The Role of Narratives in Resolving Intergenerational Conflicts of Interest

Issues in which the interests of generations differ, such as the issue of climate change, have become important issues. In a democracy, voters are limited to the adults currently living, and future generations yet to be born cannot participate in decision-making. In situations where this conflict of interest is an issue, it is important to devise ways to encourage the present generation to take actions that take into account the interests of future generations. This study examines the role of narratives (stories widely used in society to explain or justify certain actions) in resolving intergenerational conflicts of interest.

An application of the grand theories of moral philosophy to intergenerational issues has been proposed. Egalitarianism can be used intergenerationally if it organizes that each generation should be treated equally. Utilitarianism states that utility should be maximized through generations. Communitarianism holds that we and future generations are members of the same community. Altruism states that we should love future generations, and the harm principle is a proposition that we should not harm future generations. The relevant narratives are not limited to those traditionally proposed by moral philosophy. According to the sufficientarianism, a modification of egalitarianism, it requires that future generations be allowed to enjoy a minimally satisfactory degree of well-being. Although time flows only one way between generations, there is a linkage between the generations before and after. From this linkage comes indirect reciprocity. In other words, the idea arises that the preceding generation is required to pass on to the succeeding generation the good things which have been passed on to it. This is the narrative of the chain novel, in which activities inherited from the preceding generation are developed and passed on to future generations. Finally, Samuel Scheffler (2013) points out that people are concerned with the survival of humanity after their own death. Narratives that appeal to an interest in events after personal death, such as the survival of the human, are also interesting.

Can these narratives actually resolve intergenerational conflicts of interest? To answer this question, we need to know if these narratives have the power to encourage people to act with consideration for future generations. To have that power, first, the narratives need to be seen as appropriate by the people. Second, it is necessary for individuals to actually act in accordance with that narrative. According to externalism in moral philosophy, having a moral reason for an action is separate from actually being motivated to act.

This paper examines which narratives motivate concern for future generations based on a survey of 415 individuals. The survey asked respondents to respond on a seven-point scale to the appropriateness of each of the eight narratives listed so far. They were then asked if they would personally be willing to act in accordance with the narratives. In addition, assuming that a government proposing a tax increase to combat climate change uses eight narratives, respondents were asked to list all of the narratives that they find persuasive (if none of the narratives are persuasive, they were asked to respond so). Similarly, respondents were asked to respond to the similar assumptions about tax increases for fiscal consolidation.

According to the survey results, egalitarianism and utilitarianism scored low among the narratives of traditional moral philosophies on the appropriateness question. Altruism and communitarianism had medium scores, and the highest scoring traditional narrative was the harm principle (the harm principle belongs to the highest scoring narrative among all narratives). Non-traditional narratives generally scored well. The highest categories were survival and chain novel, while sufficientarianism was in the middle of the range. When the relationship between these scores and personal attributes is tested in an order logit model, the older respondents were and the more university-educated they were, the more likely they were to consider any of the narratives appropriate. When the differences in scores between the lowest scoring egalitarianism and the other narratives were regressed on personal attributes, older respondents tended to score higher on the communitarianism and the survival, and those with a university degree or higher tended to score higher on the chain novel and the survival.

Narrative scores declined in situations that asked about personal action. There was no significant variation in the order of scores on the narratives. In terms of average scores, there was a tendency for the differences in scores between narratives to compress. When personal action questions were asked, regression analysis on the attributes of those who lowered scores showed that students tended to lower scores, but other attributes did not have a significant impact.

In climate change, the survival, harm principle, and chain novel were the most compelling narratives. These results were generally similar to those obtained when the appropriateness of each narrative as asked. About one-third of respondents found none of the narratives persuasive. The same general trend was observed for fiscal policy. However, fewer respondents found the survival and harm principles persuasive for fiscal policy than for climate change. When regressing those who did not find either narrative persuasive on individual attributes, the number of respondents who did not find either narrative persuasive was common to climate change and public finance, and was less common among women and older respondents.

Finally, this paper identifies relationships among the narratives through analysis of the responses. Specifically, we examined the probability of finding one narrative persuasive over another (conditional probability). The altruism, harm principle, sufficientarianism, chain novel, and the survival had significantly higher probabilities of being linked to the other narrative. In particular, the harm principle, chain novel, and the survival are suggested to be interrelated.