



What's Wrong with the Presentist Bias?

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I. Wrong Behind Presentist Bias?

Is it that future interests are ignored quite generally, on all issues that concern them negatively, or just on a subset of those that may affect them negatively?

Why not all policies, and not even those that may negatively affect future generations are necessarily suspect: Limited influence both (a) institutionally and (b) causally.

(a) Institutionally. Ludwig Beckman: "Only the future can enforce the law on the future. Thus, no law ever applies to the future unless affirmed by future people themselves" (Beckman 2013, 781).

(b) Causally.

- Dale Jamieson "Consider the case of Manhattan, where the harvest has always been rich but what is on offer has changed from nature to experience. Because of the legacy bequeathed by past generations, people in Manhattan today can enjoy walking on the Highline, visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and soaking up the ambience of Greenwich Village. However, the same generations that bequeathed this legacy destroyed the wild green paradise that had been bequeathed to them with its oysters the size of dinner plates, dense flocks of birds that darkened the sky, and rivers so thick with fish that they could be pulled out by hand. What should we say about them? We can be grateful for their legacy, castigate their short-sightedness, or assume a range of other attitudes." (Jamieson 2014, 159)

(b) continued. Even in cases of clearly negative effects, blame attribution difficult:

- Hurricane Katrina. Bipartisan House Committee report *A Failure of Initiative*: “[i]t remains difficult to understand how government could respond so ineffectively to a disaster that was anticipated for years, and for which specific dire warnings had been issued for days. This crisis was not only predictable, it was predicted” (Davis et al. 2006)

To test the intuition, consider *intragenerational* analogy: Mr. Poison publicly dumps toxic waste into a community's water reservoir. Here are two paths the present community could take.

- (1) *Costless*: because it would be expensive to clean the water or get any other water source, the community ends up drinking the water and getting sick.
- (2) *Costly*: there is heavy investment in providing clean drinking water to the community. This is expensive. Nobody ends up getting sick.

Quick summary of the argument thus far:

The ways in which the present can affect the future is in some important respects limited (and, in some cases, in which it is not limited, certain costs seem justified):

- Institutionally, future generations seem largely free to make their own choices, even if some of these choices may be costlier on account of what previous generations did.
- Regarding causal effects, it is often difficult to tell if a particular development is positive or negative or simply neutral. Moreover, the attribution of responsibility for clearly negative intergenerational effects is also all but straightforward.

II. Policy-Issues on Which Future Generations Ought to be Included

Thesis: Future generations ought to be included when it comes to policies with **irreversible, detrimental, and long-term effects** that threaten to leave future generations to inherit a world that

forces them to **permanently exert most of their creative energies** on trying to avoid disaster.

This is a highly inappropriate way of relating to future generations, amounting to a form of **domination**.

The argument proceeds in three steps. I begin by explaining

- (1) Why the threat is relational, not distributive
- (2) how “purpose determining” differs from “very costly.” I then
- (3) show to what extent forcing future generations to permanently exert most of their creative energies on trying to avoid disaster may amount to the particular wrong of intergenerational domination.

(1.) Why the Threat is Relational, not Distributive

Consider: Extreme heat.

Death: Life becomes impossible

Suffering: A flourishing life becomes impossible

Dominant scenarios in current literature: most are concerned with the potential lowering of the quality of life that developments such as extreme heat will bring—either comparatively, hypothetically or absolutely.

Preordained: A flourishing life may be possible, but only if those affected make it their purpose to find ways and means to remedy the detrimental consequences of past generations' actions or omission to try to avoid suffering and death or the prospect of both.

(2.) Purpose Determining

- Debatable effects: having to move to cooler and more highly elevated places, spend most time indoors, increase the use of air conditioners (powered by green technologies that need to be further developed), etc...This may change the quality of life, rendering it worse or maybe even better, according to some tastes.
- Highly problematic: everyone's purpose will be determined by needing to avert disaster:
 - reproduction: are choices sustainable or ethically justifiable?
 - careers: increasingly geared at overcoming the central problems connected to extreme weather.
 - leisure activities: are they safe and sustainable under smoldering temperatures?
 - consumer choices: will my choices perpetuate the problem? Can I use my choices to help solve the problem?

By contrast: Costly

If trying to live flourishing lives under extreme heat is very costly (requiring use of newly developed green air-conditioning, for instance) but otherwise does not change people's reproductive, career, leisure-time and consumer choices.

Climate Change may have started out this way.

(3.) Intergenerational Domination?

Philip Pettit “one agent dominates another if and only if they have a certain power over that other, in particular a power of interference on an arbitrary basis” (Pettit 1997: 52)

But: Three disanalogies (Ludwig Beckman*):

- (a) Current generation lacks *capacity* to arbitrarily interfere with future
- (b) The problem of the “eye-ball” test does not exist between nonoverlapping generations
- (c) Current generations usually do not intend to arbitrarily interfere with the future

*Beckman, L. (2016). ‘Power and Future People’s Freedom: Intergenerational Domination, Climate Change, and Constitutionalism.’ *Journal of Political Power* 9 (2), 289-307

(a) Capacity to Interfere

Claim: The time lapse ensures that whatever decisions the past made have materialized by the time future generations enter the scene (Beckman 2016, 293-4).

True: Future generations do not have to live with the anxiety that, at any moment, past generations may arbitrarily interfere.

Still: Future generations do have to live with whatever the past, possibly arbitrarily, left them with. The past can still make arbitrary decisions regarding the future.

(b) Eye-Ball Test

Claim: one of the markers of domination is that one party—the dominated—acts with deference to the other—dominating—party (Beckman 2016, 295).

True: members of nonoverlapping generations never actually meet, making the physical experience of not being able to look the other in the eye impossible.

Still: it is entirely conceivable that an earlier generation feels superior to a later generation or, at least, indifferent to it. More importantly even, it is easy to imagine that a later generation feels disrespected by the acts or omissions of a previous generation and possibly resentment towards it.

(c) Intentionality

Claim: “If climate change is best understood as the unintended by-product of the aggregate activities of various agents, it follows that no one is intentionally interfered with by the consequences of climate change. Hence, the people hurt by climate change are not subject to domination...” (Beckman 2016, 296).

True: detrimental effects of climate change on the future presumably not intended.

Still: it suffices that one generation knows and thus accepts negative consequences as a result of otherwise—let us assume—benign pursuits. This amounts to negligence.

(Pettit's original definition. “[T]he worsening that interference involves always has to be more or less intentional in character: it cannot occur by accident, for example, as when I fall in your path or happen to compete with you for scarce goods; it must be at least the sort of action in the doing of which we can sensibly allege negligence” (Pettit 1997: 52).)

What does this Imply About the Presentist Bias?

The problem is that the presentist bias may lead to dominating future generations (as opposed to making them worse or not better off than we are).

If intergenerational domination is the problem then political representation seems to be the remedy—at least regarding those issues that may lead to domination.

Thank You!