

ONTOLOGICAL PROBLEMS AND METHODS IN INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE

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Abstract:

This paper argues that the well-known 'ontological problems' that beset many extant theories of intergenerational justice suggest an ontological-cum-normative response that explores the relation between questions of justice and the human time of birth and death. I begin by reviewing and re-classifying the special problems affecting moral relations with future people, from the non-existence challenge and poor epistemic access to problems affecting interaction and world constitution. I then argue that to the extent these problems are indeed social-ontological, they call for express investigations of the being of moral agents in relation to time and world, addressing such questions as the role time and generations play in social and normative relations. Most methodologies in this area, however, extend existing theories of justice, abstract from generational overlap or from historical time, or treat intergenerational relations as a special case. Even when there is an explicit recognition of the need for 'revising morality', the ontological problems thus tend to be exacerbated, avoided, downplayed, or treated in piecemeal fashion. A guiding assumption remains that a core or non-extensionist theory of justice would not (yet) have to treat generational relations. With the help of phenomenological and feminist literature, I argue by contrast that justice becomes an issue for human beings to the extent we are generational beings, beings who are non-contingently subject to birth and death. Birth and death, however, link us, in social and moral ways, to previous and subsequent generations. If moral normativity arises with generational time, then justice for future people should be seen neither as a special case nor as a problem of extension. Intergenerational justice is thus implicated in intra-generational justice from the beginning, and its theoretical elaboration should address the non-linear co-implication of past and future in the present.

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