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The Philosophical Bottleneck of the Sustainable Development Ideal: The Problem of Future Generations

Abstract

This article argues that at the core of the sustainable development concept lies a philosophical problem: the idea of moral responsibility toward future generations. The sustainability ideal, introduced globally through the Brundtland Report (1987), challenges traditional ethical theories with its claim to protect the rights of not-yet-existent generations. The paper highlights how the "future generations' problem" has gained urgency in the Anthropocene era due to the destructive effects of technology (nuclear waste, climate crisis, microplastics), while discussing the need for new ethical models. Thinkers who reject responsibility toward future generations focus on their "non-existence," the ambiguity of their rights, our inability to know their needs, and the practical difficulties of economic sacrifices. In contrast, arguments justifying responsibility for future generations assert that existence is not a prerequisite for responsibility, that threshold needs (e.g., clean water, habitable climate) are self-evident, and that the concept of harm must be reconsidered. By analyzing the tension between utilitarianism and rights-based ethics, the article emphasizes that the universal needs of future generations are predictable, making ethical responsibility inevitable. In conclusion, the article posits that sustainability not only involves political-economic dimensions but also expands philosophical discourse by introducing a temporal dimension to ethical responsibility.

Keywords: Future Generations, Utilitarianism, Non-Identity Problem, Ethical Responsibility, Sustainability, Intergenerational Justice.

Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma İdealinin Felsefi Darboğazı: Gelecek Nesiller Sorunu

Öz

Bu makale, sürdürülebilir kalkınma kavramının merkezinde felsefi bir problem olan gelecek nesillere yönelik ahlaki sorumluluk fikri olduğunu iddia ediyor. Brutland Raporu (1987) ile küresel gündeme gelen sürdürülebilirlik idealinin, henüz var olmayan nesillerin haklarını koruma iddiası, geleneksel etik teorilerin dar zamansal çerçevesini aşan bir meydan okumadır. Makale, gelecek nesiller sorununun antroposen çağında teknolojinin yıkıcı etkileri (nükleer atıklar, iklim krizi, mikroplastikler) ile nasıl aciliyet kazandığını vurgularken, Hans Jonas'ın "sorumluluk etiği" gibi yeni etik modellerin gerekliliğini tartışmaktadır. Gelecek nesillere karşı sorumluğumuz yoktur diyen Derek Parfit gibi düşünürler onların "na-mevcut" oluşu, hak sahipliğinin belirsizliği, onların ne istediğini bilemeyeceğimiz ve ekonomik fedakarlıkların pratik zorluklarına odaklanırlar. Buna karşılık, gelecek nesillere karşı sorumluluğu temellendiren argümanlar ise mevcudiyetin sorumluluk için zorunlu olmadığını, eşik değer ihtiyaçların apaçık olduğu ve zarar kavramının yeniden düşünülmesi gerektiğini savunurlar. Makale, faydacılık ile haklar etiği arasındaki gerilimi analiz ederek, gelecek nesillerin temiz su, yaşanabilir iklim gibi evrensel ihtiyaçlarının öngörülebilir olduğunu ve bu bağlamda etik sorumluluğun kaçınılmazlığını vurguluyor. Sonuç olarak, sürdürülebilirliğin yalnızca politik-ekonomik değil, etik sorumluluk konusuna zaman boyutu ekleyerek felsefi bir açılım sağladığı iddia edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gelecek Nesiller, Faydacılık, Na-Mevcudiyet Sorunu, Ahlaki Sorumluluk, Sürdürülebilirlik, Nesiller Arası Adalet.

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1. Introduction

The concept of sustainable development entered public discourse in 1987 through the Brundtland Commission's Our Common Future report, published under the auspices of the United Nations. Although environmental degradation had been identified in earlier years, the UN explicitly declared that the economy and ecology are interdependent -and that unsustainable resource use would lead to depletion- thereby introducing the principle of sustainability to the global agenda.

> "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs" (United Nations, 1987).

The ideal of sustainable development, now visible in nearly every sphere of our lives yet increasingly prone to a hollow rhetoric, rests on the principle that future generations have a legitimate claim to the use of resources. At its core, the concept of sustainability emphasizes responsibility to future generations by presupposing a moral obligation to them. While this assumption is ethically contentious from a philosophical standpoint, it also constitutes the soft spot of the ecological-political ideal of sustainability.

The issue of future generations in the context of sustainability, both opens up a rich and thought-provoking ethical horizon and presents significant challenges for moral philosophy. Until recently, the problem of future generations had received little explicit philosophical attention in either the ancient or modern periods. In the era of Anthropocene, an era in which human technology has gained the capacity to shape the planet's destiny, the fate of future generations has become a matter of vital importance. Since the problem of future generations lies at the philosophical core of the sustainable development agenda, it is crucial to clearly articulate the issue and to address its conceptual shortcomings. Unlike theoretical debates among philosophers, such as the trolley problem, discussions about future generations are not just abstract thought exercises. This problem constitutes a timely and consequential concern with the potential to shape the planet's future, influence international policy decisions, and directly affect all aspects of practical life -including taxation, regulatory measures, and the organization of financial and industrial processes.

Apart from its practical significance, this issue also serves as a highly valuable source of reflection for ethical theory. Classical moral frameworks -whether the eudaimonistic theories of antiquity, theological ethics, or modern approaches such as utilitarianism, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics- have dominantly focused on the concepts of harm, rights, and actions of living individuals in relation to others. In both ancient and modern ethics, moral concern centers on the well-being and suffering of people who living at the same time. Within the scope of modern ethical theory, the temporal horizon of moral action is relatively narrow, generally confined to the lifespan of a single individual. However, in the Anthropocene, an era in which the consequences of modern technologies may extend for centuries, it is no longer feasible to restrict ethics to such short-term temporal boundaries.

For this reason, the problem of future generations calls for a significant reconsideration the contemporary ethics. It challenges us to rethink our understanding of the moral patient, to expand the temporal scope of moral action, and to reconsider our concepts of justice, particularly preventive and restorative justice. Taking these factors into account, the issue is not merely about finding philosophical solutions to current problems; it also offers philosophy itself the opportunity to critically reassess its underlying assumptions, confront its limitations, and enrich its conceptual resources. In short, the problem of future generations has a significance not only for those working in the practical sphere to safeguard the planet's well-being, but also for philosophers engaged in the ethical domain.

This article will evaluate how debates about future generations contribute to our ethical understanding, examine the philosophically problematic aspects of our responsibility toward posterity, and ultimately provide a philosophical assessment of intergenerational obligations. Although the concept of sustainability is widely invoked across diverse fields -from politics to marketing, education to industry- it remains insufficiently explored within Turkish philosophical discourse. By addressing this gap, the article aims to contribute to moral philosophy and environmental philosophy literature.

2. Extending Moral Consideration: The Sense of Responsibility Toward Not-Yet-Existent Persons

Morality regulates interpersonal relations, whereas ethics examines the foundational principles determining our duties to others and the rights we may claim (Özlem, 2015: 22). When formulating moral or ethical principles, we typically consider living individuals who are affected by our actions - notions like 'do no harm,' 'consider others,' or 'take others into account.' Moral maxims such as 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,' 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' or 'An eye for an eye' all presuppose the existence of an 'other' and demand that we regulate our behavior accordingly. Traditional ethical frameworks universally operate through an other-directed logic, whether in negative injunctions (non-maleficence) or positive imperative. Nietzsche criticized the entire tradition of Western moral thought -from Judaism through religious morality to modern utilitarianism and deontological ethics - as fundamentally being a 'herd morality' (Sklavenmoral) that constructs itself through an outward gaze toward the other and control of 'the other. (Nietzsche, 2013: 49). When people formulate the moral rules, they consider what sanctions should apply when another's rights are violated. In a system where private property is sacrosanct, trespassing on another's land is deemed a transgression against their rights. Even without direct invasion of a home, someone who dumps a pile of foul-smelling garbage outside another's private residence commits a moral wrong by causing them distress. Similarly, polluting public spaces -though no one's private property- constitutes an ethical violation by disturbing the comfort of future visitors. All these cases fall within the domain of classical moral and ethical reasoning. As famous philosopher Hans Jonas puts it, in the traditional ethical framework:

> "… the good and evil about which action had to care lay close to the act. … The effective range of action was small, the time span of foresight, goal-setting and accountability was short, control of circumstances are limited. Proper conduct had its immediate criteria and almost immediate consummation. The long run of consequences beyond was left to chance, fate or providence. All enjoinder and maxims of traditional ethics, materially different as they may be, show this confinement to the immediate setting of action. … All these have

> decisively changed. Modern technology had introduced actions of such novel scale, objects and consequences that the framework of former ethics can no longer contain them" (Jonas, 1984: 22-23).

By taking into account the current state of technological development, Hans Jonas, a student of Heidegger who recognized the need for a profound transformation in moral philosophy, proposed a new ethical framework that he called the "ethics of responsibility." (Wolin, 2012). According to Jonas, previous forms of morality were essentially a kind of "neighborhood ethics," in which the boundaries of the concepts of good and evil were relatively narrow. The non-human world was regarded as ethically insignificant and morally neutral. Besides, traditional ethics regards only the human kind as an ethical being, whose essence was assumed to be stable and unaffected by technology. Yet modern technologies such as nuclear energy, biochemistry, and genetic engineering possess the capacity to profoundly transform both the human essence and the world we inhabit. Furthermore, technologies like nuclear energy can exert consequences far beyond the lives of those we directly affect today. These urgent matters remind us of the need for a new conception of responsibility. (Turcan, 2017). For this reason, Jonas reformulate Kantian moral imperative as: "Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of future possibility of such life" (Jonas, 1984: 27).

When we consider the novel challenges characteristic of our era, the boundaries of morality and the question of violating others' rights become increasingly complex. To begin with a simple example: the average person uses approximately 80 rolls of paper towels per year. According to one study, an American individual consumes 141 rolls of toilet paper annually, and if each American used just one fewer roll per year, 54,000 trees could be saved. In developed nations, a single person uses roughly 1,000 kilometers of toilet paper in their lifetime (QSSupplies, 2022). Global toilet paper consumption currently stands at 42 million tons annually. The production of just one ton of paper requires: 2.4 tons of wood, 440 tons of water, 7,600 kWh of electrical energy (Sammin, 2019). A single toilet flush uses approximately 6 liters of water. Thus, an individual visiting the bathroom three times daily consumes 18 liters -nearly the entire 25-liter daily water ration allocated to residents of Cape Town, South Africa, where the available water isn't even of optimal quality. (Brühl & Visser, 2021) (Barlow, 2009: 29). Even if we set aside advanced technological applications like nuclear energy or global warming, our basic daily actions can still violate others' rights. The statistics mentioned above demonstrate that even in domains where we assume no interpersonal connection exists, in our most mundane routines, we may still be violating the rights of both present and future inhabitants of Earth. Drawing from Jonas's principle, when many in Africa survive on just 20 liters of water daily, our choice to flush a toilet becomes an ethical responsibility that we cannot ignore. When 20 liters sustains an African life for a day, each flush (6 liters) becomes an intergenerational ethical calculus: the water we waste today is stolen from both the Global South's present and humanity's ecological future.

Thinking in this way may, on the one hand, raise the bar of moral responsibility so high that it risks rendering ethical action practically impossible. Nevertheless, as Jonas himself emphasizes, what must be recognized is that the conditions created by modern technology have produced situations of a magnitude that classical ethics could scarcely have imagined. In our contemporary consumerist society, new forms of the rights and responsibilities have emerged which would have been inconceivable to people in earlier eras. One could argue that,

in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, even in the event of massacres, there was no real possibility of inflicting lasting damage upon the Earth. While acts such as destroying cities during conquests or burning forested areas might have occurred, these were on a relatively small scale and could be remedied. To put it even more strongly, in past even the most ruthless individual possessed only a limited capacity to cause damage.

Today, however, even a well-intentioned individual can inadvertently cause harm to those people that she has never met. For instance, until the 1980s, the use of aerosols, air conditioners, and refrigerators containing chlorofluorocarbons gradually thinned the ozone layer, yet no one had intended such harm. Another example is the seemingly trivial act of purchasing a plastic bottle when needed. Plastic waste can persist in the environment for up to 150 years. In the world we inhabit, one of the gravest threat, poisoning not only humans but all living beings, is posed by microplastics. (Ziani vd., 2023). Although disposal and recycling can somewhat mitigate the environmental pollution, petroleum-based plastics remain a constant feature of our daily lives, and the resulting pollution inevitably affects a vast range of living beings as well as future generations. In short, even the seemingly harmless act of using plastic bottle, without any intent to cause harm, has the potential to negatively impact the lives of people we will never meet. From this perspective, it would be untenable to categorically declare that the use of a plastic bottle is morally wrong; however, it becomes evident that in today's world even the most innocuous actions can lead to far-reaching harms. These contemporary examples help clarify a pressing ethical concern: the Earth's resources are rapidly depleting, and people, in the course of ordinary daily life, impede others' access to the planet's benefits and thereby infringe upon their rights, often without intending to do so.

3. The Recent History of the Problem of Future Generations

As demonstrated by the examples in the previous section, even our most mundane daily actions pose an ethical dilemma regarding our responsibility toward future generations. However, striking examples of how our actions might affect posterity became particularly salient after World War II. By the 1960s, the "future generations problem" emerged as an unprecedented global concern, primarily for two reasons: First, the nuclear weapons deployed during the war. The United States' atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the subsequent generations of children born with congenital disabilities exposed humanity's unprecedented capacity to harm future populations through technologies whose effects far exceeded the bounds of conventional warfare. The nuclear threat was not limited to military applications: during the Cold War, nations collectively embarked on both nuclear arms proliferation and the development of nuclear reactors, compounding the intergenerational risks. All nations of the world found themselves sliding toward a nuclear doomsday it had created but couldn't stop. The 1986 Chernobyl disaster proved these fears were justified—radioactive fallout spread as far as Turkey, making nuclear safety a top global issue. What makes nuclear waste uniquely alarming is not merely its poisonous nature but the fundamental challenge it presents: this hazardous material requires extremely secure, deep underground storage yet will remain perilous for hundreds, even thousands of years to come (Reeves & Lenoir, 2006: 273). The decisions made by national leaders in the name of self-defense and realpolitik may unleash consequences that devastate human lives a thousand years later. Even with the most advanced containment technologies, we cannot predict the state of the world in 200 years, perhaps a mad ruler may emerge, or another Hitler might rise, or whether securely

stored waste could be breached through leakage or attack, endangering millions. Under such uncertainty, even securely stored nuclear waste could, through a leak or a deliberate attack, be released into the environment, endangering millions of lives. In short, from the nuclear age onward humanity has become aware of its capacity to destroy the lives of people it will never see.

Published in 1968, Paul Ehrlich's book *The Population Bomb* generated a profound impact on both public opinion and among economists. The title population bomb, echoed the fear surrounding the atomic bomb. Ehrlich drew attention to what he saw as the truly destructive threat, not the atomic bomb itself, but a far more basic danger: the population bomb. Drawing on a neo-Malthusian economic model, he warned that by 1970 the world's population was approaching four billion, and that the supply of arable food could not keep pace with this rate of growth. As a result, he predicted that hundreds of millions would die from famine and that major political crises were coming. The book's dramatic force was amplified by a statement on its cover: "While you are reading these words, four people will have died of starvation, most of them children." (Ehrlich, 1976). Although Ehrlich's predictions faced significant criticism from the economics community and his doomsday scenarios did not fully materialize, hunger and famine remain critical threats even in 2020. What makes Ehrlich's arguments particularly striking, however, is his radical proposal that we must urgently reduce the global population to address the 'population bomb' crisis. This raises a profound ethical question: For the sake of the planet's future and for the benefit of generations yet to come, should humanity consider slowing, or even temporarily halting, its own reproduction?

Another bombshell came in 1972 with the publication of *The Limits to Growth* report by a group of scientists from MIT known as the Club of Rome. Using computer modeling and extrapolation techniques available at the time, they predicted that given population growth rates and natural resource consumption, economic growth would soon stagnate and Earth's resources would be depleted in the near future (Meadows vd., 1990). According to the researchers, humanity faced a stark choice: either abandon the pursuit of economic growth and adopt a zero-growth policy, or face the inevitable collapse of the planet's life-support systems for both present and future generations. Setting aside economic and theoretical debates (Döring & Aigner-Walder, 2022), the book, translated into 30 languages, drew global attention to the problem of the Earth's future. With *The Limits to Growth*, it was presented, in scientific terms, that humanity was on the verge of exhausting the resources available to future generations, and the idea of halting current economic growth to ensure the survival of life on Earth began to be seen as an alternative worth to serious consideration.

Also in 1972, the United Nations convened the Stockholm Conference, whose declaration opened with the following proclamation to the world: "In the long and tortuous evolution of the human race on this planet a stage has been reached when, through the rapid acceleration of science and technology, man has acquired the power to transform his environment in countless ways and on an unprecedented scale"(United Nations, 1972). With the Stockholm Conference, environmental issues began to occupy a prominent place on the international agenda. In commemoration of this event, June 5 has since been celebrated worldwide as World Environment Day (Bozlağan, 2010).

During this same period, American writer Rachel Carson, in her seminal work *Silent Spring* (1962), demonstrated how the indiscriminate use of agricultural pesticides was pushing

humanity and indeed the entire planet toward catastrophe. Carson argued that modern agricultural technologies not only threatened living populations but, due to bioaccumulation of toxins in the food chain, endangered all life on Earth and future generations. Her prophetic warning "Future generations are unlikely to forgive our lack of prudent concern for the integrity of the natural world that sustains all life"(Carson, 2011: 42) highlighted chemicals as an intergenerational threat. Remarkably, her book triggered profound public outcry in the United States, shaping policy agendas and sparking widespread protests. This grassroots environmental movement ultimately led to the establishment of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970.

In 1987, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development issued the Brundtland Report, calling for a restructuring of global resources and development in ways that would not endanger the lives of future generations. This report drew attention to the importance of the concept of sustainable development, which urged a redesign of economic, political, and international systems, and proposed a new model of growth and economy (United Nations, 1987). From that point onward, the protection of future generations and the ideal of sustainable development became central themes in national policies and international agendas. Through the concept of sustainable development, the problem of future generations entered public discourse as both an ethical and a political issue. Gardiner (2011) even argues that climate change creates an “intergenerational moral storm” because mitigation has long temporal delays (imposing costs now while benefits arise later), agency is fragmented across multiple generations, and existing political and economic institutions are short-term oriented and therefore structurally unable to address the problem.

4. Counter-Philosophical Arguments on Responsibility Toward Future Generations

Given the long-term impacts at stake and the repeated warnings issued by international organizations, the idea that humanity ought to leave a livable world for future generations might appear to be a moral responsibility so self-evident as to require no further discussion. Yet, the notion of responsibility toward future generations raises a host of complex debates within moral philosophy. What exactly do we mean by “future generations”? Why should we bear obligations toward them? Do they have rights, and if so, in what sense? Do they, in fact, “exist” at present? Are the rights of those now living people superior to those of people yet to be born? And how much sacrifice should the present generation make on their behalf? Such questions collectively frame what has come to be known as the “problem of future generations.

The fundamental challenge in attributing responsibility to future generations lies in their present nonexistence. For rights to exist, there must be a rights-bearing subject. Similarly, any meaningful responsibility must be owed to an existing person or entity. Yet future generations do not currently exist, and their very coming into being remains uncertain. This echoes the classical philosophical argument: harm requires a victim. We cannot know neither who will exist in the future, nor the size of future populations. Indeed, if we collectively choose not to bring them into existence, the very notion of "future generations" might never materialize at all. (Parfit, 1983). Future generations do not yet exist; their very existence depends on our present choices. The questions of when and how they come into being are depends on our decisions. The identity of future persons is contingent upon decisions made by current generations. For instance, altering a single policy today would result in entirely different individuals being born. This creates a philosophical paradox: the actions of present generations cannot logically "harm"

future persons, since in any alternative scenario, those specific individuals would never have existed. While this does not necessarily negate the possibility of future generations having moral standing, it underscores that their existence remains either indeterminate or variable - a fundamental challenge for intergenerational ethics. (Kavka, 1982). Since future generations are not yet exist, we cannot have a reciprocal relationship. For this reason, we cannot demand rights of future generations from living people, if we consider right-based ethical perspective. (Fabre, 2001). Besides, Humphreys claims that the concept of future generations is elusive and has lack of normative clarity. This ambiguity has risks in deflecting the urgency and scale of action required to meet the suffering of concrete persons alive now (Humphreys, 2022: 1064). Humphreys concludes that duties to actual people today are philosophically stronger and politically more effective.

A fundamental challenge in debates about intergenerational justice is that genieu fairness requires mutual engagement—an actor who can either be harmed by our actions or benefit from them. Future generations, however, cannot act on our behalf; they are passive recipients of our choices. We might do good or harm to them, but they can do nothing for us in return. Justice traditionally presupposes reciprocity, yet our relationship with future generations is inherently asymmetrical. If we beneficially act for them, they cannot reciprocate. This raises a critical question: Can we meaningfully speak of justice in a context where obligation flows only in one direction? A duty without the possibility of mutual exchange may distort the conventional boundaries of justice, rendering it a moral imperative rather than a strictly just one. (Gauthier, 1987). While future generations' rights find limited recognition in positive law (e.g., in some constitutional provisions), they remain predominantly conceptualized as moral duties rather than enforceable legal entitlements. (Ceylan, 2014: 297). This distinction underscores a fundamental tension: although ethical frameworks increasingly emphasize our obligations to posterity, contemporary legal systemsstruggle to institutionalize protections for those who do not yet exist.

Apart from our lack of certainty as to whether future generations will in fact exist, we also cannot know what they will want or what they will need. It is conceivable that we might, today, divert resources from our own economy, forgoing numerous potential benefits in order to invest in the welfare of future generations, only for those future generations to have no need for such provisions. Technological and social transformations could radically alter the nature of their needs, creating the risk that our present sacrifices may turn out to be irrelevant or even meaningless.(DeGeorge, 1979). For example, throughout thousands of years of history, humanity had no need for petroleum, yet for the past two centuries it has been our primary source of energy. It is highly likely that in the near future petroleum will either no longer be needed or will be entirely depleted. Yet none of the earlier generations could have foreseen our dependence on it. Likewise, we cannot predict what future generations will require. Suppose that, thirty years ago, our government had devoted a substantial portion of our economic resources to building enormous post offices so that future generations might enjoy excellent communication facilities, and had prided ourselves on being the most advanced nation in letter and telegraph delivery. Such an investment would have been in vain, given that no one at the time could have anticipated the widespread and effortless adoption of the internet, which renders postal and telegraph services virtually obsolete. Allocating current resources to benefit future generations may, in such cases, not only fail to help them but could even cause

harm. Conversely, adverse conditions and resource scarcity might stimulate their creativity, leading to unforeseen and remarkable innovations. (Solow, 1986).

The question of discounting present-day resources for the sake of the future is among the most contested issues in this debate. In fact, according to an analysis by Nicholas Stern, even if we were to take very stringent measures against climate change today, the global economy would experience only about a 1% reduction in annual activity. By contrast, if we make no changes to our current economic practices, the economy could be affected by between 5% and 20% over the next century (Stern, 2007). Yet even if this is the case, is it still right to constrain current economic activity for the sake of future generations? One might estimate that, instead of prudently keeping a single dollar today, I might financially invest my single dollar, which could grow to four hundred dollars in fifty years. Wouldn't I contribute more to my children's future by investing this 10,000 lira to enrich them now, rather than setting it aside for later? William Nordhaus, through an extensive mathematical economic analysis, argues that modest restrictions are justified only to the extent that they do not impose substantial economic losses on future generations. In his view, any economic constraint for the sake of future generations should either be minimal or left to individual discretion. (Nordhaus, 1993). According to William Nordhaus, this constitutes a "climate gamble" - while the economic outcomes remain uncertain and inherently risky, we must still take action to mitigate potential harm (Nordhaus, 2020). Rather than discounting economic growth, we might instead seek to increase overall prosperity, thereby enabling greater investment in the search for alternative resources to address environmental problems. According to many economists, it is not justified to reduce present economic activity for the sake of the uncertain interests of future generations.

In short, the idea of moral responsibility toward future generations is fraught with counter-philosophical arguments: (1) Future beings do not yet exist, raising doubts about whether they can possess rights or claims; (2) Present generations may prioritize their own immediate well-being over hypothetical future interests, especially when sacrifices seem excessive; (3) The inherent uncertainty of long-term consequences makes it difficult to determine which actions will truly benefit or harm posterity; (4) Moral obligations typically rely on reciprocity, yet future generations cannot engage in any form of mutual agreement; (5) Economic and practical constraints may render intergenerational justice policies unfair or counterproductive for current societies. These are the arguments againt the idea of responsibility toward future generations. However there are lots of arguments defending our moral obligation to future generations, I will discuss them in the following sections.

5. Arguments Justifying the Rights of Future Generations

Most of the counter-arguments on the moral responsibility for future generations are depends on economical paradigm. These economy-based approaches prioritize current living people's interest over against future generations. (Howarth, 2011). For example, saving one life now is often considered just as worthwhile as saving no fewer than forty-five lives in one hundred years' time. Democratic decision-making, it is assumed, ought to give weight to such widely attested public time-preference (Attfield, 2018: 113). The utilitarian cost-benefit approach, which shaped by economic models, prioritizes present generations by arguing that future people do not yet exist and their identities remain unknowable, making their suffering or satisfaction ethically irrelevant. This view considers only the demonstrable suffering and happiness of present people as valid grounds for moral judgment. However, if we free our minds

from this utilitarian framework and instead adopt an ethics of rights and responsibilities, we see that the "nonexistence argument" about future generations, while seemingly commonsensical at first glance, proves to be a weak argument. A rights-based perspective reveals that the real issue is not metaphysical existence but ethical patienthood: whether our actions today can harm or benefit moral subjects who will one day exist. Thus, reducing intergenerational justice to economic trade-offs overlooks the deeper question of what we owe to beings whose very existence depends on our choices (Purves, 2016). After all, right and responsibilities are not toward single persons but they are for the social roles. For instance, if I am a teacher, I have responsibilities toward my students regardless of who they happen to be (Baier, 1981). Similarly, if I am a corporal in the army, I have duties and obligations toward the ten soldiers under my command, even without knowing their identities in advance. By the same logic, although our ancestors no longer exist, we have inherited much from them; preserving their values and showing respect for them is a matter of character ethics. In the same way, we may have duties and responsibilities toward future generations who do not yet exist. If it is not meaningless to value and protect the past, to preserve historic sites in city centers rather than converting them into shopping malls, then it is equally reasonable to take future generations into moral consideration even without knowing who they are. Thus, even if they are not yet in existence, we bear a certain measure of moral responsibility toward future generations (Warren, 1982).

Even if we accept that we have responsibilities toward future generations, how can we respond to the second counter argument, which claims that we cannot know what they will want or need? Those who reject obligations toward the future maintain that, since we cannot predict their needs, there is no justification for diverting resources from the present economy. We cannot know whether they will be harmed, nor can we know what they will require. While this is true, it is equally evident that we are currently consuming, in irreversible ways, resources such as air, water, and soil—resources that would ordinarily be renewable. We may be uncertain as to whether future people will need petroleum or compact discs, but if they are to live on this planet at all, it is certain that they will need clean water and a suitable, habitable climate. Moreover, we can be nearly certain that the nuclear waste we store today will one day pose a danger to someone. (DesJardins, 2006: 160). If no one today would wish to have nuclear waste buried in their backyard for a thousand years, it follows that future people would not wish for it either. While we may not know precisely what they will desire, it is evident that they will not want to live in a world rendered uninhabitable by melting glaciers, extreme heat, and environmental degradation. Even if the harm caused by our actions does not manifest immediately, the mere possibility that it may one day inflict damage means that we are infringing upon the rights of others. Lukas H. Meyer addresses this point through his “threshold conception of harm.” Whereas the classical view of harm refers to causing actual damage to a person, Meyer argues that “an action harms a person if it causes them to fall below a normatively defined threshold of well-being.”(Meyer, 2003). It becomes clear that the argument claiming we need not make sacrifices or take precautions for future generations—because they do not yet exist and we cannot know what they will want, what they will benefit from, or what will harm them—may appear plausible at first glance but is ultimately insufficient.

Philosophical responses can be offered to the problems of non-existence, indeterminate beneficiaries, and temporal distance. In fact, most opposing arguments regarding the rights of future generations stem from a utilitarian mode of reasoning grounded in an economic mindset.

Utilitarianism, by bracketing intentions and rights, and by disregarding considerations of character and moral sentiment, approaches the issue through a cost–benefit calculus based solely on the balance of pain and pleasure (Drivers, 2007: 44). The aforementioned economical approaches that assert what is important is the wellbeing of currently living people, we don't need to consider the wellbeing of future generations is a new version of classical utilitarian moral view. There are also some critiques about individiualism. For them we should abandon the idea of intergenerational individualism, foster both inter- and intra-generational solidarity, and understand individuals and generations not as isolated units but as members of communities that remain interconnected across time (Hourdequin, 2025)

However, according to contemporary utilitarianism, all people, whether currently living or not, have an equal right to avoid suffering and to gain access to well-being. From this perspective, the death of a child today is no less tragic than the death of a child in the year 2108. (Broome, 2008). Thus, we should not abandon the aim of prioritizing the future over present interests, but rather strive to enhance the well-being of all people and reduce their suffering. Nevertheless, even if we accept this argument, applying utilitarianism's principle of maximizing overall benefit could mean that, if a shared political consensus led to economic restrictions for the sake of future generations, the global economy would contract. The countries that would suffer most from such contraction and restrictions would be the poorer nations with larger populations. Already operating with limited resources, these developing countries would bear the harshest consequences of economic stagnation and recession. In such a scenario, we face a situation in which the children of already disadvantaged populations are asked to make "extra sacrifices" so that the children of wealthy Western nations may live more comfortably in the future. (Schelling, 2000). Another influential writer on the problem of intergenerational justice, Axel Gosseries asserts that Prioritizing assistance to the least well-off in the present generation is morally superior to generational savings strategies, because helping those who are worst off today is more likely to improve the long-term wellbeing of the least advantaged across future generations (Gosseries, 2023: 65).

Utilitarianism faces another paradoxical dilemma: if our moral goal is to maximize total happiness, then logically we ought to prioritize population growth since more people (even marginally happy ones) would increase aggregate utility. This absurd conclusion, known as the "repugnant conclusion" in philosophy, reveals a fundamental flaw in crude utilitarian calculus: it sacrifices quality of existence for quantitative accumulation. While this outcome seems plainly unreasonable, it demonstrates how rigid adherence to utility maximization can lead to morally counterintuitive prescriptions. The dilemma forces us to question whether ethics should measure value purely by sums, or whether thresholds of wellbeing, rights, or ecological limits must constrain utilitarian reasoning. Future generations thus become pawns in this calculation, exposing how unbridled utilitarianism might justify unsustainable reproduction just to "add" happy beings a *reductio ad absurdum* that challenges the very foundations of consequentialist ethics.

This inadequacy of utilitarianism in addressing the interests of future generations has led to the development of contractarian and rights-based theories. To avoid questions such as, "Why should I do anything for future generations when they have done nothing for me?" a rights-based approach can be adopted. Every human being, whether living or not, whether they have acted on my behalf or not, possesses certain inalienable rights simply by virtue of being human.

John Rawls, one of the most influential thinkers in contemporary political theory, argued that justice can be secured only if both present and future generations are taken into account (Rawls, 2018: 318). According to Rawls, the establishment of justice requires the protection of those who are disadvantaged, and future people will inevitably find themselves in such a disadvantaged position. For this reason, Rawls maintains that "all generations can benefit only if there exists a just savings principle, one that enables earlier generations to pass on a fair share to those that follow" (318). Thinkers who share Rawls's view and advocate a rights-based approach argue that the failure of the present generation to act on behalf of the future will lead to major catastrophes and will constitute a violation of the rights of others (Vanderheiden, 2006). John Rawls's theory of justice addresses intergenerational fairness through a rights-based approach, defending the right of future generations to an equal share of resources and envisioning a sustainable order through the just savings principle. The universal principles of justice, determined under the veil of ignorance, emphasize the ethical responsibility of present generations toward future ones, while requiring the fair distribution of resources within the framework of fundamental human rights. (Aydın, 2021). We should adopt economic restrictions to address climate change, because its consequences will entail the violation of certain fundamental human rights of future people. Many will suffer from malnutrition, thereby undermining their right to subsistence, their right to an adequate standard of living, and ultimately their safety of life and property due to deteriorating health conditions. Upholding an individualist contractarian ethic, John Rawls supplemented the shortcomings of utilitarianism with his theory of justice. Just as the "veil of ignorance" in the original position ensures fairness, so too must future generations, whose very existence we cannot presently confirm, be accorded equal conditions as a matter of justice. John Rawls's theory of justice treats a minimum threshold of well-being as sufficient for meeting the demands of justice, which aligns it with a *sufficientarian* framework. However, sufficientarianism has been widely criticized. For example, it does not require that future generations be no worse off than current ones; instead, it merely insists that they remain above certain basic thresholds (Caney 2021). Moreover, critics argue that sufficientarianism struggles to address the deep social and ecological uncertainties associated with climate change, potentially overlooking serious long-term risks (Hendlin 2014).

Just as Einstein expanded our understanding of a three-dimensional universe by adding time to create a four-dimensional framework, we might say that ecological challenges have added a temporal dimension to the ethical domain that governs relations among humans. The unprecedented capacity of our era to affect the planet on a massive scale demonstrates that our actions can have unforeseen and long-term consequences. It quickly becomes apparent that the traditional ethical concepts we have relied upon, such as intention, rights, violation, and the morally responsible agent, are often inadequate in this context. The emerging field of ecological ethics faces numerous unresolved questions: Do we have responsibilities toward people who have not yet been born? On what grounds can we claim such responsibilities exist? And what, in concrete terms, should we do for them? Upon even brief reflection, we realize that these are questions we cannot avoid asking.

6. Conclusion

Since the 1980s, sustainable development has become one of the most frequently invoked concepts and ideals in social and political discourse. At the core of the idea of sustainability lies the principle that both present and future generations should use the world's resources in

fair way. This article has examined the “problem of future generations,” a philosophical debate at the heart of the sustainable development ideal. By distinguishing this issue from earlier philosophical concerns, it has shown that the problem is largely a product of the technological and social transformations that emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. The paper then considered arguments supporting the claim that we have no responsibilities toward future generations. Defenders of such position claims that future people are non-existence of future, their existence depends on those living now, yet the view that the principles of rights and justice require reciprocity. Moreover they assert that economic and political arguments for making sacrifices or taking precautions on their behalf is inefficient and to some extent harmful. In response, those who argue that we *do* have obligations to future generations maintain that rights and responsibilities do not require contemporaneous existence, and that we can bear duties even toward persons whose identities are not yet determined. Moreover, while arguments concerning future generations are often grounded in utilitarian ethics, it has been claimed that their rights can be more readily justified from the perspective of right-based ethical frame. Overall, the problem of future generations continues to serve as a vibrant source of philosophical debate for contemporary policy-making, while also opening new horizons for ethical theory. With this issue, the temporal scope of human relations has been significantly extended, making it increasingly necessary to address concepts such as rights and the responsible moral agent within a deeper temporal framework.

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