



# Empathy with Future Generations?

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## Abstract

In this paper, I analyse whether empathy with future generations is feasible and whether it is a potentially useful instrument in effectively providing resources for future generations. I argue that empathy with future generations is possible, that it likely leads to a form of minimal concern, and that it can help in solving the relevant motivational problem. The most significant hurdle is not so much to do with achieving the required normative recognition of future generations, but with epistemic problems regarding the right actions in protecting future interests and needs. Empathy can again be of help in this regard, but it would need to be successfully trained and supported. We need to stretch our empathy to non-existing people and we need to constrain our imagination in adequate ways to achieve a sufficient understanding of the perspectives of future people.

**Keywords** Empathy · Future generations · Empathic concern · Imagination · Interpersonal understanding

## 1 Introduction

There has been a lot of discussion in philosophy as to whether we have moral obligations towards future generations and, if so, what they amount to. It seems to me that it has been convincingly established that we, inhabitants of the earth living today, have at least a duty to provide for the continued existence of humanity by enabling future generations to fulfil their basic needs to live a decent life (see, for instance, Nolt 2017; Scheffler 2018; Andina 2022; Andina and Corvino 2023). However, there is another problem, which has received less philosophical attention: What motivates us to actually do our duty (cf. Birnbacher 2009)?

One hopeful answer to this question is that empathy can motivate us. Yet, is empathy with future generations even possible? Note that when I discuss future generations I intend to refer to people living so distant in the future that there is no overlap with currently living people. We will, of course, have direct relationships with grandchildren, but future generations stretch far longer, and I am especially interested in the feasibility of empathy with people whose existence we can only imagine, not experience. There is

very little discussion on this specific problem. My contribution in this paper aims to thoroughly scrutinise the prospect of empathy as a means to effectively protect the interests of distant future generations. I will argue that empathy with members of future generations is indeed feasible. I will further claim that empathy usually comes with a form of minimal empathic concern, which goes along with a disposition to acknowledge the moral significance of other people. Nevertheless, motivation to benefit others as such is not enough, as it might lead to inadequate actions that entirely miss the interests and needs of other people. To adequately provide for future generations requires some level of understanding of their situation. And here empathic processes seem to run aground, because our imagination is not sufficient to reliably guide us to such remote places and perspectives.

In the next section, I will start the discussion as to what empathy actually means and what its intended function is in relation to future generations. I will argue that the hopeful look at empathy is driven by the idea that empathy is identical with, or closely related to, empathic concern. Empathic concern is a form of acknowledging the moral significance of other people. However, such concern might be one function of empathy, yet it is surely not guaranteed merely by any empathic processes. Empathy is usually conceptualised as an epistemic vehicle to gain factive understanding about the perspective of others. As such, this does not have normative motivational import. I will therefore, in the third

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section, analyse in which way empathic concern can be realised through empathic processes. Since future generations are not directly encountered, there is a question, discussed in the fourth section, as to whether our imagination can provide a basis for empathic concern. This will be discussed in relation to novels and films. We can, it is argued, empathise with non-existing protagonists, so our imagination seems to be an important means to create empathic concern towards future generations. In the final, fifth, section, I return to factive elements of empathy. To act adequately towards future generations, we need to gain an understanding of their circumstances and perspectives. This is hard, because future generations cannot be encountered or communicated with. To alleviate this final problem, I allude to ways to imaginatively gain at least a sufficiently adequate epistemic foundation for steering our empathic concern towards future people in the right directions.

## 2 Empathy as a Suggested Answer to the Motivational Problem

Empathy has been hailed as a solution to the lack of attachment with future generations and, more specifically, as a key to alleviating the current climate crisis (Boro and Sankaran 2018; Zaki 2019; Wallach 2020). It is important to scrutinise what exactly empathy is supposed to achieve and which type of empathy may actually realise the relevant function. In this section, I will focus on the first mentioned problem, that is, what we expect from empathy when discussing our relation to future generations. The second problem will be more thoroughly discussed in the next section.

The motivational problem in relation to protecting the interests of future generations is not simply one of omitting harm. Rather, there are real sacrifices involved and active provision required. Climate change is a case in point. To be sure, it is a form of harm, and hence any individual act that contributes to it might be seen as a case of neglecting an individual negative duty not to harm. However, climate change is actually an accumulative form of harm (Feinberg 1984, 30). That means it only becomes a harm when the relevant atmospheric changes reach a certain threshold that involves harmful phenomena. This, in consequence, means that individual acts, for instance driving kids to school, should themselves not be deemed harmful, despite causally contributing to reaching this threshold. So, our individual obligations towards future generations cannot be analysed in terms of avoidance of harm to others, but require active measures of sacrificing one's otherwise morally acceptable interests. Accordingly, protecting the interests of future generations requires more than fulfilling negative duties, that is, the omission of harmful acts. Rather, it requires to genuinely

help and benefit future generations, to actively provide for their interests and needs over and above the avoidance of individually harmful behaviour. Metaphorically speaking, we need to fill a savings account for future people; provision is not a matter of simply stop robbing from others. This makes the motivational problem of course an even more intricate issue, as we usually need a fairly strong relationship to people we are supposed to benefit and help, and it is doubtful whether we can have this type of relationship with distant others.

When people – for instance the scholars referred to at the beginning of this section — believe that empathy can connect us to future generations in a way that will have an impact on our current behaviour, they usually interpret empathy as a source of prosocial or moral motivation. Empathy is accordingly understood as empathic concern. Simply to grasp what other people feel does not seem to be enough; cruel people who exploit others can be empathic in the purely epistemic sense when getting into the head of another person. Our relation to future generations, in contrast, is supposed to be the opposite of exploitative. It should be caring, or at least manifesting moral respect by acknowledging the needs of future generations in our deeds, not just theoretically. Empathic concern can be this required motivational foundation.

But there is an immediate problem: Empathic concern is not the same as empathy. Even when disregarding the complex details of the different types of empathy, which we will distinguish more thoroughly in the following section, it is fairly straightforward that empathy results in a form of understanding of the perspective of another person, which by itself is not a form of concern. Rather, such understanding is mainly factive, targeting the factual beliefs, feelings, intentions etc. of someone else. Empathy enables a kind of mind-reading, which itself does not involve concern for the other – indeed, empathic skills can be used for exploiting others, as we have just seen.

There is also often an affective element of empathy (Maimon 2017). We feel what the other feels through empathy. Now, if other people feel bad, perhaps because of what we did to them, this can indeed have an impact on us. It will often result in us feeling bad, too. Potentially our bad feelings might then start a chain of considerations that eventually lead us to help the other. It might also change our own conduct or even cause us to develop a bad conscience, especially in cases where we are the source of the bad feelings of others. So, empathy can be the source of pro-social or moral motivation – of empathic concern – although there does not seem to be a necessary causal connection (Batson 2014). The bad feelings which we pick up from others via empathy might well lead to evasion, a form of flight behaviour, or even to resentment at the plight of others.

It is therefore important to get the relevant function into sight. Empathic concern can be interpreted, firstly, as an outcome of empathic mechanisms leading to an understanding of the perspective of other people and, secondly, as a dispositional attitude towards others that may or may not result in specific behaviour. The first interpretation looks back at the sources of empathic concern, whereas the second concerns the precursor of individual conduct. Regarding the first interpretation of the notion of empathic concern, we have already stressed that prosocial motivation is not always an outcome of empathic processes. There are many psychological and environmental mechanisms that can prevent pro-social motives, for instance biases towards particular populations, being emotionally overwhelmed, or peer pressure. Also, showing concern as such does not automatically enable us to act morally right. For example, it might let us unfairly prefer the person we happen to empathise with the most, thereby overestimating their justified claims in a situation of conflict of interest between people. Still, what we are after at this point is not fully-fledged moral behaviour but a general attitude, which we have just introduced as the second interpretation of empathic concern. To have relevant empathy with future generations, it seems, can be described as a stance of us, currently living humans, that their interests count. How can such a stance be the result of empathic processes?

I have said that empathy is mainly factive, that is, concerned with understanding another person. But there seem to be other functions of empathy than merely gaining knowledge about the mental life of other people. When we empathise, we usually acknowledge the other as a person – as a living being that has a mental life or subjectivity. This acknowledgement can be deemed a minimal form of social recognition, although it is as such epistemic – it involves realising the mindedness of another creature. Again, this connection between empathy and recognition is not necessary, or at least does not necessarily come to the fore, as we can see in the behaviour of sadists or psychopaths. But it seems hard to act cruelly towards a creature we have an epistemic connection to, especially if we share feelings via empathy. In other words, although empathy is mainly an epistemic tool – enabling us to gain knowledge about the other – it naturally comes with a normative component, given our biological and psychological make-up (Zahn-Waxler et al. 2018). This element can be called fellow-feeling, thereby referring to the philosophical tradition that discussed empathy in relation to morality. Fellow-feeling is the feeling – here understood as a form of acknowledgement – that the other is a fellow. To be sure, this is not the same as a fully developed moral stance.

There is still a long way from fellow-feeling to care and moral concern (see, e.g., Slote 2007). Nevertheless, it

seems to be the kind of function we are after when setting our hopes on empathy in the quest to improve our attitudes towards, and provisions for, future generations. But there is yet another problem. Empathic processes, especially those that lead us to empathic concern, happen in concrete encounters with other people. To feel the pain of others, for instance, they apparently need to be present to us. Future generations are not present to us, at least if we focus on remote generations that are definitely beyond our life-span. We will discuss this problem at a later stage of the argument, when we analyse whether imagination is sufficient for developing empathic concern towards non-existing beings.

In this section, I have tried to tease out the function that empathy is supposed to have when motivating currently living people to actively protect environmental conditions that enable remote future generations to live decent lives. The answer I provided is that the relevant effect of empathic processes is a form of concerned attitude towards others. I have gestured towards explanations as to how this minimal, non-moral (or not yet moral) concern might result from otherwise purely epistemic mechanisms of empathy. The idea is that gaining an understanding of the mental life of others comes with a normative commitment: the acknowledgement of the other as a centre of subjectivity. In the next section I will look more closely into the empathic processes that are relevant for achieving this function.

### 3 Can Empathy Bring About Concern for Others?

It has become common to distinguish between cognitive and affective empathy (see, e.g., Maibom 2020, 9 ff.). Cognitive empathy is a process of perspective-taking. We can imagine being the other person, at least up to a certain point, and through this process gain an understanding of the mental life of others. We have already seen that this type of empathy, at least if merely cognitive, does not seem to involve concern for the other. In fact, perspective-taking can be achieved from a fully disengaged stance, where we see others as mere objects or complicated mechanical automata. Affective empathy is a process of getting to feel something in line with what the other feels. We do not need to feel the exact same thing as the target of empathy, but there needs to be some connection to their feeling or the feeling that they would normally have in a specific situation. So, for instance, we can affectively empathise with someone who has not realised a faux pas and consequently feel embarrassed vicariously on their behalf. In contrast, we do not affectively empathise with another person when we feel happy on account of their frustration about failure. So,

affective empathy requires a form of alignment of the affective states of an empathiser and a target person.

Cognitive and affective empathy can both be realised during the same processes of an empathic interpersonal encounter. For instance, an empathiser can understand at the same time that a target believes that she has failed miserably in a task and share her feeling of misery. Still, the two types of empathy can be distinguished and they can fall apart in certain circumstances. For instance, we might struggle to affectively align with the pleasure sadists gain from their cruel behaviour and at the same time cognitively fully comprehend their motivations and beliefs by taking their perspective.

There is a third type of empathy worth mentioning (see, e.g., Zahavi 2011). We often straightforwardly perceive other persons' mental states via their expressive behaviour. They might wince in pain, laugh of joy, or frown in disbelief. In this way, we can gain an understanding of their situation and perspective. This might also go along with certain mental states of ourselves. For instance, seeing the other person expressing pain and realising their anguish, we might ourselves feel uncomfortable. So, this type of empathic perception can connect us to others as well, although we do not end up in a fully aligned mental state.

In the previous section I have drawn a connection between our realisation of affective states of others, especially negative feelings such as sadness or pain, and concern for others. When we feel what the other feels this might result in an acknowledgement that the condition of the other requires improvement. At least it puts psychological pressure on the empathiser to acknowledge that the other is a fellow creature that has a weal and woe and can hence be in a harmed state. In other terms, once we affectively empathise with someone else, we are naturally led to a stance of minimal concern for the other, if not always or necessarily.

There is some empirical support for this connection between empathy, specifically affective empathy, and concern. For instance, one of the most important psychological theories discussing the role of empathy in prosociality and morality has been developed over the course of several decades by Dan Batson. His theory is called empathy-altruism hypothesis. Batson interprets empathy itself not simply as vicarious feeling or perspective-taking, but as empathic concern, which already seems to imply some kind of fellowfeeling (cf. Batson 2023, 2 f.). More specifically, Batson describes empathic concern as "other-oriented emotion elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone in need" (Batson 2011, 11). With these conceptual restrictions in place, Batson shows in numerous ingenious experiments that such empathic concern produces altruistic motivation. Perhaps more accurately it should be said that he shows that alternative, egoistic motivations, are unable

to explain the observed behaviour of subjects in the relevant experiments (Batson 2023, 121). In a word, he draws an inference to the best explanation, establishing genuine altruistic motivation via empathic mechanisms.

Batson's theory is particularly helpful for corroborating the sought connection between empathic concern and a motivation to initiate helping behaviour. As explained, Batson however identifies empathy with empathic concern, which arguably begs the question regarding the connection of the psychological mechanisms we explored earlier in this section and the prosocial attitude of concern. In brief, we need to be careful not to conflate sympathy – a type of concern for the other – and empathy – which is mainly an epistemic mechanism to understand another person. Batson's assumption of a close connection of empathy and concern is nevertheless plausible, because understanding others presumes a connection to the other, as explained before. We find this link also in numerous philosophical accounts. In the tradition of moral philosophy, for instance, we find references to fellowfeeling (Smith 1759/1790, 12 ff. (TMS I.i.1.3)). More recent moral philosophers explain the interpersonal bond in terms of relationships (Peters 1974; Berenson 1981) or a second-person standpoint (Darwall 2006).

Other relevant theories have been developed by numerous developmental psychologists, most prominently by Nancy Eisenberg and her collaborators, by Carolyn Zahn-Waxler and her team, as well as by Martin L. Hoffman (Eisenberg and Miller 1987; Zahn-Waxler et al. 1992; Hoffman 2000; see also Davis 1994). Hoffman calls empathy the "bedrock of morality" (Hoffmann 2014, 96) and further explains the development through human maturation in the following way: "As part of the child's growing sense of self and others as separate beings, empathic distress is transformed partly into sympathetic distress: the child continues to feel emphatic distress, more or less matching the other's feeling, but now adds a reactive feeling of sympathetic distress or compassion for the other" (Hoffman 2014, 80). Eisenberg, in a recent paper, summarises her detailed assessment of relevant psychological research by stating that "[i]n general, empirical findings support the conclusion that empathy and sympathy (more consistently for the latter) contribute to prosocial behavior, prosocial moral reasoning, and social competence, as well to low levels of aggression/externalizing" (Eisenberg 2018, 178). Zahn-Waxler and her collaborators conclude: "Human beings are social creatures, born with natural empathy; and concern for the wellbeing of others is essential to morality. Both affective and cognitive empathy must be in play if our moral potentials are to be fully realized" (Zahn-Waxler et al. 2018, 207).

Such scientific theories and findings, as always, are contested and cannot be used to establish, once and for all, any philosophical assumptions (cf. Maibom 2014, 23 ff.). Still,

there is hope to find sufficient empirical support in current developmental psychology for our assumption of a psychological connection between empathy and other-oriented concern. However, what has been established so far in this section is directed at empathic concern for other existing human beings. It is far from obvious that we can empathise with future people, at least via the same processes as in interpersonal encounters.

On the other hand, it is obvious that we do not have to go through a real empathic process all the time when encountering others in order to recognise them as having some normative significance. It seems correct to say that we need to affectively understand others, in the sense of acknowledging that they are fellows. But this process does not have to be run through constantly in an experiential way. We are capable to cognitively appreciate that human beings are similar in the respect of being vulnerable to harm. It is true that we need to feel that others are also feeling beings in order to develop a concerned stance toward them. But once this general stance is developed in us, we can apply it to every human being. This is the basis for a general attitude of moral respect. And yet, although many people expand their moral respect to future generations, this seems to be inert; it does not lead to relevant action. We seem to be back where we started – a lack of motivation to protect future generations.

It is almost as if the minimally concerned attitude towards others, which results from empathic encounters and then becomes generalised, needs to be fuelled by the sparks of really experienced empathy to lead to action. Again, there is some empirical and anecdotal support for this assumption. Human beings are more prone to help concrete victims who they can actually empathise with in an experiential way, rather than people whose need for help they only abstractly understand. This is a well-known phenomenon, for instance, in health care and public health, where statistical and concrete lives are often evaluated differently. The psychological effect has been called identified person bias (Cohen et al. 2015). Since we cannot have interpersonal encounters with members of remote future generations, this experiential avenue appears to be blocked. In other words, it seems that we might well be able to develop a stance of empathic concern towards future generations but that this stance will not cause any relevant actions.

The required spark might nevertheless be induced via imagination. After all, we feel, sometimes very vividly, what fictional people feel. Non-existing protagonists of novels, for instance, can become targets of subjectively experienced empathy, so why not future people as well? The role and limits of imagination in causing benevolent action out of concern for future generations will be discussed in the following part of my argument.

#### 4 Is Imagination Sufficient to Replace Direct Interpersonal Encounters?

The underlying question of this part of my argument is whether imagination suffices to spark real life individual motivation to help others. In other words, can empathic concern we feel through non-direct encounters with others reliably bring about changes in our behaviour? So far, we have assumed that direct interpersonal encounters often lead to support for others in need. This has been explained by the close connection between experienced empathy and empathic concern, in combination with psychological research regarding the link between empathic concern and altruistic motivation. But what happens if there is no real connection between the relevant individuals; if the concern is towards abstractly conceived – that is, merely imagined – beings, not real people?

Early scepticism to the effect that imagination cannot always produce sufficient motivation comes already from David Hume (Hume 1739–40, 385 ff. (T 2.1.11)). His doubts are mainly due to his assumptions that the psychological causes of actions need to be vivid. Ideas cannot motivate, only impressions can, and remote empathic mechanisms only lead to rather faint impressions. Without going deeper into Hume's account as to how ideas can actually be occasionally converted into impressions under specific circumstances (Collier 2010), it seems intuitive to assume that fictional encounters do not have the same motivational force as direct confrontations with others.

Much of the philosophical literature on empathy and human imagination deals with fictional writing and cinematic experiences (Nussbaum 2001, 327 ff.; John 2017; Stadler 2017; Hogan 2022). After all, characters in novels and films are fictional. Now, it is a common experience that we can empathise with such characters. So, if members of future generations are comparable to fictional characters, there still seems hope for counting on empathy as a means to improve our precautions for the future.

Indeed, it appears to be obvious that we can have empathy and empathic concern for non-existing beings. We are regularly invested in their well-being, for instance when we root for protagonists in novels or films to achieve their goals. Numerous philosophers have argued that we can empathise with fictional characters by perspective-taking (e.g. Coplan 2004), directly perceive their mental life (De Vecchi and Forlè 2020), feel sympathy towards them (Carroll 2011, 173 f.), and that we occasionally even experientially share their feelings (Caracciolo 2020). What is more, since imagination is a skill (Kind 2022, 41 ff.), it seems plausible to assume that we can stretch our imagination to ever wider circles and across time (ibid., 1 f.). This would



give us leverage to develop full empathic concern towards future generations.

Yet there are also philosophers who doubt that the type of empathy we show towards fictional beings is relevantly similar to empathy with real people (Berninger 2018; Werner 2020). For instance, in imaginative contexts, there is no real interpersonal relationship. There is no dialogue or experiential exchange between empathiser and target. A character in a novel cannot interact or engage with the reader. In a word, the type of empathy realised in watching films or reading novels can be described as solipsistic. This will become an important point when we discuss, in the following section, whether empathy with future generations can be successful in the sense of leading to fully adequate actions, not just to a beneficial attitude towards others. For now, the lack of interpersonal relationships does not seem to be a major problem for setting our hopes on empathy as a means to improve precautions for future generations. After all, it is relevant whether the motivational element of empathy can be realised, not whether the type of empathy we feel towards future beings is different from real-life empathy.

To be sure, the motivational element seems to be uncertain in imaginative contexts. As audience members we are not really actively pursuing the welfare of others. We are not usually motivated to alleviate, for instance, the pain and sorrow of protagonists, even though we may deeply care for them. This is because we realise that our real-world actions would of course not change the proceedings within the fictional world. The life trajectories of fictional characters are preconceived by authors, we cannot change them. However, conditions are different in relation to future generations. Our actions today will change their life trajectories. So, the fact that we are not motivated to change the plight of fictional characters does not seem to prevent pertinent motivations in relation to future generations. All we initially need is a form of empathic concern, and we have already established that this is possible even in case of non-existing people. So, altogether, imagination can indeed be the foundation for empathic concern as well as real actions for the benefit of temporally distant people.

So far, we have analysed the case for empathy as an instrument to change our current behaviour in relation to distant future generations. We have focused on the possibility of empathy, empathic concern and prosocial motivation. There seems to be a strong case in favour of employing and developing the skill of empathy to improve circumstances for future generations. However, empathy has success conditions. Importantly, empathy is supposed to lead to an accurate and adequate understanding of the other in order to serve as a guide of one's own action (cf. Langkau 2020). If empathisers misunderstand the interests and needs of others, they might do the wrong things, despite their empathic

concern and best intentions. Importantly, in contrast to a character in a novel or film, the lives of future people are not scripted but open. Accordingly, there are many features that may be misunderstood. So, here is a new problem: Can we humans, who live today, adequately understand the life of future people, so that we act according to their interests? This will be the topic of the final stage of my argument.

## 5 Can we Understand Future Generations?

In the previous sections, I have mainly discussed empathic concern and, relatedly, prosocial motivation as a function of empathy. There is another aspect: our actions are supposed to be adequate; they should be in line with the subjective perspective of others, at least on many occasions. Empathy enables us to gain access to the subjective perspective of other people – up to a point. Empathic concern is adequate in cases where we are supposed to act on behalf of someone else, if it does not lead us astray from the interests and needs of the target of our concern. Of course, not every morally charged situation is supposed to result in helping behaviour; very often we are required to suppress our disposition to helping others, or we might even be obliged to act against their interests (cf. Maibom 2022, 220 ff.). However, we are interested in cases where we are meant to serve the interests of future generations. In order to be successful in this regard, currently living people do not merely need to be concerned for future people but also have sufficient understanding of their point of view. We are therefore returning to the factive element of empathy, which I have briefly mentioned above. And it is here that empathy with future generations seems to fail.

When we misunderstand others, in the sense of misinterpreting their point of view, they can usually answer, at least within a direct encounter. By a form of empathic interchange and via communication we can eventually settle on an adequate understanding of the other. In other words, empathic factive understanding is the result of an interpersonal process. But distant future people cannot answer to us and we cannot meet them. What is more, we do not know much about their circumstances. Hence, we apparently cannot even get off the ground by generalising from our own living conditions and preferences, that is, by using the mechanisms we regularly employ when initially trying to take the perspective of someone else. “[G]etting to know and understand a person is largely a matter of withdrawing projections and dispelling the smoke-screen of what we imagine he is like” (Berenson 1981, 23). There might simply be too many such projections, and the smoke-screen blocking our view on future people might be too thick.

I have argued that to adequately show empathy towards future generations, we need to understand them. Yet, they are distant people. To understand them, we need to imagine what life will be like for them. To make decisions about what to do presently in relation to their future lives, and accordingly in relation to their interests and needs, we cannot but constrain our imagination by specific assumptions (Kind 2016). In cases of reading novels or watching films these circumstances steering the process of factive understanding are set by authors. On what basis do we – people living today – assume epistemic constraints in imagining the life of future generations? We cannot simply suppose that the world in, say, 400 years' time will be relevantly similar to the present world. What is more, perhaps the most important problems of future generations may not even have to do with what we now assume to be their biggest concerns. Perhaps they will not struggle with climate change but with other circumstances of life, for instance social conditions, or with lack of specific scientific knowledge? We simply cannot know. Accordingly, our imagination regarding future generations might lead us astray. Hence it is very possible that our empathic skills will not help us at all in providing adequately for future generations.

It seems, finally, that the two types of interpersonal understanding I have discussed – factive knowledge and a concerned attitude – are connected (cf. Echols and Correll 2012, 61 ff.). We tend to be more concerned for others, and accordingly more motivated to help, if we have an adequate understanding what they need or want. If we do not adequately understand the needs of others, it might turn out that our help is in fact not required or even resented. As we know from our own experience, interpersonal misunderstanding indeed seems to be a widespread cause of conflict, lack of concern, and reduced motivation to help. For instance, paternalistic interventions might be resented because they assume better knowledge about what is best for a person than the person interfered with. So, the lack of adequate factive understanding in relation to future generations might well undermine our otherwise feasible moral concern.

These worries are not supposed to end in a plea for doing nothing, of course. Rather, they highlight specific problems when using our empathic skills in relation to distant future generations. Being concerned about future generations is not enough, we ought to do the right things; that is, we ought to aim to provide for adequate living conditions. To act adequately, we do not have to be certain. In fact, it is very common that we have to make decisions on the basis of imperfect knowledge – decisions based on risks and probabilities. As regards decisions impacting on future generations, we accordingly need to steer our imagination as realistically as possible; we need to make assumptions about the likely living circumstances of future people

from the perspective of today. We know, for instance, that future people will have biological needs that are related to the quality of the environment they will live in. But over and above some general assumptions we need to enrich our imagination to get an adequate picture of possible needs of future people. Such enhanced imagination is a task that of course cannot be achieved individually. We need input from many sources, the sciences, arts and humanities. Contributions, for instance, by science fiction writers may be useful, because they lay out future possibilities. Overall, we need to model imaginatively future worlds and the lives of their inhabitants.

The level of our factive understanding of others is regularly influenced by the depth of our relationship to them. Again, it is difficult to build a personal relationship to distant future people, especially as we have very little knowledge about their circumstances and subjective perspectives. There might be ways, though, to compensate for the lack of real interpersonal relationships and acquaintance. For instance, they can be artificially created in role plays or through avatars representing distant future people. Lack of physical presence might be replaced by using virtual reality devices or, more ambitiously, empathy machines (cf. Bollmer 2017). The latter are technological devices, such as virtual reality glasses, that artificially enable experienced interpersonal encounters. Potentially, we could simulate direct interactions with future generations, thereby deepening our level of understanding of them. This is all very speculative, of course, and beyond my philosophical expertise. However, given that we can form rudimentary relationships to non-existing people and achieve at least some level of understanding with them, it seems to me that gaining a sufficiently vivid level of empathic concern and understanding in relation to future people is viable as well. Such an achievement requires a lot of effort, though.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have analysed whether empathy with future generations is feasible and whether it is a potentially useful instrument in effectively providing resources for future generations. I have argued that empathy with future generations is possible, that it likely leads to a form of minimal concern and that it can help in solving the motivational problem. The most significant hurdle is not so much to do with achieving the normative recognition of future generations, but with epistemic problems regarding the right actions in protecting future interests and needs. Empathy can again be of help in this regard, but it would need to be successfully trained and supported. We need to stretch our empathy to non-existing people and we need to constrain our imagination in

adequate ways to achieve a sufficient understanding of the perspectives of future people.

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