

## Book Reviews

Joerg Chet Tremmel

*A Theory of Intergenerational Justice*

London: Earthscan, 2009

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In *A Theory of Intergenerational Justice*, Joerg Chet Tremmel admirably addresses the question of what and how much to save for future generations and thus significantly advances the scholarship on the issue of justice to future generations. Tremmel, who has doctorates in Political Science and Philosophy, has written a book that is awesome in scope, drawing from political science, history, ecology, economics and psychology, as well as philosophy, which is its primary focus.

Most of the early writers on the topic of future generations chose to interpret that term to mean, non-concurrent generations. Thus defined, the issue of responsibility to future generations raises questions of non-reciprocity, non-identity and radical contingency; questions that do not arise regarding responsibilities to adjacent generations, i.e. the generations of our parents and of our children and grandchildren.

Early in the book, Tremmel includes adjacent generations in his analysis of 'intergenerational justice', a decision that I found troublesome, since it tends to obscure those unique issues regarding non-concurrent generations. However, as I read further I came to appreciate the advantage of such a stipulation. For the present generation's capacity to deal justly with remote generations is surely a function of the capacity to deal with one's immediate successors. This is the approach of John Rawls, who argued that parental 'ties of sentiment' are the key to establishing a 'chain of obligations' that might extend to the remote future. But while this approach might solve many or even most issues of intergenerational justice, it does not solve all of them. There remains the question of policies that have impact *only* on remote generations. Geological disposal of nuclear waste is a compelling case in point.

To what end should we provide for the future? Tremmel considers two alternative answers: a 'capital-based approach' and a 'well-being based approach'. 'Capital' is broadly interpreted to include natural resources, technology, financial assets, political institutions and education. But that very breadth, involving incommensurable values, makes it difficult if not impossible to assess a just and sustainable legacy for a generation to leave to its successors. But more significantly, Tremmel argues, the capital-based approach (or 'generational accounting' as he calls it) cannot serve as an ultimate value for, he writes, 'the value of capital is purely instrumental. From a human point of view, it is only valuable if it increases human welfare' (p. 141).

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Accordingly, Tremmel prefers the 'well-being approach' to intergenerational justice. But this approach has substantial problems of its own, beginning, quite obviously, with the task of defining the notoriously vague term 'well-being.' Just what is 'well-being'? Happiness? Quality of life? Utility? Fulfilment? If fulfilment, then fulfilment of what? Wants? Preferences? Rights? Needs? Tremmel eventually settles on 'fulfilment of needs' and 'life satisfaction' as the fundamental indexes of 'well-being'. 'Needs' he understands to be human requirements that are at the base of Maslow's pyramid: thus they are universal (independent of culture), objective, and directed toward survival. 'Wants', on the other hand, are culturally relative, subjective, and occasionally socially and personally destructive. As Tremmel astutely points out, we can not know the wants and preferences of future persons, and to be blunt, their wants and preferences 'are their own business', not ours. But we can know their basic needs, and if intergenerational justice is to be accomplished it must, at the very least, include provision for the requisites for survival.

But doesn't 'the accounting problem' that we encountered with the capital-based approach arise again with the 'well-being approach'? How, that is, are we to assess and compare the well-being of individuals and societies in history and in various contemporary nations and cultures? We must be able to do so, if we are to meaningfully provide for the well-being of future generations. Tremmel believes that it is possible 'to measure well-being [using] observable living conditions that can be measured according to scientific standards' (p. 124), and as a prime example of such an indicator, he points to the 'Human Development Index' (HDI) introduced in 1990 by the United Nations Development Program. I am not convinced that the HDI delivers all that it promises. But given its relative newness, and the indispensable need to develop and apply some sort of measure of well-being, we can surely expect considerable refinement of this and other instruments in the future. Be that as it may, Tremmel puts the HDI to excellent use, consequently I completed his chapter on 'What to Sustain?' with enhanced confidence in our ability to anticipate and provide for the needs of future generations.

In his penultimate chapter, Tremmel addresses the question of the just distribution of well-being among generations. Following Rawls, Tremmel explores the possibility of deriving rules of just distribution from an 'original position' comprised of 'hypothetical contractors', ignorant of their particular life circumstances but aware of all relevant general scientific and historical knowledge. Unlike Rawls's contractors, who are aware that they are all of the same generation but ignorant as which generation this is, Tremmel imagines six contractors, each representing a thousand generations spanning 25,000 to 30,000 years, from 'Neanderthal Man' to 'Man of the Future' some thousand generations ahead (p. 162). Our generation is the fifth of this sequence. I find this conception of 'the original position' to be somewhat baffling and fail to

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understand how rules of intergenerational justice could be derived from it. First of all, the earliest generations, facing acute dangers and scarcity, are in no position to make deliberate sacrifices for future generations. Furthermore, while 'Man of the Future' will no doubt acquire knowledge that is extremely relevant to these deliberations, this knowledge, *per hypothesis*, is unavailable to us in the present and thus useless as we attempt to derive rules of intergenerational justice. Rawls, I suggest, had the better conception of an 'original position', albeit not without considerable problems of its own.

Tremmel usefully distinguishes three types of provision for the future which, separately or in combination, result in variable rates of savings for the future. They are: first, 'autonomy' whereby later generations 'benefit from the unconscious, but fortunate conservation of the works previous generations created for their own purposes' (p. 165). This is the only legacy that the earliest generations (Neanderthal, nomad and tiller) can provide for the future. Second: 'caring', a negative conception which includes the 'prevention of wars and man-made ecological, social or technical collapses'. And finally, 'sacrifice', 'similar to the economic savings rate', a share of the wealth 'not consumed but put aside for the future.'

And so, at the close, Tremmel concludes that 'intergenerational justice has been achieved if the opportunities of the average member of the next generation to fulfil his needs are better than those of the average member of the preceding generation' (p. 199). Not a remarkable conclusion, to be sure. But it is a noteworthy conclusion nonetheless, given the wealth of research and the display of philosophical talent that has preceded and which supports this conclusion.

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PO Box 9045, Cedarpines Park, CA 92322

Jeffrey E. Foss

*Beyond Environmentalism: A Philosophy of Nature*

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ISBN 978-0-470-17941-3 (PB) £ 43.50. xii + 325pp.

The Canadian philosopher Jeffrey E. Foss has written a book in which he presents a systematic criticism of many convictions, beliefs and policies defended by environmentalists. As he sees it, 'contemporary environmentalism has blinded many of us to the facts' (p. 2). Because of such a harsh criticism, the reader may wonder whether Foss is unexceptionally against green causes. This is something he tries to avoid in various ways, for example by emphasising the need for radical reconsideration of humanity's relationship with nature and, in effect, by sharing many of environmentalists' goals. Thus, Foss proposes that we