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Is intergenerational equity the right approach to climate change?

Carbon dioxide emitted today may remain in the atmosphere for centuries to millennia. There is moreover a time lag of about 50-100 years between emissions and rising temperatures, because of the thermal inertia of the oceans. Whether we decide today to emit more or less greenhouse gases will therefore hardly result in a climatic change noticed by ourselves during our own lifetime, but by people who are as yet unborn. Restricted self-interest would therefore advocate *adaptation*; *mitigation* can only be justified by caring for future generations as well. This makes climate change pre-eminently a matter of intergenerational ethics.

The question, however, is *why* we would care about future generations and thus mitigate climate change. Traditionally, this question has been answered in terms of justice, equity, rights and duties. Due to the notorious non-identity problem, however, it has proven remarkably difficult to bring our moral intuitions (that we do have duties towards future generations) in equilibrium with theory. Depending on the policy we choose, other people will inhabit the future, making it impossible either to benefit or to harm future generations. Utilitarian theories, which are immune to the non-identity problem, face other problems such as the ‘repugnant conclusion’: that it would be better to have a future world with a hundred billion people with a low quality of life as long as the sum total of wellbeing would be a higher than a future world with ten billion people with a high quality of life.

There is, however, no necessity to frame our reasons to care about future generations only in terms of ‘duties’, rights, and the like. Much stronger reasons originate in the human need for *self-transcendence* and *meaning in life*. The term ‘self-transcendence’ is not meant to refer to the belief in a different metaphysical reality or mystical ontology. Instead, what is referred to is simply the human need to be part of or to contribute to something that lies outside oneself. Examples include contributing to family life, the university where one works, writing books, continuation of traditions, or starting a new company. Most of the activities that offer meaning to our lives presuppose that these activities will be continued and can prosper after our own lifetime. Since climate change endangers the ongoing flourishing of what we value today, we have an interest in climate mitigation.

Research questions are why in our modern society our relation to the future is framed in terms of intergenerational equity, instead of meaning in life and conceptions of the good life. To what extent is neo-liberalism responsible, by emphasizing competition in market relations and thereby eroding self-transcendent values? Has our society become too individualistic?