

Intergenerational Justice and Environmental Ethics in the Age of Climate Crisis

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Abstract

The global climate crisis is not only an environmental challenge but a profound ethical dilemma involving responsibilities between present and future generations. Intergenerational justice—the moral and political idea that current generations owe ethical duties to those yet unborn—provides a philosophical foundation for assessing climate policy, human behavior, and environmental governance. Environmental ethics, which considers human obligations toward the natural world, intersects with this notion by expanding moral consideration beyond human interests to include ecological systems and future life. This paper critically explores how intergenerational justice and environmental ethics inform responses to climate change, the challenges in operationalizing these concepts, and how ethical frameworks can shape policy, international agreements, and collective action. By evaluating theories such as utilitarianism, rights-based ethics, Indigenous philosophical perspectives, and policy-oriented approaches like carbon budgeting and climate litigation, we argue that genuine climate action must integrate ethical responsibility to future people, ecosystems, and justice across temporal and spatial scales.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, Climate Change, Intergenerational Justice

1. Introduction

The climate crisis represents one of the most significant and long-term threats to human and ecological systems in recorded history. Its effects—rising temperatures, sea level rise, shifting precipitation patterns—will unfold over decades and centuries, shaping the conditions under which future human societies must live. Unlike many traditional problems of political and environmental governance, climate change uniquely raises questions about **intergenerational obligations**: what do current generations owe future ones? And how should ethical principles guide decisions whose consequences transcend human lifetimes?

The concept of **intergenerational justice** concerns the fairness and moral duties between generations. It asks whether present humans have obligations to future people who do not yet exist and requires us to consider how the benefits and burdens of environmental decisions should be distributed over time. Environmental ethics, by framing human relationships with nature and non-human life, supplies additional ethical depth by treating ecosystems and future ecological conditions as morally relevant considerations. Together, these frameworks help confront the climate crisis not merely as a technical or economic problem, but as a profound **ethical challenge**.

This paper examines key philosophical perspectives on intergenerational justice and environmental ethics and explores how they relate to climate change governance, policy

design, and societal values. We begin with foundational theories of intergenerational justice and environmental moral frameworks. We then analyze how these theories are applied to climate policy, including issues such as carbon budgets, legal strategies, Indigenous perspectives, and principles of distributive justice. Finally, we discuss practical implications for international cooperation and long-term climate governance.

2. Intergenerational Justice: Definitions and Foundations

2.1. What Is Intergenerational Justice?

Intergenerational justice involves moral and political considerations about how actions today affect people in future generations. It examines whether and how the present generation should account for the rights, welfare, and interests of those who have not yet been born. This concept extends beyond immediate social justice to include **temporal justice**—fairness over time.

According to ethical scholars, intergenerational justice asks questions such as: “Do we have ethical responsibilities to past and future generations?” and “To what extent are decisions made today harming or benefiting people tomorrow?”

Traditional accounts focus on the duties of current societies to leave an **inhabitable world** for future people, arguing that the present generation’s actions have profound consequences for future opportunities and freedoms.

2.2. Philosophical Approaches

Scholars identify several ethical frameworks for thinking about intergenerational justice:

1. **Presentism** – This thesis prioritizes the interests of currently living generations and holds that future generations do not have full moral standing in ethical deliberation. According to this view, concern for future people arises mainly through altruistic preferences rather than moral entitlement.
2. **Utilitarianism** – Classical utilitarianism advocates giving equal weight to the welfare of all sentient beings across time. This implies that future people’s well-being matters as much as the present generation’s, justifying actions that minimize suffering and environmental degradation over the long term.
3. **Rights-based Ethics** – These approaches argue that future generations have inherent moral or legal rights to protection from harm, including environmental harm. Such philosophies support strong climate action to safeguard those rights.
4. **Relational and Indigenous Perspectives** – Beyond Western frameworks, Indigenous philosophies often emphasize **asymmetrical reciprocity**, where present responsibilities to future generations stem from ancestral gifts and interconnected ecological relationships. This reframes intergenerational justice as reciprocal stewardship rather than abstract moral calculus.

These differing frameworks reveal core disputes about moral standing, protections of future people, and the foundations for environmental responsibility.

3. Environmental Ethics and Climate Change

3.1. What Is Environmental Ethics?

Environmental ethics is a branch of philosophical inquiry that examines humans' moral relationship with the natural environment. It challenges anthropocentric attitudes—where

human interests are paramount—and explores **biocentric** and **ecocentric** perspectives that extend moral consideration to non-human life and ecosystems.

Environmental ethics intersects with intergenerational justice by framing climate change as not simply a human concern, but as a disruption to ecological balance that affects many forms of life over time.

3.2. Ethical Perspectives on Climate Responsibility

Environmental ethics prompts critical reflection on how human activities—especially fossil fuel combustion and land use changes—affect long-term ecological health and fairness across generations. Major ethical approaches include:

- **Anthropocentrism:** Values nature instrumentally for human benefits.
- **Biocentrism:** Grants moral status to all living beings.
- **Ecocentrism:** Regards whole ecosystems as morally significant.

Each perspective suggests different climate responsibilities, but all recognize that current choices have ethical implications for future ecological and human well-being.

4. Interactions: Climate Ethics, Justice, and Policy

4.1. Why Intergenerational Justice Matters in Climate Policy

The long temporal scale of climate change—where emissions today influence climate dynamics decades or centuries ahead—makes intergenerational justice central to climate governance. Without ethical frameworks that recognize duties to future generations, policy decisions risk prioritizing short-term interests over long-term sustainability.

One key policy implication is **carbon budgeting**, which allocates permissible emissions over time to achieve long-term climate goals. Ethically, stringent early reductions support future generations by preserving greater environmental flexibility and reducing future burdens.

Legal strategies have also emerged. For example, climate litigation increasingly invokes the **duty of care principle**, arguing that governments and corporations have obligations not to impose disproportionate climate harms on younger and future generations.

4.2. The Precautionary Principle and Climate Governance

Closely related is the **precautionary principle**, which asserts that strong climate measures should be enacted even if scientific certainty is incomplete, to avert irreversible harm. This principle supports intergenerational justice by prioritizing safeguards for future people absent full evidence of harm.

4.3. Ethical Challenges

Implementing intergenerational justice faces several philosophical challenges:

- **The Non-Identity Problem:** Some philosophers (e.g., Derek Parfit) argue that future people's identities are contingent on present actions, complicating claims about harming specific future individuals.
- **Uncertainty:** The unpredictability of future ecological and societal conditions complicates ethical calculations and policy decisions.

Despite these challenges, ethical discourse continues informing institutional frameworks and legal strategies to protect future interests.

5. Indigenous and Cross-Cultural Perspectives

Global discussions of intergenerational justice often foreground Western philosophical traditions. However, **Indigenous philosophies** offer valuable alternative perspectives on climate ethics and intergenerational relationships.

Many Indigenous traditions emphasize relational responsibilities and **reciprocity**, recognizing that humans inherit gifts from ancestors and are morally obligated to care for future generations. This view integrates ecological stewardship, cultural continuity, and moral obligations across time without imposing a strictly linear temporal worldview.

These perspectives enrich ethical dialogues by challenging anthropocentric and linear conceptions of time and justice, advocating for collective and ecological forms of responsibility that span generations.

6. Justice, Sustainability, and Global Cooperation

True intergenerational justice in the climate era requires embedding ethical values into international frameworks. Current global accords like the **Paris Agreement** hinge on shared but differentiated responsibilities, balancing developed and developing nations' historical emissions while considering future consequences.

Yet critics argue that economic and political systems remain overly focused on short-term growth and national interests, undermining long-term climate commitments and equity. Ethically grounded governance must shift values toward long-term sustainability, fairness, and intergenerational equity.

7. Conclusion

Intergenerational justice and environmental ethics are essential lenses through which to view the climate crisis. They remind us that climate change is not only a technical problem of emissions reduction but also a **moral challenge** about what we owe to future people, ecosystems, and justice across time.

By integrating ethical theories with actionable policies—such as carbon budgeting, robust climate governance, and legal duties of care—societies can align short-term decisions with long-term sustainability. Inclusion of diverse philosophical perspectives, especially Indigenous and ecological traditions, enriches the moral foundations of climate action and broadens the ethical mandates beyond mere human self-interest.

As the climate crisis unfolds, ethical reflection on intergenerational justice must continue shaping global efforts, ensuring that future generations inherit not only a habitable planet but a legacy of justice, responsibility, and moral foresight.

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