

Vulnerability and Future Generations: A Problem of Altruism?

Federica Madonna

ABSTRACT

The present work aims to ask the reasons why, de facto, it is difficult to protect future generations; it would not only be a question of how to safeguard the frail or arrange the protection of the vulnerable, but of trying to provide a moral explanation that fits into the intricate field of intersubjectivity, emphasizing the difficulty of establishing a relational relationship with a You detached from our time and our space: the problem of moral altruism seen from the aspect of mindreading.

Keywords: Altruism, Future Generations, Intersubjectivity, Mindreading, Vulnerability.

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I. INTRODUCTION

When we talk about future generations, the reference to the work of Hans Jonas would seem to arise spontaneously; in the work of 1979, *The Principle of Responsibility* (Jonas, 2009), the German philosopher, starting from the observation of the new powers assumed by technology and the consequent threat that it could bring to human existence itself, poses the need for a change in traditional ethics, in which anthropocentrism (Battaglia, 2009). is the first of the various aspects to be brought down. The human being's ability to implement, reached levels of sophistication far greater than the simple, albeit complex, Athenian polis, poses the affirmation of an ethical novum, identified not only in the legitimacy of use of the technique itself but also in responsibility the consequences of their actions towards future generations.

This “regulative idea” of humanity far from the first-person perspective, placed in a future time and in an indefinite space, must make man hic et nunc aware of facing the decisions he will make with prudence and responsibility since the enlargement of the “(...) Stage on which his representation takes place -the earth- (...) spread (and, n.d.r.) throughout the globe; it is possible that (his, n.d.r.) cumulative effects extend over countless future generations. With what we do here, now, and mostly with our gaze turned to ourselves, we massively influence the lives of millions of people in other places and still to come, who have had no say in the matter”(Jonas, 2006).

On these, therefore, Jonas continues, that today’s man is posing “(...) mortgages on future life for present and short-term benefits and needs, and in this respect mostly for needs created by ourselves”(Jonas, 2006); it is no coincidence, in fact, that Jonas goes so far as to claim that “Includ(ing, n.d.r.) in your current choice, the future integrity of man as an object of your will (Jonas, 2009), in which, that is, the man, the only universal Legislator, will be called to respect the most important ethical prescription, exemplified in the review of the Kantian categorical principle: “Act so that the consequences of your actions are compatible with the permanence of an authentic human life on earth” (Jonas, 2006).

A responsibility, therefore, which is combined with the awareness of the vulnerability of future generations.

II. WHAT IS VULNERABILITY?

From the Latin *vulnus*, meaning “wound”, vulnerability indicates, even semantically, the corruptibility and fragility of a body or object exposed to corruption; transporting the meaning of the term to the condition of the human being, one immediately understands that vulnerability is part of an *ontological* dialogue on the very constitution of the individual: the ability to suffer, having a body, and, simultaneously, the ability to react (personally, socially, politically) to such suffering (Fineman, 2010; Goodin, 1985). A universal condition that, highlighting the interconnection between vulnerability and dependence, requires, from a moral point of view, particular attention to the now consolidated belief that the ontological characteristic

of the human being is only and exclusively his rationality; placing vulnerability and dependence at the centre of ethical reflection reveals that “the virtues of rational agency need for their adequate exercise to be accompanied by the virtues of acknowledged dependence and that a failure to understand this is apt to obscure some features of rational agency” (MacIntyre, 1999); to paraphrase MacIntyre, this means *ab origine* to end up in a paralogism. An erroneous reasoning would lead to a false analysis of the real condition of *Homo Sapiens*.

It is now urgent, therefore, to go back to talking to man about man, moving away from an entire tradition of thought that, from the Enlightenment to the present day, has favoured the *Homo Faber* (Roger, 2005), the *Homo Economicus* (Pettit, 1995), the *Homo Videns* (Sartori, 1997), bringing to fruition what for many is identified with the failure of the Enlightenment project itself: founding a common morality on the pillars of autonomy and reason (Engelhard, 2011), excluding *a priori* the fallibility and corruptibility of the human being from a *realistic* analysis of his existential condition.

Wanting to replace the search for truth in search of the useful and the economically advantageous has ousted philosophical analysis from its real object of investigation (the search for truth) to the erroneous belief that it can replace God, metaphysically understood. Modern and post-modern man, thinking of himself as omnipotent and arbitrary legislator of nature, of the world, and of future generations, wanted to abandon the unconscious awareness of existing as a vulnerable, corruptible and finite subject, in the face of the seductive vision of oneself of being alone. and exclusively rational.

Here, then, that going back to talking about vulnerability means rediscovering the “reflective innocence” (Engelhard, 2011), that is “the innocence that allows us to return to simple reflections on the ultimate meaning of our lives and the universe” (Bellino, 2013).

The problem, at this point, will not only be the identification of the sources or causes of the vulnerability -*intrinsic* (Rogers & Ballantyne, 2008), *situational* (Dunn *et al.*, 2008) and of *institutional precariousness* (Turner, 2006)- but being able to initiate social, economic and, therefore, protection policies to safeguard the *more than ordinarily vulnerable* (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014) for *potential interventions to mitigate the effects of various forms of vulnerability* ((Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014).

It is therefore inevitable to enter the field of intersubjectivity, since the very nature of the transience to which man is intrinsically linked places him in relation with a You (personal or institutional) that allows him to place himself in the position of protecting what he deems important: “a person is vulnerable to the extent to which she is not in a position to prevent occurrences that would undermine what she takes to be important to her” (Anderson, 2014, p.135).

Protection, I would add, presupposes, on the one hand, the responsibility of that hypothetical You to prepare the conditions for the vulnerable to act; on the other hand, the very *autonomy* of the fragile subject who, socially in the conditions of being able to act, acts according to his possibilities and potential to protect what is important to him.

Back to Jonas.

In the relational dimension, in fact, the responsibility of those who “govern the present” must be directed towards those who, not yet physically existing, will have to be enabled to claim their autonomy in order to have *chances* of safeguarding what will be significant for them; future generations, therefore, cannot be considered only as an “abstract principle” to be forgotten about, but as a further push to initiate an ethic of vulnerability that diversifies in safeguarding the born and the unborn. In this way one would answer why vulnerability raises moral obligations (Fineman, 2008; Ho, 2008), *who should have primary responsibility for responding to vulnerability* at any level Eckenwiler, 2011; Kittay *et al.*, 2005) and *how moral obligations towards the vulnerable are fulfilled* (Fineman, 2008); that is, one would answer the question of *what vulnerability is* (Hoffmaster, 2006).

III. THE SELFLESS MAN BY NATURE?

Asking the problem of safeguarding the generations to come implies a double level of analysis: understanding how *to act in the present* so that the consequences of one’s work are compatible with that authentic human life on the Earth of tomorrow - resuming Jonas - and understanding, in turn, what that *action* means.

If it is true that morality has in itself the *quid* of indicating which practical behaviors to adopt in any given context (what is the good, the just, the good and the like) it is equally true that so that any morality can have a sense and a meaning he must necessarily investigate the nature of the one who will find himself adopting it; how could we ignore the study of human nature? How, in fact, to prescribe *Homo Sapiens* to sacrifice himself in the present (the *mortgages placed on the shoulders* of those who will come) for an increase in the well-being of a You, far from the *hic et nunc*?

The problem of altruism, then, cannot be excluded from any analysis that aims to propose itself as prescriptive and not merely descriptive ethics in order to safeguard, in this way, all those affected by

vulnerability: that they are contemporary to their own existence or mere future hypothesis.

Typically, with the definition of *altruism* (Stich *et al.*, 2010; Fontaine, 2008) it is usually understood that a disinterested attitude towards the You, which places the well-being of the other in the foreground rather than one's own, highlighting that the distinctive trait of any altruistic behavior *versus* the egoistic one is the motivation: in the first, the object of interest for who helps is the achievement of the well-being of others at the expense of one's own; in the second, the behavior towards the other becomes the means, and not the end, of one's doing.

Even if, phenomenologically, the same behavior can be the result of two diametrically opposed attitudes, which differ only in the underlying *intentions* (Maner & Gailliot, 2007), it should be noted that there is an equally substantial – dare I say substantial – the difference between *the behavior given to help* (Dovidio *et al.*, 2006) and the *altruistic behavior* (Patrick, 2017) properly said. This distinction tends to define a “limit” between the two, based on the absence of psychological motivation, in the first, as opposed to its presence in the second, which would affect the cognitive capacity (dedicated to *mindreading*) of the agent inclined to help.

A distinction that would allow the *problem of altruism* to be investigated from a moral point of view and not to be superimposed on what biologists or ethologists can define as such; the increase in the reproductive *fitness* of a single member of a species.

What raises, then, the interest in asking whether a contemporary man is properly altruistic towards future generations is, at this point, a double aspect: the understanding, as mentioned, of the nature of Homo Sapiens and the presence of one cognitive effort to imagine any condition of discomfort or well-being for a hypothetical You. How to respond, that is, to Hobbes about his homo *homini lupus*? On the contrary, is man *naturally altruistic*?

The problem is that studies, especially in recent decades, seem to be equally for and against both positions equally. Psychologist Daniel Batson, for example, argues experimentally that man is *constitutionally* altruistic (Batson, 1991) since it would have in itself a natural tendency to do all it can for those in difficulty. He would not take action to alleviate his own emotional anguish, but for a “natural ability” to perceive and understand the other's state of need – the *perception of another as in need* (Batson, 2014). We understand, then, why altruism is defined by Batson as a *motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare* (Batson & Shaw, 1991), that is, the manifest expression of an agent's precise and punctual will to achieve that goal and not others: the increase in the well-being of others.

Hobbes, therefore, was wrong.

To support the old English philosopher there would be, in contrast to the model just exposed, that of the American philosopher and psychologist Martin Hoffman, who argues, exemplifying, that man is a “conscious altruistic animal”; unlike Batson, in fact, Hoffman argues that to speak of altruism we must distinguish two kinds of situations: one in which the other's state of need is simultaneously present to the ego; one in which that state of need is outside of sensory perceptions of the Oneself (Hoffman, 2008). This distinction would revolve around the preconscious and preverbal activation of all those neurophysiological mechanisms which, in a completely instinctive way, would move the action of help to the You, the ego that visually sees its state of need; different, however, would be the second situation. In the latter, the behavior devoted to disinterested help towards the other -altruism proper- would be the result of a cognitive effort and, therefore, of a conscious reflection, operated by the ego to decide whether *to act to the other*.

In this sense, then, it is necessary to understand why I define Hoffman's model of Man as a “conscious altruistic animal”: depending, in fact, on the given situation, the ego would act either instinctively - and therefore “animal” -or *consciously*- the conscious cognitive effort to understand others' *vulnerability*.

In this case, Hobbes would be half right and half wrong.

Therefore, according to Batson's model, altruistic action towards future generations should be the natural tendency of man to do his utmost to increase the well-being of others; therefore, any action that is consistent with *authentic human life on Earth* would *naturally* take place.

If this were true, how to explain voluntary causation to those who do not yet have a say, of those mortgages on the future life for present and short-term benefits and needs, and in this regard mostly for needs created by ourselves? (Jonas, 2009) The environmental emergency, for example, is one of the latter.

Given, however, Hoffman's model, the problematic nature of implementing practical behaviors aimed at safeguarding future generations could be explained precisely by the difficulty of cognitively thinking about the real and pragmatic existence of those who actually do not yet exist; the absence of a real, but only imaginary You, would be the cause of the lack of that “conscious cognitive effort” that would make a man become an altruistic being. The half for which Hobbes would be wrong, therefore, is understood in the explanation of a much more complex human nature than a *natural tendency* towards one's neighbor, in which the difference -at least in certain situations- would be made by his own rational capacity.

The question would become: is man able, today, to initiate a cognitive effort such as to imagine the suffering or the state of need of those who will exist in the future? We are in the problem of *mentalizing*.

IV. FUTURE GENERATIONS AS A YOU: THE DIFFICULT INTER-RELATIONSHIP

The most compelling difficulty in *acting* for the “protection of the unborn” is to think of them in a completely impersonal way and, above all, to think of them as a You of tomorrow to which to relate in the present; how, then, being able to sacrifice oneself today to increase the well-being of a merely hypothetical You?

A starting point for the following analysis was precisely to ask whether man was *naturally altruistic or necessarily altruistic*; the two models presented, Bateson and Hoffman, formed the further piece of the puzzle that served as the background to the answer that we want to present here.

It has been learned, in fact, that if the American psychologist Bateson argues that man is substantially altruistic, Hoffman’s man is far from being so; from a model in which “emotional suffering” is the effect of one’s own nature devoted disinterestedly to the other one passes, in reverse, to its opposite: man, only in specific situations, would move to altruistic action (effect) upstream of a vision or perception of one’s own emotional suffering.

In my opinion, therefore, the key to the problem in the analysis of altruism/vulnerability of future generations would lie in the very concept of altruism; the serious conceptual limits of the inter-relationship with the hypothetical You, materializing in the phenomenon of *egoistic drift*, would manifest a *dissolution* of the probable feeling for the You and the simultaneous inability to initiate a cognitive effort *to act coherently to a life authentic on Earth tomorrow*; although, therefore, we are “in solidarity” with the hypothetical victims, subject to the vulnerability of our present actions, in the end we are not the victim himself. In the face, that is, of the rational and ethical awareness of being in a position of responsibility that can disadvantage and damage those who will come (the vulnerable future generations), the ethical egoism of the awareness of not being these “wins”.

In the words of Hoffman:

(...) *the figure of the victim takes a back seat. In other words, the empathic relationship with the victim takes hold of the observer and then, ironically, breaks down, since the empathic affection deeply resonates with the needs of the observer himself, who shifts his attention, initially centred on the victim, on itself* (Hoffman, 2008, p. 82)

I do not think it is a “question of empathy” for the reasons I have already outlined elsewhere (Madonna, 2020a), but of mindreading.

This expression is usually understood not so much as the “reading of the mind”, which the translation of the lemma denotes, as the characteristics that would make it possible:

- The cognitive effort of the ego to understand the situation of you (future generations).
- The processing time of the message.
- The psychological distance between oneself and the possible suffering of the You (future generations).

In addition to what has just been said, further limits of the altruism/vulnerability relationship of future generations would lie in the structural and psychological inability of the human being to maintain constant the cognitively necessary work to “understand” and “act” towards a You who, essentially, it is perceived only as a regulatory idea.

The constitutive, cognitive inability to initiate the process of reading the mind towards those who imagine it may be similar to me finds its difficulties in the very structuring of the process: where, in fact, would the “mind” be “read”? And what kind of approach should be taken to achieve the intended purpose?

If one approached the mind in a naturalized way, one would immediately run into a paradox (Madonna, 2020b): methods and tools of “basic intersubjectivity” would be applied to understand an aspect of the phenomenon that affects the purely cognitive and epistemological sphere, confusing the two distinct levels of discourse. That is, the problem of understanding the other would flatten out at the time of neuroscientific discoveries on brain functioning.

If, on the contrary, the mind is approached as a *substance* distinct from the body, how could we ever “access it” with inappropriate tools (neuroscience)?

This second aspect opens further problems.

If the dualist thesis of the mental is shared, then, retracing Descartes, a *res* having the attribute of thought distinct from a *res* having the attribute of extension (Cartesio, 2001), we would also find ourselves running into a cognitive difficulty in thinking about the protection of the most vulnerable in the future.

How, in fact, by comparing the hypothetical relationship of a present I with a You of tomorrow, could we start a reading of the future mind? Where, that is, would the minds be to be read?

We could, however, find ourselves in the position of having to think of minds as infinite substances; this, however, would mean, in turn, that, from the beginning of humanity we should find ourselves “talking”, interacting, understanding all the infinite minds of all human beings who have succeeded each other since the *Homo Sapiens* era (to put an arbitrary start date) to date.

Which seems to me not to happen.

The first great difficulty, then, in putting into practice *an action in keeping with an authentic life on Earth today and tomorrow* lies precisely in this first aspect; how to start an inter-relationship with a regulatory idea?

Another crucial aspect in explaining the precarious relationship vulnerability/future generations is found in the inability to think about time.

The time of vulnerability, if you grant me the expression, is not the definite and confined time of a specific existence, but it is of life, of the *bios* in the broad sense: it is in the symbiotic *continuum* that the problem of the time of vulnerability settles, which, accepting Janna Thompson's position, should be understood in a *diachronic* and not merely *synchronic* sense.

The latter expression (synchronic time) usually indicates the awareness of one's own and others' vulnerability, starting from the initial situation of existing at a given historical moment. From this first-person perspective, for example, the elderly or infants are identified as *vulnerable* because either their power to act is limited or because they are not yet able to express, concretely, their infinite possibilities of being.

From Thomson's words, we read:

There are two ways of viewing temporal vulnerability. The first conforms to the way that vulnerability is usually understood. Taking the present as our point of reference, we identify the source and causes of vulnerabilities that have to do with position in time. Individuals who are very old are vulnerable because of the decline of powers that age brings, the very young because they lack the ability to look after themselves. The people of the past are vulnerable because they are dead and unable to act to protect their interests, and yet-to-be-born individuals are vulnerable because they are not yet alive and are thus unable to influence decisions that will affect them. These individuals are vulnerable to people who are at the height of their temporal powers—those who make decisions and engage in activities that affect, or will affect, temporally vulnerable groups. I will call this the synchronic view of temporal vulnerability (Thomson, 2014, p. 163).

On the other hand, vulnerability understood in a diachronic sense is different in which, essentially, the rigidity of a first-person point of view from which to understand vulnerability is lacking; the continuum of past, present and future life makes the diachronic interpretation of the time of vulnerability chaining dependent on what has been, is and will be. From his words:

(...) to regard time as a process with no fixed point of reference. The present is a continually changing location in a continuum that moves us inexorably into the future. People are born, grow up, grow old, and die; generations succeed each other. From a diachronic perspective a person has no fixed temporal address and thus what makes her vulnerable are not merely her present properties and her present relation to other generations but her being subject to the changes that time brings. The vulnerability of a young child does not merely have to do with her present dependence on the care of others. It also has to do with the way her well-being as an adult depends on what members of older generations do now and in the future. A person at the height of her temporal powers is nevertheless temporally vulnerable as a person who will age and die and whose concerns will thus be dependent on the actions of others. Temporal vulnerability belongs to the human condition, wherever in time individuals happen to be (Thomson, 2014, pp. 163-164).

Adopting a diachronic conception of the time of vulnerability could, in my opinion, partially solve the problem of acting in view of *an authentic human life on Earth today and tomorrow* for two reasons: the first, it would be possible to overcome the difficulties outlined in the effort. cognitive, hypothetically operated by present generations in favour of future ones; the second, we would become aware, as Thomson maintains, that the actions of some are linked to those of the others, regardless of the time in which they act. In other words, it would not be a question of causally determining the action of the human, entering medias res in the unsolved and intricate problems of the free will-world relationship, but of starting a reflection on the ethics of vulnerability, starting from a lesser point of view. anthropocentric and more "ilozocentric" (life in everything). This would lead, among the "harmful consequences" to being able to save, for example, biodiversity or to take care and concern in the management of climate change.

This proposal, which could therefore seem decisive, incurs the sore point of the vulnerability / future generations relationship: altruism.

Whether the man is *naturally altruistic* or *naturally selfish* is a dilemma that is still much debated today, since the action of which Jonas speaks should be equivalent to disinterested acting towards the You, placing the well-being of the other in the foreground rather than his own and highlighting that the characteristic feature of any altruistic *versus* egoistic behavior is the motivation that sustains the action: the growth or achievement of the well-being of others, in the first case; the growth or achievement of one's well-being, in the second.

The problem, then, lies in the fact that, phenomenologically, two same behaviors, having different intentions *ab origine*, can produce the same result: the growth or achievement of the well-being of others.

V. CONCLUSION

Concluding these considerations, it is understood that the difficulty of the relationship between present humanity and future generations is linked to the nature of moral altruism: how to initiate a behavior linked to the intention of protection, care, and well-being of future generations if there really is no concrete and real, present in this time, to be protected, cared for, helped to increase its well-being? Even the imagination, faced with this task, cannot support the cognitive effort it would require.

The themes just discussed return as a background.

The relationship, therefore, between vulnerability and future generations, in the opinion of the writer, should not only be reconstituted, and re-founded in the light of new approaches and new rethinking of intersubjectivity and time but it should be considered that the problem of this relationship would reside precisely in the third aspect of *mindreading*: psychological distance.

The latter, being the pivot that moves any prosocial action dedicated to increasing the well-being of others rather than one's own, providing the I with the ability not to "succumb" under the emotional weight that the state of need of the other arouses, in the case of the relationship with future generations prevents this last aspect; that is, the presence or birth of a feeling that can push the I to sacrifice itself for a You, by implementing any *practical action*, intended as a preventive action to protect the most vulnerable: the "unborn".

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