

Intergenerational Justice

Final Paper by Stefan J.W. Marti
Dept of Philosophy, University of Berne, 1993

This paper originates from a speech in the seminar *Basic Positions in Ethics: Kantianism and Utilitarianism in Practical Ethics*, and refers to the article *Intergenerational Justice* by Anton LEIST.

Summary

This paper is about the question, if we have a moral responsibility for past and/or future generations, or in other words: What sort of responsibility do we have for our parents (and their parents, etc.), and what for our children (and their children, etc.)? How could such a responsibility be explained?

The practical problems triggering these questions are: Decreasing social security because of decreasing birth-rate and overpopulation, as well as deterioration of life quality through environment pollution and exploitation of non-renewable resources.

Additionally, the question is asked if an ethic of INTRAgenerational justice (ethic within a generation) follows the same logic as the one of INTERgenerational justice (ethic among generations).

Anton LEIST (on whose article this paper is based) lists two main points why intergenerational justice is often ignored: lacking knowledge about future generations, and incertitude about the existence of a such a responsibility. Why this problem is indeed an ethic problem is that we all accept an everyday *moral of equality*. We are ethically equal to refugees and disabled, and why should this be different from people belonging to the future?

(...)

What follows is a substantiation of responsibility for the future, from the viewpoints of Hans JONAS, Annette BAIER, Utilitarianism, Kantian tradition, HUME, and RAWLS. (See references.)

Here are a few catchwords:

Jonas: The characteristic of human beings being *able* to be responsible for something/someone is enough for *having* this responsibility. (He tries to prove this allegation.)

Baier: If we do not start from an *individualistic* approach to ethics, but from an *ethic of community* (communitarism), the problem transforms to an internal problem. The community takes care for its generations as an individual takes care for its stages of life.

Utilitarianism There are two possibilities to reach the *summum bonum* for everyone (including future people): principle of sum of benefit, and principle of average of benefit. The consequences of these two principles are different when applying to our intergenerational responsibility problem.

Kantian tradition When ethic is to be deduced from a concept of autonomy (what Kant proposes), there are two possibilities: the individual and the collective versions: self-legislation versus theory of consensus. Concerning our question, the implications of those two versions are different.

(...)