

Intergenerational Rights: A Philosophical Examination

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Abstract

One of the primary views on our supposed obligation towards our descendants in the context of environmental problems invokes the idea of the rights of future generations. A growing number of authors also hold that the descendants of those victimized by historical injustices, including colonialism and slavery, have the right to demand financial reparations for the sufferings of their distant ancestors. However, these claims of intergenerational rights face theoretical difficulties, notably the non-identity problem. To circumvent this problem in a relationship between present and future generations, some rights theorists replace future individual rights with such collective rights. Others advance the threshold conception of harm in discussing intergenerational relationships in general. Despite the significant implications these revisionist views might have, few efforts have been made to scrutinize their solidity.

To plug such a gap in the literature, this paper examines to what extent the collective understanding of intergenerational rights is pertinent. I also explore the virtues and drawbacks of the threshold interpretation of harm. The paper concludes by suggesting that the motivation behind these and other versions of the rights theory suffers from the ambiguity of a traditional dichotomy between perfect and imperfect duties.

Keywords: collective rights, historical injustices, perfect and imperfect duties, rights of future generations, the non-identity problem, threshold conception of harm