

Education in Cultural Heritage as a Duty of Intergenerational Justice

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I. Introduction

If we accept the idea that, despite major uncertainties regarding the future, we do have moral duties towards the members of the next generations, how should they be expressed?

The literature on intergenerational justice has offered various justificatory models to this end. Some originate in concerns about the resources future people will inherit, their welfare and life quality in circumstances of scarcity and environmental degradation. Others stem from normative proposals regarding the moral climate we create for unborn individuals: What kind of public culture and institutions will we transfer to future people? What moral principles should govern the distribution of benefits and burdens in the next generations? Does it suffice to rely on the assumption of a natural intergenerational solidarity and trust that future generations will not compromise the developmental opportunities of their successors? Or should we rather actively focus on a shift of values in the present generation, thus avoiding consumerism and short-termism for the benefit of future people?

In the intricate landscape of ethical concerns regarding intergenerational justice, heritage education is a relatively less researched proposal. This is mostly because each domain of research has generated its own language and a core of favourite topics which became representative of the specialized literature. In the case of intergenerational justice, sustainability is such a central topic. For heritage studies, the debate has been built on the ideas of identity-formation and safeguarding in the context of nation-building, property rights, and, more

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recently, cultural diplomacy in a globalized world. However, significant areas of overlap should not be ignored, even if it is often problematic to circumscribe such a complex notion as heritage and treat it as a subject of intergenerational justice. The aim of this paper is to argue that cultural heritage education is not only a desirable asset we should bequeath to future generations, but rather a duty of justice. In order to substantiate this point, the first part will explore a few models of intergenerational duties, and focus on the chain of obligations which links people from non-overlapping generations. Further, it will defend the idea that cultural heritage is a legitimate subject of intergenerational justice from Rawlsian and communitarian perspectives. The last section will develop an argument in favour of education for cultural heritage as a channel for transmitting values across generations.

II. Models of Intergenerational Duties: An Overview

Insofar as moral obligations between individuals of distinct generations are agreed on in principle, on what grounds are they justified? One can easily project moral intuitions which hold for relations between contemporaries into a distant future and argue for the extension of the same social norms that one would advocate in the intra-generational realm. For example, it is safe to assume that, to the extent that a liberal egalitarian framework has proven conducive to a fair distribution of benefits and burdens among members of the same generation, and, in addition, it has been compatible with concerns for sustainability, a similar framework should be endorsed for future people. Another way of phrasing this is to imagine there is an indefinite, yet primary duty of justice to permanently protect the human species and the environment. This could be interpreted as a negative duty, i.e. of not harming the environment and future people by our current actions: according to this precautionary intuition, we should refrain from choosing those policies which impose risks on future generations, regardless of how beneficial they turn out to be for present people. In a similar way, this interpretation accommodates a general duty not to compromise life on earth, responsibly use non-renewable resources and protect biodiversity.

The advantage of this abstract view on intergenerational duties is that it bypasses the language of rights, and does not address the matter of ascribing rights to unborn people, which leads to the non-identity

problem²). On the other hand, it is not sufficiently clear with regard to why such duties should be met under circumstances of competing needs of distinct generations, and, therefore, has little to say about actual application conditions.

A less abstract way of representing intergenerational duties is the concept of indirect reciprocity, predicated on the idea of justice as reciprocity³. As a justificatory background, indirect reciprocity theories argue that we should care for the future because our predecessors cared for us. The fact that life in the present is possible, that we have resources and institutions allowing us to form rational life plans and pursue them is in many ways dependent on our predecessors' decisions to protect our interests. Nevertheless, we can express our moral duties towards these people only in a symbolic manner by honouring their memory or committing to respect the values they believed in. What lies in our power is to pay our debt to the predecessors in the form of savings for future individuals, even if different circumstances (different demographics, life quality, developmental priorities) require some equivalence, rather than exact compensation. This equivalence could take the form of savings funds, resources, investment in technologies or improved institutions but what is crucial to reciprocity theories is that no one ends up as a net beneficiary or a net recipient in the intergenerational exchange⁴.

Since circumstances vary a lot between generations, in addition to the rationale of intergenerational duties, criteria are needed for establishing *what* and *how much* we should leave to future generations. The Lockean proviso proves to be a useful guiding principle, and in the left-libertarian version it works with the assumption of initially unowned natural resources which could be appropriated without permission, yet in some sense continue to belong to all individuals. As a corollary, we should strive to leave future people *enough and as good* of this initial pool of resources⁵. In other words, the present generation does not stand under an obligation to save more than it would be willing to for the benefit of

² Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

³ Brian Barry, *A Treatise of Social Justice. Vol.1. Theories of Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

⁴ Axel Gosseries, "Three Models of Intergenerational Reciprocity," in *Intergenerational Justice*, ed. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H.Meyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 119-146, 120.

⁵ Hillel Steiner and Peter Vallentyne, "Libertarian Theories of Intergenerational Justice," in *Intergenerational Justice*, ed. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H.Meyer, 50-76, 53.

unborn people, yet it does stand under an obligation to leave them an inheritance which is sufficient in both quantity and quality, as compared to the initial scenario.

However, moving from a rather theoretical model of inter-generational justice to one anchored in real motivational triggers applicable in the intra-generational sphere, we can represent moral relations between non-contemporaries as a chain of obligations. This metaphor used by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* builds on the idea of indirect reciprocity but at the same time introduces a quantitative dimension (the “just savings” principle) and a normative goal related to ensuring a background of *justice as fairness* across time. This model addresses, thus, the main concerns of intergenerational justice without imposing strict distributive patterns, but rather suggesting that intergenerational transfers are authorized insofar as they contribute to consolidating justice in a temporal framework:

We can adopt a motivation assumption and think of the parties as representing a continuing line of claims. For example, we can assume that they are heads of families and therefore have a desire to further the well-being of at least their more immediate descendants. Or we can require the parties to agree to principles subject to the constraint that they wish all preceding generations to have followed the very same principles. By an appropriate combination of such stipulations, I believe that the whole chain of generations can be tied together and principles agreed to that suitably take into account the interests of each.⁶

What makes the chain of obligations a valid representation of intergenerational duties in which cultural heritage may play a part is that it relies on a far-reaching normative premise: the idea that, in the end, our current actions and savings will consolidate a just society over time. This amounts to arguing that intergenerational justice ensures the stability of the original contract whereby the individuals agreed on the core principles that should govern their society. Moreover, although this model does not elaborate on the content and strict distributive patterns

⁶ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Revised Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 111.

of obligations, it starts from a natural motivation: the aspirations of individuals to ensure the continuation of just structures are based on emotional ties, not on abstract principles. Thus, Rawls suggests individuals should act as if they wished to protect the well-being of their immediate successors. Thirdly, as the metaphor suggests, continuity is the cardinal virtue of this model. It would therefore not suffice that some generations work very much for the benefit of future people, while others free-ride. The chain should not be interrupted, since it is the carrier of the initial aspirations and this temporal dimension is crucial for the consolidation of just institutions.

III. Cultural Heritage as a Subject of Intergenerational Justice

Let us now examine the place of cultural heritage in the context of duties between non-contemporaries. Even if most often this is not a topic integrated in actual theories of social justice, the connection between heritage and social values is explicitly supported by numerous conventions and international regulations designed to safeguard heritage. The UNESCO World Heritage Convention mentions the need of giving “cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community”⁷) and the duty of the States to transmit heritage to future generations⁸. In addition, many policy instruments developed around the Convention acknowledge the role heritage plays in the formation of identity and intergenerational transmission of values. One example is the Nara Document on Authenticity drafted in 1994 by the participants to the Nara Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention, which states in its Preamble that “the essential contribution made by the consideration of authenticity in conservation practice is to clarify and illuminate the collective memory of humanity.”⁹ Also, the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes the importance of cultural practices and representations for social cohesion, sustainable development and intergenerational transmission of values. In its terms, the ICH is:

⁷ UNESCO, The Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 1972, Article 5

⁸ UNESCO 1972, Article 4.

⁹UNESCO, The Nara Document on Authenticity, 1994, Preamble.

transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.¹⁰

Therefore, cultural heritage also has an instrumental value, being related to a constellation of social desiderata that should be preserved for future generations as well. However, the fact that heritage is usually associated to cultural productions should not make one overlook its natural connection to social practices which depend in turn on the design and quality of basic institutions.

The main argument for including cultural heritage as a subject of intergenerational justice, along with rights, interests, resources and institutions is that it is inconceivable in the absence of social cooperation. If we agree that heritage encompasses not only the sites and cultural productions (tangible and intangible), but also the dynamics that led to their formation, it should be best understood as “a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present”¹¹.

Theoretical support for including the safeguarding and transmission of heritage to future generations in a system of moral duties can be found in *A Theory of Justice*, where John Rawls describes the basic structure of society as comprising of major social institutions¹². Institutions such as markets, basic freedoms, the political constitution and the family define individuals’ rights and aspirations and participate in the ideal of social union. In fact, “it is through social union founded upon the needs and potentialities of its members that each person can participate in the total sum of the realized natural assets of the others.”¹³

Since social cooperation is fundamental in *justice as fairness*, the values and practices which define group identity are of utmost importance. Not only should the social fabric be appropriate for the application of liberal egalitarian principles of justice, but it should also contribute to the

¹⁰ UNESCO, *The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, 2003, Article 2.

¹¹ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 44.

¹² John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 6.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 459.

development of a secure sense of one's self-worth. The public culture of a democracy, as well as the traditions of interpreting the constitution and the basic laws¹⁴ provide the framework which is also influenced by a society's "traditions, its religious and ethnic composition"¹⁵. In addition, within society there should be areas (groups, associations, educational institutions, vocational centres) in which individuals could express those talents that give them confidence to pursue their life plans. A powerful instrument in this respect is encouraging cultural diversity and favourable conditions for the development of distinct individual aspirations. Equal respect for individuals, well-being and the ability to participate in the creation of collective identities by means of cultural heritage are, therefore, fundamental concerns for a just society and establishing a secure sense of self-worth of its members.

Strong emphasis on the value of traditions and collective identities for the affirmation of individual selves and aspirations is also central to the communitarian tradition. As Charles Taylor writes, we define our identities by shared moral or spiritual commitments in the absence of which we "would be at sea"¹⁶, i.e. unaware of the significance these common ties have for each of us.

Communitarian thinkers give a prominent role to group identities and collective agency in the development of the self, and criticize the overemphasis on individual rights as undermining the notion of community obligations. Preserving traditions and social practices which consolidate collective memory should be a primary goal of a political community, since the identities thus legitimized have greater consistency than the abstract logic of rights and state neutrality with regard to various views of the good life.

Therefore, layers of social identity expressed by family ties, allegiance to community values, and participation in collective practices are not accessories to one's otherwise separated identity, but rather its actual constituents. As MacIntyre writes, "Individuals inherit a particular space

¹⁴ John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 5.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 101.

¹⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.

within an interlocking set of social relationships; lacking that space, they are nobody, or at best a stranger or an outcast.”¹⁷)

Since heritage is conceptually linked to the formation and transmission of identities across generations, safeguarding collective memory, habits, practices and social representations is not an elective concern, but rather a moral duty for which both indirect reciprocity and the Lockean proviso may offer legitimate justifications. One could object to this view by claiming that modern communities characterized by fluid boundaries, high mobility and globalization are very far from the Aristotelian ideal of a society whose members actively participated in shared goals and who defined their aspirations only in relation to those of the *polis*. In addition, what is nowadays understood as heritage, especially since the adoption of intangible heritage as a category worth safeguarding exposes further difficulties. For one thing, heritage is characterized by a great diversity, from sites and cultural artefacts to social imaginary, know-how and practices often eluding national and territorial boundaries. For another, as the UNESCO 2003 Convention showed, not only communities, but also individuals should decide what is worthy and should be safeguarded. Various elements of heritage have various meanings and weights for larger or smaller groups, an interpretation more attuned to the reality of atomized societies than to close-knit traditional communities. Therefore, in the context of contemporary societies, interest in heritage safeguarding encapsulates *communicating* heritage narratives within social networks, public and popular culture as well as, equally important, education.

IV. Communicating Cultural Heritage to Future Generations by Education

Uncertainties as to what the world will look like in the remote future are generated by complex inter-related and mutually reinforcing factors, including environmental, economic and political crises. Even simple facts about the structure of the next generation are partially unknown to us, such as its demographics and its political regime. Yet, such variables are crucial for the welfare of its members and the kind of education they will need. Will educational institutions teach people to be more

¹⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*. Third Edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 33-34.

technologically savvy, de-growth enthusiasts, frugal and pacifists? Will the seeds planted in the present mature in the next generation or are they vulnerable to antagonistic drives which could transform future people into irresponsible consumerists, technological addicts and advocates of authoritarian regimes?

Such distinct possibilities also invite us to reconsider the issue of transmitting collective identities across generations by cultural heritage. Synergies between cultural heritage policies, intergenerational justice and the goals of education are manifest in the sphere of values, beliefs and discourses which legitimize social arrangements and priorities in the next generations. On the other hand, causal asymmetry and substitutability¹⁸ complicate current assessment of what is to be considered worthy of safeguarding and transmitting for the benefit of future generations.

It is therefore crucial to acknowledge that new approaches are needed to complement current models of reflecting on intergenerational duties, i.e. approaches of a more complex nature and with a far-reaching impact. In the context of an increasingly globalized world concerned with sustainable development backed by a system of cultural and moral values, the issue of heritage transmission gains in significance.

It is not surprising therefore that many guidelines accompanying international heritage regulations emphasize the need of transmitting heritage values by education. For example, the FARO Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, or the Namur Declaration referring to the European Cultural Heritage Strategy for the 21st century urge for a reconsideration of heritage as a central component of policy-making in order to stimulate creativity, social interaction and face the challenges that globalization brings about. To this end, the Namur Declaration notes that:

cultural heritage is a key component of the European identity; it is of general public interest and its transmission to future generations is a shared responsibility; it is a unique resource, fragile, non-renewable and non-relocatable, contributing to the attractiveness and the development of

¹⁸ Joel Taylor, "Intergenerational Justice. A Useful Perspective for Heritage Conservation," *CeROArt*, online journal, October 2013, DOI: 10.4000/ceroart.3510.

Europe and, crucially, to the creation of a more peaceful, just and cohesive society.¹⁹

This complements the argument in favour of reorienting current education from the transmission of skills that will allow an efficient use of resources - according to a worldview having emerged in the wake of the Industrial Revolution - towards the inclusion of the arts, humanities and vocational education in order to foster human creativity. Furthermore, this places a stronger emphasis on memory and communication as being intrinsic to educational endeavours. The need to give memory, experience and participatory processes a prominent place in education expresses deeper concerns about losing contact with an inheritance of culture and civilization which risks being replaced by uniformity and a rather technical normative language. To the limit, transmitting identities across generations means being able to enact the practices identities build on, as if one were perpetually rehearsing them, as expressed by a Talmudic dictum: “In each and every generation let each person regard himself as though *he* had emerged from Egypt.”²⁰

In practice, however, educational goals could be more feasibly adjusted to shed light on the multiple interconnections between cultures and identities. New perspectives open for educational institutions which are called now to take responsibility for future generations’ preference-formation, community involvement, moral design, cultural literacy or aesthetic sensitivity. Cultural heritage education could be seen as an instrument consolidating the abstract allegiance to the shared values of political communities, by drawing attention to the actual contexts in which this can be possible. This does not need to refer to myths and heroes, military victories or linguistic unity, but rather focus on the practices and historical contexts having created cohesion in regional, national and trans-national communities. The aggregation of symbolic elements cannot be thus separated from the cultural landscapes where such elements developed in the first place. Here, education can play a significant part by raising awareness on the mutual interests in safeguarding heritage by fostering cooperation between neighbouring communities. At the same time, it can encourage the symbolic interaction

¹⁹ Council of Europe, The Namur Declaration, 2015, Article 2.

²⁰ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country – Revisited* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 399.

and mapping of meaning between social actors and institutions of apparently close-knit communities by means of educating individuals about existing visual symbols (monuments, public memorials), in order to understand “relationships within local communities and their subsequent relationships with the state.”²¹

Such goals may seem to generate difficulties with regard to the categories of heritage that could be valid subjects of education for the intergenerational transmission of values. Whereas acquaintance with elements of tangible heritage by education is often easier as it relies on tradition and institutional infrastructures, intangible heritage seems more problematic. For one thing, a fine-grained selection is needed, and this raises the question of axiological criteria according to which some aspects of ICH are worthier of presenting than others. For another, intangible heritage elements can range from poems and songs to more volatile notions such as know-how, practices and views about nature and humans. In fact, it would be legitimate to claim that “the whole notion of *intangible cultural heritage* is all about (often competitive) representation.”²²

Consequently, although education in the arts and humanities may often overlap with cultural heritage education, a distinct approach is needed in order to make the latter an effective instrument for the intergenerational transmission of values. Two reasons are worth signalling. The first one is that the diversity of cultural heritage requires an all-encompassing framework, in which environmental considerations, historical facts and discourses, social values and the justice of institutions should be integrated to illuminate the meanings of heritage elements. For example, it makes little sense to present future generations with contemporary projects for the hyper-modernization of an urban hub such as Berlin in the absence of a value-based perspective on the “historical void left by the Nazi destruction of Berlin’s thriving Jewish life and culture.”²³

²¹ Sara McDowell, “Heritage, Memory and Identity”, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, ed. Brian Graham and Peter Howard (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 37-53, 39.

²²Kristin Kuutma, “Inside the UNESCO apparatus. From intangible representations to tangible effects”, in *Safeguarding Intangible Heritage. Practices and Politics*, ed. Natsuko Akagawa and Laurajane Smith (London and New York, Routledge, 2019), 68-83,73.

²³ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts. Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 66.

Secondly, to the extent that every category of heritage has an intangible component manifest in the encounter between a form of cultural expression and its audience, education addressed to future generations should give particular weight to heritage perception. How heritage is understood, received, integrated in contemporary life or how it manages to carry values across time and transform the lives of unborn individuals are characteristics meant to enrich traditional education in the arts and humanities. As David Lowenthal beautifully argues in *The Past is a Foreign Country*, because time sublimated the discovery of the Roman world, the spell its ruins cast on generations of artists can only be understood via this dynamic: the past remains a foreign country, yet contemporaries cross it over and over again it to reaffirm their own values:

Ruins roused reflections on the vainglorious new made decrepit, corrupt, degraded by the transience of men and deeds, the effects of depravity, the legacy of tyranny. As reminders of the evanescence of life and the futility of effort, ruins became a staple of later takes on the past. Initially valued as residues of bygone splendours and tokens of true antiquity, they were now lauded for their own look. The patina of age morphed from worthy sentiment to aesthetic canon. Time 'ripened' artefacts, marks of age enhanced art and architecture.²⁴

V. Conclusions

We may be lacking a clear picture of how the world inhabited by future generations will look, yet, insofar as we adhere to the ideal of intergenerational justice, there is a strong case for including cultural heritage in the goods and values that should be transferred to our successors. Rawls's chain of obligations model and the communitarian tradition emphasize the need to pass on just institutions and the inheritance of traditions to future people with the aim of consolidating the acquisitions of civilization across time. At policy level, this can be done not only by the consolidation of a public culture that will instil in the next generation a secure sense of self-worth for each individual, as

²⁴ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 242.

well as the motivation to participate in social cooperation. Rather, as this paper suggested, it should include the social practices and complex frameworks in which identities are shaped: institutions, resources, values and beliefs crystallize in cultural heritage elements which future generations will adopt and transform depending on their own vantage points.

Since cultural heritage is made of multiple layers of meanings, reaffirmed in a creative dynamic over time, future-oriented educational policies need to address it as a distinct category instead of confining it to the domain of liberal arts and humanities education. To this end, particular goals should be addressed in educating future generations, among which: understanding the complex contexts in which heritage elements have emerged, cultivating attitudes attuned to social values such as tolerance, respect among communities, tolerance, sustainability, as well as enforcing participatory mechanisms that help to keep cultural heritage alive and relevant for individuals whose lives will never cross ours.

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