

THE ETHICS OF INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS FRITSCH'S ANSWER TO GARDINER'S CHALLENGE

JANNA THOMPSON

Department of Philosophy and Politics, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia
j.thompson@latrobe.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Global warming, as Gardiner says in *A Perfect Moral Storm*, reveals a deficit in our thinking about intergenerational justice as well as in moral behaviour. In response Fritsch develops models of intergenerational justice that make intergenerational relationships central to ethical life. But how can these models be applied to our social world, and how do they compare to other approaches to intergenerational justice? This contribution raises questions about how his models should be interpreted and how they should be translated into requirements of intergenerational justice.

KEYWORDS

Intergenerational justice, Environmental ethics, Global Warming, Reciprocity, Future Generations, Duties to the Dead.

INTRODUCTION

Few philosophers pay much attention to intergenerational ethics and those who do are stymied by the difficulty of explaining how we can owe duties to non-existing people or how we can maximise the wellbeing of an indefinite number of future individuals. Theories of justice concentrate on relationships of co-present people and treat justice to future generations as an afterthought. The moral perspective that dominates policy making in the western world encourages a focus on costs and benefits to present people and discounts effects on future people. In *A Perfect Moral Storm* (2011), Stephen Gardiner argues that the crisis of climate change reveals both a deficiency in ethical theory and ethical behaviour. We haven't found a good way of conceptualising intergenerational justice, and individuals and governments fail to act even when they know that the wellbeing of future generations is at stake.

Matthias Fritsch's response to this two-pronged problem is to offer a new direction for ethical theorizing about intergenerational relationships and to locate a

source of ethical motivation in an ontology of the human self and its relationship to others and to the earth. Ethics, he argues, arises from an understanding of ourselves as beings subject to birth and death whose lives overlap with the lives of others. Responsibility for the wellbeing of others, arising out of a relationship grounded in mortality, includes responsibility for those whose lives will continue after our own. Letting them live and flourish as ethical beings requires us to ensure that they can fulfil their responsibilities to those whose lives overlap theirs, and so on down the generations. Ethics, according to Fritsch, is basically intergenerational.

Fritsch's starting point is thus an ontology that relates individuals to each other as members of generations who through birth and death succeed each other in time. Other philosophers have attempted to ground ethics in a selfhood that is basically relational. Naess (1973) advocates an ethics founded on a connection to nature that makes self-realisation a matter of understanding our proper place in ecological relationships and responding with care and concern to the beings with whom we share the earth. Communitarians argue that individuals acquire their identity and thus their ethical perspective from being members of a community. Fritsch's position differs from these not only because he emphasises intergenerational relationships. Like Levinas he insists on the alterity of individuals: their separate existence and never fully comprehensible otherness. And like Derrida he rejects essentialist conceptions of identity. Who we are cannot be understood in isolation from what is outside of and different from us, and identities are always 'haunted' by what is past and open to what is to come. One of Fritsch's accomplishments is his creative use of French and German philosophy to develop an intergenerational ethics that does not depend on an essentialist conception of the self or an identification with a communal good.

How does his ethical starting point translate into a conception of intergenerational justice? Fritsch does not intend to provide an account of what we should do for future generations but he offers two ways of orienting our thinking about this matter. The first makes use of his key idea of 'asymmetric reciprocity'. Gifts, according to Mauss's well-known anthropological work, are sources of obligation deeply embedded in human relationships. They bring with them a requirement of reciprocity either directly to the giver or indirectly to an appropriate other. The gifts Fritsch highlights are intergenerational. From our predecessors we have received gifts of culture, language, political institutions and wealth that not only benefit us. They also become part of who we are, the ground of our social being. Such a gift exceeds the possibility of discharging the obligation of reciprocity by an equivalence. "... every obligation and transfer to future generations involves repaying a debt to the past, but a debt from which agents can only break free in opening themselves to a future" (58-9). Gifts must be directed onward to future generations. Fritsch's second model focuses on the turning of the generations through time and in respect to the earth as the indivisible basis for life. As mortal beings our existence in time

cannot be understood without a relationship to others who come before and after, and to the earth for which we share responsibility as our turn gives way to the turn of others.

Both models locate the source of intergenerational justice in our relationship to past and future others – a relationship central to human existence and to our understanding of ourselves as beings who were born and will die. “Social life is intergenerational life” (170). An ontological grounding of ethics raises the question of how it manifests itself in the actual behaviour and consciousness of individuals. When reading Fritsch’s book I was struck by the similarity between his phenomenological approach and the perspective of some Australian Aboriginal elders. Rose (1992) reports the story of the Dingo and the Moon as told by the Yarralin, a community in the Northern Territory, which explains how death came to humankind. To obtain the opportunity to live life to the full we had to become mortal, like the Dingo:

Dingo, like his human descendants, is open to life, sharing the finality of life and the continuity of parts... We are not descendants of the moon; he has none. Our ancestor dingo, opens us to the world, requiring that we come to an understanding of our place in it which is radically different from the moon’s... Death and its corollary, birth, open humans to time and the sharing of life: we kill and eat, and our bones nourish country, giving life back to the places and species that sustained us... and death, for all that it may be unwelcome, is one of life’s gifts (1992, 105).

His idea of asymmetrical reciprocity is echoed by the Yarralin idea that people existing now are able to maintain themselves and their way of life because of those who have gone before. People who presently exist are the ‘behind mob’ in the sense of always needing to ‘catch up’ with their forebears (Rose 1992, 111). The never-achievable catching up translates into the obligation of maintaining the Law for those who follow, who will in turn become the ‘behind mob’. The Law – the basis for relationships between individuals, society and the land – is the centre around which Aboriginal generations turn, each sharing and passing on the responsibility for fulfilling its requirements.

Nor are the ethics of asymmetrical reciprocity and turn-taking confined to indigenous communities. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address appeals to the idea of the gift as the basis of an intergenerational obligation – given not only by the sacrifices of those who died on the battlefield but also through the deeds of forefathers who set up a nation founded on liberty. Their gifts, Lincoln implies, can never truly be repaid and the only appropriate response of the living is to dedicate themselves to the maintenance of a government of, by and for the people and to pass their democracy on to succeeding generations so that it ‘shall not perish from the earth’. These institutions, the indivisible basis for the nation and the relationships of its people, require that each generation takes its turn in maintaining them. The power of Lincoln’s speech – a power that resonates down the generations – is due to a

predisposition to be moved by an idea of obligation that appeals to the sacrifices of past generations and requires each generation to share the burden of maintaining what is of fundamental value to an intergenerational community.

Fritsch's models thus provide a response to Gardiner's challenge not only by providing ways of reasoning about intergenerational justice that avoid the problems of presentism and individualism but also by revealing motivating reasons for making the welfare of future generations into a concern of present people. But his discussion takes place at a high theoretical level of engagement and it is not easy to make a connection between his models and the political and social environment in which a theory of intergenerational justice must be applied. Some of my questions and doubts about his project have to do with problems of application, but others are concerned with alternatives he doesn't explore or differences between his approach and those of others. I approach this critical task from the perspective of an analytic philosopher with an interest in intergenerational justice but with only a superficial acquaintance with some of the literature Fritsch discusses. This is, of course, a weakness, but by coming from a different way of thinking about a topic that deeply concerns both of us, I hope my critical examination of his ideas will prove useful.

ASYMMETRIC RECIPROCITY

I will start with Fritsch's first model, the approach that makes use of the asymmetry between the gifts of predecessors and what we are able to reciprocate. The Yarralin elders and Lincoln in his Address refer to gifts of great value to present and future generations. But how should we regard gifts that are poisoned chalices? In his discussion of Rawls's theory of intergenerational justice, Barry wonders how members of a generation should respond if they inherit a world degraded by the activities of their predecessors who demonstrated no interest in their wellbeing and who lived by values that ought to be rejected (1979:71). If justice depends on intergenerational reciprocity then, in Barry's view, this generation would have reason to conclude that there is no such thing as intergenerational justice. The same conclusion might be reached by those who believe that what their predecessors gifted them is valueless or worse.

Fritsch would undoubtedly deny that all the gifts of a generation to its successors could count as poisoned chalices. There will always be good among the bad: language and cultural heritage, for example, as well as the wealth that predecessors left behind. If all that our predecessors have provide for us is wealth, he says, then this too is a benefit that ought to be passed on to our descendants. But this answer raises questions about what counts as a gift. A gift, in ordinary contexts, is something intentionally given by one person to another. It is the recognition of this intentionality that requires an appropriate response. The members of the Yarralin community are able regard what they inherit from their ancestors as a gift because they believe,

with good reason, that their ancestors acted for the sake of their descendants as well as themselves in maintaining the health of their country and society. The Unionists fought the Civil War, according to Lincoln, to preserve government of, by and for the people, and although we cannot assume that this was the intention of all of those who fought at Gettysburg, we have reason to suppose that the Union government acted for this end (as well as others). But some of the things that we acquire from our predecessors may be ours simply because they had no choice but to let them go. Suppose that our predecessors' motivation for acquiring wealth was their own greed. Their mortality and not a desire to benefit us was their reason for leaving it behind. If they could have found a way of prolonging their lives (as the billionaires of Silicon Valley are now trying to do) they would not have surrendered their wealth and power to later generations. But if what we obtain from our predecessors is not a gift in the usual sense of the word but merely what they involuntarily leave behind, then it is difficult to understand how its existence can impose a moral imperative on us. We may be glad or sorry about what they left for us, but being the recipient does not by itself dictate a response.

However, even if it is true that gifts have to be intentionally given, an objection that appeals to this semantic point fails to undermine requirements of intergenerational ethics. Fritsch's starting point is an ethics of concern for others that encompasses those who will live beyond our lives. He also points out that we are able to regard many of our projects as meaningful only because future people will have the opportunity of taking them up. When people make sacrifices to construct something for a future that they will not experience they are fulfilling a future-directed conception of themselves. It is in fact common for people to be concerned about the heritage they are leaving for future generations. Even the tycoons of Silicon Valley suppose that the research they are funding to prolong life is for the good of humankind and not merely themselves. But if future-directed interests are the main motivation for accepting requirements of intergenerational justice, then what role is played by the gifts of predecessors?

Suppose, says Annette Baier, that a generation of a society makes sacrifices to establish first rate universities for the good of future generations. However, the next generation allows the universities to deteriorate, and as a result their successors fail to get the benefits that the first generation wanted them to have. According to Baier, the behaviour of the middle generation is not only an injustice to their successors but also to their predecessors (1981, 176). Intergenerational justice, according to her view, encompasses duties to past as well as future generations. Her discussion raises two questions about the role of the gift in an account of intergenerational justice. One is whether reciprocity is owed to those who did the giving and how the asymmetric nature of the gift is reflected in our ideas of duties to the dead. The other is what form future-directed asymmetric reciprocity should take. Must we pass

on the gifts of our predecessors to our successors or is it sufficient to demonstrate a concern for the wellbeing of future generations in whatever way we please?

Lincoln's speech was given at a memorial ceremony for those who died in a crucial Civil War battle. Honouring the dead is a common way of responding to such sacrifices. The asymmetry of the gift is reflected in the impression left by these ceremonies that we can never do enough to honour them. We are admonished to keep the memory of what they did alive forever - an unfulfillable obligation since we know that memories are bound to fade as the deeds of predecessors recede into the past. In some societies ancestors are worshipped. But honouring the dead is rarely thought to be sufficient. We are also supposed to carry out the task that they left uncompleted or to maintain the traditions or institutions that they struggled to maintain. Lincoln appeals to this idea when he makes the sacrifices of the dead and the deeds of forebears into a moral reason to maintain and pass on a democratic government.

Asymmetric reciprocity, according to this account, gives us backward as well as forward-directed responsibilities. We owe duties to the dead and these are unbounded in the sense that we can never do enough to honour their sacrifices and to appreciate what they were trying to achieve. Do we also have an obligation to carry on the projects for which our predecessors made sacrifices (providing they did not give us poisoned chalices)? This is what Baier seems to assume when she claims that the middle generation wronged the first as well as the third generation. It wronged the first, she implies, because it failed to carry on a project that was supposed to benefit all future generations and it wronged members of the third generation not only because they failed to benefit from the gift but also because they did not receive what the first generation wanted to give them.

Fritsch's model looks backward to the gifts of ancestors but he does not include duties discharged to the dead in his account of asymmetric reciprocity. Perhaps like most philosophers who discuss intergenerational justice he assumes that we have no duties to those who cannot be benefited. And his focus on the problems posed by Gardiner requires an emphasis on duties to future generations. But if we return to Fritsch's ontological account of intergenerational ethics - to the basic moral duty to allow and enable others to flourish and find meaning for their lives - then it is possible to find support not only for the duty to honour members of past generations for the sacrifices they have made for our sake, but also to carry on some of their lifetime-transcending projects. If interests and relationships with others essential to selfhood transcend our own existence then the meaning of our lives depends to a significant extent on how we think our successors will regard us and respond to our efforts to benefit them. We want to believe that they will appreciate our sacrifices and will make proper use of their inheritance. But are we entitled to demand that they do so? Could asymmetric reciprocity encompass a moral duty to maintain at least some of projects or assets that predecessors provided for future generations?

The very idea of such a duty conflicts with the liberal view that each generation, as well as each individual, should be free to determine their own values and goals: that they should not be bound to carry out the wishes of their predecessors. In some cases, the liberal position is obviously justified. The project of predecessors may be valueless or it may not be practical to continue it under present conditions. And each generation is surely entitled to have its own ideas about what will benefit future generations. If the middle generation in Baier's story decides to concentrate its limited resources on giving younger generations a good primary and secondary education, it is difficult to suppose that it is doing anything morally wrong by spending less on universities. However, if it uses the money that could have been spent on universities for ephemeral public entertainments (which is perhaps the scenario that Baier has in mind) then it is much more plausible to say that it has wronged both its successors and predecessors. If a generation of Americans were to allow their government to lapse into a dictatorship then it is surely right to judge that they have not only wronged future generations. They have betrayed the generations of the past.

TAKING TURNS

I have argued that duties to past as well as future generations can and should be incorporated into the model for intergenerational justice that Fritsch discusses in the first part of his book. But an ethics that is both forward and backward looking is also implicit in the account of turn taking that he develops in the last chapter. The duty Lincoln gives to future generations of Americans to preserve their democracy can be understood in the framework of an ethics that requires each generation to take its turn in maintaining something of value to all. Basic to the existence of an Aboriginal community is the understanding that each generation must take its turn in maintaining the land and social relationships in accordance with the Law. Intergenerational turn taking is a form of cooperation that obligates present generations in respect both to the needs of future generations and the contributions of past generations.

Turn taking is basic to other accounts of intergenerational obligations. The idea of sustainability that often makes an appearance in discussions of philosophers, policy makers and conservationists gives each generation the responsibility of ensuring that their successors will have sufficient resources for a good life. In Rawls's account of justice between the generations, the mutual advantage of intergenerational cooperation is the basis for an imagined contract which requires each to take its turn in maintaining assets and institutions of justice. However, there are important differences between Fritsch's conception of turn taking and these other accounts. His view is holist. The earth is not divisible into shares; nor can one part of it be substituted or sacrificed for another. This distinguishes it from accounts of sustainability

that regard the earth as a collection of resources and allow some to be used up providing there is a substitute or if the wealth generated by its use can compensate those who have to adapt to its absence. On the other hand, he does not think that his holism requires him to subscribe to the view held by some environmentalists: that the earth itself, or its eco-systems, are valuable in their own right.

Rawls has to explain why self-regarding individuals should accept the obligations required by cooperation, especially when their relationship is intergenerational. He imagines a contract made under a veil of ignorance by generations that do not know their place in time (1996, 273-5). Fritsch can appeal to a moral ontology that is inherently intergenerational. Ideas of contract and fair play are thus not essential to his account of turn taking. Its requirements derive from an existence in time of beings whose identity is linked to a future to come and a past that leaves its traces, and who are motivated by the value to all generations of the earth as the centre around which turn taking takes place. Responsibilities of a generations do not depend on whether their predecessors did their share or whether the sacrifices they have to make to ensure the wellbeing of future generations are no greater than the sacrifices of other generations.

In Rawls account the generations take their turn in maintaining the institutions of justice of their society. For Fritsch turning takes place around the earth as whole. This model for Intergenerational justice is by necessity universal in scope. It includes all of humanity and there is no limit to the number of generations that have to be taken into account. As Fritsch points out, such an ethics provides the only appropriate model for a world threatened by global warming and, more generally, for a world in which human beings have become the shapers of the earth.

Because the model focuses on the turn taking of humans and their collective responsibility for the earth, it abstracts from differences among humans in their situation and values. The wealth that the affluent are storing up for their descendants is often gained at the expense of the poor and their families. What some want to preserve as natural heritage for future generations others see as a resource for improving the life chances of their descendants. The burdens of turn taking, as Fritsch conceives it, must be equitably distributed. Resources must be divided more fairly. The affluent will have to change their way of life and their ideas about what they should give to their descendants. Nations will not be able to hoard what others need for themselves and their families. Fritsch's view is inherently cosmopolitan and it challenges nation-based ideas of intergenerational justice that most people now hold. Generational turn-taking is an idea that comes naturally to those concerned about the wellbeing of future generations – as the widespread endorsement of the idea of sustainability attests. But it is important to recognise that for Fritsch turn taking requires a radical re-configuration of social and political life.

The earth is the centre around which the generations turn and also into which each generation comes to rest. But Fritsch's anti-essentialism does not allow him to

treat the earth as an entity with a fixed meaning or value. What the earth is depends on its changing relationship to humanity. As we change our way of life we also change the earth. The idea of the Anthropocene pushes this point home and suggests a kind of Copernican revolution. Humanity does not any more turn around the earth as the given to which it must adapt. Instead the earth turns around humanity and its technology as humans re-make it to fulfil human ends and bequeath this project and its results to their successors. Some visionaries believe that humanity can deal with the breakdown of environmental systems by using technology to simulate their effects. Some think that the atmosphere can be remade so that it will better absorb greenhouse gases. These proposals may be impractical for one reason or another. The very idea of the Anthropocene may be nothing more than a manifestation of human arrogance – akin to Stephen Hawking's belief that after using up the resources of the earth humans will find other planets to colonise. But if the project of reshaping earth to fit humanity's idea of itself as the conqueror of nature is morally unacceptable, then what resources does Fritsch's holism have to condemn it?

The ethics he adapts from Levinas is human-centred, but Fritsch does not think that it can be confined to a concern for humans. He argues that a view that attaches ethical value to beings who are subject to birth and death must encompass a concern for the animals with whom we share the earth and indeed all its living things. "We cannot but – and also *must* – make a gift of the earth to future people and future animals, future plants and future fungi, bacteria, and so on" (201). How this should be done he does not explain, but the obvious result of adopting an ethics that takes the flourishing of living things as a focus for ethical concern is an environmental ethics similar in important respects to that advocated by Names and other eco-centred philosophers.

Has Fritsch met Gardiner's challenge? He opens up a new approach to intergenerational justice – one that rejects the atomistic individualism that Gardiner regards as the chief obstacle to an adequate theory of intergenerational ethics. Intrinsic to his conception of the self is a relationship with others that motivates a concern for the wellbeing of future as well as present individuals. His models for a theory of intergenerational justice make it central to human relationships and the obligations generated by our exchanges and our common concerns. Ethical duties are for him not external requirements which humans, motivated mostly by self-interest, grudgingly accept and often ignore. But this view makes it even more difficult to explain the problem that most concerns Gardiner: selfishness and short-sightedness, particularly of people in affluent countries, and our apparent inability to face and deal with a looming catastrophe. Understanding why this ethical failure exists is probably not the job of philosophers. But Fritsch's approach, distant though it is from political and social realities, points to sources of ethical motivation to which a better politics might be able to appeal.

REFERENCES

- Baier, Annette. 1981. "The Rights of Past and Future Persons". E. Partridge (Ed). *Responsibilities to Future Generations*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Barry, Brian. 1979. "Justice as Reciprocity". E. Kamenka and E. Tay (Eds). *Justice*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Fritsch, Matthias. 2018. *Taking Turns with the Earth: Phenomenology, Deconstruction, and Intergenerational Justice*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Gardiner, Stephen. 2011. *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*. London, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1972. *A General Theory of Magic*. London: Routledge.
- Naess, Arne. 1973. "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary". *Inquiry* 16: 95-100.
- Rawls, John. 1996. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rose, Deborah Bird. 1992. *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture*. Melbourne, New York: Cambridge University Press.