



# Introduction: Emotions Towards Future Generations

Tiziana Andina<sup>1</sup> · Giulio Sacco<sup>1</sup>

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Since the second half of the 20th century, intergenerational justice has emerged as a central theme for philosophers. Issues such as the anthropogenic causes of climate change, the sustainability of public debt, and the problems raised by an ageing population in Western societies have become urgent and drawn the attention of several scholars. Until now, philosophical research on these topics has primarily been approached from a moral and political perspective.

Many scholars have attempted to reconcile the main theories of justice with the problem of temporal asymmetry (Barry 1996; Page 2006). Others have focused on the difficulties arising from the fact that our present actions can determine not only the well-being of future generations, but also their very identity (Parfit 2017). In political philosophy, there has been research on how different political doctrines, especially liberalism (Ferrara 2023), can address real issues such as pensions and intergenerational distributive justice (e.g. Walzer 1983; Sangiovanni 2007; Bengtson 2020). A number of philosophers have explored whether it is possible to speak of the rights of future generations and, if so, which concept of equality should be favored (De George 1981; McKerlie 1989; Partridge 1990; Temkin 1993; Beckerman 2006). Other philosophers have sought to define and combat the concept of age discrimination (Gosseries 2014).

Another area of research on transgenerationality has adopted a metaphysical perspective based on the fact that many actions performed in the present extend over a longer period of time than the lives of the actors involved (Thompson 2009; Andina 2022). Therefore, these actions would have no value outside of a generational chain. Some philosophers have used the idea of self-transcendent interests to argue that, in addition to moral reasons, there are also

reasons to care about future generations (Patridge 1981; Fritsch 2018; Scheffler 2018).

Less frequently, research on future generations has focused on moral psychology. Recently, some pioneering efforts have been made to analyze the psychological causes that prevent people from caring about their own future and that of future generations (Gardiner 2011; Persson and Savulescu 2012; Jamieson 2014). This special issue aims to extend this type of research. More precisely, it delves into the emotions we feel towards future generations, i.e., towards beings that do not yet exist. The perspectives and methods used to tackle this problem are diverse. They range from theoretical contributions on the nature of emotions to practical insights that focus on the affective tools with which we can fulfil our moral duties towards future human beings.

We have chosen to open the issue with two essays that discuss some features of our everyday emotions and their consequences for transgenerational problems. In our own essay, *Feeling Emotions for Future People*, we explore the question of why we find it harder to feel emotions for future generations than for those who are currently alive. According to a number of authors, this is mainly due to so-called «future discounting», i.e., the tendency to value the present more than the future. We challenge this common view and argue that the main reason we find it difficult to care for future generations lies in two features of our daily emotions: the «identified victim effect» and the decline in empathy for people who are different from us. After analyzing these problems in our moral psychology, we show how they explain differences in affectivity towards various entities that do not currently exist, such as future generations, past generations and fictional characters. Acknowledging the real limits of our emotions in dealing with future people, we outline an alternative proposal for developing emotions to motivate citizens of liberal democracies to act in favor of future generations.

In his essay, Ingmar Persson addresses a number of traditional problems concerning future generations and links them to a reflection on the emotional sources underlying our morality. Contrary to some popular arguments, he posits

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✉ Giulio Sacco  
giulio.sacco@unito.it

Tiziana Andina  
tiziana.andina@unito.it

<sup>1</sup> Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences,  
University of Turin, Via Sant'Ottavio, 20, Turin 10124, Italy

that causing someone's existence can be beneficial to them. Persson shows how this view avoids Parfit's repugnant conclusion and challenges McMahan's idea of asymmetry, according to which we have stronger reasons not to cause a bad life than reasons to bring someone with a good life into existence. The only asymmetry Persson recognizes is a psychological one: the intensity of our negative feelings for pain is greater than that of our positive feelings for pleasure. As a result, he argues, our compassion for someone's loss is stronger than our compassionate joy for someone's happiness. Based on this assumption, Persson analyzes how these natural characteristics of our emotions can influence our compassion for other people.

The following three contributions deal with the moral psychology of empathy applied to transgenerational problems. Thomas Schramme analyses whether empathy with future generations is possible and whether it is a potentially useful tool for the effective provision of resources for future generations. After considering the relevant psychological literature on empathy, he argues that affective empathy with future generations is possible and likely to lead to a form of minimal concern that contributes to solving the "motivation problem". According to Schramme, the most challenging problem does not lie in achieving the necessary normative recognition of future generations, but in our epistemic ignorance of what actions will protect the interests and needs of future generations. He then claims that empathy can even be helpful in this regard, arguing that we should train ourselves to feel empathetic with non-existent people and develop our imagination to gain a sufficient understanding of the perspectives of future people.

In her contribution, Sarah Songhorian deals with the so-called "motivational problem", the question of what can motivate us to act in favor of future generations, even if we have to sacrifice part of our own well-being to do so. She argues that the case of future humans is a paradigmatic example of why it is not possible to rely only on immediate emotions and empathy, as these are affected by biases and prejudices. She then discusses the possibility of adding a conscious "rational" component to emotions through an educational process. Starting from these premises, Songhorian reconsiders the sentimentalist tradition, focusing primarily on Adam Smith's theory of the impartial spectator as a possible solution to the motivational problem.

Igor Cvejić, Tamara Plečaš and Petar Bojanić address the issue of empathy towards future generations from a phenomenological perspective. The authors claim that, strictly speaking, it is not possible to empathize with future people because, since they do not yet exist, we cannot have direct interaction with them and therefore have no access to their mental states. Furthermore, they express doubts about the danger of paternalism that can arise in empathic

relationships with future generations. Despite these problems, Cvejić, Plečaš and Bojanić try to find a solution in the phenomenological tradition by pointing to our social self-consciousness, i.e. the fact that we can be aware of ourselves as part of a relationship with the future. According to the authors, even if we never have a direct relationship with future generations, some form of engagement with them is possible, as our actions can be good or bad for them and we will be judged by them for our behavior.

We have then decided to put together two contributions that analyze the possibility of human extinction from different perspectives. Maurizio Balistreri argues that – despite the criticism levelled against it – a sentimentalist "Humean" view is capable of justifying the condemnation of such a scenario. He begins by addressing the objection that morality cannot be based on sympathy alone because it is selective and narrow-minded, essentially incompatible with the possibility of taking an impartial, objective standpoint. On the contrary, according to Balistreri the sentimentalist view can explain our intuitive horror when thinking of the possibility of human extinction. From a Humean perspective, he argues, it is not only immoral to harm future generations (because this would entail actions that cause misery, pain and suffering), but also not to care at all about the extinction of the human species. In fact, this would mean being indifferent to the happiness of potential humans who might come into existence and have a life worth living. In both cases, Balistreri concludes, we show no ability to empathize with the possible people who might be born tomorrow.

Avram Hiller also deals with the problem of the end of humanity (and the intuitive horror it triggers in us), albeit from a different perspective. He takes a critical look at Samuel Scheffler's (2013) assertion that we value the existence of future generations even more than our own lives and the lives of others today. According to Scheffler (2013: p. 45), «[t]he coming into existence of people we do not know and love matters more to us than our own survival and the survival of the people we do know and love». The argument he puts forward in favor of this conclusion is that while we do not regard the fact that we will all die relatively soon as a catastrophe, we do regard the non-existence of future generations as one. In his essay, Hiller challenges this line of reasoning. He argues that Scheffler's example does not show that we value future lives more than our present ones, because what is seen as catastrophic is the combination of the idea of the death of the present generation and the end of all humanity, not just this second scenario. Therefore, Hiller suggests other ways to compare our valuations of present and future generations, and recommends that philosophers interested in the moral psychology of valuing future generations engage with the social sciences, as this is an empirical question.

The issue concludes with Carola Barbero's essay, which deals specifically with the nature of our emotions. She compares the emotions we feel towards future generations with those we feel towards fictional characters and addresses the so-called "paradox of fiction". According to it, it is irrational to feel emotions for objects that we know do not exist. The paradox is based on the assumption that in order to be genuine and rational, emotions should be directed towards existing beings. Starting from the rich literature on that topic, Barbero asks herself whether this can draw a parallel with the emotions we could feel for future generations – she calls this "the paradox of the future." By providing an ontological answer to the paradox of fiction, which she achieves through a Meinongian Object Theory, she argues that both emotions for fictional characters and for future people should be conceived as rational and genuine.

The most compelling aspect in the preparation of this special issue was its innovative nature – we could say that it encompasses one of the frontiers of research on transgenerationality. For this reason, this issue has required a certain audacity on the part of the Editor-in-Chief Fabio Paglieri and all the contributors. We express our gratitude to all of them for accepting this challenge. We hope the results of our work have been worth the efforts and will contribute to enrich the debate on this facet of transgenerationality.

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