

Intergenerational Cooperation¹

I find myself doing a number of puzzling things: I observe a two-minute silence for those who died in a war fought before I was born, and so are in no position to approve of my respect for them. I feel guilty about oppression that was carried out in the name of my country by people who lived centuries ago, even though I was not around to be causally responsible. I separate paper and plastic recycling for the benefit of people whom, it seems, don't exist and won't be born until long after I die. In this paper I will offer a way of making sense of all of these practices, in the context of intergenerational cooperation. I will do so *only assuming my own self-interest*.²

In section 1, I will explain why these practices, and intergenerational cooperation more generally, are apt to be difficult to make sense of. In section 2, I will explain why it is in our self-interest to care about future generations, e.g. by recycling our waste. This will not be enough, however to make sense of our cooperating with future generations, since their cooperation with us would also be required. In section 3, I will explain how to make sense of the reverence of war dead, and argue that this can be seen as cooperating with previous generations and give us the resources to understand why future generations might cooperate with us. In section 4, I will show that, given this account, we also have a natural account of phenomena like national guilt, which involve our feeling responsible for things that happened before we were born.

1: The puzzle of intergenerational cooperation.

Intergenerational cooperation, that is cooperation with past and future generations, clearly takes place. People *are*, in many cases, motivated to continue projects that began before their birth, and

¹ This manuscript was begun in 2014 and developed over the next 2-3 years. It was rejected from a number of journals, and I was persuaded that the argument was good, but insufficiently original for publication as research. I make it available for those interested under a creative commons CC BY-NC-ND licence.



² I'm not claiming there aren't reasons beyond my self-interest to participate in intergenerational co-operation, merely that I will not discuss them in this paper.

motivated to act for the benefit of future generations, and, what's more, view themselves as engaging in shared activities with past and future generations. As Janna Thompson puts it:

“But most citizens do not merely conceive of themselves as people who happen to share a territory and institutions with people of the past and future. They regard themselves as inheritors of a history and a political tradition. They understand themselves and their political actions in a historical framework that connects the deeds of past generations to their own deeds and to aspirations for the future of their society... Their government makes agreements and incurs obligations which succeeding generations are supposed to honour.”³

Thompson argues that we live in a ‘transgenerational polity’; a society that is continuous in time, and views itself as such. Thompson is concerned with arguing that theories of justice based on the existence of transgenerational polities are preferable to those that do not. Edmund Burke seems to defend a similar view. He says:

Society is indeed a contract... As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.⁴

I'm sympathetic to the insights of Burke and Thompson, but my aim is different. I wish to make sense of an aspect of transgenerational polities – intergenerational cooperation – that might seem puzzling, even when we accept that we *do* view ourselves in the ways Thompson and Burke describe. In this section, I aim to outline why intergenerational cooperation, or a social contract between the living, the dead and the as yet unborn, might seem puzzling. More broadly, I wish to give an account of why intergenerational cooperation might be in our self-interest, such that it is

³ Thompson (2009) p.2

⁴ Burke, E. (1790) *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, para 165

not simply a feature of our societies that we do view ourselves as cooperating with past and future generations, but that such cooperation makes sense.

I will discuss three practices that might independently seem puzzling: caring for future generations, valuing the preferences of past generations, and feeling guilt toward past generations. I will argue that, when viewed together, they can create a situation where intergenerational cooperation makes sense.

Before I discuss these different practices, I will set out some background. Dead people, I'm assuming, are not aware of the actions of the living. They are, in short, dead. When I refer to past generations, in this paper, I will, to avoid complication, mean people who were dead before you were born, such that there was never any overlap between their having conscious awareness of the world and your having conscious awareness of the world. By future generations I mean whichever sentient creatures come to inhabit the earth after you are dead. Again, to avoid complication, I will mean only those sentient creatures that first become consciously aware after you cease to be consciously aware, such that there is never a time when you are mutually aware of each other. I'm assuming, in this paper, that no such future generations exist. They may or may not come to exist, depending on how things go, but, when I talk about future generations, there is not a specific set of people to whom I'm able to refer.

1.1: Caring for future generations

The puzzle of caring for future generations has two parts. The first part is well known; it is the 'non-identity' problem, most famously discussed by Derek Parfit.⁵ This is the problem that the identity of the future generations we aim to help is in part dependent on the sort of help we offer. So the question of cooperating with future generations is puzzling because we can't get a firm grip on the identity of the collaborators, indeed, there are, as yet, not such people for us to care for.

⁵ Parfit, D. (1984) *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Given that there are no future generations, and whatever future generations there turn out to be depends on our attitude towards them, we might wonder why we spend so much time sorting out our recycling, and being prudent with our finances and in a thousand minor ways sacrificing our free time and money for the benefit of people, we know not who, that we will never meet. Perhaps these sacrifices are minor enough that the need for an explanation from self-interest is not pressing. Consider, then, those advocates of views that suggest that large financial sacrifices be made in order to secure advantages for future generations. There is a puzzle of why we should consider their arguments, given that there is no definite group of people on whose behalf we are induced to make sacrifices, whereas the world contains many people who presently are in dire need.

Brian Barry argued against appealing to the existence of a motivation to help future generations to explain why we ought to help future generations. He says “surely this is a little too easy, like a conjurer putting a rabbit in a hat, taking it out again and expecting a round of applause”.⁶ This is why I have restricted myself to considering only self-interest. In doing so, however, the possibility of cooperating with future generations becomes more puzzling, since I will be dead before these future generations have the opportunity of cooperating with me. How can my self-interest be served by caring for a group of people who *ex hypothesi* are in no position to return the favour during my lifetime? This is the second part of the puzzle of cooperating with future generations. For cooperation to take place there has to be reciprocity, and, since I don’t know who these future generations will be, it seems difficult to see why they might wish to cooperate with me. Again, I’m restricting myself to reasons that might be in their self-interest, even though I know very little about what they desire, so I can’t assume that they will wish to cooperate with me out of the goodness of their hearts.

⁶ Barry (1977), p.279

I'm not for a moment suggesting we stop our efforts to dutifully sort our recycling, merely that it seems uncharacteristically altruistic so far. Let us move from future generations to past generations, so that we might view the problem from the other end.

1.2: Valuing the preferences of past generations

In conversation with my mother once, she told me that her father (my grandfather) would be have been very proud of me. I have never met my maternal grandfather, who died before I was born. Yet I felt quite pleased at being told that he would have been proud of me. Why? I've never met the man. Why should I feel motivated to gain his approval? Unquestionably, this sort of thing happens all the time. We are constantly being exhorted to honour the memory of those who died fighting fascism, or struggled for equality or did good works, and, what's more, such exhortations seem to be rhetorically powerful. In various ways we get told that we ought not do as we please because of the preferences of some dead (mostly) white (mostly) guys.⁷ We might wonder, given that these people will never find out, why we should be moved by their preferences. The puzzle of cooperation here is not based on whether past generations will cooperate reciprocally, since we already know what they have done for us, the puzzle is that, given they have already done their part of the bargain, why should we be moved by their preferences, and cooperate with them? They cannot, at this stage, withdraw their cooperation, so self-interest seems to demand that we ignore their wishes and look after ourselves. Caring about their wishes seems to be a further act of altruism.

1.3: Feeling guilt toward past generations

If our only explanation for caring about the preferences of past generations is altruism, then feeling guilt towards them seems frankly peculiar. Finding out that, people acting in the name of my

⁷ Nothing I say here hangs on the fact that the dead people we are asked to care about are overwhelmingly white and male; I merely wanted to acknowledge that, although I defend the practice of cooperating with previous generations, I am aware that it is bound up with injustices in our historical narratives.

country or a cause I support inflicted cruelty and oppression on huge numbers of other people makes me feel bad. But I was not there, and have never killed anyone, and, let's assume, I've done everything I can to minimize the injustice for which I am personally responsible. Why should I feel guilty for activities that I could not, in the smallest way, be causally responsible for? This seems different to feeling embarrassed for someone, it feels like *guilt*. The puzzle, here, is to explain how I might reasonably feel guilt at something I haven't done.

Having set out the three practices that are puzzling I will provide a unified explanation of all three, only appealing to self-interest, that allows us to make sense of each.

2: My future interests

In this section I aim to show that it is in our self-interest to care about future generations. Let us start with my self-interest and make one key point: my interests can be served without my being aware of it. You can go to a country I will never visit and slander me in a language I don't speak and I might never find out. Nonetheless, it seems, my interests have not been well served. It seems to me that I don't want you to slander me, rather than merely not wanting to discover that you have been slandering me. There are some cases, then, in which my interests can be poorly served without my being aware of it.

My interests are served or thwarted depending on whether those projects to which I am committed go better or worse, rather than whether I experience pleasure or pain. We seem to allow that a highly self-critical artist, or engineer may have led a 'great life', even if she was often plagued by feelings of inadequacy. And we have all sorts of interests, if we construe 'interest' quite broadly. Some interests are interests that have minimal effect on anyone else. I wish to enjoy a whodunit, and my enjoyment is spoiled if I look at the back and discover who the culprit was, rather than letting the suspense build. Some (most?) interests require cooperation, however. If I wish to host a successful dinner party, this requires that my guests show up, and that the electricity company continues to supply my house with power. In turn, I must pay my bill, and provide food for the

guests. The dinner party project is a relatively short one, maybe lasting a week from inviting guests to finishing the washing up, but it involves a group of people co-ordinating their activities. My life in some respect goes better if the party is a success, whether or not I know it.

Some interests have a short duration, like our dinner party, and some our longer. My interest in teaching a particular course well lasts a semester, writing a book may take a few years, one's career may last a few decades. It is possible to have interests that are even more long term, and even to have interests that transcend one's own life, indeed to interests that only make sense if they continue beyond one's own life. John O'Neill has defended the view that we have such interests, and the view goes back at least to Aristotle's discussion of Solon.⁸ O'Neill uses the example of a long dead mathematician who, after decades of neglect, provides the mathematical foundation for an important scientific breakthrough. O'Neill is keen to stress that it is not merely that one's reputation can be enhanced posthumously, but one's achievements. He says "The question of reputation is one of whether or not that achievement is recognised, and not whether or not a work is an achievement."⁹ If a breakthrough is made as a result of work done by a dead mathematician, O'Neill argues, regardless of the effect on their reputation, that mathematician has achieved more than if no such breakthrough were made. If we view the mathematician as having an interest in a project that necessarily transcends his own life (let us call this project 'science'), then this project goes better if science succeeds, and his life has gone better (i.e. his interests are better served) if he has contributed to this life-transcending project in a significant way.

I have restricted myself to self-interested reasons for acting, but have just appealed to life-transcending projects. The thought at work here is that if I have a project which necessarily involves other people (as in the dinner party case, or the mathematician case), my own interests become bound up with the interests of my collaborators on the project. This does not mean it

⁸ O'Neill, J. (1993) 'Future Generations: Present Harms' *Philosophy* 68:35-51; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, T. Irwin trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985) book 1.10-13

⁹ O'Neill (1993), p.39

ceases to be in my interest that my projects succeed, even though it happens also to be in the interest of my collaborators. That the costs and benefits become collective is merely one of the features of cooperation, but it seems greatly in my interests that I allow for cooperation. Indeed, the self-interested need for cooperation to make sense will play a major role in my argument.

Science is a good example of a necessarily life-transcending project, but we can come up with others. Philosophy might be one, Civilisation might be another, as will Partfit's own example, the preservation of Venice.¹⁰ A more explicitly political case might be the Polis. We might have a certain political community that we wish to continue beyond our lives, and we may make sacrifices, including our own lives, to preserve that community.

Our interest in future generations, on this view, is not that there is a group of particular individuals to whom we owe duties, because the non-identity problem discussed above is precisely a problem with establishing who that group might be. Rather we have a currently existing project, and future generations are instruments of its persistence, whoever they may be. This may appear a shocking result. Future generations have just be reduced to instruments for my own self-interest! However, depending on the project, the autonomy of the future people may be presupposed by the project. If one's political community is democratic (and that democracy is a feature which you wish to be preserved), the flourishing of that community requires that it be made of people who are capable of participating democratically, and that requires that they possess the capacity to act autonomy. So there are cases in which furthering your interests requires future generations that act in their own interests with a high degree of autonomy. In pursuing your own interests you may have reasons to ensure that future generations are in a position to pursue theirs.

Similarly, you may be shocked by the suggestion that we are only interested in those future generations that serve our projects, however autonomously. Barry describes such a view as "a diachronic version of the common American view that famine need only be relieved in countries

¹⁰ Partfit (1984) *Reasons and Persons*

with the right attitude to capitalism”.¹¹ To some extent worries of this sort might be a natural consequence of the limitations I have set for myself – I am only interested in reasons for cooperation that are self-interested. We can choose to value different things however. If I decide that my life is made better (because my interests are served) by the human race continuing to exist, or sentient creatures continuing to exist, or a bio-diverse earth continuing to exist, the future generations that serve our projects can be pretty inclusive. We might, indeed, have second-order interests in having interests which are as inclusive as possible. Very few people *want* to be mean-spirited or callous, after all.

Let’s say that we take it to be in our self-interest that we live *meaningful* lives. Antti Kauppinen has argued that a meaningful life has the following features:

“In particular, we can see that in particularly meaningful lives, the goals achieved have *lasting* rather than fleeting value, both within a life and beyond it... Beyond a lifetime, achievements have lasting value when they impact on the lives of others and even future generations, whether it is by way of artistic or scientific innovation or moral excellence.”¹²

If one thinks of it as being in one’s self-interest to live a meaningful life, one might thereby think that one’s life is greater the more future generations that one impacts, and the more inclusively one thinks of those future generations. To worry only about one’s own kin might seem parochial compared to an inheritance for all humanity. For all I say here one might construe self-interest quite narrowly, but I want to leave room for a conception of self-interest on which living a meaningful life, in Kauppinen’s sense, is in one’s own interests.

We can think of ourselves, then, in having a stake in our political community, because we have interests which transcend our own lives. This explains why we might care about future generations.

¹¹ Barry (1977), p.273

¹² Kauppinen, (2012), p.346

It is because we want our projects to succeed and our life-transcending interests to be served, whoever those future generations turn out to be. There is something enduring that we have a stake in – the Polis, or Philosophy, or Civilisation, or Humanity, or whatever – that we need the next generation to co-operate with us on. We have a self-interested reason to care about future generations because we have an interest in our projects succeeding, and our lives being meaningful. In the next section we will look at the problem of cooperation with the next generation. We have so far seen why we need them, but we have yet to see why they need us.

3: The Future Past Generation

We have seen in the previous section that we have a reason to care about the next generation, but why do they need us? As we saw in section 1.1, they seem to have no reason to cooperate with us, because we are not in a position to withdraw our gifts if they don't cooperate with us. As Barry puts it, "It is up to them [future generations] to decide what they think about us – or indeed whether they think about us at all."¹³ Though we know little about what interests the next generation will have, we can consider their position by remembering that we stand in the same relationship to future generations as past generations did to us. We can consider our reasons for continuing the projects of previous generations, and see if any of those reasons are neutral enough with respect to the things we happen to value that they might apply to future generations.

Why should we care about past generations? As we saw in section 1.2, although we find ourselves motivated by how past generations would feel about our actions, or feel guilt towards the actions of past generations, it is not clear why that would be a reasonable thing to do. We might be lucky, in that previous generations gave us an inheritance that it happens we have independent reason to value, or we might rely on the fact that there are generations which overlap between us and past

¹³ Barry (1977), p.270

or future generations, such that they can transmit cultural influence. I don't see that luck and cultural inertia are enough to be relied upon in the long term, however.

I suggest that the solution lies in acknowledging that the desire to have our projects continued is something we have in common with past generations and can, I think, assume of future generations. It is also the case that, for each generation, having their projects continued relies on future generations cooperating. As I said above, if we could find a reason for continuing previous generations' projects then future generations would potentially have a reason to continue ours. My proposed solution is that we make a bet that, if we continue past generations' projects, future generations will continue ours. How sensible the bet is depends entirely on how sensible the next generation thinks it is. But since it is, we can assume, in the self-interest of the next generation to have their own projects followed, it is in their self-interest to make such a bet in turn.

In this situation, it is precisely because you see the need to give future generations reason to think that carrying on your projects is reasonable, that you set an example by carrying on the previous generations' projects. The next generation, of course, can decide not to continue your projects, but they then undermine the chance of their own projects being continued, because they know that generations in their future, if such generations come to be, have access to the same reasoning that they used in deciding to ignore the projects of preceding generations.¹⁴

The idea that we might persuade future generations to continue our projects because we decided to continue the projects of previous generations might seem overly optimistic. It may seem to place more faith in the next generation than is warranted, given we know so little about them. I do not think it requires that much faith, however. It may be unrealistic to expect all our projects to be followed, but it is quite realistic to think that some will be. In addition, it is important to note that we have very little alternative. If we are to engaging in any project that transcends our own life,

¹⁴ This situation might be seen as diachronic version of the Stag Hunt, in game theory, where the rewards of cooperation are higher than non-cooperation only if everyone cooperates, cf. Hume (1739).

and so requires such cooperation we have to bet on there being a chance of its being continued. Though it may be costly to us that any individual project may not be continued, costlier still would be ruling out life transcending projects entirely. If we have an interest in engaging with any projects that require cooperation with future generations we have to think that there is a non-negligible chance that we might receive such cooperation. Unless we think it is reasonable for us to engage in such cooperation, then we should not think there is any likelihood that future generations will find it any more reasonable.

We have reason, then, to bet that future generations will care about our projects just inasmuch as we find ourselves to have reason to care about *past* generations projects. We needn't think that all of our projects will be continued in this way, and, as we shall see in the next section, making the idea of such continuation palatable depends on it sometimes being reasonable to distance ourselves from such projects.

4: Pride and Guilt

So far I have been concerned with justifying intergenerational cooperation. In this section I want to explore the idea that, in some cases, we might actively refuse such cooperation. In section 1.3 I discussed feelings of guilt for actions done by *past* generations. The aim of this section is to make room for them alongside intergeneration cooperation.

It is not enough to explain guilt for past generations' actions that we have benefitted from past generations. A bank robber benefits greatly from the cash reserves of the bank, but is unlikely to feel guilty that the bank charged exorbitant interest rates, for example, though he may feel guilt about the way the money was obtained from the bank. To feel guilt for an injustice, we need to feel like we stand in the right sort of relation to the cause of the injustice. If we have decided to continue the projects of previous generations, that might put us in just such a relation to certain injustices. If, for example, I express pride in continuing a political community that has existed for many generations, and express a desire that that political community is continued by future

generations, it seems that injustices carried out by members of that political community, in its name, appear to be things I also endorse. To endorse the community involves, to some extent, to endorse its history. If I was entirely silent about such injustices, while loudly endorsing a political community that I see myself as inheriting, then that would carry the implicature that I was also endorsing such injustices. If we do take on projects from previous generations, as I argued in the previous section we have reason to, we need to be explicit in which bits we want to distance ourselves from.

This sort of guilt may go with various projects, from ones attached to political communities, to humanity at large, down to very local and personal concerns. It is important that such guilt be considered alongside intergenerational cooperation, however, since it is important to note that the arguments I have given in favour of intergenerational cooperation are not arguments in favour of conservatism, in the sense of a general preference for the status quo. Instead they are in favour of a sense of continuity between generations that is compatible with generations being critical of each other. The argument is one in favour of considering ourselves as part of a transgenerational polity, of the kind Thompson described above, not of idolising past generations, or binding ourselves to their wishes. Similarly, we should view future generations as collaborators, with their own contribution, rather than as executors of our will. As with collaboration generally, the benefits of collaborating with future generations may well exceed the benefits of having no projects that transcend our own lives, even though it involves handing over an element of control in the project to others.¹⁵

That something is a tradition may be a defeasible reason to continue it, but that it undermines the prospects of the sort of society we would wish to come into being is a defeasible reason for adapting, stopping or reinventing it. Similarly, engaging with history is not merely useful in avoiding the repetition of mistakes, but in understanding what we're doing when we view ourselves

¹⁵ There are analogies with social contract theory here, except that this is diachronic, rather than synchronic.

as collaborators in projects that precede us in time, and, we hope, will continue after our deaths. The thrust of my point is that we ought to see ourselves as continuous with past and future generations, but this is neither incompatible with sacrificing our autonomy, or sacrificing theirs. In collaborating on a project we don't have to agree with all our collaborators, but must have enough common purpose that the collaboration is worthwhile for all involved. The other alternative is to limit ourselves only to those projects that we can achieve alone.

To conclude, I have argued that we can make sense of intergenerational cooperation, assuming only self-interest, provided we think our interests can be served by the success of our projects, even after our deaths. We have reason to care about future generations, because we need those future generations to act as collaborators with us on projects that we care about, and those future generations need to be in a position to collaborate. We have reason to think that future generations will be inclined to collaborate with us, because they will want generations in their future to collaborate with them. Collaborating with past generations is reasonable insofar as it makes the next generations collaboration with us reasonable. A future generation's collaboration with us is reasonable insofar as their collaboration with generations future to them is reasonable, and so on. Nonetheless we can be choosy about what projects we collaborate on, and where we collaborate on some projects, we can and should distance ourselves from related, but unpalatable projects.

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