

Altruism Beyond Time

Care Ethics for Future Generations

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Abstract

This article supports the thesis that intergenerational moral relationships need to be reconceived and re-modelled under the framework of care. Hence, it will defend that the Ethics of Care can provide a contextual and narrative approach to intergenerational moral theories, not only because it focuses on cultivating and applying emotions like empathy and compassion, but also because it encourages the creation of distinctive altruistic dispositions towards others, not necessarily limited to cases of space or time closeness.

Keywords: *Care ethics, Intergenerational ethics, Vulnerability, Solidarity, Altruism*

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1 INTRODUCTION

In a world increasingly shaped by extreme climate phenomena, migratory crises, and, more recently, the renewed outbreak of wars, the issue of future generations' rights has gained unprecedented visibility. The urgency of reflecting upon this troublesome matter can be evinced by the inclusion of future rights in numerous international legal frameworks, among which the Declarations of Stockholm,¹ Rio² and Paris,³ as well as in national laws such as the Italian Constitution.⁴ Yet, despite the broad legal recognition, contemporary ethical theories still manifest structural deficiencies in adequately responding to the challenges of a future-oriented morality.⁵

Although intergenerational rights have *de facto* been theorized and accepted, there remains a significant lack of clarity regarding their specific content and the corresponding obligations for present generations. Among other, this factor has led the American philosopher Stephen Gardiner to define our current era as a "perfect moral storm."⁶ This definition captures the convergence of two critical moral issues, namely "a lack of theories seriously capable of solidly justifying an intergenerational responsibility and [...] a series of social and institutional praxis focused on favoring the present [rather than the future]."⁷ The shortcomings noted by Gardiner within existing ethical frameworks, not only regarding the scope of future rights but, crucially, in defining our corresponding accountability, have "pushed some authors to support the necessity of [the creation of] a moral dimension founded on a novel global awareness."⁸ Several philosophers endorsing this view argue that, in order to solve the challenge of intergenerational responsibility, we first ought to adopt the viewpoint of future generations and, thus, rediscover a conception of humanity as inevitably interconnected with other living beings.⁹

¹UNEP, *Declaration of the United Nations Conference of the Human Environment*, Stockholm 1972.

²UNCED, *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, Rio de Janeiro 1992.

³UNESCO, *Declarations on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations*, Paris 1997.

⁴ATTO DEL SENATO, *Modifica all'articolo 9 della Costituzione in materia di protezione della natura - approvato con il nuovo titolo "Tutela costituzionale dell'ambiente"*, 9 giugno 2021, n. 83. Legge costituzionale n. 1/22 del 11 febbraio 2022, GU n. 44 del 22 febbraio 2022.

⁵F. MENGA, *Etica intergenerazionale*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2021, pp. 24-25.

⁶S. GARDINER, *A Perfect Moral Storm. The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

⁷F. MENGA, *Etica intergenerazionale*, cit., p. 24.

⁸E. PULCINI, *Perché prendersi cura delle generazioni future*, in M. Mascia (ed.), *L'agire ecologico: motivazioni, politiche e pratiche per la sostenibilità: rapporto di Ricerca Fondazione Lanza*, Proget Edizioni, Albignasego 2018, p. 16.

⁹*Ibidem*.

The relational dimension has been a central concern in a number of ethical currents. Among them, the so-called philosophy of Alterity especially stresses that one of the fundamental preconditions for the emergence of morality lies in the human mutual interdependence with other living beings.¹⁰ Yet it is within the current of Care Ethics that the concept of interdependence has found its most comprehensive and nuanced development. Indeed, the approach of the Ethics of Care emphasizes how, to understand the moral development of an individual, we should first comprehend the nature of human relationships and responsibilities.¹¹

Recently, Care Ethics' intellectuals have begun to explore how this philosophical framework might be applied to the dilemma of intergenerational responsibility.¹² This paper aims to contribute to this emerging field by presenting a novel viewpoint on the possible applications of Care Ethics notions to intergenerational duties and obligations. In this sense, this dissertation will propose additional arguments on how we could reasonably broaden our moral responsibilities from contemporary dimensions to future generations. To do so, the paper will support the claim that, first of all, intergenerational moral relationships need to be reconceived and re-modelled under the framework of care.

Hence, this article will be divided into three main sections and a conclusion. The first will be devoted to illustrating the conditions under which moral behaviors emerge among contemporaries, identifying three key characteristics for the formation of moral relations. Section two will then highlight how current moral interactions, in their fundamental features, resemble those we might undertake with future individuals. Building on this, the paper will examine how the responsibilities we have towards present individuals might be extended to future generations as well. Therefore, the third section will then propose a revised ethical framework for intergenerational responsibility. In particular, it will advocate for a reinterpretation of solidarity and altruism that moves from a synchronous (present-based) to a diachronic (across time) perspective. Finally, the concluding section will stress the urgency of fostering societal engagement in intergenerational initiatives. Following from this, the paper will underline the necessity of cultivating a shared sense of moral duty toward the future, to be developed alongside a normative recognition of future generations' rights.

¹⁰P. RICŒUR, *Sympatia e rispetto. Fenomenologia ed etica della seconda persona*, in F. Riva (ed.), *Il pensiero dell'altro*, Lavoro, Roma 2008, pp. 13-38; E. LÉVINAS, *Totalità e infinito: saggio sull'esteriorità*, Jaca Book, Milano 2010; H. JONAS, *Il principio responsabilità: un'etica per la civiltà tecnologica*, Einaudi, Torino 2014.

¹¹C. GILLIGAN, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1982, p. 19.

¹²R. MAKOFF, R. READ, *Beyond Just Justice – Creating Space for a Future-Care Ethic*, «Philosophical Investigations», 40 (2016), pp. 223-256; E. PULCINI, *Perché prendersi cura delle generazioni future*, cit.; T. RANDALL, *Care Ethics and Obligations to Future Generations*, «Hypatia», 34 (2019), pp. 527-545.

2 CARE ETHICS

One of the core arguments of the Ethics of Care lies in the belief that we should acknowledge “the necessity of considering human beings as relational and incarnated beings, against any objectifying tendency of morality.”¹³ Care Ethics claims that morality is both embedded in rationality and affectivity, and that feelings and emotions represent a relevant share of personal and collective moral belief. Proponents of this ethical tradition stress the importance of cultivating and applying emotions like empathy and compassion between individuals, as well as recognizing our sense of responsibility towards others. One of the core arguments of this ethical view is that, in order to act morally, human beings should adopt a perspective of interdependence and cooperation.¹⁴ Following from this, it also advocates for the exercise of care in every aspect of humans’ life.

Yet, outlining the basic principles of Care Ethics does not immediately clarify its relevance in the peculiar and multifaceted field of intergenerational ethics. Indeed, an ethics that is mainly based on relationality could be considered ill-suited in a context in which relations and reciprocal communication are absent. Hence, where does the intuition of applying this ethical understanding to future ethics lie? The answer is to be found in the foundational features Care Ethics uses to define moral relationships. In the next paragraphs, we will observe three of such characteristics: *opacity*, *vulnerability* and *asymmetry*.

2.1 *Opacity*

According to the philosophers of care, human beings live in profound interdependence with one another. This interdependence begins from the first moments of our lives, in which we are completely subjected to the care of others. The period of natality and infancy is considered attentively by care ethicists, who regard it as the foundational moments for the identity of every individual. Moreover, according to the philosopher Judith Butler, the initial phases of our existence conceal the creation of a sort of *hidden identity*, “an original and primary self of which individuals do not retain any memory, a self that acts even if it remains opaque.”¹⁵ This “hidden self” is fundamental for the shaping of relationship among individuals. Indeed, it constitutes one of the founding pillars of our identity, defining how we enter into contact with our own intimacy and with otherness. For Butler, such an opaque self is the result of the primary relationships we are subjected to at the very beginning of our lives. According to the American philosopher, such relationships happen so early in our lives that they inevitably are forgotten during

¹³F. BRUGÈRE, *L’etica della cura*, Mimesi, Sesto San Giovanni (MI) 2023, p. 13.

¹⁴*Ibidem*, pp. 15-25.

¹⁵J. BUTLER, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Fordham University Press, New York 2005, p. 31.

growth. It is precisely such forgetfulness that represents the origin of our hidden selves, and it is also responsible for provoking an ignorance regarding the basis of our own personality and way of behaving; this ignorance, in turn, will lay the basis for our modes of relating with one another.

Two main considerations follow from this conception regarding the formation of the individual *persona*. The first one is that such theorization of the fundamental exposition to the other in the early moments of our lives entails that each individual is formed through and thanks to an alterity. An alterity that is to be intended as someone inherently extraneous to us and that, somehow, “sieges” us with its “enigmatic” character.¹⁶

The second consideration pertains how the forgetfulness of the initial and *initiative* moments of our personality inevitably leads to developing a sort of *double opacity*. Indeed, not only individuals are partially prevented from understanding themselves, but they are also unable to comprehend others in their totality. According to Butler themselves, no one is fully transparent to us, but every individual permanently resides behind a cloak of opacity,¹⁷ shaping our possibility to understand and relate to different forms of otherness.

2.2 Vulnerability

The second defining characteristic of moral relationships, according to Care Ethicists, lies in vulnerability. In particular, vulnerability pervades every individual from birth, and it follows them until their final departure. This condition stems from the inescapable relationality of human beings and, indeed, the its implications are most visible and significant during our interactions with one another.

Furthermore, vulnerability arises not only from our capacity of being hurt by others, but also from our ability to hamper the “the vital power, the power to speak or to act” of other individuals.¹⁸ Dangerous and reciprocal, this condition highlights how human beings perpetually reside and move within the so-called “chains of vulnerability.”¹⁹ Within such notion of vulnerability, not merely to be intended as fragility, but as a *status* that underscores how “we are responsible in virtue of the fact that we are always constrained, bound and dependent on the others,”²⁰ lies our responsibility to care about the other can begin.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ F. BRUGÈRE, *L'etica della cura*, cit., p. 41.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 243.

2.3 Asymmetry

The third pivotal characteristic endorsed by Care Ethics resides in the asymmetry inherent in every moral relationship. According to Emmanuel Lévinas: “the relation with the other man represents the asymmetry *par excellence*,”²¹ underlining how each individual embodies another being, different from us and with needs that can deeply diverge from ours. Indeed, precisely because the other is not fully knowable, every action they perform carries a distinctive and inassimilable attribute.²² As a result, all moral relationships are marked by structural asymmetry, in which no one can fully repay the other’s behaviour. Any action performed by individuals remains unpossessable, excessive in its singularity, unable to find its perfect counterpart.

According to the Ethics of Care, these three features – opacity, vulnerability and asymmetry – form the backbone of moral relationships. Crucially, none of them seems to be limited within relationships between co-present living individuals. Indeed, this article argues that these features are equally applicable to intergenerational moral relationships as well.

The same vulnerability that is manifested in relations marked by exposure to otherness is also the condition of future generations’ existence. After all, future individuals are excluded from decisions that will shape their lives, yet they are wholly subjected to the long-term effects of our current actions. Similarly, opacity, understood as the impossibility of fully accessing another’s intentions and desires, is just as veracious in intergenerational contexts. Our inability to predict the specific needs of future people mirrors the uncertainty we face every relationship with our contemporaries. Lastly, asymmetry is not only present in our moral relation with future generations, but it is also heavily skewed in favor of our present interests: while we exercise an immense power over the future world, future generations remain radically dependent on our choices, without any possibility of intervention.

3 DIACHRONIC SOLIDARITY

According to the Ethics of Care, human beings need to be seen and recognized as deeply interwoven with one another. Consequently, such condition leads them to be in constant exposure to others’ actions, decisions and overall existence, and this is the reason why every *rational* being is to be recognized and perceived also and at the same time as a *relational* being. Concurrently, each person inherently

²¹E. LÉVINAS, G. MARCEL, P. RICŒUR, F. RIVA, *Il Pensiero dell’altro con un dialogo tra E. Lévinas e P. Ricœur*, Lavoro, Roma 2008, p. 74.

²²M. FRITSCH, *Taking Turns with the Earth: Phenomenology, Deconstruction, and Intergenerational Justice*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 2018, p. 119.

represents a “relation in itself,”²³ since it needs, first of all, to relate and accepts its own fragility. This entails that, to perceive oneself in all one’s opacity, and vulnerability, also signifies acknowledging our capacity to form meaningful connections.

It is precisely through such inextricable human *relationality* and interconnectedness that *solidarity* finds a way to enter our existences. Indeed, while the capacity to establish relations cannot be automatically equated with solidarity, it is in the moment when the eyes of the other meet ours,²⁴ as Levinas describes, that solidarity is given the possibility to grow. Thus, solidarity “represents an ontological structure undetachable from the self,”²⁵ one that becomes unavoidable the instant we encounter another in need. To experience solidarity means to enter in contact with the radical interdependence, uniqueness and vulnerability of each human being, and to realize the destiny we share with the rest of the world. This is why solidarity not only depicts the pragmatic application of the Ethics of Care in an intergenerational frame, but it could also serve as a countermeasure to one of the great moral challenges of our times: diachronic indifference.

3.1 *Diachronic Indifference*

Diachronic, or intergenerational, indifference represents one of the most pressing challenges of our times. It denotes a particular kind of apathy that arises when individuals are confronted with the task of caring for future generations. Thus understood, the indifferent subject is the one who fails to perceive the gap between one’s opinion and the outside world, thus remaining confined within her own judgments and an “irreplaceable set of values that her agency is to be harmonized with.”²⁶ In her one-way monotonic vision, the indifferent subject remains unconcerned not only with “others” but also with “the multifaceted contribution that might come from them.”²⁷

Additionally, when transposed onto intergenerational ethics, indifference conveys a form of moral disengagement from the future. Diachronic indifference exteriorizes the belief that ethics is only applicable to the world one presently inhabits, hence assuming that the overwhelming issues of today are a sufficient reason to dismiss one’s long-term responsibilities.

Such conception of ethics and responsibility fails to capture the full scope and the transformative potential of solidarity. In this context, the concept of soli-

²³*Ibidem*.

²⁴E. LÉVINAS, *Totalità e infinito: saggio sull’esteriorità*, Jaca Book, Milano 2010, p. 257.

²⁵*Ibidem*.

²⁶A. PIRNI, *Climate Change and the Motivational Gap*, in G. Pellegrino, M. Di Paola, (eds.), *Handbook of Philosophy of Climate Change. Handbooks in Philosophy*, Springer, Cham 2023, p. 11.

²⁷*Ibidem*.

darity needs to be understood in its time-transcending meaning, as that essential component of human existence capable of inspiring a more interconnected and responsive approach to our responsibilities, both now and in the future. Indeed, the basic extent and meaning of any form of solidarity lies in a reciprocal commitment. A commitment that entails the willingness to assist anyone who asks for help. This duty encompasses not only the immediate needs of others but also the needs of future generations.²⁸

Solidarity, in the deepest sense, knows no boundaries to its extension. Accordingly, solidarity ought to be treated as a reciprocal obligation which, in the end, “consists in being open to help anyone who finds itself in real or potential need.”²⁹ This does not mean privileging future generations at the expense of the present, but rather refusing to completely exclude them from our moral field. Solidarity, often perceived as an extraordinary and supererogatory act,³⁰ could provide a crucial instrument for bridging the divide between the present and future generations instead, encouraging behaviours that prioritize long-term well-being over short-sighted actions.

3.2 First Objection

One possible objection to the idea of achieving diachronic solidarity arises from a fundamental doubt: how can *another* who does not exist yet trigger our sense of solidarity?

Even within moral relationships among coexistent human beings there are points of *partial absence*, instances where full co-presence is never entirely achieved. Partial absence is inherent to human relations, either because shaped by mutual opacity or arising from our asymmetrical vulnerabilities. Lévinas’ notion of the “epiphany of the face of the other”³¹ – that reveals to us the boundaries of our existence and compels moral responsibility³² – remains possible to us only to a certain extent. Others are always revealed by degrees to us, their intentions never fully transparent. Such uncertainty is one we also share regarding future individuals, their intentions, values and overall life objective. Yet, just as with present individuals, future generations’ dignity is intrinsic, *gratuitous* at the very core.³³ In particular, for dignity to be gratuitous entails that the recognition of dignity to human beings, that in turns allow

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ E. LÉVINAS, *Totalità e infinito: saggio sull’esteriorità*, cit., p. 89.

³⁰ A. PIRNI, «Anche nell’interesse delle future generazioni». *La promessa e il compito della recente riforma della Costituzione italiana*, «Lessico di Etica Pubblica», 2 (2022), p. 86.

³¹ E. LÉVINAS, *Totalità e infinito: saggio sull’esteriorità*, cit., p. 174.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 257.

³³ R. MANCINI, *Esistenza e gratuità. Antropologia della condivisione*, Cittadella Editrice, Assisi 1996, p. 44.

us to grant a duty of responsibility, does not require “a theoretical necessity that produces it, but ‘only’ an unconditional form of respect addressed to the other as it is, to the other for the other itself.”³⁴ We do not, strictly speaking, *need* to see someone in front of us to believe we have a duty of responsibility towards them.

3.3 *Second Objection*

However, another pressing question remains: what about the fact that we cannot perceive future generations at all? Shouldn’t this absence influence how much we take their needs into account?

Indeed, “the absence of a real, but only imaginary You, seems to be the possible cause of the lack of a conscious cognitive effort to respond to needs that we cannot perceive.”³⁵ The difficulty in undertaking intergenerational practical actions, therefore, could be the direct consequence of our struggle to fully grasp the real, tangible possibility of existence of people who are currently not in front of us.

Yet, even among contemporary individuals, relationships are largely shaped by the mind’s *imaginative content*. Kathryn Norlock, in her reflections on the relationship between the living and the dead, maintains that the basic element in the relations between living creatures lies in what she calls *imaginal content*. Such content, according to the philosopher, is what gives our relationship moral value and meaning. One of the most particular features of such a faculty is that it is able to persist even after one of the relata dies.³⁶ The *imaginal*, unlike what is merely *imaginary*, introduces a kind of interpretation that is deeply grounded in our reality. It lies in the dynamic interplay of our judgments about the world and our relationships within it based on actual, known facts. Moreover, such imaginal activity represents a continuous and mutually constitutive process, since we not only coexist with other people but also reflect upon and recreate our relationship with them.³⁷

This paper wants to argue that individuals can form such imaginal content not only with their contemporary peers, but with future generations as well. In this sense, while we cannot predict with certainty who future people will be, we are still capable of imagining and morally engaging with them. Although we may never be able to articulate the needs of future generations, we can still recognize that they share a threshold of fundamental interests, such as the opportunity to

³⁴*Ibidem*.

³⁵F. MADONNA, *Vulnerability and Future Generations: A problem of Altruism?*, «European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences», 2 (2022), p. 78.

³⁶K. NORLOCK, *Real (and) imaginal relationships with the dead*, «Journal of Value Inquiry», 51 (2016), p. 343.

³⁷*Ibidem*, p. 346.

grow in a world with “unpolluted air, unpolluted water, adequate food, adequate clothing, adequate shelter, and minimal preventive public health care,”³⁸ in which their fundamental rights to life, health and subsistence needs to be protected.³⁹

However,

rather than being concerned with what specific identities will or will not be born (an impossible task), we ought to be concerned with what sort of *world* we are bequeathing to whatever persons are born – something that is within the present generation’s control.⁴⁰

Moreover, in exploring the intergenerational impact of our actions, it is essential not only to consider the relational aspect of human life, but also to reflect on how the inherent vulnerability of individuals – both present and future – shapes and deepens our ethical responsibilities. This awareness invites a deeper reflection of how the way we cultivate our present values and ethical commitments extends beyond immediate relationships, prompting a reconsideration of those behaviours that allow us to better engage with our responsibility towards others, both within and across generations.

4 INTERGENERATIONAL ALTRUISM

The question that arises now, thus, regards through which modalities we could successfully prescribe actions for the present individuals to take in order to benefit future generations. Indeed, if safeguarding the future requires that we understand what intergenerational rights precisely are, it also necessarily requires the comprehension of the actions we need to undertake in order to genuinely advocate for them. This is the reason why, if we aim to create a morality that considers the well-being of those yet to come, we must first address the issue of altruism.

Whenever we enter the realm of intersubjectivity, we also step into the domain of vulnerability. Indeed, from the fundamental human condition of intersubjectivity and relationality, it follows also the possibility of being hurt by the other and of being subjected to violence. After all, vulnerability is “part of an *ontological* dialogue on the very constitution of the individual: the ability to suffer, of having a body, and, simultaneously, the ability to react (personally, socially, politically) to such suffering.”⁴¹ More specifically, a person is deemed vulnerable

³⁸H. SHUE, *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence and United States Foreign Policy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1996, p. 23.

³⁹S. CANEY, *Climate Change, Intergenerational Equity and the Social Discount Rate*, «Politics, Philosophy & Economics», 13/4 (2014), pp. 320-342.

⁴⁰M. SAGOFF, *The Economy of the Earth: Philosophy, Law and the Environment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 16; T. RANDALL, *Care Ethics and Obligations to Future Generations*, cit., pp. 538-539.

⁴¹F. MADONNA, *Vulnerability and Future Generations: A problem of Altruism?*, cit., p. 76.

when she is “not in a position to prevent occurrences that would undermine what she takes to be important to her.”⁴²

Whenever we adopt the perspective of the Ethics of Care, we place such vulnerability, together with the unavoidable condition of mutual interdependence, at the heart of our ethical considerations. Indeed, this paper argues that such is the kind of ethics that is fundamental if we truly wish to establish a morality grounded in our shared human predicament, as well as on “experience of alterity or otherness that goes beyond the closure of the ego.”⁴³ Concurrently, in order to enact truly intergenerational altruistic behaviours we need to learn how to look beyond our immediate interests and embrace a selfless concern for the future. In this way, we will be able to ensure that our actions contribute positively to the lives of those who will directly experience the consequences of our choices. For this reason, altruism becomes key in shaping a moral framework capable of extending across time.

Altruism is commonly understood as a disinterested concern for the other, prioritizing the well-being of another over one’s own. It is defined as that “behaviour that benefits another individual at a cost to oneself.”⁴⁴ In this sense, altruism highlights a shift from an *ego-centred* approach of agency to an *other-directed* one. This switched approach can be achieved through the adoption of a distinctive motivational trait: while, in egoism, keeping a certain behaviour towards the other becomes a means to reaching a personal goal, in altruism “the object of interest is the achievement of the well-being at the expense of one’s own.”⁴⁵

After all, altruism emerges when the subject actively engages in mechanisms of perspective-taking and empathy, driven by “the goal of increasing welfare [...] of other individuals.”⁴⁶ In this sense, altruism falls within the broader category of those behaviours that are deemed to be “pro-social,” meaning that they are aimed at improving the condition of the receiver.⁴⁷ This type of behaviours is characteristically included within the framework of care, and it is deeply entrenched in the processes of socialization and interdependence between individuals. Indeed, pro-

⁴²J. ANDERSON, *Autonomy and Vulnerability Entwined*, in C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers, S. Dodds (eds.), *Vulnerability. New essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, p. 135.

⁴³G. HESS, H. POLTIER, *About the Possibility of a Distant Future Ethics: The Motivation Problem*, in *Proceedings from the 50th Societas Ethica Annual Conference «Climate Change; Sustainability; and an Ethics of an Open Future»*, August 22-25, Soesterberg 2013, ed. by G. Collste, L. Reuter, LiU Electronic Press, p. 115-121, <http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/098/009/ecp13098009.pdf>.

⁴⁴I. NOWAKOWSKA, D. JASIELSKA, *Altruism: Benevolent Behaviors*, in *Encyclopedia of Sexual Psychology and Behavior*, ed. by T.K. Shackelford, Springer, Cham 2023, p. 2.

⁴⁵F. MADONNA, *Vulnerability and Future Generations: A problem of Altruism?*, cit., p. 78.

⁴⁶D. BATSON, *Why Act for the Public Good?*, «Personality and Social Psychology bulletin», 20 (1994), pp. 604-608.

⁴⁷H. W. BIERHOFF, *Pro-social behaviour*, Psychology Press, London 2003, p. 9.

social actions find their roots within the developmental stages of life and have been observed to be present in individuals from a very young age. Notably, pro-social behaviours such as altruism are functions “of the social environment that impacts a child at a particular developmental context.”⁴⁸ Hence, these behaviours are the possible result of determinate and specific conditions experienced in our infancy and of the relationships to which we are exposed to in that time. However, most of these behaviours are not only limited to the social circle in which we find ourselves. For example, even if sympathy tends to be partial, and often experienced towards those who are closer to us, some authors sustain that “a person can be naturally or reflexively sympathetic, as an emotional response, for others not connected to oneself.”⁴⁹ In other words, “we can learn not just to feel for others like us but how to feel for others, for humanity in general,”⁵⁰ thus extending our pro-social behaviours to even distant people.

An expanded understanding of altruism offers a compelling foundation for the intergenerational Care Ethics explored in this dissertation. Indeed, according to the Ethics of Care: “just as interdependency in the lifespan obliges people to care, so does global interdependency justify a global obligation to care.”⁵¹ This notion of relationality, however, takes on a broader significance when we shift our focus to the long term. When we begin to see vulnerability not only as a present and individual condition but also as a diachronic and global one, we can overcome that moral *impasse* that prevents us from understanding the connection between present humanity and the future one.

To broaden our comprehension of altruism we need to be deeply conscious of our imaginal capacity and of the concept of diachronic vulnerability. In turn, this could permit us to shift our focus from the singular individual, in order to better understand the continuum that is represented by humanity in time.⁵² Diachronic altruism could provide a way to disengage from the centrality of the present typical of other intergenerational approaches. This is because intergenerational altruism is based on the diachronic recognition of vulnerability, which reflects a condition that is first acquired and *then* passed, in a “continuum of past, present and future lives [that] make the diachronic interpretation of time of vulnerability chaining dependent on what has been, is and will be.”⁵³

⁴⁸R. S. BALMORES-PAULINO, *Altruism*, in T. K. SHACKELFORD (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Sexual Psychology and Behavior*, Springer, Cham 2023, p. 3.

⁴⁹L. JACKSON, *Beyond Virtue: The Politics of Educating Emotions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020, p. 96.

⁵⁰*Ibidem*, p. 97.

⁵¹S. BEN-PORATH, *Care ethics and dependence – rethinking jus post bellum*, «Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy», 23 (2008), p. 65.

⁵²F. MADONNA, *Vulnerability and Future Generations: A problem of Altruism?*, cit., p. 80.

⁵³*Ibidem*.

5 CONCLUSION

The comprehension of one's own vulnerability and the fear of not being able to manage its consequences [is the fundamental condition of the human being]. It is, in other terms, the anthropological comprehension of finitude and of constitutive exposition to the risk in the face of which [...] there are two choices: to bear other's burdens to develop a society of peace, or safeguard ourselves using others to our advantage. In both cases it's in action the dynamic of salvation: save yourself with others or at the expense of others.⁵⁴

The so-called intergenerational dilemma is an inescapably collective issue, and therefore fundamentally political. While individual agency is undeniably significant, addressing this complex problem requires systemic changes both at the community level and in the broader social structure.⁵⁵ Indeed, our intergenerational duties and obligations cannot be detached from the formation of a collective praxis, one that poses relevance to a future-directed moral responsibility. According to this, it is "imperative that we establish common actions that prescribe the necessity to confront with and bear the interests of the future generations."⁵⁶

But where can we ground this responsibility, and how can we justify imposing it on present individuals? Alberto Pirni suggests that the motivations to act on behalf of future generations ought to be found in a *collective pre-existing praxis*,⁵⁷ to be intended as the shared social behaviours and values already embedded in the fabric of society. Despite the challenges involved, this paper argues that collective praxis could serve as a robust foundation for motivating actions aimed at preserving intergenerational justice. Moreover, elements of this forward-looking *praxis* already exist within our society, and some experiments have shown that "most people appear to *intrinsically* value the welfare of future generations."⁵⁸

Furthermore, this paper defends the claim that human society is inherently projected towards the future. In her work "The Human Condition," the philosopher Hannah Arendt describes how one of the community's essential roles lies in ensuring that the lives of its members are not forgotten after death, but achieve "an intergenerational permanence"⁵⁹ instead. Reaffirming this function involves acknowledging the inherent transgenerational nature of human communities,

⁵⁴A. PIRNI, «Anche nell'interesse delle future generazioni». *La promessa e il compito della recente riforma della Costituzione italiana*, cit., p. 95; S. NATOLI, *Stare al mondo. Escursioni nel tempo presente*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2008, p. 58.

⁵⁵A. FRAGNIÈRE, *Climate change and individual duties*, «WIREs Climate Change», 7 (2016), p. 20.

⁵⁶A. PIRNI, «Anche nell'interesse delle future generazioni». *La promessa e il compito della recente riforma della Costituzione italiana*, cit., p. 9.

⁵⁷*Ibidem*.

⁵⁸G. AGNEMAN, S. HENRIKS, H. BÄCK, E. RENSTRÖM, *Intergenerational Altruism and Climate Policy Preferences*, «PNAS Nexus », 3 (2024), p. 105; italics added.

⁵⁹F. MENGA, *Etica intergenerazionale*, cit., p. 215.

thereby nurturing a collective sense of connection and responsibility towards future generations.

In this view, the duty of present generations must be oriented toward those who, while not yet physically existing, will one day need to be able to protect what will matter to them. Future generations cannot be viewed just “as ‘abstract principles’ to be forgotten about, but as a further push to initiate an ethic of vulnerability that diversifies in safeguarding the born and the unborn.”⁶⁰ This entails acting in such a way that maximizes the opportunities available to future generations. It involves ensuring that we do not deprive them of existing opportunities or diminish their potential to benefit from them.⁶¹

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⁶⁰F. MADONNA, *Vulnerability and Future Generations: A problem of Altruism?*, cit., p. 77.

⁶¹A. PIRNI, «Anche nell'interesse delle future generazioni». *La promessa e il compito della recente riforma della Costituzione italiana*, cit., p. 90.