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Feeling Emotions for Future People

Tiziana Andina[1] · **Giulio Sacco**[1]

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Abstract
It is more difficult to feel emotions for future generations than for those who currently exist, and this seems to be one of the reasons why we struggle to care for the future. According to a number of authors, who have recently focused on the psychological flaws that prevent us from dealing with transgenerational issues, the main problem is "future discounting". Challenging this common view, we argue that the main reason we struggle to care about future generations lies in two features of our daily emotions: the «identified victim effect» and the decrease in empathy for people who are different from us. These traits give rise to two puzzles we call the *problem of the indeterminateness* of future persons and the *problem of dissimilarity*. After having analyzed these problems of our moral psychology, we show how they allow us to account for some differences in affectivity towards a number of entities that do not currently exist, such as future generations, past generations and fictional characters. Bearing in mind the real limits of our emotions when dealing with future people, we sketch an alternative proposal on how to develop emotions to provide citizens of liberal democracies with a motivation to act in favor of future generations.

Keywords Emotions · Future Generations · Moral Psychology · Empathy · Intergenerational Justice

1 The Moral-psychological Puzzles of Transgenerational Justice

The problems of transgenerational ethics, i.e., the issues of justice concerning future generations, are extremely tricky for traditional moral and political thinking. A number of challenges we are facing, such as the sustainability of public debts and welfare systems with an aging population, or climate change, are either totally new or much more serious than in the past. Classical theories of justice have problems when it comes to these issues, for they usually think in a synchronic way–considering the rights and interests of those who live in a certain historical moment–rather than diachronically (Jonas 1985; Barry 1996; Andina 2022; Andina and Corvino 2023).

It is not by chance that, in recent years, an increasing number of philosophers sought to analyze the theoretical and psychological obstacles that prevent us from effectively addressing transgenerational challenges, especially climate change. Gardiner (2011) has coined the expression «perfect moral storm» to suggest that the conjunction of different flaws in our moral psychology dooms our attempts to deal with climate change and protect the rights of future generations to failure. Similarly, Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu (2012) have criticized our commonsense morality, arguing that–having developed to respond to the evolutionary needs of small communities of hunter-gatherers, whose actions had limited effects in space and time–it is not suited to confront the global challenges of our times, where we have the power to put at risk, with our actions, the very existence of human life on Earth. As suggested by the subtitle of his book, Jamieson (2014) also sought to explain «why the struggle against climate change failed», focusing on the inadequacy of political institutions, citizens' scientific ignorance, the communication problems faced by scientists and some psychological limitations of human beings–such as the need to have immediate feedback on the consequences of our actions to feel responsible for them,

✉ Giulio Sacco
giulio.sacco@unito.it

Tiziana Andina
tiziana.andina@unito.it

[1] Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences, University of Turin, Palazzo Nuovo, Via Sant'Ottavio, 20, Turin 10124, Italy

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or the tendency to deny a problem when we think we are powerless against it.

These three accounts have something in common. First, they all criticize the «causal conception of responsibility» (Persson and Savulescu 2012: 24) underlying common-sense morality, i.e., the intuitive idea that we are morally responsible only for the harm we cause through our direct action, but not for our omissions or for states of affairs that are causally produced by a great number of agents. Applied to environmental problems, such a view suggests that no one is responsible for climate change, since the contribution of any single individual to atmospheric pollution is negligible, while it is collective action that causes it.[1] Moreover, all three accounts compare the moral problems related to climate change to «collective action problems» (Jamieson 2014: 4) such as the *prisoner's dilemma* or the *tragedy of the commons*. As in these game theory puzzles, *prima facie*, everyone has an individual interest in not cooperating with the others; but the sum of all single defections yields an undesirable collective result.

One of the points on which the three inquiries seem to agree concerns the psychological limitations that prevent us from developing the motivation to concretely take responsibility for the future. Not only do we struggle to confront transgenerational problems from a theoretical point of view, failing to include the unborn in the realm of rights.[2] We also lack the emotional tools to deal with this issue: it seems that many people are not concerned enough about their own long-term future,[3] and that they are not sufficiently interested in the well-being of those who will come after them to make sacrifices for the sake of the latter. Although with slight differences, Gardiner, Jamieson, Persson and Savulescu all seem to think that the reason for this failure of our moral psychology lies in the «temporal dimension» (Gardiner 2011: 32). According to Gardiner (2011: 32–38), the problem is twofold: for one thing, the effects of climate change are not immediate, so people may become aware of the problem too late; for another, the greenhouse gasses emitted take a very long time to dissolve, so our good actions will also take a long time to bear fruit, and–with no prompt feedback on our behaviors–it is more difficult to feel proud of them. Likewise, Jamieson (2014: 102–103) argues that «[t]he most difficult challenge in addressing climate change» lies in our natural emotional endowment:

> Climate change must be thought rather than sensed, and we are not very good at thinking. Even if we succeed in thinking that something is a threat, we are less reactive than if we sense that it is a threat. Consider the difference between touching a hot stove and being told that the stove is hot. Scientists are telling us that the world is warming, but we do not sense it and so we do not act.

Since climate change threatens a future that does not exist yet, Jamieson holds, it is difficult for us to develop the proper emotional reactions, which usually involve exciting stimuli that are present or oncoming. Finally, Persson and Savulescu (2012: 27, original emphasis) argue that one of the most serious problems with our moral psychology–which makes us «unfit for the future»–is the «*bias towards the near future*», or «temporal bias». This expression means the phenomenon (usually called «future discounting» in behavioral economics) whereby we are inclined to overvalue what happens to us in the present, even when this is detrimental to our own future well-being. (For example, one may accept to experience greater pain in the future in order to avoid minimal discomfort in the present, or one may renounce a greater good in the future to enjoy a lesser one now.) According to some scholars, the very fact of ascribing more value to the consumption of goods in the present is per se theoretically irrational. For, assuming that we aim to maximize our utility over our lifetime, it would be sound to distribute our delight proportionally over time (Elster 1984: 65–77; Persson 2005: 195–210). For others, within certain limits, it is reasonable to discount the consumption of a good in the future compared to its immediate enjoyment, since delaying a pleasure increases uncertainty. (After all, we cannot know that the good will be available to us in the future as it is now.) Nonetheless, psychology and behavioral economics have provided us with ample evidence that people often discount their own future in a hyperbolic way–i.e., excessively and irrationally, to the point of having contradictory preferences, which violate ideal economic rationality (Thaler 2015).

The tendency to underestimate the future, which has been the primary focus of those addressing transgenerational issues, is certainly a problem for an ethics of the future: if we struggle even to be interested in our own well-being 5 or 10 years from now, it seems unlikely that we would be willing to make sacrifices for someone else who will live 50 years from now. And, as Jamieson argues, it is certainly easier to have emotions that motivate action when we perceive a stimulus through our senses–for instance, we usually

[1] For this reason, Gardiner (2011: 24, original emphasis) speaks of «*fragmentation of agency*».

[2] See, for instance, Beckerman (2006) on «the impossibility of a theory of intergenerational justice», or the «non-identity problem» (Parfit 1984; for a useful review of the literature about that puzzle, see Corvino 2019).

[3] While we rationally aim to make our future better (e.g., saving money for our retirement and our children's college tuition), sometimes we fail to achieve our rational goals without proper nudges (cf. Thaler and Sunstein 2008).

feel fear when we are faced with an actual or at least oncoming threat. However, we believe that these flaws are neither the only nor the main obstacles to developing a stronger affectivity towards future generations. In fact, as much as we privilege the present, we *can* feel emotions (even very strong ones) towards people who lived in the past and are no longer here; and, although we commonly have deeper reactions to what happens before our eyes, sensory perception is not a necessary condition for being passionate about a cause or someone's fate. If that were the case, it would be impossible to feel emotions when reading a book.

In what follows, we will argue that one of the reasons we struggle to care about future generations lies in two features of our daily emotions, which, so far, have been mostly overlooked by philosophers who deal with transgenerational justice: the so-called «identified victim effect» and the decrease in empathy for people who are different from us. [4] These traits give rise to two puzzles we could call the *problem of the indeterminateness* of future persons and the *problem of dissimilarity*. In Sects. 2 and 3 we will analyze each of these problems of our moral psychology, explaining how they affect transgenerational issues. In paragraph 4 we will show how such an analysis of emotional problems allows us to account for some differences in affectivity towards a number of entities that do not currently exist, such as future generations, past generations and fictional characters. Bearing in mind the real limits of our emotions when dealing with future people, in Sect. 5 we will try to sketch a proposal on how to develop emotions to provide citizens of liberal democracies with a motivation to act in favor of future generations.

2 The Problem of Indeterminateness: The «Identified Victim Effect»

The term «identified victim effect» refers to the phenomenon whereby we tend to give more aid when we know the identity of the person in need rather than in cases where the victims are mere statistical data, devoid of concrete features (Small and Loewenstein 2003a; Kogut and Ritov 2005a, b; Slovic 2007; Lee and Hugh 2016). For instance, in a well-known experiment (Kogut and Ritov 2005a), participants were asked how much money they would be willing to donate to finance the production of a drug that could save a child's life. The willingness to contribute was almost double when, instead of hiding details about the identity of the sick child, participants were told the victim's age and name and were shown a photo, making her recognizable. The bias was so strong that participants were willing to pay more to save the single identified child than to save eight anonymous ones, violating any principle of moral rationality. Another paradigmatic example of how emotions for a single identified victim can lead to moral failure is the widely discussed experiment by Daniel Batson and his colleagues (1995). Participants were told the tearful story of a terminally ill little girl who was waiting for a treatment to relieve her suffering. Her story was described vividly, in great detail. After that, the subjects were given the opportunity to fill out a special form to move the unfortunate girl to the top of the list, specifying that, by doing so, they would damage other children in worse conditions. Three-quarters of the participants, induced to pity the infant, agreed, against any conception of justice.

Different behaviors when dealing with specific individuals and groups of people have also been observed among experienced professionals. Donald Redelmeier and Amos Tversky (1990) have shown that physicians make different assessments and prescriptions when considering a single case and a group of comparable patients. Contrary to their own evaluations of abstract groups of people, when presented with a single case, they are more inclined to examine a healthy patient with a mild fever in-person rather than by telephone; they are more likely to prescribe expensive additional tests to exclude the possibility of a highly unlikely disease; and they tend to avoid unpleasant–but useful–questions such as willingness to organ donation.[5]

These findings are bad news for transgenerational justice, for at least two reasons. First, they suggest that, while we spontaneously empathize with single individuals, we are less equipped to feel equally compelling emotions towards groups of people. This flaw of our moral psychology can threaten all attempts to confront issues affecting future generations through a communitarian perspective (cf. De-Shalit 1995; Thompson 2009), insofar as our concern for groups seems to be spontaneously weaker than that for individuals. In their account of our moral psychological boundaries, Persson and Savulescu (2012: 30, original emphasis) especially stressed this emotional problem, which they call «*number insensitivity or numbness*». As they put it,

> While many of us are capable of vividly imagining the suffering of a single subject before our eyes and, consequently, of feeling strong compassion for this subject, we are unable to imagine vividly the suffering of, say, ten subjects even if they be in sight […].

[4] Both these problems are well-known to philosophers of emotions, at least since Aristotle's seminal treatise on «passions» in his *Rhetoric*. However, no one has adequately applied these accounts to transgenerational problems.

[5] «Our results are consistent with the notion that physicians give more weight to the personal concerns of patients when considering them as individuals and more weight to general criteria of effectiveness when considering them as a group» (Redelmeier and Tversky 1990: 1163).

> Nor could we feel a compassion which is ten times as strong as the compassion we could feel for a single sufferer.

While Persson and Savulescu are mainly concerned by our failure in fitting our emotions to the numbers–and, as a result, in maximizing the well-being of the greatest number–, we believe they have overlooked a second and more worrying problem. Indeed, not only do our moral emotions work better with individuals than with groups; their strength is closely related to the fact of knowing the identity and features of those individuals–or, at least, to the fact that they are definite people rather than abstract and vague numbers. But future generations, as unborn, are by definition indeterminate entities, devoid of those details that would allow us to put ourselves in their shoes. Contrary to what one might think, this problem is not simply related to their current non-existence. For, as philosophers of art well know, we *can* feel very strong emotions for fictional characters we know do not exist.[6] Likewise, we can find accounts of the lives of historical figures just as compelling, if properly told. Conversely, the absence of details about the identity of those who are to be born seems to undermine our emotional attachment to them.

Identifiability works not only for emotions like sympathy, but also for negative ones such as resentment. For instance, Deborah Small and George Loewenstein (2003b) have shown that we tend to punish wrongdoers more harshly if they are identified individuals rather than sheer statistical data. This suggests that «any identifiable target evokes a stronger emotional and moral reaction than an equivalent, but unidentifiable target» (Small and Loewenstein 2003b: 312). Another proof, albeit more indirect, of the role of identifiability in human punitiveness is provided by Sunstein (2005b) in his careful analysis of «moral heuristics». He points out that people are inclined to condemn and economically punish automotive companies that conduct cost-benefit analyses to decide whether to make a certain investment in safety, and then decide not to do it because it would not be worth it. Suppose that, after a cost-benefit assessment, a company «concludes that certain precautions are not justified–because, say, they would cost $100 million and save only four lives, and because the company has a "ceiling" of $10 million per life saved (a ceiling that is, by the way, significantly higher than the amount the United States Environmental Protection Agency uses for a statistical life)». It is likely that people will blame the company as cynical. But the most surprising thing is that «they [impose] less severe punishment on companies that are willing to impose a "risk" on people, but that do not produce a formal risk analysis that measures lives lost and dollars» (Sunstein 2005b: 536). This is quite striking, since–as Sunstein rightly notices–from a legal point of view the company that conducts the cost-benefit assessment is less negligent than the one that does not.

Sunstein's hypothesis is that this behavior stems from the commonsense moral insight that life is priceless–an attitude he calls «cold-heart heuristic». According to it, those who know that their action will cause identified victims and do nothing to prevent it are more blameworthy than those who are unaware of the exact consequences, having just a vague idea that their choice involves a generic (not quantified) statistical risk. However, we can also interpret this evidence as an extension of the identified victim effect. In fact, in our example, the company carrying out the cost-benefit analysis knows that its (in)action will produce four deaths. Although it is still a number, the identity of the victims is more determined than in the case of the company that does not inquire, for the latter only knows that not investing in the safety of its cars will increase the statistical risk for the customers. Clearly, such a reaction is irrational, since not quantifying statistical risk does not make the company morally better. But this is further evidence that our emotions are more easily directed towards specific individuals rather than vague scenarios. (It is not by chance that an emotion such as fear is also stronger when a danger is described in terms of frequencies rather than probabilities: for instance, a cancer is considered more dangerous when it is said to kill 1,286 people per 10,000 compared to killing 24.14% of the population, even though the risk of death in the second case is double that in the first (Yamagishi 1997). This phenomenon, sometimes called «denominator blindness», is considered further evidence of human difficulty with statistical reasoning. However, we think it also shows our different emotional attitude towards vivid and merely statistical objects.)

All these results support the idea, widely shared both in philosophy and in psychology (Ben Ze'ev 2000; Nussbaum 2001; Sunstein 2002; Persson 2005; Kahneman 2011; Bloom 2016), that being able to vividly imagine a scenario is pivotal for feeling emotions–both positive and negative. However, it is hard to be emotionally involved when it comes to vague and «property-poor» entities such as future generations. We are not saying it is impossible to develop an emotional commitment towards future generations (in Sect. 5 we will try to provide some suggestions on how to enhance our affectivity towards them). For example, it is plausible that the young demonstrators of the *Fridays for Future* movement have greater fellow feelings for those who, although not yet born, will suffer the consequences of climate change rather than the generation they call «boomers» with some contempt. Nonetheless, the lack of details about the identity of future generations makes it difficult to

[6] This phenomenon is usually called «paradox of fiction». For a detailed account, see Friend (2022). For an analysis of the paradox related to issues of future generations, see Barbero (forthcoming).

be emotionally involved by them, which leads to the failure to care for them.

3 The Problem of Dissimilarity

The *problem of indeterminateness* combines with a second flaw in our moral psychology that can undermine our capability to pursue transgenerational justice: what we call the *problem of dissimilarity*, or the *problem of distance*. Indeed, not only are our emotional capabilities limited when we deal with indeterminate groups of people, as future generations are. In many cases, our affective endowment is excessively narrow and parochial even when it comes to our contemporaries. As a number of authors–both for and against the moral use of empathy and compassion–have underlined (Hoffman 2000: 197–217; Nussbaum 2001; Prinz 2011; Bloom 2016), it is generally easier for us to empathize with those who resemble us, or with whom we share social status; or–more simply–with those who are in front of us. It is not by chance that the psychologist Hoffman (2000: 207–209), a leading expert in empathy, spoke of «in-group bias» and «similarity bias». Discussing the results of several experiments, he underlined that, on average, subjects feel more empathy towards people who share their skin color, gender, and even personal attitudes and preferences. The evidence summarized by Hoffman primarily relied on self-reports. (After being shown pictures of happy, scared, or sad people, participants claimed to feel more empathy when they shared gender, race, or personality traits with the people portrayed.) However, subsequent instrumental investigations–which measured objective features such as neural activity or skin conductance–seem to confirm the previous hypothesis. There is evidence (Xu et al. 2009; Gutsell and Inzlicht 2010; Forgiarini et al. 2011) that our empathic response at the sight of others' pain decreases when the victim belongs to a different ethnic group: for instance, Caucasian bystanders tend to experience greater emotional sympathy at the sight of other Caucasians in pain rather than black people–similarly, Asian subjects show greater arousal when they see another Asian's pain.

It is highly probable that these «empathy's limitations» (Hoffman 2000: 197) depend on our evolutionary history. Indeed, our emotional endowment has emerged to promote collaboration in small groups of hunter-gatherers, competing with other groups for resources. Thus, it was advantageous to cooperate with the in-group and not with the out-groups (cf. Persson and Savulescu 2012: in part. ch. 2). Given its evolutionary roots, this emotional flaw could be intrinsic to our biology. (Some studies (de Dreu et al. 2010; 2011) suggest that the injection of oxytocin–a hormone linked to physical contact, couple bonds, maternal care and pro-social attitudes in general–raises trust and solidarity among in-groups, but increases aggression and discrimination towards out-groups.)

The struggle to vividly imagine and create an emotional bond with people who are different may jeopardize any project of transgenerational justice. In fact, insofar as future generations do not exist yet and dwell in a remote and "opaque" future, they are one of the most distant, abstract and difficult things to imagine. If, in Hoffman's words, similarity makes it easier to empathize (and to create an emotional bond) with someone, we speak of a *problem of dissimilarity* precisely to indicate our difficulty in feeling emotions towards someone who, as non-existent, does not share anything with us: just as spatial and social distance, temporal distance weakens our affectivity.

Persson and Savulescu (2012: 27–30) have also analyzed this problem, which they define «spatial bias». However, according to them, it is less threatening than the «temporal bias»–a term by which they refer to future discounting. We think that Persson and Savulescu–like most of those concerned with this issue–underrate the problem of distance and dissimilarity when it comes to transgenerational justice. Indeed, focusing primarily on temporal discounting suggests the idea that our moral-psychological limitations in caring about the well-being of future generations stem only from our biased preference for the present. Conversely, our analysis of the problems of indeterminateness and dissimilarity shows that they are but an extension of our common emotional flaws. For, even when the object of our emotion is present and not future, we tend to feel more empathy for those who are similar to us, and we are more involved by a single victim whose features we can vividly identify or imagine than by abstract numbers or vague entities. We are not claiming that the temporal bias is not relevant, nor that issues of transgenerational ethics do not raise peculiar challenges. However, we believe it is worth underlining that the problem of eliciting emotions for future generations–and motivating action for their sake–overlaps with the problems of the narrowness and parochialism of our common emotional responses (not only towards future people, but also for some existing ones).

Such a perspective allows us to explain why we have different emotional attitudes towards entities which do not exist at present, such as fictional characters and past generations. If the problem were only a temporal one, it would be unclear why we are often so emotionally bound to the past; and, if the trouble were only that future generations do not exist, one would not understand why we feel emotions (even strong ones) towards fictional characters, who not only do not exist now, but have never existed and will ever exist. In the next section we will show how, acknowledging these problems of our emotional endowment, it is possible

to account for the different attitudes towards a number of non-existing entities, reflecting their different ontological features.

4 Fictional Characters, Past and Future Generations: A Big Emotional Difference

The analysis of the emotional problems we have conducted so far allows us to account for some ontological similarities and differences between a number of entities that do not currently exist. Indeed, while future generations do not yet exist, past generations no longer do. However, this does not prevent us from feeling strong emotional responses towards the latter: we can cry thinking about our deceased parents or grandparents; be proud of our ancestors who, hundreds of years ago, accomplished remarkable deeds, etc. The reason for this difference lies in the different ontological structure of these entities. Using established jargon, we can call both of them "fictitious entities," which share the feature of not existing here and now. However, there is a substantial difference: having existed, past generations have left traces of their presence and activity–a presence we can trace through the stories of those who knew them. It is precisely by reconstructing and remembering these features (which make their identity richer and more defined, hence, more salient for us) that we can feel emotions thinking about them.

The species *homo sapiens* has invented several devices to enhance and organize this form of memory. The basic idea is that, in order to maintain an emotionally rich relationship with the past, the "presence" of what we want to remember must be recalled as much as possible; this, in many cases, renews its salience. This is particularly evident in the case of trauma, i.e. experiences that have settled permanently and have taken on negative emotional connotations. In fact, traumatic experiences are sometimes reactivated by events that lead back to a specific circumstance or situation. As far as non-traumatic events are concerned, on the other hand, the idea is that their general form, i.e. what is salient about them, must be preserved in some way if we want it to be reactivated: a written text, a document, an image, an audio track; something, in short, that allows us to trace back to what once was. Human beings have proved capable of building gigantic preservation and cataloging systems to serve this purpose, many of which are even portable–such as those handled by devices that accompany us in our daily lives (Ferraris 2022).

Not everything we preserve and catalog has an affective connotation, but much of it does. Examples include the photos we take and store in the cloud, the letters we write and store in our archives, or the books we read, discussed and shared. The places we visited, for instance the museum we visited on that rainy Sunday in NY, bring back emotions related to a certain time of life. And that museum, in turn, preserves objects and expressions of individuality –works of art–which are a vehicle for emotions. In short, as far as the past is concerned, we have a series of tools to reactivate our memory, making the remembered thing, in some way, proximate again. Of course, the issue of distance is crucial also when it comes to the past: as is well-known, the intensity of mourning usually fades as our memories lose their "freshness" (e.g. Nussbaum 1994: 381–386). However, this does not depend on temporal distance per se, but rather on the «vividness of representation» (Persson 2005: 210), i.e., on our capacity to imagine the object of emotion vividly and in detail. And, as we have seen, it is possible to make our memories vivid again by reconstructing the physical traces the past has left. This process seems to be more complex when we focus on the future, because there is no trace of it: we do not have traces from the future that can be preserved, cataloged, recalled, made proximate and salient. The future is not yet, and future generations are extremely vague entities. While the identity of past generations is defined by the fact that they have lived, future generations have no defined identity whatsoever.

In this sense, future generations are akin to another non-existent entity: fictional characters. For, in both cases, their identity is defined by the person who conceived them, i.e. the author (Thomasson 1999: 35–37). However, there is a pivotal difference between the former and the latter. Fictional characters–at least those we are passionate about–are defined by a rich plot and we know many things about them. Instead, future generations are vague entities of which we do not know much, except that–excluding catastrophic events–sooner or later they will exist. It is precisely the determinateness or indeterminateness of their identity that affects our emotional response. Let us take the case of Paolo and Francesca, the story of love and adultery narrated by Dante in *canto* V of the *Inferno*. The story, in Dante's poetic reconstruction, enters into the readers' world, that is, into the sphere of experiences that have formed and marked them, into the framework of values and norms they share and accept. Through the details of their love story, their vicissitude can become salient for readers, and thus elicit their emotional responses.

This circumstance does not only manifest itself in literary works. Let us consider a different entity, which nevertheless shares certain properties with fictional characters: namely the Trinity according to the Christian faith. This is an interesting ontological complex that includes reference to an entity that has existed (the Son), an entity whose existence is outside space-time and eternal (God), and a third entity also endowed with a particular form of existence, namely the Spirit. Of the three entities mentioned, only one, namely the

Son, has enjoyed a historically determined existence. There is a sense, which is not properly theological, in which we can argue that God is an entity of fiction since, indeed, he is an entity of reason, regulative of human action. Yet, despite the fact that God is conceived of as a perfect (hence complete) entity, the story that has been told about him predicts that he became incarnate and made man. Why? Why was God not sufficient unto himself? Why was it necessary to add the figure of the Son to the Father? There have been many theological explanations for this, but we believe it is not unreasonable to imagine that the incarnation can be conceived as a particular form of closeness between God and man. By incarnating in the Son, God was able to make himself close to human beings: some were able to observe him, touch him, embrace him, love him, envy him and even hate him. This proximity reinforces salience. It is thanks to the Son that God ceased to be an entity of fiction and became the object of a more complex relationship with human beings: as much as it is possible, in a way, for a reader to love Jane Eyre, or the concept of an abstract god–the mystics are proof of this–it is much easier to feel sympathy and pity for a man who we know died on the cross and whose life was handed down through stories and testimonies. For us, the concept of God is particularly salient, that of the Son is proximate, and the link between Father and Son allows the salience of the former to be reinforced through proximity. In these terms, the account of the incarnation becomes salient–it constitutes the path of human beings to salvation–and is also made proximate, thus, in many ways, more accessible. If therefore God is important to us, since he leads and decides our eternal life, the Son makes the relationship with the Father possible, by virtue of his proximity to humanity.

Let us now return to future generations which, as we said, are also fictitious entities, i.e. figments of our imagination at least until they exist. What we have understood so far is quite simple: if we want future generations to be the object of our emotions (whether positive or negative), they must be perceived as close and salient. That is, they must find a significant place in our beliefs and be perceived as close to us. For this to happen, it is necessary to imagine properties that identify future generations and place this within a narrative. Of course, this does not imply the assumption that future generations will actually be as we imagine them to be. The point rather concerns the possibility of social and political action. Identifying future generations by means of certain properties, by embedding them in a narrative, can facilitate the creation of an emotional connection between us and the future; and this in turn–as we have argued so far–can support political decision-making, especially in democratic contexts. Not only reasons, but also positive emotions can be provided to support long-term decisions. Now, we would like to argue that this is possible if we consider future generations as entities in search of an author. Just as with novels, the artistic medium – i.e. the narrative form – can make this easier and more direct.

5 Entities in Search of an Author

Our description points to a fairly precise idea that we can try to summarize as follows: (1) in order to direct actions effectively, especially in contexts that require a high level of normativity, it is crucial to feel emotions such as care, sympathy, friendship and solidarity; (2) these feelings are generally favored by the *determinateness* and the *similarity* (or *proximity*) of the object. In the case of fictional characters, these features are provided by the narrative plot. In the case of future generations the problem is precisely the lack of plot surrounding them: we cannot say anything about future generations precisely because they are possible entities which, because of their possibility, do not have a detailed identity. Hence, they are not included in a narrative that would allow us to consider them salient and, of course, they are not close to us. Birnbacher (2009: 282, our emphasis), speaking of «the 'motivation problem'» (i.e., our lack of motivation to care for distant future generations), notes that «the quasi-moral motives potentially supporting moral motivation such as love and sympathy are significantly absent in this field because *they essentially depend on face-to-face relations with their objects* [while] future generations are faceless and invisible. Future people are *objects of thought and calculation*». What, then, is to be done?

In a well-known work, Jonas (1985) argued that, in order to re-found ethics and persuade human beings to be more responsible towards the future, we should rely on fear. To this end, he sketches a veritable *heuristics of fear*; using fear to respond with extreme caution to the challenges posed by the contemporary world, particularly by technology. Jonas' thesis has raised a wide debate and has had the great merit of bringing to the center of philosophical and public discussion the consequences of human actions, especially over a long period of time. This is what is known in the literature as the problem of long-termism (MacAskill 2022). While it is true that Jonas intercepts a delicate issue, the solution he identifies belongs, in many respects, to the tradition of Western political thought: using fear as the central emotion of the political realm and leveraging it to propose a solution–typically, this is had already been proposed by Hobbes to justify the necessity of the political state. However, Jonas' solution, perhaps even more than similar ones identified by his predecessors, has some drawbacks.

First, it is problematic to think of using a primary emotion, which should be activated occasionally and under extraordinary conditions–when we have to defend ourselves against

something or someone–as a sort of benchmark to regulate individual and social choices and intentions (cf. Nussbaum 2018; Sunstein 2005a). Hobbes used people's natural fear of death to justify the need to overcome the state of nature; Jonas, on the other hand, uses fear as a background emotion, so as to regulate the direction of social action. But while fear provides us with quick responses to immediate threats, it is not equally suitable when it comes to dealing with complex problems such as the political management of the future. Moreover, and this is a second problem, when we are addressing a long-term horizon, which will certainly not involve us or those close to us and within our sphere of relationships, fear is unlikely to be one of the predominant emotions: while it may make sense to say that we are afraid of how the world will affect our children's lives, such a feeling is already weaker when we refer to the future of our grandchildren, and it ceases to make any sense at all when we think of those who will live three hundred years after us. In fact, fear focuses on dangers that the subject perceives as imminent. As Birnbacher (2009: 280) rightly underlines, analyzing the emotional limitations that weaken our motivation to care for the distant future: «Any attempt to change the fundamental behaviour patterns in a society by political initiatives seems doomed to failure if the necessity of these changes is only motivated by possible or future rather than by present dangers». For these reasons, fear and the heuristics of fear do not seem to be a good tool for grounding an ethics aimed at the future, especially when it comes to those who are not yet born.

We think a better strategy, though probably not the only one, is to elaborate narratives to bring future generations closer, which–as already observed–would facilitate the emotional bond with them, as in the case of past generations. In relation to the past, we have seen how we can use memory to elicit a strong emotional response. Now, it goes without saying that if we have to refer to something that does not exist, we cannot deploy memory: this faculty serves to recall, roughly, what has been, but it is not useful for relating to the future or, at least, not immediately. When it comes to the future, a more suitable faculty is the imagination, which, as we know, can be productive. The imagination does not produce absolute novelty. This is an old lesson, left to us by eighteenth-century philosophy: in its productive activity, the imagination organizes the matter it draws from perception and memory, recomposing it to create something relatively new. The imagination can indeed be used to reconfigure part of what we know and transport it to a time that is not our own, including the future. This is exemplified by science fiction, which uses imagination to construct a narrative syntax aimed at what might come to pass. *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Visitors*, and *Cocoon*, respectively, tell an apocalyptic tale about the future of humanity, portray the fear of the Earth being invaded and subjugated by extraterrestrial intelligences and, finally, speak of the fear of death and the desire for eternal youth. Starting from something we have some knowledge of (extraterrestrial space, fantastic tales about the existence of life forms and extra-terrestrial intelligences, the fear of death), the filmmakers have imagined a narrative that extends to what we do not know.

In some cases, the imagination, especially when working within the context of artistic creativity, can also help us hypothesize how we would behave if we lived for years wandering in space, if we knew that giant lizards had taken the appearance of our closest friends to take over the planet, or if we discovered that a small lake in a remote mountain is filled with water that has the property of halting aging. These three films give a good idea of how science fiction allows us to explore imaginary but possible scenarios, enabling us to speculate about situations that are conceivable but beyond our control. It reshapes elements that hold significance to us, such as the desire for immortality, into hypothetical scenarios where we question whether it is possible for a human being to choose eternal life and under what circumstances they might do so. Do we want a future where one or even many individuals never die? If such a state were achievable, what ethical considerations would we have towards those who are born "after" the initial immortals? How would we approach the allocation and utilization of resources that are presently finite?

Artistic practice can be legitimately utopian and address objects we value and that occupy a position within our beliefs; these objects can therefore take on an emotional connotation, that is, become objects of expectation, anxiety, anguish or serenity. We could give a great many examples of this kind, but the essential point is always the same: by hypothesizing what could happen as a result of a certain configuration of possible events, human beings imagine situations that have the characteristic of being salient–that is, of signifying something precise within their world–and close enough for them to configure possible scenarios of action.

These scenarios, in fact, are close enough to arouse our interest and, at the same time, remote enough not to trigger solely defense and survival mechanisms. What we want to argue, therefore, is that the artistic medium, especially in the forms that envisage a stretching of the narrative over time, makes it possible to construct a complex object that can be invested with our emotions and create the conditions to move us to action. In the event that our complex object envisages recourse to future generations, in order to be realized it must include a series of elements: reference to the *world*,[7] i.e. the totality of everything that exists and that has a meaning and value for the species *homo sapiens*; *imagination*, i.e.

[7] We refer to the meaning suggested by Arendt (1958).

the faculty that allows for a reproductive manipulation of the elements of the world; and, lastly, specific *artistic skills* indispensable to realize a coherent work. We would like to emphasize once again that what makes all this possible is, of course, the world we inhabit, from which we extrapolate our imagined visions of what it could or should be like, based on our motivations and interests. The proximity of this world, which constitutes the permanent background to passing and changing phenomena, allows our productive imagination to breathe life into what is relatively novel, pointing the way towards the future. Just as the Son acts as an intermediary, bringing humanity closer to God through his proximity, the narrative structure of utopian fiction serves as an intermediary between the present and future generations.

To return, then, to the question we started with, which committed us to investigating the emotions that possibly bind us to future generations, we can formulate an answer of this kind: future generations are not a direct or immediate object of our emotions. This is because, as we said, they are vague entities: since they do not yet exist, we can only attribute to them the property of possibility. Consequently, it becomes challenging to define their identities clearly and establish emotional connections with them.

But is it possible to do that? To bridge the space that separates us from them, we can use middle terms; that is, something that brings them closer and makes them salient to us. Salience and proximity can be reinforced by having recourse to the world, that is, to the set of beliefs, values and meanings that are normally the object of our interests. In other words, if the world is the background condition that has allowed the formation of each individual's identity, and hence of each generation, it is through the emotionally connoted relationship with the world that we can weave the bond with future generations. What we want to suggest here is that the middle term we are looking for can be provided by the arts, and especially by artistic forms that make use of experience, words and time, such as literature, cinema, or theater. These are arts that make use of the imagination: the faculty that takes us from the known to the unknown. We can easily direct our emotions towards such a narrative, and thus feel a clearer predisposition to action. This kind of operation works rather well, for example, with literature. In his *Pragmatic Anthropology*, Immanuel Kant proposes that literature serves an exemplary function: by exaggerating character traits and employing extreme characterization, it illuminates certain human dispositions, providing examples or warnings. We would like to suggest that the imagination makes it possible not only to construct exemplary cases, but also to elaborate on counterfactual scenarios. When we imagine what a certain reality might look like under different circumstances, we are motivated to act in favor of or against certain occurrences rather than others.

This drive to action is pivotal, because the future as such does not exist except in the form that the present articulates. Certain art forms can greatly assist in this process, as they are able to construct stories that stir our emotions through tales of possible worlds and exemplary cases.[8] Coming-of-age novels traditionally fulfill the task of showing young readers a possible path to become adult, autonomous individuals. Their effectiveness is linked to several factors: first, they illustrate potential life experiences in great detail, stirring the readers' emotions; second, they suggest that by observing those experiences we can learn something about the human condition; finally, they show a concretely possible way to make something of oneself. The same applies to art forms–e.g., fantastic or dystopian fiction, science fiction, etc.–that describe alternative realities or worlds that refer to the current state of affairs. Cinema, literature and theater produce artworks that can act as a middle term between us and the future, as they bring the latter closer to us and make it emotionally salient.

Much will depend, of course, on the type of emotional bond we invest in these narratives: narratives about the future serve not only to exorcize the time to come but also to orient it positively.

In the light of the above, we can follow two strategies: the first, already mentioned, we will call narrative; the second, which we will briefly sketch now, we will call regulatory. We will also quickly note how the first can be a useful tool for reinforcing the second.

In *A Philosophy for Future Generations* (Andina 2022), one of us argued for the importance of the temporal dimension when reflecting on social dynamics, since this allows us to account for the fact that institutions and societies are made to last. Hence, we said, the very structure of our social artifacts requires us to presuppose future generations as abstract entities that will exist sooner or later. Such entities serve to perform a great number of actions that have long-term consequences: if we did not presuppose the existence of future generations, we could not repay a country's debts, there would be no point in developing long-term scientific research, and so on. Future generations are, therefore, necessary artifacts for the very possibility of certain types of individual and collective actions.

However, we can also understand them as regulatory artifacts: in fact, if we consider the preservation and perfecting of humanity as a common destiny, then future generations (in the dual meaning of new generations and the unborn) are indispensable, because they make it possible to think of the future of humanity as a collective enterprise in which each

[8] It is worth noting that vividly imagining one's future with positive emotional connotations has been shown to reduce future discounting (Zhang et al. 2018). For a detailed account of the role of the imagination in our emotional life, see Ben-Ze'ev (2000: 191–219).

of us can usefully cooperate (De-Shalit 1995). It is necessary to construct a narrative that embodies the goals of the scientific and moral advancement of the human species. Progress and the preservation of our species serve as overarching and universal ideals, capable of evoking passion and enthusiasm. For this reason, they can provide a framework, albeit not the sole one, for forging the emotional connections we are seeking with future generations.

In this sense, future generations can help regulate the direction and meaning of individual and collective actions. In fact, it is easy to see how many of the everyday activities we value most (and which give subjective meaning to our existence) presuppose a regulatory assumption. Think of scientific research: scientists, humanists and technologists strive for the ideal goal of contributing (albeit minimally) to the advancement of knowledge. In most cases, for their activity to make sense, it must be assumed that the research will be promoted and continued in the future by others, who will be motivated by similar ideals and aims. Put differently, the progress of knowledge to which humankind has been contributing for thousands of years through synchronic and diachronic collaboration would not be possible without the assumption of a precise regulatory ideal, one that is shared and universal.

6 Conclusions

The transgenerational issues we are dealing with are challenging. To be solved, they certainly require a good theory of justice. However, an abstract theory is unlikely to be effective–especially in a democratic context–without being supported by appropriate emotions. In recent years, several authors have sought to confront this puzzle, sometimes labeled as the «motivation problem» (Birnbacher 2009). In this paper, we tried to provide a better account of the real flaws that prevent us from feeling emotions towards future generations. Rather than focusing only on the temporal dimension, we underlined that they mainly depend on our difficulty to feel emotions for objects with an undetermined identity and to identify with those who are very different from us. After having accounted for these emotional flaws, we showed that they can explain why we are able to feel emotions for fictional characters and people who lived in the past even if, like future generations, they do not exist at present. We sought to sketch some proposals on how to cultivate emotions for the future by providing a more detailed narrative of what it could be like and generating enthusiasm for the idea of a common enterprise, which is necessary to give meaning to the experiences we value. These answers are not definitive, but they can hopefully help guide political efforts to take care of the future.

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Competing Interest None.

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