

THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF THE NOTION OF THE RIGHTS OF PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS TO CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN THE FACE OF THE PROSPECT OF A CLIMATE DISASTER – AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Helena CIAŻELA

The Maria Grzegorzewska University, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Warsaw; hciazela@aps.edu.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0002-3151-0623

Purpose: The subject of the article is the issue of the current status of the formula of the rights of present and future generations to climate and environmental protection in the face of the ongoing anthropogenic climate disaster.

Design/methodology/approach: The analysis is based on a hermeneutic method that examines the rootedness of the analysed problems in a broader cultural and historical context.

Findings: The results of the analysis indicate the consequences of shortening the time horizon with regard to the potential existence of future generations in conditions that will enable them to exist unaffected by the radical development of the climate disaster.

Research limitations/implications: The study of contemporary phenomena bears the risk of subjectivity. The study refers to current events, hence the use of Internet materials of a journalistic nature.

Social implications: The analysis undertaken in the article will allow for an in-depth, holistic reflection on current issues related to the threat of a climate disaster.

Originality/value: The analysis is aimed at researchers dealing with the ethical aspect of the issue of the rights of present and future generations in their ecological dimension.

Keywords: rights of present and future generations, climate disaster, ethics of global responsibility.

Category of the paper: General review.

1. Introduction - New context for the issue of “the rights of present and future generations to climate and environmental protection”

The issue of the rights of present and future generations to protect the climate and environment¹ is now becoming one of the most important challenges of political practice in the modern world. The progression of the anthropogenic, i.e. human-induced, climate disaster makes the issue of protecting the rights of living generations and their successors a fundamental problem of our times (Maslin, 2018; Popkiewicz, Kardaś, Malinowski, 2019; Monabo, Broccoli, 2022). The fundamental doubt that arises in this regard is whether, when we speak of “the rights of present and future generations to climate and environmental protection” we are not dealing with an euphemism and, in fact, whether we are not referring to the right of present and future generations to continue to exist over time, or even, in the case of the latter, to come into existence. However, it is only formal and persuasive in nature.

Unlike many previous diagnoses and predictions, the current one regarding the climate disaster is no longer about its possible eventuality, but about its reality, as a process taking place here and now (Broniatowski, 2019; Dmitruczuk, 2023; Mieszko, 2024). We can leave the technical aspect of the issue, that is, the question about the degree of advancement of the climate disaster and the likelihood of its possible reversal, to specialists. We, on the other hand, can reflect on the impact of this new reality on the definition of previous approaches, the problems associated with it and the readiness to undertake rescue operations.

From the perspective of this reflection, it should be noted that the formula of the rights of present and future generations to protect the environment and climate is an attempt to update, in the perspective of the ethics of global responsibility, the previous considerations on the issue of responsibility towards future generations, which experienced their glory years at the turn of the millennium.

2. The traditional dimension of the issue

Responsibility for future generations, understood in the traditional sense, is one of the obvious dimensions of human existence. The evolution of species, by basing human reproduction on sexual separation, gives the functioning of the species a generational character, and the need to care for young individuals gives rise to a relationship assuming the obligation of older individuals to provide for the younger ones. The social nature of human existence leads

¹ The term environment used in this article refers to the natural surroundings of man. It allows to avoid discussions and problems concerning the definition of the natural environment understood as an environment undisturbed by man.

to the separation of the aspect of personal ties, family relations and group relations resulting from the sense of belonging to a political (state), social (resulting from the division of labour), professional or ethnic (tribal, national) community.

The moral and ethical reflection that develops around these intergenerational relationships is of a rather obvious yet general nature due to the limited, in terms of its scope and causal capacity, nature of these intergenerational relationships (Birnbacher, 1999, pp. 2-5). This is particularly apparent with regard to the so-called future generations, whose aspirations always remain mysterious and unpredictable. It is a reflection that leads to the issue of the obligations of future generations to be responsible towards past generations whose achievements require protection and continuation.

The traditional approach most often leads to the pursuit of binding future generations to the goals of the current ones - to pass on heritage in exchange for a commitment to continue the family, state, nation, etc. as valuable and protected values. Protecting the rights of future generations in this situation leads to the articulation and defence of the right to challenge these commitments and choose one's own path. Recognition of the "generational conflict" as a natural phenomenon and the decision-making sovereignty of future generations.

3. Responsibility towards future generations as an individual ethical issue

The emergence of the formula of responsibility for actions towards future generations in the area of intergenerational relations, as a phenomenon significant for defining the contemporary human condition, began in the 1960s (Ciążela, 2006). It has its origins in the dynamics of the development of modern civilization. Its roots go back to the methodical approach to the problem of broadening the scope of ethical reflection due to the very rapid and radical expansion of the scope of human agency (Jonas, 1996, pp. 26-33). It entails an increasingly far-reaching range of consequences that threaten the continued existence of humans on the planet.

This direction is represented, independently of each other, by Georg Picht (Picht, 1981) and Hans Jonas (Jonas, 1996). However, it is impossible not to take into account the very specific activities of Aurelio Peccei. He was not only a thinker, but also the initiator and animator of an important phenomenon i.e. the Club of Rome (Ciążela, 2006, pp. 155-188). The first reports for the Club, commissioned on his initiative, defined, on the basis of scientific research, the scale of global threats and their accompanying responsibilities (Ciążela, 2006, pp. 273-310).

The causality achieved through the development of technology has not only extended the scope of problems for the entirety of human life on the planet, giving it a global character, but has also taken on a temporal dimension, including in its scope both responsibility for past actions and the future, often far-reaching, consequences of our activity. The possibility of

destruction, being a consequence of uncontrolled human activity, gave ethical reflection a specifically eschatological character (Picht, 1981 pp. 240-255; Jonas, 2003).

The expansion of causality achieved through the development of technical capabilities in the reflection of the 1970s, turns out to have a primarily negative and destructive character. While it might seem that future generations are potential beneficiaries of the development of civilization, methodical reflection indicates that they become potential victims of the irresponsibility of its creators and direct beneficiaries, while the consequences of their action can make their lives a proverbial hell, or even make it impossible. The scale of threats covers all aspects of development, from environmental devastation to genetic manipulation (Jonas, 1996, pp. 49-54).

The conviction that the environmental disaster is real and threatening to the future of human civilization was expressed not only in the forecasts of subsequent reports for the Club of Rome, but also in the philosophical reflections of Georg Picht and Hans Jonas. Regardless of the differences between the two thinkers, what is worth emphasising is their belief that the future of the human species is in its hands and that its continued existence depends on its responsibility and vigilance in the face of impending threats. It should be emphasised, however, that neither Picht nor Jonas used the category of generation as a subject of history, determining the tasks of people in a given time period, nor did they pay attention to intergenerational relations as an independent phenomenon.

For them, humanity was an integral whole, the continued existence of which was such an imperative that separating future, present and past generations had no deeper meaning². For them, the destruction of humanity meant the total erasure of everything it had created in its history and of history itself. In the face of disaster, both the future and the past lost sense³.

4. The development of the ethics of responsibility for future generations in the 1980s. The path from the rights of future generations to the rights of present and future generations

The ethic of responsibility for future generations began to develop as a result of the criticism of the catastrophic assessments of the situation presented by the Club of Rome (Meadows, D.L., Meadows, D.H., Randers, Behrens, 1973) and analyses made at the same time, such as Paul Ehrlich's well-known book *The Population Bomb* (Ehrlich, 1968). The radical nature of this criticism, the axis of which was the argument that the collapse of civilization predicted in the

² Even if at one point in his research Georg Picht openly addresses this issue, he does so from the perspective of what is common, not what is differentiating (Picht, 1981, pp. 244-253).

³ Georg Picht's reference to the theological vision of the Last Judgement as a moment when all generations meet is particularly meaningful (Picht, 1981, pp. 231-262).

criticised studies, resulting from the depletion of non-renewable resources and thus exceeding the “limits of growth”, was exaggerated (Simon, 1981) and led to the belief that the possibility of a catastrophic realisation of the forecasts presented by representatives of the criticised orientation concerns a long period of time (Kuzior, 2007, p. 116). Thus, it was recognised that there is a problem of “future generations” being exposed to the consequences of the activities of “current” or “present” generations. The perspective of the long-term nature of responsibility towards “future generations” has created a framework for interpreting issues related to predictions of an environmental disaster, in its most well-known form today, as a phenomenon pertaining to the near or distant, but still approaching future.

The fundamental issue for “responsibility towards future generations”, in this sense, is the fact of their unquestionable existence, which makes their status similar to that of an unborn child and its status not only ethically but also legally. “Future generations” in this sense - an entity whose existence turns out to be inevitable, but only postponed in time - turns out to be the subject of moral and legal action (Human Rights..., 1998; Sustainable development..., 2005). It has certain rights and claims that should find its representatives, etc.

The more the succession of future generations becomes obvious and unproblematic, the more important it becomes to define their claims and rights. Specific issues of interpretation and clarification of the nature of these claims also become important. A work that presents a whole catalogue of these problems, from the perspective of synthesising ethical reflection with the tradition of legal logic, is Dieter Birnbacher’s 1986 study *Responsibility for Future Generations* (Birnbacher, 1999). It is difficult not to notice that the sophisticated and academic nature of the work under discussion reveals a specific mechanism of marginalisation of the issue, which, thanks to its normalisation, is inscribed in a huge catalogue of the most diverse rights and claims defined as human (and not only human) rights, which, in the light of the moral imperatives of modernity, demand satisfaction.

The dramatic condition of various groups belonging to the currently living generations makes the rights of future generations only one aspect of this issue. A reflection of these processes was the most important achievement in the field of care for future generations, i.e. the report *Our Common Future*, prepared and published under the auspices of the UN in 1987 (*Our Common...*, 1991). The most important idea of this Report is the idea of sustainable development. The goal of sustainable development is to harmonise the realisation of the rights of present and future generations over time. The realisation of the economic, social and environmental rights of the present generations was, in the light of the report’s assumptions, not to violate the right of future generations to enjoy the planet’s resources in a way that is not threatened by their devastation (Kuzior, 2007, 2014).

The report, commonly referred to as the Brundtland Report, thus proposed a synthesis of the rights of present and future generations, integrating their claims and proposing actions that would lead to their harmonisation. It should also be noted that a solid empirical basis in the

form of a catalogue of global problems requiring solutions seemed to make it a serious proposal to take up these challenges.

The intention of the UN commission was to stop the debates that entailed the demands of the first reports of the Club of Rome in the international arena (Report of the United Nations..., 1972; Furtado, 1982) and a sensible inclusion of ecological issues in the disputes surrounding the implementation of conflicts tearing the contemporary world apart (Kuzior, 2007). This intention was realised to some extent with the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (UNFCCC or FCCC) followed by the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 and the Paris Agreement in 2015. It should be emphasised, however, that consequences unexpected by the authors came to the forefront and had a far-reaching impact on the implementation of the postulates.

The concept of sustainable development, by adopting a perspective that recognised the existence of future generations, turned out to perpetuate the belief that since future generations have rights, their existence is not an issue of concern. Of course, the slogan of sustainable development itself, inadvertently guaranteeing the future existence of the subject of this development, was not the main reason for the marginalisation of the issue of the threat of the ecological disaster, but opened the way to a “positive dialogue” with neoliberal thought, which believes that economic and social development is balanced by the laws of the market and the “invisible hand of the market” guaranteeing the optimisation of resource use.

Thanks to these laws, present generations would spontaneously build the best of possible worlds for the future. The process of inscribing the problem of the relationship of present and future generations into the traditional historical optics was disturbed by the increasingly alarming results of scientific research, which however, as having the status of forecasts, could be ignored by questioning the degree of their certainty.

5. The breakthrough in 2018 and Greta Thunberg’s speech

The growing discrepancy between rising public optimism about the future and the prospect of a growing climate disaster led to the shock of the publication of a new series of IPCC reports, in October 2018, presenting the immediate prospect of exceeding the 1.5 degrees Celsius limit adopted in the Paris Protocol and the reality of the direct threat of a climate disaster.

The study’s findings triggered a sharp political turnaround consisting in an attempt to operationalise the new policy challenges of the so-called Green Deals proclaimed by the European Union leadership and the US Democratic leadership after taking power from the Republican team of Donald Trump. The Green Deal policy, which set new tasks for Western societies that were completely unprepared for it (Kuzior, Kettler, Rąb, 2022), caused a deep

unrest, becoming a factor driving the political crisis in the Western bloc countries, the effects of which we are currently observing.

On the question of the history of the formula of the rights of present and future generations to protect the climate and the environment, a key moment was the speech of a Swedish high school student Greta Thunberg, who in August 2018 undertook a one-person protest in front of the Swedish Parliament as a representative of the generation directly threatened by current climate policy (Erman, B., Erman, M., Thunberg, G., Thunberg, S., 2019).

The resonance of this speech and the accusation of the current elites that they have “stolen the future” not only from future generations, but also from those currently beginning their life, marks a break with the formula of the rights of present and future generations on climate and environmental issues, and a reflexive return to the thinking of the 1970s, when the prospect of an ecological disaster united humanity. The generation formula in this perspective can only appear now in the name formula of the radical environmental organisation The Last Generation [Ostatnie Pokolenie] (Wikipedia..., 2024).

6. The current shape of the debate

The most serious problem posed by the breakthrough of 2018 was the conflict between the new challenges and the traditional attitudes that dominate public life not only in the West, but globally. In the U.S. and European Union policy, new goals have clashed directly with traditional understandings of both the economy and politics. Globally, the forecasts announced by the UN did not have a significant impact on reorganising the existing logic of understanding economic development.

There has been a clear crisis in the environmental policy issue of interest to us and its dimension of protecting the rights of present and future generations. The Green Deal, proclaimed in the wake of concern over forecasts announced since 2018, is being implemented despite growing public resistance. The victory of the Republicans in the 2024 elections suggests that its American counterpart will be rejected by the new team. The work of successive climate summits is also underway despite growing disappointment with their results (Kielak, 2024).

The actual victory of the opponents of the fight against the climate disaster is the current freezing of discussions about the future. The limited horizon leads to the fact that the energy transformation of the EU is treated by a large part of politicians and public opinion as a political tool directed against Russia.

In such a context, there is a progressive isolation of the movement initiated by Greta Thunberg. The specificity of the young activist's speech involved not only climate protection slogans, but also a consistent reference to scientific research. Greta Thunberg has no views of her own in the traditional sense of an ideological creed. She acts as an intermediary between

science and the practice of public life (The Climate Book, 2023). This specific situation meant that criticism targeting her personal deficits, family connections, etc., was unable to undermine her rapidly growing authority (Błaszkiwicz, 2019; Wiech, 2019). Today, this situation is rapidly changing and the Swedish activist is treated as a marginal political figure (Aikman, Holligan, 2024; Greta Thunberg protestowała..., 2024).

The developments referred to in the article, however, have resulted in a growing isolation of the movement she initiated, taking the form of a conflict between political elites and public opinion interested in saving or at least maintaining the illusion of the status quo and climate activists acting as defenders of the rights of present and future generations to protect the natural environment and climate in which they live and will live in the coming years and decades (Sorry, taki mamy klimat..., 2024).

The deepening conflict is reflected in the radicalisation of forms of opposition to the disproportion of actions to the scale of threats. A protest that is drastic in its forms and involves a direct attack on the symbols of stabilising development trends of contemporary civilization, in its spiritual and practical dimensions, arouses anger and opposition from public opinion embodying the position of its supporters. This applies both to the attack on what is supposed to be the spiritual core of this civilization - works of art and monuments embodying the timeless and universal beauty that man is capable of creating, starting with Vincent Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" and ending with the Warsaw Mermaid monument. On the other hand, the demonstrative act of activists glueing themselves to highways or airport runways strikes at the basic principles of obvious comfort carried by modern civilization, for which mass communication has become a basic standard. The grotesque form of these demonstrations and conflicts is an expression of the powerlessness and desperation of environmental movements fighting to secure the rights that are proving to be increasingly threatened, if not erased, by the rapidly progressing climate disaster.

The starting point of these activities is the thesis that even the most valuable achievements of humanity have value only insofar as there is still a human population for which they mean something, in the most literal sense. However, this is too radical for the popular consciousness to be taken seriously. Activists are treated like criminals and brought before the courts (Bujalski, 2024a, 2024b).

7. Conclusions - Does it still make sense to discuss the rights of present and future generations to climate and environmental protection?

By presenting the issues of the status and logic of the formula of “the rights of present and future generations to climate and environmental protection”, the author of this article tried to show that it is deeply rooted in recent history, which is the source of both its historical role and its temporal limitation.

This formula undoubtedly played a positive role in the process of bringing order to the chaos that resulted from the sudden introduction into the public debate of the issue of an ecological disaster threatening the future of humanity on a planetary scale. The questions of whether the responsibility for this state of affairs is distributed equally among all people and whether everyone should bear the costs of the transformation equally were questions that ignited discussions and gave rise to constant conflict. Similarly, there was the problem of social, economic and cultural inequality, which the new challenges seemed to dismiss as unimportant in the face of the threat of imminent destruction.

Creating a formula that brings elementary order to the issue and taking corrective action based on international consensus was a constructive factor at the turn of the millennium. However, this formula, assuming the possibility of further development and making the existence of future generations more realistic in the eyes of the public, proved to be a demobilising factor and strengthened the drive to continue the existing practices, despite the risks they carried.

The events of 2018 have shown the rapidly growing gap between current realities and the perceptions of the near future that dominate public opinion. This applies not only to climate sceptics or denialists, but also to the overwhelming majority of those who accept the existence of global warming and even those who are concerned about its consequences. This is a situation that becomes increasingly dangerous from the perspective of upcoming events. Although the formula of the rights of present and future generations to protect the climate and the environment fulfilled a positive role at its inception, integrating the issue of the rights of future generations with the issue of human rights, it has now become an anachronism. The implicit guarantee of the future contained in it, allowing it to be stretched out over time, is becoming a source of deepening the current crisis of environmental consciousness. Thus, it requires not only revision, but also rejection and development of an approach adequate to the situation in which the time for implementing the postulates is shrinking at an alarming rate.

References

1. Aikman, I., Holligan, A. (2024). Greta Thunberg: Activist arrested during a climate protest in The Hague, 6 April 2024 (bbc.com).
2. Birnbacher, D. (1999). *Odpowiedzialność za przyszłe pokolenia*. Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa.
3. Błaszczewicz, K. (2019). *Greta Thunberg manipulowana przez rodziców i wielkie firmy? Krążą nieprzyjemne plotki*. Wirtualna Polska, 20.08.2019, <https://kobieta.wp.pl/greta-thunberg-manipulowana-przez-rodzicow-i-wielkie-firmy-kraza-nieprzyjemne-plotki-6415548410325121a>
4. Broniatowski, M. (2019). Unia straszy: ludzkość wyginie, jeśli nie powstrzymamy wzrostu temperatur. *Politico, Onet*, 8.04.2019. <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/politico/globalne-ocieplenie-alarmujacy-raport-ue/0zhxc1w>, 11.04.2019.
5. Bujalski, S. (2024a). *Sąd po stronie Ostatniego Pokolenia*. “Kryzys klimatyczny ma realny wpływ na życie obywateli”, “Ziemia na rozdrożu”, 14 X 2024, <https://ziemianarozdrozu.pl>
6. Bujalski, S. (2024b). Ten sam sędzia, inne wyroki. Więzienie za oblanie zupą obrazu, „zawiasy” dla synów miliardera. “Ziemia na rozdrożu”, 24.10.2024, <https://ziemianarozdrozu.pl>
7. Ciążela, H. (2006). *Problemy i dylematy etyki odpowiedzialności globalnej*. Warsaw: The Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw.
8. Dmitruczuk, A. (2023). Świat doprowadzony do wrzenia. Lipiec 2023 najgorętszy w historii. *Gazeta.pl*, 28.07.2023, “Koniec epoki globalnego ocieplenia. Nadeszła era globalnego wrzenia” (wyborcza.pl)
9. Ehrlich, P. (1968). *The Population Bomb*. New York: Sierra Club/Ballantine Books.
10. Erman, B., Erman, M., Thunberg, G., Thunberg, S. (2019). *Sceny z życia rodzinnego. Strajk klimatyczny Greta*. Katowice: Post Factum - Sonia Draga.
11. Furtado, C. (1982). *Mit rozwoju gospodarczego*. Warsaw: PWE.
12. Greta Thunberg protestowała przeciw wojnie w Strefie Gazy. Policja ją zatrzymała (2024). *Reczpospolita*, 4.09.2024, <https://www.rp.pl/spoleczenstwo/art41072261-greta-thunberg-protestowala-przeciw-wojnie-w-strefie-gazy-policja-ja-zatrzymala>
13. Jonas, H. (1996). *Zasada odpowiedzialności. Etyka dla cywilizacji technologicznej*. Kraków: Platan.
14. Jonas, H. (2003). *Idea Boga po Auschwitz*. Kraków: Znak.
15. Kielak, E. (2024). Co do diabła robimy?! Wściekły premier Albanii przemówił na szczycie COP29. Zaskoczył wszystkich. *Gazeta.pl*, 14 November 2024, *Gazeta.pl - MSN*
16. *Książka o klimacie, którą stworzyła Greta Thunberg* (2023). G. Thunberg (ed.). Warsaw: Agora.

17. Kuzior, A. (2007). Odpowiedzialność człowieka za przyrodę w perspektywie kryzysu ekologicznego. *Studia Ecologiae et Bioethicae*, no. 5.
18. Kuzior, A. (2014). *Aksjologia zrównoważonego rozwoju*. Baska Bystrzyca: Belianum.
19. Kuzior, A., Kettler, K., Rąb, Ł. (2022). Great Resignation-Ethical, Cultural, Relational, and Personal Dimensions of Generation Y and Z Employees' Engagement. *Sustainability*, no. 14.
20. Maslin, M. (2018). *Zmiany klimatu. Krótkie wprowadzenie* (Original in the English language edition by Oxford University Press). Łódź: Publishing House.
21. Meadows, D.L., Meadows, D.H., Randers, J., Behrens III, W.W. (1973). *Granice wzrostu*. Warsaw: PWE.
22. Mieszko, T. (2024). Ekstremalnej pogody będzie coraz więcej. ONZ ostrzega przed katastrofą. *Komputer Świat*, 25 October 2024. Zmierzamy w kierunku globalnej katastrofy. Alarmujący raport ONZ.
23. Monabo, S., Broccoli, A.J. (2022). *Algorytmy w służbie klimatu czyli sekrety globalnego ocieplenia*. Warsaw: PWN.
24. *Nasza wspólna przyszłość. Raport światowej Komisji do spraw Środowiska i Rozwoju* (1991). Warsaw: PWE.
25. Papuziński, A. (2005). *Zrównoważony rozwój. Od utopi do praw człowieka*. Bydgoszcz: Brant.
26. Picht, G. (1981). *Odwaga utopii*. Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
27. Popkiewicz, M., Kardaś, A., Malinowski, S. (2019). *Nauka o klimacie. Obserwacje zmian klimatu teraz i w przeszłości. Mechanizmy działania systemu klimatycznego. Dawne zmiany klimatu – co, kiedy, jak i dlaczego. Obecna zmiana klimatu - obserwacje, przyczyny. Przyszła zmiana klimatu - dokąd zmierzamy. Klimatyczne kontrowersje*. Katowice: Sonia Draga, Postfactum, Nieoczywiste.
28. *Prawa człowieka w państwie ekologicznym* (1998). R. Sobański (ed.). Warsaw: The Academy of Catholic Theology.
29. *Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment* (1972). Stockholm, 5-16 June 1972, <http://www.un-documents.net/aconf48-14r1.pdf>
30. Simon, J.L. (1981). *The Ultimate Resource*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
31. *Sorry, taki mamy klimat. Świadomość i postawy Polaków wobec katastrofy klimatycznej* (2024). Ziemia nie atakuje! Report, earthlings-attack-2024-2.pdf
32. Wiech, J. (2019). Greta Thunberg. Klimatyczny symbol bez znaczenia [KOMENTARZ], *Energetyka 24*, <https://www.energetyka24.com/greta-thunberg-klimatyczny-symbol-bez-znaczenia-komentarz>, 16.08.2019.
33. Wikipedia: Ostatnie pokolenie (2024). Ostatnie pokolenie – Wyszukaj.