

Our Responsibility to Future Generations in the Context of Ecological Crisis: Perspectives and Future Challenges

Laura García-Portela
University of Valencia

Abstract: The present article aims to present how the different philosophical perspectives have tackled the problem of the foundations of our responsibility to future generations in the context of ecological crisis. The main theories addressed here will be Hans Jonas metaphysical foundation, utilitarianism, communitarianism, the rights theory and contractarian perspectives derived from John Rawls's theory. By assessing these perspectives, I assert that, against jonasianism and related perspectives, our responsibilities to future generations must be thought of in terms of "political, not metaphysical". The foundation of these responsibilities must be based, not on God, nor compassion, nor benevolence, nor identity sentiments, but on a conception of ourselves as rational and reasonable persons. From my point of view, we must find our responsibilities to future generations in our respect for their necessities and interests as well as in the maintenance of their available opportunities. This point of view allows us to point out some of our future challenges in the intergenerational justice scope.

Introduction

One of the most important challenges that twentieth-century philosophy has to face is to think about the consequences of the finitude and vulnerability of the biosphere, revealed by the ecological crisis. The development of modern capitalism increases the power of the actions of human beings over the world, and also our knowledge about its harmful effects. This pairing of power and knowledge constitutes a new era: "the far-reaching-moral era". We could understand this period as one in which our actions and our knowledge of their effects spread beyond our species

and beyond the temporal limits of our present situation. The increase in our capacity for action and our knowledge forces us to think about the enlargement of the limits of our responsibility, in a biological and in a temporal sense. In this communication I would like to focus my attention on the temporal dimension of this enlargement of our responsibility.

As Ernest Partridge pointed out in the earlier 80s (1980: 13), “the meta-ethical task of explaining the moral concepts that may apply to the posterity question and defining the rules for justifying claims of responsibility to the future falls to the moral philosopher, who also has the normative task of articulating moral principles of duty to future generations. Yet while occupied with these abstract and theoretical questions, the moral philosopher must endeavour, with deliberate haste, to bridge the gap between concepts, principles and theories, on the one hand, and working policies and practical moral judgements on the other”.

My aim here is to face the first meta-ethical task: how to justify what we owe to posterity? For this purpose, I’m going to analyze the different philosophical foundations of our responsibilities to future generations. The main theories addressed in this communication will be Hans Jonas’s metaphysical foundation, utilitarianism, communitarianism, and contractarian perspectives derived from John Rawls’s theory. By assessing these perspectives, I assert that, the foundation of these responsibilities must be based on a motivation to satisfy our normative conception of ourselves as autonomous, free, rational and reasonable persons, and in the value of those elements as things to bequeath to future generations. From my point of view, we must find our responsibilities to future generations in our respect for the necessities and interests of future generations and in the maintenance of their available opportunities for their development as autonomous persons. This point of view allows us to point out some of our future challenges in the intergenerational justice scope.

Hans Jonas’s Metaphysical Foundations

Hans Jonas was one of the first philosophers who analyzed the way in which the development of technoscience affected to the nature and the catastrophic ecological consequences for future generations and for the survival of our species.

Technoscience has been developed in a circular dialectic that makes its development unstoppable. Technoscience is constantly producing new objectives for itself for which satisfaction becomes a necessity. This way of working not only produces an exponential quantitative increment of the effects of technoscience, but also qualitative changes on them. The main one

is that the effects of technoscience become irreversible. This irreversibility modifies the future of the world in a definite way and imposes burdens on future generations. Our ethics cannot yet be thought in terms of “here and now”, but in a far and future reaching way. This means that we must spread the way in which we have thought out our responsibility.

Hans Jonas thought that because our actions could destroy the future existence of humanity, and we know that it could be so, we have the responsibility of maintaining the existence of human beings on the Earth. This is why he formulated his “imperatives”, in an analogous way to Kant’s categorical imperative. One formulation of Jonas’s imperatives (1979: 40) is: “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life”. But what is the foundation or justification for this kind of responsibility? Hans Jonas elaborated three arguments for it: the ontological argument, the deontological foundation of the responsibility and a teleological argument.

In the ontological argument, Hans Jonas pointed out that the Being has an absolute value, higher than Nothingness, because the Being gives the possibility of existence to all that it is valuable. The existence of humanity, despite having a relative value, is necessary because the human being is the only one that can perceive and express the value of the Being and all entities in the world. So the human beings are indispensable to the manifestation of the value of all that exists. Humanity is the only one able to assure the axiological dimension of the Being.

The argument of the deontological foundation of responsibility is developed in a similar way: a human being is the only one able to have responsibility. So, as the responsibility is valuable, we must maintain the existence of humanity as the condition for maintain the responsibility.

The teleological argument is based on the “axiomatic dignity” of the human capability of having ends: a being that has ends is valuable in itself. So, because human being has ends, we must maintain its existence.

All those arguments are guided to defend a concretion of the general principle of the existence of a responsibility to future generations. This concrete principle asserts that we all have the responsibility to maintain humanity on the Earth.

The main problem of the jonasian perspective is that it falls into a “naturalist fallacy”. Jonas makes an unjustified leap from “be” to “should be”. His arguments are constructed in this way: because human life is as it is (gives value to the world, is capable of responsibility and has ends), then it should exist as something like the human species. However, the philosophical

distinction between facts and values allow us to understand that the fact that things are in such a way does not mean that it should be like this. For example, the fact that human beings are capable of responsibility is something valuable, but this does not mean that the human being should exist, because they are also responsible for the ecological crisis.

Contrary to Hans Jonas's ideas, I suggest that there is nothing bad or unjust in the fact of the mere extinction of human beings. My claim is that the problem is in the conditions in which existing human beings live between the present situation and the extinction of our species. If in the middle of those two moments future human beings live in heavily damaged conditions and their opportunities of development are limited because of our present actions, then, we do find a situation of injustice. But then, the kind of responsibility that we have to future generations has to be thought in terms of respecting the conditions for their good living and their opportunities for development as persons, but not in the mere survival of the specie. As Feinberg has said (1980: 148): "the suicide of our species would be deplorable, lamentable, and a deeply moving tragedy, but it would violate no one's rights".

Communitarianism: A Transgenerational Community and the Motivation of the Immortality

The basic scheme of the communitarian perspective is based on a consideration of the individuals as immersed in a community. All the members of the community share the same interest and an idea of the "common good" that defines their relationships and their mutual obligations (Thompson 2009: 28). The existence of this community is possible because of the cultural and daily life interactions of its members. Thanks to this interaction, individuals achieve a *moral similarity* that spreads through generations and that defines the identity of the community (De-Shalit 1995: 16).

The issue of the responsibility of future generations is put in this scheme with the concept of self-transcendence or with the idea of the desire for immortality (Partridge 1976). Communitarian theorists think that the responsibility that we have to future generations has to do with the bequest of our ideas, our debates, and the communitarian political and cultural background that constitutes its identity. In O'Neill's words (1993: 42): "Our primary responsibility is to ensure that future generations do belong to a community with ourselves". It is supposed that we are motivated to do this because we wish our self-transcendence, that is, that something of us (our interests, our political and personal projects, etc.) remained after our death.

The problems with the foundation of our responsibility in the idea of our shared community emerge when we consider “other communities” that could be affected because of our present actions. Those problems are reproduced with the “remote generations”, with whom we won’t be able to share the same community, but to whom we affect when we damage the environment. Should we say that we do not have responsibilities to other communities’ future generations or to remote generations?

Communitarian theorists accept that in those cases we can describe our responsibility as having the duty not to damage the conditions of the possibility for the development of their communities. But they think that the responsibility in those cases has to do with humanitarian issues rather than justice issues (De-Shalit 1995: 463). For example, Avner de-Shalit thinks that we should not to damage future generations because it is up to us to avoid the suffering of those with whom we share our common humanity, but not because it is just to do it. However, I think that our intuitions are against this assertion.

From my point of view, the difference between “humanitarian” relations and “justice” relations has to do with the source of our obligations to others. As Lichtenberg has said humanitarian relations have their source of obligation in moral arguments. Moral arguments are characterized by this structure (Lichtenberg 1981: 90): “A owes something positive to B ... not in virtue of the causal role that it had in the situation of B, or in a previous relation or agreement, but simply, for example, because it is capable of benefit to B or soothe its suffering”. Otherwise, “justice” relationships have their source of obligation in “historical arguments” characterized because of “what A owes B, it owes it by virtue of some action, compromise, agreement, relation or similar, antecedent” (Lichtenberg 1981: 81).

If we accept this distinction, we could agree that the atmosphere contamination or the destruction of human lives caused by radioactive leaks are better described as “unjust” situations. This is because those situations are caused by the action of the powerful part of humanity over the vulnerable one, which is damaged by it. This description shows, in a better way, our intuitions about what (in)justice is.

But if we could accept that with remote (or other communities) future generations, our responsibility is defined in terms of “not damaging their available opportunities to develop their own community guided by their own conception of the good”, why can’t we use this formula to describe our responsibility to future generations in general, and as a responsibility of “justice” rather than of “humanity”?

Utilitarianism: Utility Calculations and Population Policies

We could define utilitarianism as a theory, which consider that we have to act always to obtain the result that maximizes the existing happiness (utility or welfare) in the world (namely, in ways that pleasure results over suffering). For the utilitarianism theorists, the main intergenerational problem is related to demographical policies. Then, the discussion is centred on questions like: how many people should (or shouldn't) we bring into the world in order to increase the level of happiness? Do we have to increase the quality of life rather than quantity of life? All the versions of utilitarianism justify their answers to those questions in particular conceptions of the better way to increase utility.

One of the best achievements of utilitarianism is its defence of the "irrelevance of the temporal factor", namely, that the time in which an individual exists is not important for the moral evaluation of the acts that affect him. So the happiness or the utility of the future individual is as important as present ones. This is why utilitarianism is a universal and impartial moral theory: because it considers the interests of everybody and because it considers the interests of everybody equally.

We can distinguish between impersonal utilitarianism and personal utilitarianism. Impersonal utilitarianism considers all individuals: future, possible and present individuals. It is divided into two types: total utilitarianism and average utilitarianism. Total utilitarianism seeks to maximize the total existent utility in a population (Sigdwick 1907: 140; Sumner 1978: 91). So, for this theory, the more people over the threshold of a life worth living, the greater utility/happiness there will be. Alternatively, the average utilitarianism asserts that utility calculations to choose among a population policy or another one have to be based on the average per person. The average utility produced by any alternative could be defined as the addition between utilities produced by that alternative and divided by the number of people that exists if that alternative is made (Pontara 1995: 138).

The differences between one type of impersonal utilitarianism and the other are revealed when we look at cases in which alternative political actions produce different effects on the number of existing people (Sigdwick 1907: 145). This is why population policies are important for utilitarianism theorists in the context of intergenerational problems.

Population policies can set aside a population control (or even boost an increase of population), or they can be made to control the population (keeping or reducing it). A population policy of no-control would probably generate an increase in population; so, it would be more total happiness (or

utility) (if this population would be over the threshold of a life worth living), but less average utility. Otherwise, a population policy of population control would produce less population; so the total happiness (or utility) would be less, but it would be more average utility.

Personal utilitarianism, despite seeking a maximization of the total utility too, does not consider possible individuals. Jan Narveson was the first philosopher who developed this approach, from a critique of total utilitarianism. He considered that the total version of utilitarianism forces human beings to reproduce or to perpetuate our species. Contrary to total utilitarianism, Narveson (1967: 63) asserts that our moral principles have to seek “the greatest happiness of the greatest number and not ... the greatest happiness and the greatest number”. So, personal utilitarianism is “in favor of making people happy, but neutral about making happy people. Or rather, neutral as a public policy, regarding it as a matter for private decision” (Narveson 1976: 73).

In my opinion, all these versions of utilitarianism have problems that affect them in a particular way, but an exposition of all those ones could be endless. Instead of doing this, and for the sake of brevity, I would like to underline a global problem that affects utilitarianism in general and that prevents us from adopting a utilitarianism perspective. The problem of the utilitarianism is that it forgets our responsibility to future generations and does not have anything to do with the objective of reaching a total or average result of net happiness in the world, but to enable present and future people (those who we are sure that are going to exist) to be happy. In this sense, personal utilitarianism is closer to the way in which we should conceptualize our responsibility to future generations, because it points out that we should seek to “make people happy, not to make happy people”. However, the problem with this kind of utilitarianism is that it forgets that future generations also have to be considered (not only present ones), and that we do not have to consider them by giving them a happy life, but giving them the possibility of achieving it by themselves, guided by their own conception of good.

The issue of the responsibility to future generations must include a conception of what is necessary for us in order to autonomously elaborate our own life according to our concept of happiness. So, the sacrifices made by present generations, as well as the sacrifices imposed on future generations, that endanger the conditions of possibility for the autonomous development of their lives are not justified. Utilitarianism theory, by focusing on the choice between a world crowded people whose lives are barely worth living and a world with few individuals who are always enjoy high level of happiness,

bypasses the problem of terms that should be given. The numerical calculation that takes as reference aggregated utilitarian indices does not represent the way in which people understand their lives. As Richard Routley (1980: 293) has said: “the fact that this numerical information is typically indeterminate means that insofar as head-count utilitarianism requires determinate information on numbers ... ; it may apply theoretically to future people, but since the calculations cannot be applied to them their interests will be left out of account. And, in fact, utilitarianism for the most part does not, and perhaps cannot, take future creatures and their interest seriously”.

From my point of view, one of the concepts that describes better the way in which we should think of our responsibilities to future generations is “sustainability”. This concept, as Brian Barry has said, points out that there is something (an X) that we must conserve. Our responsibility to future generations could only be conceptualized if we make clear what it is we have to conserve. Is it total or average utility based on a criterion of preferences and satisfactions? Or has it to do with a set of elements that we consider essential to our development as persons? Brian Barry’s answer (1999: 104) is clear: “the requirement is to provide future generations with the opportunity to live good lives according to their concept of what constitutes a good life. This should surely include their being able to live good lives according to our conception but should leave options to them. ... This thought leads me to the suggestion ... that X needs to be read as some notion of equal opportunities is notoriously treacherous”.

Utilitarianism translates what we consider valuable in global terms to future generations’ concept of life, but it does not think that they could have other ways of value. If we think on that, we have to say that our responsibility is to enable them to develop their own conception of a valuable life. Maybe, the problem of utilitarianism perspective is that it looks at the human world from a distant point of view. In this way it is describe by Avner de-Shalit (1995: 72): “Utilitarian evaluates moral and political questions as an outsider who stands outside the arena observing the players. She then tries to sympathize with all the players affected by an action, and calculates how to maximize utility. But, in this venture, our utilitarian is in danger of failing to recognize the variety of people who in the course of time will be affected by an act”.

Rawlsian Contractualism: Limits, Possibilities and Ulterior Developments

The first problem that we find with future generations in Rawls’s theory is in relation to the circumstances of justice. Circumstances of justice determine

the imaginary context in which individuals decide to establish cooperative and reciprocal relations with others in order to establish a just society. These circumstances are described as ones in which individuals seek their own interests (they are self-interested), coexist in the same territory and at the same time; they are also equally powerful and equally vulnerable (Heyd 2009: 168). It is supposed that the only reason they have to avoid selfishness and cooperate with others is that, in those circumstances, cooperation gives them more advantages than disadvantages.

The problem with the relation between present and future generations is that the future ones aren't able to be in the circumstances of justice established by Rawls. These are, by definition, relations between individuals with unequal powers and vulnerabilities. For example, we have the possibility of affecting them, but they do not have the possibility of affecting us (Callahan 1980: 73); we can't establish reciprocal relations. In this context, which reasons do the present generation have to leave a selfish behavior or moderate their exclusive quest for self-interest in order to establish principles of intergenerational justice?

In order to answer this question, Rawls proposes to imagine individuals in the Original Position as representing "heads of family". As he puts it: "the parties are regarded as representing family lines, say, with ties of sentiment between successive generations" (Rawls 1971: 269). And those "heads of family" are supposed to be guided by a restriction of universality when they choose intergenerational principles like the saving principle: "the parties are to ask themselves how much they would be willing to save at each stage of advance on the assumption that all other generations have saved, or will save, in accordance with the same criterion" (Rawls 1999: 292). These two elements constitute the circumstances in which individuals decide on a just, saving principle.

The motivational assumption of the "heads of families" has been heavily criticized. The main criticism has been that this principle seems to be a beneficence principle between familiars. That principle is not able to sustain a universal justice (Heyd 2009: 175), because there are a lot of things that a father would do to his son that are not an issue of justice (Loewe 2010: 47). It seems that there are the same reasons to refuse this motivational assumption as for refusing benevolence as an element of justice, as Rawls does in his theory (English 1977: 91). In addition, this motivational assumption does not solve ecological issues because it only explains the motivation we have to care for our nearest descendants. But ecological damage affects far remote generations (Partridge 1976: 186).

Rawls was heavily critiqued for introducing this motivational assumption in his theory of justice. Because of these critiques, he removed the “heads of family” condition in his *Political Liberalism*, and justified the intergenerational principle only in the restriction of universality. In Rawls’s words (1993: 274): “The parties can be required to agree to a savings principle subject to the further condition that they must want all *previous* generations to have followed it. Thus, the correct principle is that which the members of any generation (and so all generations) would adopt as the one their generation is to follow and as the principle they would want preceding generations to have followed (and later generations to follow), no matter how far back (or forward) in time”.

But the problem with this Kantian strategy is its lack of motivation: “to what extent are the appeals of a universalistic morality capable of motivating people to act in ways that are strongly contrary to their interests?” (Rawls 1993: 235).

In my opinion, the normative conception of the person that Rawls proposed gives us a strong element in which to build a motivation to carry out an intergenerational principle. Our motivation to act in a way described by the intergenerational principle could be our desire to satisfy our own nature of rational, free and autonomous beings. We are motivated to act according to principles that we give to ourselves as moral persons, not compelled to act according to natural contingencies. To act according to interests derived from our contingent place in the world would take away our freedom, our autonomy and our rationality.

The second element that constitutes this normative conception of the person is the reasonability. The conception of the person as reasonable incorporates “the particular form of moral sensibility that underlines the desire to engage in fair cooperation as such, and to do so on terms that other as equals might reasonably be expected to endorse” (Rawls 1993: 51).

The key to reasonability is the justification to others. Those principles chosen by us as moral persons have to satisfy the condition of being reasonable, that is, they should be open to the acknowledgment of the validity of others’ requirements, those with which we are going to cooperate.¹ In this case, this implies being open to the requirements of future generations.

¹ The idea of reasonability incorporates a condition of publicity. This condition contributes to avoid critics to the kantian idea of impartiality. Heyd has criticized this idea of impartiality in these terms (2009: 185): “impartiality is a point of view which is not necessarily adopted by everyone, while a contract is the product of the free exercise of everybody’s will”. For Heyd, the idea of impartiality is contrary to the idea of justice as fairness, because “the whole point of grounding justice on fairness is that there is no external, impersonal, impartial, ideal observer’s point of view which is independent of the terms of a fair agreement between cooperating

The value of freedom and autonomy allows us to elaborate a Rawlsian perspective of justice between generations. This perspective could be expressed in a “minimum irreversible damage” principle, as a condition for respect for the freedom and autonomy of future generations. This principle could be interpreted as a principle of intergenerational equality of opportunities. The objective is not to damage conditions of possibility for the development of rational, free and autonomous beings. As Dierkmeier has pointed out (2006: 83): “It is in the name of this potential for autonomous life, and especially in view of its factual fragility, that we protect individuals against harm. ... We undertake all this—without regard reciprocity, and other against the explicit will of the persons involved—out of respect for the “humankind” in their person”.

Notice that these perspectives are in contrast to the utilitarian conception of the responsibility that we have to future generations. For utilitarianism, what we owe to future generations is the maintenance, or even the increment, of utility or welfare, conceived in economical and global terms (Norton 1999: 120). Against utilitarianism ideas, I think that there are characteristics and processes that are too important to be compensated anyway, and that a loss of them would generate irreparable damage for future generations. There are irreplaceable elements that are not considered if we think of our welfare in aggregated terms. In Henderson’s words (2011: 21): “The environmental services provided by forests, wetlands and healthy soil could not be performed at such scales and with such efficacy by any anthropogenic means. This is due in part to the multifunctionality of ecosystems. This means that ecosystems are able to supply materials for economic activities and a location for recreational ones, as well as sustain local wildlife and provide other environmental services, such as regulating the local climate”.

To choose what constitutes justice between our generation and future generations is to decide which set of actual options our generation can exercise without unjustly blocking the choice of future generations. In these terms, Brian Norton (1999: 137) has shown what constitutes intergenerational justice and which the challenges are that have to be faced: “The problem of charting a strongly sustainable path to the future now becomes the problem of determining which of the future resource-use options open to the present are consistent with maintaining options open to the present are consistent

individuals” (Heyd 2009: 186). However, our motivation for action could be grounded in our concept of ourselves as reasonable people. As a reasonable person, we seek to count with those with whom we cooperate and with whom we participate in public justification systems. So, there is nothing independent of the cooperation between individuals. Understood in these terms, impartiality entails counting with others instead of establishing an external point of view.

with maintaining the fullest range of options, and what are adequate trade-offs when an option is chosen that will significantly narrow future options, and hence opportunities for many generations”.

So, my position could be summarized by saying that the best justification of our responsibility to future generations is one held by an abstract and universal moral principle of keeping equality of opportunities available. We can find the motivation to carry out this principle in our normative self-conception of rational, autonomous, and free beings. This equality of opportunities has to be achieved by not damaging the basic interests of future generations that are correlative with rights.

Our responsibility to future generations must be conceived under the paradigm of a theory of justice. It is not to be benevolent with regard to future human beings, nor to perpetuate our species, nor to maximize the utility. It is to acknowledge that we have duties derived from our causal role in the way that future generations’ lives could develop. We are force to act in such ways that respect a principle of equality of opportunities and that respect the development of future individuals’ lives according to their own concept of good. All this is held by our normative conception as autonomous, free, rational and reasonable human beings that acknowledge their duty not to damage the interest of other human beings.

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