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## Review: Janna Thompson: Intergenerational Justice

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lated industry would profit economically at Europe's cost. Furthermore, it would harm the poorest countries, because if industry just migrates the effect on the climate is not restricted.

Furthermore they doubt the popular idea of fairness, which states that global resources should be divided equally among the world's inhabitants. Why should, for instance, the United States agree to lose much more than everyone else? That is not how international bargaining works. Furthermore, the per capita approach would not be good in the long run, because states with a high population would be rewarded. This could lead to fertility policies that try to maximise the size of the population. In the end their argument remains the same: International Paretanism is the only thing which is feasible because every state thinks it is better off with a treaty, and therefore is willing to negotiate.

The chapter on future generations and the defence of discounting is more complicated than the others, and lacks some of their coherence. Posner and Weisbach use numerous calculations and complicate an issue which – for their purpose – could be explained more easily. Between these calculations they make a point that is clear and well argued. They come to the conclusion that the discounting of today's costs and future benefits at the market rate of return is

the best way to evaluate a climate treaty. Low rates of return would mean that we lose today as much as others will lose in the future. They make clear that this does not mean that it is unethical, because discounting is just a way to choose projects; it is not a way to discount the value of future lives.

Although a total equal weighting of people today and in the future is not possible, discounting to find effective projects is probably the best way to come near to it. The scholar Dieter Birnbacher sees discounting also as a problem if the harms and benefits of the contemporary era are discounted for the future but not if monetary resources are. For example, it would be unethical to say that future suffering is not as important as the suffering today, but it is not unethical to say that a billion dollars will be less valuable in hundred years than today.

Posner and Weisbach sketch the arguments for the optimal design of a treaty in the last chapter and the development of the argument brings clarity to the whole subject. The omnipresent issue of climate change can be seen in a different perspective after reading this provocative book, and in the end it is clear that their ideas on a climate change treaty are not at all unethical. Posner and Weisbach are separating a climate treaty from other important issues and do not

make idealistic proposals. Justice is not left out of it, but it does not help anyone if justice is the reason why an effective treaty is not possible. For the authors it is important that something happens because former negotiations and agreements have failed dramatically. The self-interest of states cannot be ignored in the creation of an effective treaty, so everyone must think that they are better off with a treaty. The book's ideas should be taken into account during future international negotiations.

*Eric A. Posner and David Weisbach (2010): Climate Change Justice. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 220 pages. ISBN: 978-0-691-13775-9. Price \$27.95.*

#### Cited Literature:

Lumer, Christoph (2009): Klimawandel, Generationengerechtigkeit und Entwicklung. In: *Journal für Generationengerechtigkeit*. (3/2009), 88-93.

Birnbacher, Dieter (2004): Responsibility of Future Generations. Scope and Limits. In: *Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations* (ed.): *Handbuch Generationengerechtigkeit*. Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 45-78. (German original edition 1992).

## Janna Thompson: Intergenerational Justice

*Reviewed by James Wilhelm*

Janna Thompson's extensive work enters the literature at a significant juncture in intergenerational terms. Notably, the process of ageing in many European countries is causing the sustainability of pension systems to be called into question, and many political commentators are beginning to contemplate whether many of them will – or have already – become “gerontocracies” (hegemony of the old). These changes have begun, in both academia and beyond, to generate a debate about whether the so-called “generational contract”, an implicit compact which governs the relationship between old and young, is still tenable in modern times. Given this increasing uncertainty about how the generations should relate to each other,

Thompson's wide-ranging contemporary account of intergenerational rights and responsibilities could prove to be an important reference text for today's world.

The book is intended for both academics and students with previous experience in the field of intergenerational justice, but can also be read with relative ease by readers with little prior knowledge of the subject. This is made possible by Thompson's ability to articulate the complex ideas she espouses in cogent, comprehensible prose. In a nutshell, it is a multi-disciplinary study on the nature of intergenerational justice between past, present and future generations which draws on, and has implications for, environmental studies, legal studies, political science and philosophy.

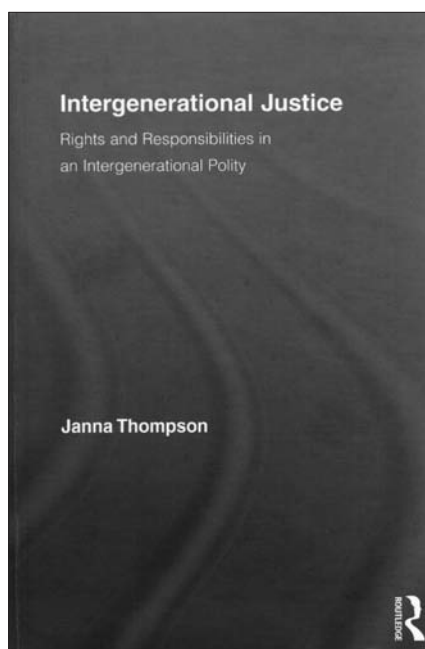
The content of the book is predominantly devoted to Thompson's main aim: to propound a theory of intergenerational justice capable of generating rights and responsibilities – a moral compass for generational relations. For those with a keen interest in the theoretical dimension of intergenerational studies, Thompson's theory will be of great interest due to its uniqueness; Thompson diverges from conventional contract, which broadly focuses on agreements rational citizens would make with each other, often in a “state of nature” (e.g. Hobbes). In the intergenerational justice literature, this method of reasoning has been adopted by many authors, sometimes leading to an expansion of the contractors to include not only the

current generation, but all generations. A popular route is to extend John Rawls' "veil of ignorance" thought experiment; in doing so, a generational contract is reached which would presumably be accepted by all generations.

Thompson rejects this conventional approach to intergenerational theory construction on the basis of an ontological specificity which fundamentally differentiates a contractual agreement made between currently living citizens and one made between succeeding generations: unborn future generations cannot be said to have agreed to any contract, because they do not exist. We cannot know what objects, institutions and practices they will value, and the problem becomes increasingly problematic with regard to distant future generations, whose value system may develop to such an extent that it only vaguely resembles our own. Finding an alternative starting point, Thompson proposes that a theory of intergenerational justice should begin by recognising that all individuals have lifetime-transcending interests (embodied in intergenerational projects) which ought to be respected by political society, thus leading to the recognition of intergenerational rights and responsibilities. This forms the central thesis of the book.

Lifetime-transcending interests are, according to Thompson, central to the lives of most citizens: scholars write books which they hope will make a contribution to their respective field, often for the benefit of both present and future people; grandparents often save to ensure that their grandchildren will receive a generous inheritance, or contribute to their education for the sake of their future career; and people frequently make requests about what should be done with their body after death. As can be ascertained from the examples, lifetime-transcending interests are defined as interests focusing on circumstances which could occur after one's own lifetime.

For the attentive reader, a question will undoubtedly emerge with regard to the tenability of Thompson's thesis: is the supposition that citizens have life-transcending interests that extend beyond their lifetime not negated by the fact that many citizens are, *prima facie*, indifferent towards the future? In other words, does Thompson have a response to the vulgar egoist who claims that that which occurs after his life has ended is unimportant? Some readers will surely conclude that lifetime-transcending interests are simply not considered important enough by a large



enough fraction of the population to constitute a basis for generating rights and responsibilities which should be recognised and protected by political society. In modern consumer society, this view has enough of a basis to threaten the very foundation of Thompson's intergenerational theory.

Thompson, in response to the sceptics, neatly circumvents the indifference of the egoist towards future generations. She convincingly argues that many of the activities which egoists engage in are, in fact, dependent on the maintenance of intergenerational relationships. Thompson confronts the reader with the case of the miser who openly confesses to having no concern for future generations and, on the face of it, hoards gold for the sake of his own self-interest. Thompson utilises the well-known sociological premise of not understanding a social actor's interests according to his/her own self-definitions, but instead identifying the sociological underpinnings of the actor's actions. In this way, she demonstrates that the miser's pleasure in amassing a fortune is dependent on the *social meaning* of gold as a mark of value, and that this meaning is maintained intergenerationally. Given the centrality of lifetime-transcending interests to the proposed thesis, and the fact that the indifference of the egoist (if widespread) poses a fundamental challenge to a theory based on these interests, it is surprising that Thompson devotes so little space to her explanation to this challenge. An expanded explanation with more examples would have strengthened Thompson's claim that unacknowledged intergenerational interests exist, and, in turn, strengthened the basis for her theory.

In contrast to the initial theory building phase (chapters one to four), the rest of the book devotes itself to making a contribution to some of the most prominent contemporary debates amongst scholars of intergenerational justice: what constitutes a fair share of burdens and benefits between generations; the role of inheritance in intergenerational cooperation; justice between both cotemporal and distant generations; and the non-identity paradox problem. As well as making valuable contributions to the above-mentioned traditional debates in intergenerational studies, Thompson also provides the reader with a commentary on less often discussed topics, such as the implications of genetic engineering for intergenerational justice.

In the final chapter, Thompson problematises her theory by considering its relation to the subject matter of international relations: a world of nation-states. Thompson suggests that two intergenerational principles should operate in international relations. The first is that each polity should respect the entitlement of members of other polities to pursue and maintain intergenerational relationships: if a polity economically exploits or damages the environmental resources of another polity to the extent that intergenerational relationships which maintain things people value – such as a system of inheritance or an ecological site of great cultural or economic importance – cannot be sustained within it, then this constitutes an intergenerational injustice. The second principle asserts that polities that have committed an injustice with regard to the first principle should seek to put things right by striving to ensure that the initial injustice does not prevent intergenerational relationships being reformed. In terms of implications, Thompson suggests that the application of these principles to international relations would lead to redistribution between rich and poor countries. In fact, since Thompson believes that an agent, including a collective agent such as a nation-state, can be held morally accountable for unwitting harms and to some extent responsible for acts committed by predecessors representing that agent, it holds that Thompson's theory may have far-reaching moral implications for historical injustices and, if accepted and acted upon, the present international order.

In order to make the step from theory to political reality, Thompson suggests that the lifetime-transcending interests of citizens need to be further researched and explicated, and, after the content of these interests has

been determined, they should be made more visible in the democratic arena. Thompson's argument suggests that a more long-term oriented democratic process could be achieved not just through the use of an "Ombudsman for Future Generations", or a lowering of the voting age in order to incorporate the views of the young generation at the ballot box, but through a reconsideration of what we currently regard as rational interests of present people. In other words, Thompson

concludes by calling for a re-examination of the real interests, namely the intergenerational interests, of present generations.

Thompson offers an innovative approach to considering the rights and responsibilities of citizens towards posterity and directly confronts potential critique of her theory in a convincing and logically persuasive manner, although more space could have been devoted to its defence. Whilst certainly providing an original contribution to the debate, it remains

to be seen whether Thompson's theory is able to challenge the dominance of the contractualist school in intergenerational studies.

*Janna Thompson (2009): Intergenerational Justice. Rights and Responsibilities in an Intergenerational Polity. New York: Routledge. 191 pages. ISBN: 0415996287. Price £80.75.*

## An Interview with Professor Dieter Birnbacher: Reflections on Ethical Universality

conducted by Hanna Schudy

Dieter Birnbacher is professor of philosophy at the University of Düsseldorf and a member of the Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations' scientific board. In 1988 he published the book *Verantwortung für zukünftige Generationen* (responsibilities for future generations), which was translated into French (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1994) and Polish (Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa 1999). Hanna Schudy is an ethicist and environmentalist interested in questions of intergenerational responsibility concerning the natural environment. She is a doctoral student at the University of Wrocław and a DAAD scholarship holder. The interview was conducted in December 2011 at the Heinrich Heine Universität, Düsseldorf. It is part of Ms. Schudy's current research into "The principle of responsibility in Hans Jonas' and Dieter Birnbacher's environmental ethics".

**Hanna Schudy:** Within the framework of the ethics that is developed by you, it is emphasised that moral norms must be understood and accepted in general; that is why, according to you, not every concept of value can fulfil the requirements of universal ethics. You stress that the axiology which supports such an ethics should understand value as a result of an evaluation by the subject. According to this axiology, the value of the environment is equivalent to the interests of the evaluating subject(s). But, problematically from an intergenerational

perspective, most people, especially in Poland, are not interested in protecting primeval forests such as the Białowieża.<sup>1</sup> When one accepts your axiology, the logical corollary appears to be that, morally speaking, the area is worthy of no special protection. Is this an acceptable conclusion? Furthermore, what kind of moral norm with regard to human attitudes towards other similar cases can be recommended within the framework of your ethics?

**Professor Birnbacher:** Ethics should be universally applied, and moral norms should be formulated in such a way that they can be universally accepted and understood. This implies that our axiology, or our theory of value, has to be rather narrow and somewhat elementary. Therefore we cannot expect that the values we consider to be of importance will be shared by all subjects. In fact, in connection with the environment, there is a varied spectrum of different attitudes. On the one hand, many subjects hold anthropocentric attitudes towards the environment. On the other, there are many subjects who ascribe an intrinsic value to nature as a whole, or to certain nature systems, plants, animals, etc. In short, there exists a variety of values. How do we manage this variety? My proposal is that we try to make our axiology as universalisable as possible. This seems to me the correct route to a kind of utilitarian ethics that respects the variety of existing attitudes and evaluations and, in turn, ascribes value to the satisfaction of

these values, or, in other words, to a certain interpretation of utility. This route is not contrary to the protection of the environment since the interests of not only the present generation, but also future generations must be taken into account. These interests are crucial in our preservation efforts because we do not preserve landscapes and other natural items solely for those living now, but also for the indefinite future, and all this rests upon the irreversibility of much of the destruction of nature. In the process, we may not only lose *this* plant or *that* forest as an entity, but a specific facet of nature that is unique, such as the irreversible extinction of an animal species; it should make us reflect on whether this has compatibility with our intergenerational responsibilities. This responsibility is not indifferent to what we think our future will be, and the best guess concerning our future is that people will be better off than they are today; not only will civilisation continue, but it will spread and expand. Additionally, the degree of material wellbeing of humans will, at minimum, continue to grow, and it is also probable that human needs and wants will at some point become more concerned with non-material goods. Among them, natural goods will become increasingly important; they will become scarcer, and more wanted and desired in the future as the level of wellbeing increases.

Technical and scientific progress as well as the so-called internal logic of capital will, by yielding a constant surplus, ensure that