too. David DeGrazia (2012) argues that when it comes to same-people choices (when we are dealing with existing or *future* people) we need to apply person-affecting considerations; whereas when we are dealing with different-people choices (involving *possible* people), we need to decide based on impersonal considerations. Other philosophers explicitly reject such a mix. Scanlon (1998) claims that impersonal considerations are inadmissible when we are thinking about what we owe to each other (pp. 160–161).

## Justice and Future People

It is one thing to establish that future people have moral standing, but another to establish that we have obligations of *justice* to posterity. This section asks whether we have obligations of *justice* to or concerning future generations, and—if yes—what is the *content* of these obligations is. Do theories of justice simply extend to future people, or are different kinds of principles required? There are several things that set relations with future people apart from relations among contemporaries. First, future generations do not exist now and may never exist in the future. Second, due to the unidirectionality of time, there is power asymmetry: we can shape both them and the circumstances they live in, but they cannot do so to us in return. How do these differences impact obligations?

This section will discuss three key questions of intergenerational justice. First, it asks whether future and possible people fall under the *scope* of justice: do principles of justice apply across generations? Second, what is the *content* of our obligations to future generations: what are the kinds of things we owe future people? Third, it asks *how much* we owe to future people.

### The Scope of Justice and Future Generations

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Traditionally, theories of justice have been thought to apply to people living together on a specific territory at a specific time. There is a lively ongoing debate about global justice: Is the scope of justice limited to the national sphere, or does it apply on the global level? This raises two separate but related questions. First, there is the *grounding* question: What determines whether we owe people obligations of justice? Once we have answered this question, we can move on to the *scope* question. Are the conditions that generate obligations of justice present globally or only nationally? The questions of grounds and scope need to be asked about intergenerational justice as well. Or, in other words, we have to ask whether we stand in the “circumstances of justice” (Barry, 1978; Rawls, 1971) with future generations.

One of the most famous justice theorists in contemporary political philosophy, Ronald Dworkin (1994), concluded that formulating our obligations to future generations in terms of justice

is misleading, because our concern for the future is not a concern for the rights and interests of specific people. . . . Our concern for future generations is not a matter of justice at all but of our instinctive sense that human flourishing as well as human survival is of sacred importance. (pp. 77–78)

There are broadly two families of views about the grounds of justice: interactional and noninteractional views.

### Interactional Theories

Some theorists argue that we only have obligations of justice to those with whom we stand in a particular kind of relationship: obligations of justice are not general moral obligations but special obligations. An example will help us see the difference. Take the obligations of friendship. We do not have obligations of friendship to everybody (they are not *general* duties), but only to those people with whom we stand in the relationship of friends (they are *special* duties). Interactional theorists believe that justice is like friendship: it is owed to people with whom we stand in the kind of relation that generates justice obligations. But what relationship generates obligations of justice? The literature offers several alternatives: shared coercive institutions (Blake, 2001; Nagel, 2005), shared national culture (Miller, 2007; Tamir, 1995), an intergenerational community (De-Shalit, 1995; Thompson, 2009), or a cooperative scheme for mutual advantage (Rawls, 2001; Sangiovanni, 2007). How these views work out for *intergenerational* justice is a relatively underexplored topic.

Consider the view that sharing a set of coercive laws, a form of reciprocal coercion, grounds obligations of justice. Although future generations of a particular state share a constitutional framework with current citizens (see Harb, 2014), *mutual* coercion across generations is impossible: while current generations might coerce future people, this is not reciprocal.

The view that principles of justice are duties of reciprocity among those engaged in social cooperation for mutual advantage faces similar challenges. *Direct* reciprocity does not apply across generations because of the unidirectionality of time. We can make transfers to future people, but they cannot transfer anything back. Perhaps we owe something to future people because we have received something from past people. But does receiving something generate an obligation to give on to someone else? One could point out that the idea of nonoverlapping generations is a considerable abstraction: there is chain of overlapping generations. Perhaps mutual reciprocity between the old and the young generates an intergenerational chain of reciprocity (Gauthier, 1986; Gosseries, 2009; Heath, 2013; but see Arrhenius, 1999).

Shared culture is another candidate ground of justice. Drawing on David Miller's (2005) liberal nationalist argument for legitimate partiality for compatriots, one could argue that future compatriots fall under the scope of partiality. Special obligations to compatriots flow from the nature of the relationship (as with friendship): these duties are part of what makes being a member of a nation valuable. Miller argues that international distributive justice is not feasible because of a lack of solidarity between noncompatriots. Justice to future generations might be feasible, assuming (quite plausibly) that people care about the lives of their descendants and the success of their national project.

Communitarians conceive of societies as transgenerational communities, a partnership between different generations. Arguably, we owe it to past generations to continue their projects, to each other to protect *our* life-transcending projects, and to future members of our cooperative project who will continue our efforts (De-Shalit, 1995; Thompson, 2009). The claim that life-transcending projects are important to people is quite plausible (Heyd, 1994, pp. 210–228; Scheffler, 2013). So, on this basis, one could argue that we have duties of justice to future generations of the same intergenerational community, for example, national intergenerational justice.

This touches on a possible feature of interactionalists' theories. Some interactionalists believe the scope of justice is global (because the relevant feature is present at the global level), such as Van Parijs (2007). Some believe that the scope of justice is intergenerational, such as De-Shalit (1995); and others, like Dworkin, that it applies only across contemporaries. Interactionalists' theories, then, can defend three different positions: the scope of justice is global and intergenerational, global and only intragenerational, and—finally—national and intragenerational (Vrousalis, 2016).

## Noninteractionalist Theories

Noninteractional theorists see obligations of justice as general obligations owed to everybody or, at least, to all beings with the necessary features for moral equality. Examples of such features include sentience in utilitarian theories (Singer, 1975), membership of the human species (Caney, 2006), self-ownership in libertarian theories (Nozick, 1974; Steiner & Vallentyne, 2009), and autonomy or human dignity (Beyleveld, 2016; Hiskes, 2009).

Do future people fall under the scope of justice on these accounts? The nonidentity problem arises again. We usually think of justice as being about how well people do or about respecting people's moral status. It is not, usually, thought to be about which states of affairs are impersonally better. If one thinks the nonidentity problem undermines the possibility of strict person-affecting duties to future generations, we either have to give up on the idea of intergenerational justice, as Dworkin or Heyd (1994, 2009) suggest, or give up the idea that justice is strictly about person-affecting obligations.

Does justice, properly understood, contain wide person-affecting principles, or even impersonal principles? Accepting that it does comes at some theoretical cost: theories of justice would not merely be about what *people* are owed, but also about what *state of the world* is better than others. Some justice theorists might think this is an easy bullet to bite. (Mildly perfectionist) liberals might claim that a world in which people are able to formulate and pursue plans they reflectively endorse is better, even if not better for anyone, than a world in which (different) people cannot do those things, and egalitarians might claim that a (more) equal world is better than a less equal one even if it is not better for anyone.

Some philosophers argue that even if the nonidentity problem undermines obligations *to* future generations, we can still have obligations *concerning* future generations, hence circumventing the nonidentity problem. Anca Gheaus and Axel Gosseries argue (in different ways) for an obligation to make sure future generations are not badly off by working through generational overlap. An argument from overlap goes something like this: the currently adult population has obligations of justice to the currently young, and the currently young will have an obligation to the young when they are adults. It would be wrong for current adults to place the currently young in a situation where they cannot act on their obligations (or, as Gheaus argues, where they are confronted with the choice of not having children or creating children whose rights will be violated). Their children, in turn, will have such an obligation to their children, etcetera (Gheaus, 2016; Gosseries, 2008a). Such an approach grounds duties *concerning*, but not *to*, future generations.

## Hybrid Views

It is important to note that those who believe that obligations of justice are interactional do not necessarily deny that we have general obligations altogether. Most of those who defend a restricted scope endorse two-tier views: we have one set of obligations of justice to one group, and less demanding (and often less binding) obligations to others. Perhaps we owe future generations *duties of humanity*, or duties of *minimal justice*. Many interactional theorists argue

that we owe something like this to foreigners (e.g., Miller, 2007; Nagel, 2005). Possible views include a negative duty not to *harm* future generations (but no positive obligation to *benefit* them), or one that claims there is a positive duty to see to it that everybody's human rights are protected.

Rawls's view of intergenerational justice takes such a hybrid form. He defends a just-savings principle, which requires that enough be transferred to future generations to establish or maintain just institutions (Rawls, 1971, 2005). Once this threshold has been reached, there is no further duty to save. His—more demanding—two principles of justice do not, on his view, apply across generations (Attas, 2009; Gaspart & Gosseries, 2007). It is not completely clear whether Rawls thinks this is a duty *to* future generations (i.e., that we would *wrong them* if we did not act on the savings principle), or whether he thinks that just institutions, or people living together under just institutions, have impersonal value (i.e., that the world would be worse if we did not act on the savings principle).

Suppose that we can successfully include future generations under the scope of justice, either on *interactionalist* grounds or on *noninteractionalist* grounds. This settles that we have obligations of justice toward future people. But what kind of duties are they? What is the content of our obligations: that is, what do we owe to future people, and how much?

## Currency and Future Generations

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The question of *what* we owe to future generations consists of two intimately related questions. We need to settle on *how much* we owe to future people and on as *what* the object of these obligations is. An answer to the first question has two parts. First, we need to ask what the right currency of justice is: the distribution of *what* is justice concerned with? Second, we need to ask whether justice requires the same in the intergenerational case as in the intragenerational case.

There are several prominent candidate currencies of justice: welfare, opportunity for welfare, primary goods, resources, capabilities, and, perhaps, recognition or respect. Often, questions of intergenerational extension prove to be important test-cases for principles of justice. This is certainly true for debates about currency. Some currencies of justice prove to have especially troublesome implications in the intergenerational realm.

Take welfarism. This is the view that distributive justice aims at fairly distributing well-being or welfare. Imagine the following scenario:

*Cheap Justice.* Generation 1 spends resources lavishly, at an unsustainable rate, destroying natural beauty and diminishing the productive capacity of the planet. Through education and parenting, they instill preferences in their children, generation 2, which can be satisfied with very little use of resources. As a result, generation 2 has much less resources but equal levels of welfare.

Welfarist egalitarians (Cohen, 1989; Lippert-Rasmussen, 2015), it seems, are unable to judge Generation 1's behavior as unjust (Barry, 1997; Page, 2007). Welfarist justice is compatible with transferring an impoverished world to future generations, as long as we make sure people have cheap tastes: less resources combined with cheaper tastes does, after all, not lead to a reduction in welfare. One may think that that this is an unacceptable implication, and that this says something about the plausibility of welfare as a currency of justice, although one may argue that we should simply accept this implication of the view (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2012).

Resourcist theories, which claim that justice is about the fair distribution of the means to pursue plans, are arguably vulnerable to a damaging version of the slavery-of-the-talented objection: the time of earlier generations is a very valuable resource, because all subsequent generations would profit from investments made by past generations. Leisure for earlier generations, then, is very costly. After all, the opportunity cost of earlier generations lazing around instead of engaging in productive labor will have consequences for all generations that follow. If we allocate resources based on their value (determined through, say, a Dworkinian hypothetical auction), earlier generations will not be able to afford leisure time with their fair share of resources (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2012). If resource egalitarians cannot deflect this objection, either by rejecting the idea of intergenerational justice more generally (as Dworkin did) or by showing that the implication can be avoided, it arguably makes equality of resources an unattractive ideal. Resourcist sufficientarians (see the discussion in "*How Much Do We Owe*") may not be vulnerable to this worry, because they do not aim at maximizing resource sets but at making sure future generations have *enough*. One may also think that both resources and welfare are not able to deal with questions of intergenerational justice in an acceptable way, and that the capability approach, with its focus on the distribution of capabilities rather than resources or outcomes, deals best with the intergenerational case (Claassen, 2016; Page, 2007).

So far, we have assumed that the currency of intergenerational justice is the same as the currency of intragenerational justice, but this may not be the case. Especially those who defend interactional theories of justice may think that the content of our obligations to future generations is radically different from that of our obligations to contemporaries. In the global justice literature, some philosophers argue that the kind of thing we owe to our fellow nationals is different from what we owe to foreigners. For example, one may argue that we owe equality of resources to the former and nonharm to the latter. Such a two-tier view may also be thought to apply intergenerationally. One may argue that we have associational obligations of justice to contemporaries (nationally or globally), and noninteractional obligations to future generations. In Rawls's view, *what* we owe to future generations is just institutions, not primary goods. There are other candidate noninteractional obligations: perhaps justice among contemporaries is about distributing benefits, and intergenerational justice about avoiding harm. Alternatively, one may argue that we owe future generations conditions under which their human rights are protected.

Although it is not a question about the right currency, a question defenders of any currency will need to answer is *what* the content of the package we should transfer to future generations. This ties in with the discussion between the defenders of strong sustainability and of weak

sustainability. Defenders of weak sustainability believe that man-made capital can substitute for lost natural capital (Solow, 1993); whereas defenders of strong sustainability are more skeptical about substitution (Beckerman, 1995). Two questions arise here.

First, we need to ask whether a particular good can be substituted to fulfill a particular function. Take environmental degradation. If natural beauty is destroyed, can we substitute natural beauty with other things of beauty? Can the function that one good plays for current generations be replaced by another good without the loss of the function? It is implausible to claim that no natural resources can be substituted: this would imply that we should leave all nonrenewable resources untouched (and so should future generations). Some goods are clearly substitutable: fossil fuels provide energy, but transferring renewable energy sources to future people will do just as well.

Second, there is the question whether some functions are adequate substitutes for other functions. Can the loss of some functions be compensated for by transferring other possibilities? Say that there is a unique value to enjoying natural beauty; no other good can adequately fulfill that function. But could the loss of this particular function be compensated for by transferring other functions, like a fantastic arts scene and beautiful artifacts? If one thinks that we owe future generations a sufficient range of options, it does not necessarily matter if some meaningful options disappear and are replaced by others (but see Zwarthoed, 2016). Some functions are certainly crucial: nothing can compensate for insufficient sources of food or clean water.

Capability theorists in particular will insist that we need to transfer enough for people to have *all* their basic capabilities met: not having a basic capability protected cannot be offset by having more of another (Claassen, 2016; Page, 2007). Alternatively, one might argue that it matters that future generations have sufficient valuable options available to them, but that these options do not need to be the same as *our* options. This will allow for a higher degree of substitutability. If one accepts a welfarist view, aimed at preference satisfaction, everything is substitutable as long as it does the job of satisfying future people's preferences (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2012; Vrousalis, 2016).

## How Much Do We Owe?

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Having discussed the grounds on which and the goods that we owe future people as a matter of justice, it is time to turn to the question *how much* we owe to future people. This is a question about the right pattern of intergenerational justice. There are several prominent candidates for patterns of intergenerational justice, but this section focuses on sufficiency and equality, and a view that denies that theories of justice should aim to preserve certain patterns: libertarianism. Finally, the question is asked whether there are reasons to *discount* the interests of future people, as this would significantly impact distributive obligations under any pattern.

## Egalitarianism

Egalitarians believe that justice requires an equal distribution of the relevant currency. Welfare egalitarians believe justice requires that people are equally well off in terms of welfare; resource egalitarians, that people are equally well off in terms of resources, etcetera. This does not mean that egalitarians think inequalities are never justified. Responsibility-sensitive theorists of justice think that inequalities are not unjust if they are the result of people's free choices. Luck egalitarians place this idea at the heart of egalitarianism; they believe nobody should be worse off than others through no fault of their own. Other egalitarians introduce efficiency considerations. Rawlsians, for example, argue that inequalities are just if they are to the maximum advantage of the least well off (leximin efficiency). These views lead to radically different requirements of intergenerational justice. Some luck egalitarians will argue that the fact that we are better off than past generations is an injustice: after all, the time at which one is born is a matter of brute luck. Past generations then—or future generations if they are worse off than previous generations—have a justice-based complaint *simply* because they are less well off through no fault of their own (assuming they are not responsible for their own disadvantage). It is important to note that the nonidentity problem has no grip on this egalitarian principle (although it does make it vulnerable to the leveling down objection, see Segall & Hirose, 2016), because it considers equality as an impersonal value: justice requires equality *even if it benefits nobody*. It is also important to point out that most luck egalitarians are value pluralists: they believe equality is one value among many. Most luck egalitarians do not believe that we have to realize equality across generations. Rather, from their commitment to luck egalitarianism, it follows that they think we have *a reason* to do so, but perhaps not a decisive one taking other considerations into account.

A leximin egalitarian is not committed to such a position: she will argue that, given that there is nothing we can do to improve the position of past generations, efficiency requires that we improve the position of the least well-off group whose position we *can* improve (Van Parijs, 2003). Intergenerational justice, on such a view, requires that we make the intergenerationally least well off as well off as possible—whenever they are. Gaspart and Gosseries (2007) argue that leximin egalitarianism leads to the same conclusion as strict-egalitarian principles. A prohibition on savings follows, on their view, from a commitment to intergenerational leximin egalitarianism, because higher savings would violate intergenerational leximin: savings could also have been invested in the intragenerationally least well off.

## Sufficientarianism

Sufficientarianism is the view that justice requires that people be brought up to a certain threshold. Intergenerational sufficientarians believe that intergenerational justice requires that we transfer *enough* to future generations. Paula Casal (2007) distinguishes between two versions of the sufficientarian thesis: the positive and the negative (p. 297). Defenders of *positive thesis* emphasize the importance of bringing people up to this threshold, but defenders of the *positive thesis* do not deny that inequalities above the threshold could be a concern as well. Defenders of the *negative thesis* argue that all inequalities above the threshold are irrelevant from the point of

view of justice. An intergenerational sufficientarian may think that it matters *most* that future generations live lives above the threshold, or that it matters *just* that people live above the threshold.

There are different ways to set the threshold. The content of the threshold depends on the currency of intergenerational justice one endorses, and thresholds may be set higher or lower. One may think that we have an obligation to make sure that future people have their basic rights protected, that they will lead lives with a certain amount of welfare, or that they have sufficient resources to lead meaningful and flourishing lives.

There are several arguments for sufficientarianism in the intergenerational realm. One may think that this is best for impersonal reasons (it is better, even if it is not better for anyone), or for wide person-affecting reasons. Sufficiency as a pattern for intergenerational justice is often endorsed by those who endorse a wide person-affecting view, or with defenders of the threshold notion of harm. Because they are not concerned how *particular* people fare but with how generic future people far, they tend to focus on the generic requirements for respecting what needs respecting in future people (dignity, reasonableness, human flourishing) rather than how much ends up with particular people.

## Relational Equality

The distinction between sufficiency and equality is not so clear-cut from certain theoretical perspectives. Relational egalitarians argue that those who think that justice requires an equal *distribution* are mistaken (e.g., Axelsen & Nielsen, 2015): we should be concerned with people's equal standing, and this may not require distributional equality (Anderson, 2010; Scheffler, 2003) but rather distributional sufficiency. What relational equality requires in terms of intergenerational justice is a so far unexplored topic, but—insofar as we are concerned with treating people as free and equal citizens—it is clear that this cannot be required between generations. We cannot interact with future and possible people as our moral equals, because they do not exist. However, if we interpret the relational egalitarian ideal in impersonal terms—that is, that it is good, even if good for nobody, that people live in a society in which they are treated as free and equal—we end up with something like Rawls's *savings principle*. We have reasons to make sure that future people inherit a natural world and institutions that are conducive to this ideal. Transferring stable just institutions is probably an important element of this.

Philosophers endorsing a particular pattern in the intragenerational domain do not necessarily endorse that same pattern in the intergenerational domain. Rawls believes that his principles of justice do not apply across generations, just as he believes they do not apply across states (see, e.g., Meijers, 2017). His intergenerational view is a form of *institutional sufficientarianism*. These dualist approaches are not uncommon, but they raise an important question: *what* justifies this difference? This brings us back to the scope question: Rawls, and others who endorse different principles in different domains, will have to argue that the kind of relation that we stand in with future generations triggers different obligations from the kind of relation we stand in with our contemporaries (Gosseries, 2014a; Paden, 1997). Those with an associational view may have an answer: because our relations differ, our obligations differ as well.

## Libertarianism

Libertarian theories reject patterned theories of distributive justice (Nozick, 1974); they deny that distributions need to have a particular shape. These theories take the idea of self-ownership as a starting point, from which property rights follow: they focus on the process by which distributions come about, not on the distribution itself. Three principles are central: the principle of just acquisition (an object needs to be appropriated in the right way), the principle of just transfer (objects can change ownership through voluntary transfers by their legitimate owner) and the principle of compensation (in case either of the previous principles are violated).

There is a fundamental disagreement between right-libertarianism and left-libertarianism. Right-libertarians believe the planet was unowned before people started appropriating, whereas left-libertarians believe everybody has equal ownership of the earth. Nozick, the most famous right-libertarian, is not explicit about questions of intergenerational justice. But given that intergenerational justice is about intergenerational transfers, one may conclude that transfers between generations are just if, and only if, the transferred goods of which (a) the original acquisition of the unowned object was to nobody's detriment, and (b) it has been transferred by its legitimate owner voluntarily. Does that mean that legitimate property owners can simply destroy what they own and transfer nothing to future people?

One could appeal to a variant of the Lockean proviso to argue that appropriation is just if and only if it makes nobody worse off than they would have been without the appropriation. This grounds a duty to leave a world in which future generations are not worse off than in one in which there would have been no appropriation (Gosseries, 2008b). Note, however, that this introduces a comparative element, which—because of the nonidentity problem—raises important difficulties, as we have seen. Left-libertarians defend a more demanding principle, and claim that appropriation and use of an object is just if and only if it leaves others with an equally valuable set of opportunities to use unowned resources (Otsuka, 1998; Steiner & Vallentyne, 2009). Left-libertarianism, setting the bar much higher than its right-wing counterpart, “requires that the members of each succeeding generation have at least as great an opportunity to own worldly resources as did the first generation to acquire resources out of a state of nature” (Otsuka, 1998, p. 88).

## Discounting

For all of the distributive views discussed so far, an important question is whether the interests of future people have the same weight as the interests of current people. Some think we should *discount* the interests of future people, and that the further away in the future they are, the more heavily we should discount their interests. Economists generally employ this in cost-benefit analyses of future scenarios (Dasgupta, 2008; Stern, 2007, p. 50). When making calculations about, for example, the cost of climate change, factoring in a discount rate can have great consequences: even a very low discount rate (say, 5% or less every 100 years) will make tremendous disasters in the far future morally trivial today. But should future damages be seen as

less important than damages today? These questions matter especially, but not solely, when we are thinking about the harms of climate change, and how much we should do to limit it (Caney, 2008).

At first sight, discounting seems impermissible because it runs against the idea that all people—future or present—are moral equals. Suffering is not less bad if it takes place farther in the future. Yet, there are several possible grounds for discounting. For example, one may worry that, assuming that humanity will continue to exist for a long time, future people greatly outnumber current people. If their interests are assigned equal weight, it seems that current generations will always lose out. This could be seen as too demanding (Caney, 2008). A utilitarian theory, combined with a prohibition on discounting, may lead to extremely high savings rates. Utilitarianism may only be plausible with a discount rate. If one rejects utilitarianism, one can conclude with Rawls that “these devices [discounting] simply mitigate the consequences of mistaken principles” (Rawls, 1971, p. 296; Roser, 2009).

In the philosophical literature, several philosophers have scrutinized lists of possible arguments for discounting only to conclude that none succeed (Caney, 2008; Cowen & Parfit, 1992). Quite unusually for philosophy, there is broad consensus that moral discounting is impermissible. If future people matter morally, they matter as much as current people. Although, as some point out, sometimes economists are simply talking about the value of commodities when they discount, and this may be unproblematic (Broome, 1994).

## Policies to Secure Intergenerational Justice

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Now that we have covered some of the more philosophical questions around intergenerational justice, we can end by looking at some policy questions. It is one thing to have a set of principles of intergenerational justice and objectives to realize; it is quite another to get political institutions and individuals to act in accordance with these duties. But there are some possible policies that could promote intergenerational justice.

## Changing Institutions

One may worry that democratic institutions can stand in tension with the demands of intergenerational justice. Decisions taken by these institutions affect the kind of lives future people will live, but future people do not have a voice in the decision. Because of the lack of a vote and voice of future people, intergenerational considerations may receive little consideration. Some even argue that representative democracy leads to short-termism, or what Thompson called *presentism* (Thompson, 2010). Should we tinker with democratic institutions to increase the likelihood that democratic decisions will be in accordance with the demands of intergenerational justice?

## (Parliamentary) Representation

The average age of politicians and members of parliament is much higher than the age of the average population. Will a relatively old legislative body do what is needed for younger and future generations? Or should the young, or future generations, be represented in legislative bodies—perhaps by introducing youth quota (Bidadanure, 2016b)?

The lack of representation of the young in parliament could itself be seen as an injustice, in the way that an all-male parliament would be unjust: a large part of the population is not represented. But one may also think that better, more just, decisions are likely to come out of a more diverse parliament. Two questions arise. First, is it permissible to tweak democratic institutions to influence the outcome of decision-making to advance the goal of justice? This is an important debate in democratic theory, concerning the relation between justice and democracy. Second, we need to ask whether having a younger parliament would, in fact, improve decisions. We cannot be certain about this, but perhaps presence would increase the likelihood that the young's interests will be known and taken seriously (Bidadanure, 2015). Would having a younger parliament promote justice to more remote generations? Although the young have interests that extend into the future for a bit longer, it does not seem that when it comes to remote generations they are in either a better epistemic or motivational position to stand up for remote generations (Karnein & Roser, 2015).

Should we give future generations a voice in parliament? One could argue that given the fact that future generations are affected by decisions made now, they have a right to decide. However, they do not exist and may never exist, so they cannot be represented in the same way as existing people can be. Can someone represent their *interests*? Some countries have experimented with representation for remote future generations, inside and outside of parliaments. Hungary had ombudsman for future generations, and Israel had a parliamentary commissioner for future generations. There are some epistemic problems: can we know what the interests of future generations are? The importance of this should not be overstated. Although we do not know what future people want and need exactly, even for remote generations we know that what their needs as human beings are. Having a representative of future generations, or perhaps even a representative of the environment (Dobson, 1996), somewhere in the law-making process could have an effect on deliberation. This might even be true if the representative does not have any legislative power, but simply gets to have a say. The mere fact that someone voices objections and demands on behalf of future people may force lawmakers to take them into consideration and to justify going against the demands voiced (Ekeli, 2005).

Are measures that give *actual* power—votes in parliament or veto rights over legislation—to representatives of future people acceptable? Perhaps one worries that it is antidemocratic, but this depends on one's view of who the demos is. Some argue that decisions are not truly democratic if they are not taken by all affected (Goodin, 2007) or, at least, not until the interests of all affected have been heard and taken into consideration. This question is a variety of the boundary-problem: *who* is the demos that is supposed to make a decision? If future generations are part of the demos in a relevant sense, they need to have a voice. Or, at the very least, their interests need to be taken into account as if they had a voice when making decisions. However, nonidentity may make such a claim problematic (Heyward, 2008).

## Changing the Electorate

Instead of changing the decision-making process, we could also try to make it more likely that voters will elect politicians who are likely to act on the demands of intergenerational justice. One controversial proposal is to take away the voting rights of the elderly in order to make political parties less concerned with the interests of the elderly and the “grey vote.” But for this to have an effect either on age-group justice or justice to future generations, it would have to be *true* either that elderly voters focus more on the short term (Van Parijs, 1998) or that political parties cater to the interests of the elderly. There is no conclusive evidence for the former (the young generally vote like the old), but there is evidence for the latter (Vanhuysse & Goerres, 2013). But even if it would be effective, would it be desirable? Although it does not lead to inequality over whole lives (just as disenfranchisement of the young does not), one may think that justice requires that all adults have equal political rights.

Instead of disenfranchising the old, we could enfranchise the young. Not necessarily by letting children vote, but by giving their parents the right to vote on behalf of their children as well. This proposal seems less unfair than the previous proposal, although one could worry that it is a *de facto* violation of the one-person-one-vote standard. In addition, we should ask whether it will have the desired result: will parents use their child’s vote to vote for parties that will do better from the point of view of age-group justice? Moreover, one could argue that this proposal would in effect give a lot of votes to people who behave *irresponsibly* with regard to future generations, because having many children contributes and exacerbates existing sustainability challenges we face.

## Legal Constraints on Democratic Decisions

Instead of tinkering with democratic institutions, one could also try to *contain* the domain of democratic decision-making. For example, by codifying the demands of justice into positive law, limiting the possibilities of democratic decision-making through what Michael Kates (2015) calls counter-majoritarian devices. A powerful way to do this would probably be to add a clause to the constitution on duties to future generations, or through an international treaty that takes precedence over national law. There are at least two ways in which positive law could be used to protect future people.

First, current generations could enshrine obligations to future generations in positive law. International or constitutional courts, depending on the country, could then test legislation against these higher order legal principles, and overturn laws that violate the codified duty toward future generations. For example, laws that would lead to a tremendous increase in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions could be overturned by such court on the grounds that it is incompatible with constitutional or international legal requirements regarding future generations, regardless of whether parliament approved the law or not.

There are important worries about such a proposal. First, it would shift power from the legislative to the judicial branch. This may not be a worry when constitutional rights of current generations are at stake, but given the amount of disagreement and uncertainty about our moral obligations

to future people and epistemic uncertainty about the effects of some laws, one may think that these are essential political judgments, which need to be made by elected representatives, not judges. Second, we would need to ask *which* future generations judges should protect. If it is national legislation, should courts only look after obligations to *their own* future generations? Should the German constitutional court just check whether German legislation does not impermissibly affect future Germans, or should it worry about the impact on future Dutch or Bangladeshi, too? Given the differential geographical impact of, for example, global warming (rising sea levels will be more of a problem for future Dutch and Bangladeshi than for future Germans) a lot hinges on this question.

Second, state constitutions are often conceived as *perpetual* constitutions, which aim to “settle the political structure of a society a secure the rights of its citizens, not for a fixed and finite period of time . . . but rather indefinitely” (Muñiz-Fraticelli, 2009, p. 377). Yet they often have clauses stipulating how they can be changed. Constitutions can be more or less rigid (i.e., easy to change). One could aim to protect the democratic ground rules and the rights of future citizens by making a constitution harder, or impossible, to change.

One may of course wonder whether this is particularly effective. A prospective dictator may disregard a rigid constitution as much as a more flexible one. Moreover, states can start over, with a new constitution (the French talk of their state as the fifth French Republic!). Even if it does make it harder for future leaders to act unjustly, there are important worries.

First, there is the *generational sovereignty objection*. Rigid constitutions would not only be undemocratic; they would violate generational sovereignty (Muñiz-Fraticelli, 2009): the dead<sup>6</sup> are effectively imposing laws on the living, or at least setting the limits within which the living can make laws. One may reject this worry by claiming that consent is not particularly important for justice: even if future people disagree with basic rights, they still do not have a right to change the constitutions. This is exactly why we made the constitution rigid to begin with. Second, we may raise the *epistemic immodesty worry*. Current generations may, of course, be wrong about what justice requires. Is it not epistemically immodest to think that current generations know what justice requires and hence are entitled to impose it on future generations?

An analogy makes these objections vivid. Suppose that people from Zimbabwe would impose a constitution on Japan against the will of the Japanese. Would this be acceptable? Although intuitively the answer is that it is not, it is at first sight unclear what the difference with the intergenerational case is. If one thinks the analogy is convincing, and that there is at least a strong *pro tanto* case for generational sovereignty, one has a choice to make. Either give up generational sovereignty or the protection offered by a rigid, fair constitution. In other words, we have to choose between “the non-rigidity of a fair constitution, or the unfairness of a rigid constitution?” (Gosseries, 2014c). However, changing the rules of the democratic game is not the only way to (try to) secure intergenerational justice, there are ways to influence people’s behavior more directly.

## Changing Behavior

Policies could also try to influence present people's behavior. One strategy consists in creating *incentives* for existing people to behave in ways compatible with obligations of intergenerational justice. For example, one could make environmentally unsustainable products more expensive by increasing the value-added tax, or by subsidizing choices that are less resource intensive. Examples include improving public transport, subsidizing vegetarian diets, and facilitating recycling. Nudges are a more subtle way to influence choices (not, strictly speaking, incentives) which aim to make it more likely that people make environmentally friendly choices (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009, pp. 185–200). One could also increase the likelihood that people will opt for environmentally friendly options by making these the *default* options. People would have to *choose* the bad option, instead of *choosing* the right option.

## (Tradable) Quota

Two concrete examples are worth mentioning here: tradable emission quota and proactive quota (De La Croix & Gosseries, 2009). Tradable emissions are the less controversial idea, and we'll focus on that idea here. In light of climate change and the need to reduce emissions, some propose tradable quotas. Tradable emission quotas are already a fact, but not for individuals. Should they be created for individuals as well?

Tradable quota schemes involve three steps: establishing what total amount of emissions is desirable (or acceptable), distributing the available permissions fairly, and setting up a market to trade. Hence, *cap and trade*. This would be a way, if complied with, to steer behavior and create incentives to lower emissions (Gosseries, 2015, pp. 98–105).

There are several objections to such schemes. The first we could call the *commodification objection*. The commodification of emissions could be considered wrongful because it allows people to buy the right to act in environmentally unfriendly ways (Goodin, 1994); it could be seen as buying a right to do wrong. One may also worry that once one pays for emissions, it removes the stigma from environmentally unfriendly behavior (Sandel, 2006, pp. 93–96).

Second, one could object that quota schemes are *isolationist*: why should we focus on the distribution of one particular good, and not on how goods are more generally distributed? Perhaps, given that the policy goal is climate-change reduction, this is unproblematic insofar as isolating one distributive dimension allows us to reach that goal. But tradable quotas do not need to be isolationist. A lot hinges here on what the *fair* distribution of emission entitlements is. An equal distribution of emission entitlements is isolationist, and fails to take both general inequalities and responsibility for the need to cut emissions into account (Caney, 2012). But if we, for general distributive reasons, assign a greater share to the least well off, they could sell a part. That way, making a particular good tradable could have general distributive implications.

## Changing People

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### Education

One way to make people behave in ways conducive to intergenerational justice is through education (Bell, 2004). Education can do this in two distinct ways. One, education can raise awareness of the implications of our decisions for others, notably in our case for future people. One could hope that, simply *showing* people how high levels of consumption (for example) affect living standards of future people might make them want to change their behavior. You may also convince people that resource-intensive lifestyles are not always better lives: lives less focused on consumption may be equally attractive, or even more so.

One could also aim for *moral* education, trying to teach people to reflect on their obligations to future people. This can either be done by making people more aware of their moral obligations, or by cultivating certain *virtues* in education that are conducive to people making choices compatible with obligations of intergenerational justice. Frugality could be an example of such a virtue (Zwarthoed, 2015b).

### Preference Formation

What future people want from life is something we, to some extent, control. We could instill a cheap or frugal environmentally-friendly preference in future generations. We could do so for two reasons. First, we would have to transfer less to give them good lives. Second, it would be much easier for them to live within their means (Zwarthoed, 2015a, 2016). This strategy is particular, because it does not concern a strategy that *motivates* current generations to care for future generations: it simply aligns their desires with their obligations. It makes compliance with the demands of intergenerational morality less difficult (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2012).

This strategy is not without worries. The first motivation mentioned seems impermissible: it would allow us to dodge our obligations of intergenerational justice. Future generations will have fewer resources at their disposal, which is intuitively unfair (Page, 2007). Welfarist theorists, who care about people's (opportunity for) the realization of welfare, will not judge this particularly unjust: in fact, it may be a particularly efficient way to make people's lives better.

However, *liberal* theorists may worry about the circumstances in which people's preferences came about. Liberal theorists emphasize the importance of people's ability to live according to plans they themselves reflectively endorse. If cheap preferences can only be instilled through brainwashing, or by using other means that violate autonomy, one may object to this strategy on these grounds.

## (Moral) Bio-Enhancement

Some philosophers entertain the idea of changing human beings in a more literal sense. For example, we could think of making people smaller, or allergic to meat. This would reduce the environmental impact of individual human beings (Liao, Sandberg, & Roache, 2012). Others take things a step further. Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu are pessimistic about the chances that education and institutional engineering can steer people's behavior in sustainable direction to a sufficient degree. They think democratic decision-making, in combination with certain features of common-sense morality, makes us—human beings—fundamentally unfit to deal with the sustainability challenges we face (Persson & Savulescu, 2012). They make the case for *moral* bio-enhancement: perhaps the only way to keep democratic institutions *and* avoid disaster is to make the electorate—and human beings—morally better. For example, we could try to make people care more about distant people, or be less biased toward their own interests. These proposals raise some worries, regarding risks, uncertainty, and effectivity but, most importantly, freedom: are people “designed” to always do the right thing still free (DeGrazia, 2013; Harris, 2011)?

## Further Reading

Broome, J. (2012). *Climate Matters*. New York: Norton.

A great introduction to the ethics of climate change and obligations to future generations by one of the world's most influential ethicists.

Gosseries, A., & Gonzales-Ricoy, I. (Eds.). (2016). *Institutions for future generations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This edited volume offers excellent philosophical discussions about both intergenerational justice and particular policy proposals aimed at realizing intergenerational justice.

Gosseries, A., & Meyer, L. (2009). *Intergenerational justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

An important collection of essays dealing with questions of intergenerational justice from a variety of theoretical perspectives.

Meyer, L. (2015). Intergenerational justice. In E. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-intergenerational/> <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-intergenerational/>>.

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One of the first edited volumes on intergenerational justice, it contains several excellent papers. See especially the chapters by Brian Barry and Jan Narveson.

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## Notes

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1. Not all questions of intergenerational morality are discussed here. The most significant omission is that of what we could call *backward looking* questions of intergenerational justice: who is responsible for things that happened in the past, such as historical emissions, slavery, or colonialism? In addition, the focus here is on macro-level obligations, not obligations, say, in the familial sphere. Although one may reasonably believe that there are also special obligations of intergenerational justice that rely on personal relations (say, to one's offspring or one's children), this entry focuses on questions that play on the macro-scale, what people owe to each other as co-citizens or as co-humans, not what people owe to each other as friends, family, or neighbors. For two relatively recent volumes on procreative ethics, see Archard and Benatar (2010); and Hannan, Brennan, and Vernon (2015).
2. For other discussions around the creation of new people, see the relevant literature in population ethics and bioethics, Brake and Millum (2016).
3. Yet others argue that coming into existence is always a harm and that for this reason, creating new people is always wrong (Benatar, 2006), at least pro tanto (DeGrazia, 2012, pp. 137–162).
4. In addition, one could argue that *existing* people have an important interest in future generations doing well: many of our plans are life transcending. It may be a matter of self-interest, or obligations to contemporaries, to make sure future generations do well. See Heyd (1994); Meijers (2016, p. 201); Scheffler (2013).
5. Critical-level utilitarians attempt to avoid this conclusion by introducing a critical threshold. They argue that we should not start weighing people's utility until they have reached a certain utility level. The intuition is that the allocation of utility across different people matters. It is bad to create lives with very little utility; lives need at least a certain amount of utility. Critical-level utilitarians can both stick to the intuition that aggregative utility matters and also avoid the repugnant conclusion (Blackorby, Bossert, & Donaldson, 1997).

6. If the dead can have interests and rights—a hotly debated topic in moral philosophy—they may be part of the intergenerational demos, too. The implications of such a view remain largely unexplored. For the moral status of the dead, see, e.g., Gosseries (2003); Partridge (1981); and Taylor (2005).

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