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Rethinking limits: ecology and intergenerational ethics

Repensar los límites: ecología y ética intergeneracional

Repensando os limites: ecologia e ética intergeracional

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Abstract

The focus of this work is to explore the idea of limits within certain scopes where they arguably matter most: those of intergenerational justice and a prospective ethics of the future. When limits are conceived in a nuanced and emancipatory way – as the autonomy and capability to place limits in the current context of environmental crisis, while taking into account our finite nature – the possibility arises to build a concept of responsibility that cares for the well-being of present and future generations.

Keywords: Limits. Ecology. Responsibility. Intergenerational Justice.

Resumo

Este artigo se concentra em explorar a ideia de limites em uma área em que eles são fundamentais: a da justiça intergeracional e uma ética prospectiva do futuro. Quando os limites são concebidos de forma matizada e emancipatória – como autonomia e capacidade de estabelecer limites no contexto

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atual de crise ambiental, levando em conta nossa natureza finita – torna-se possível construir um conceito de responsabilidade que cuide do bem-estar das gerações presentes e futuras.

Palavras-chave: Limites. Ecologia. Responsabilidade. Justiça intergeracional.

Resumen

Este trabajo se centra en explorar la idea de límites en un ámbito en el que resultan fundamentales: el de la justicia intergeneracional y una ética prospectiva del futuro. Cuando los límites se conciben de forma matizada y emancipadora – como la autonomía y la capacidad de poner límites en el contexto actual de crisis medioambiental teniendo en cuenta al mismo tiempo nuestra naturaleza finita – surge la posibilidad de construir un concepto de responsabilidad que se hace cargo del bienestar de las generaciones presentes y futuras.

Palabras clave: Límites. Ecología. Responsabilidad. Justicia intergeneracional.

Introduction

This historical period in which we find ourselves has been defined as the century of limits. The idea of limits is the greatest concern of our time.

In cities there is limited space for building, so the tendency is to grow upwards, towards the skies, causing an increase in housing prices that pushes part of the population to the periphery. When territorial borders are violently crossed to occupy another country, the misery and devastating effects on the population have an impact not only along those borders but, inevitably, beyond those places. Women's freedoms and human rights are curtailed by the 'morality police' (the *Gasht-e Ershad*), who determine whether you wear the veil correctly according to the Islamic religious code, as was the case of Mahsa Amini in Iran.

At the same time, information and communication technologies channelled through devices have caused a metamorphosis in the new experience of time and space, in instant stimulation, in access to content within seconds, in the construction of parallel worlds and architectures that do not need centuries of planning and building. Biotechnology has opened the door to CRISPR gene editing and the hybridisation of machine and human, not to mention the fact that modern economic dynamics are pushing us towards so-called continuous growth with no intermediate or final stop.

Both the idea that we have transcended and exceeded many limits, and the perception of a new era without limits, are in one way or another linked to the human and, consequently, in thinking about humanity.

The focus of this work is to explore the idea of limits within certain scopes that are determined by and deeply concerned with them: those of intergenerational justice and a prospective ethics of the future.

Let's carry out a thought experiment: imagine a world in which the environment is degrading, drinking water is becoming scarce in more and more regions, numerous animal species are becoming extinct, and 'natural' disasters are occurring with greater intensity and duration, causing displacement of people, the disruption of supply chains and serious security problems. In this world, there are global inequalities – of health, economics, political agency – of rights in general. In such a world, it would seem inevitable that we carry obligations of justice.

This is, in fact, the world in which we live.

Justice has a lot to do with limits; we are faced on the one hand with scarce resources that need to be distributed and, on the other hand, with social, historical, and political injustices already instituted over time that should be corrected.

I am interested in bringing the idea of limits into the territory of justice – and in particular, to that of intergenerational justice – by articulating a concept of intergenerational responsibility as a necessary category for thinking the human in the current context of environmental crisis.

With this ambition in mind, I will first approach the idea of limits to then describe what I understand by intergenerational justice, to delve into the question of what this category of limits contributes, as well as how we might deal with it so that it responds to the demands of a justice that extends beyond the present moment.

I.

Giorgos Kallis, professor of ecological economics and advocate of degrowth, argues that the permeating paradigm, which has penetrated Western societies, is the Malthusian idea that there are biological and ecological boundaries imposed on us (Kallis, 2021). Considering the incessant growth of the population, it will never be possible to satisfy the needs of all people to lead dignified lives. In other

words, with the motto that reproductive capacity will always be greater than productive capacity, full equality can never be achieved because there will never be enough for all human beings.

What has been carried over into our times by the hand of capitalist logic is thus an irresolvable paradox: resources are limited and to satisfy our desires and combat inequality we have to grow without limits. This results in a state of permanent inequality. And appealing to our sense of injustice when faced with this very inequality is also what capitalism is all about: fighting inequality with the thesis of growth. But, Kallis warns us, 'growth is a particular necessity of capitalism', 'capitalism needs expansion and *expansion needs a frontier*' (Kallis, 2021, p. 175; emphasis added).

This is how the hegemonic discourse, through the idea of limits, gives rise to the expulsion and control over minorities and the most vulnerable people (the homeless, the undocumented, the poor).¹ But can there be a reframing of limits as a concept for building collective networks of support and care that are oriented towards including the vulnerable, not only now but also in the future?

Another sense of limits may appear here that gives rise to a different space of thought. This other sense must be nurtured because it promotes an idea of limits as a space of *possibility*, of thinking and acting where it seems that there can be no transformation, no reflection, no alternative and no future.

From this fracture with the hegemonic paradigm of limits emerges another disposition linked to another sensitivity, because one of the central issues of intergenerational responsibility is that of moral disposition and motivation to care about the quality and dignity of lives, not only of the immediate future generations, but also those of people of a more distant future.²

Alongside the freedom to carry out actions that determine the present and future life that democracy and techno-scientific advances allow us, we can also have the freedom to decide not to carry out certain actions. The capability for self-limitation, as a reflective and deliberative activity, gives fruit to a freedom that is thus intimately related to autonomy and justice.

This brings us to the central question: what happens when we set the limits ourselves?

It would suggest setting limits where we have the tendency not set them (argues Kallis) – such as in the spaces of artificial intelligence, biotechnology or production and consumption – and, of course, when they are not imposed on us by violence, coercion, or domination. It would also be an exercise in deliberation; agreements would have to be found, and priorities and sacrifices would have to be established.

However, this analysis leaves out a sense of limits necessary for thinking about the responsibility of an ethics that extends into the future; it ignores the fact that we are limited, finite, living and suffering beings: as Paul Ricoeur masterfully expressed, we are 'fragile beings' – a characterisation that, fortunately, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, now occupies a privileged space in the debate on contemporary justice.

Our ability to empathise is not infinite, nor is ours to imagine our future or to conceive of space and time beyond our experience, something that is significant for intergenerational ethics. It is also necessary to recognise our epistemic impotence – the limitations of the structural foundations on which we base our knowledge – which Kant already advanced in his examination of reason by seeing not only these limitations but also examining them and glimpsing what these were. It also seems that

¹ See, in this regard, Saskia Sassen's excellent work: *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2014.

² This is the so-called 'motivational problem' according to Dieter Birnbacher (BIRNBACHER, Dieter. What Motivates Us to Care for the (Distant) Future? In: GOSSERIES, Axel and MEYER, Lukas (Eds.), *Intergenerational Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 273-300).

a limit must be set that allows us to think slowly and critically, within a shared thoughtscape that is dominated not by noise but by comparative silence.

We could say, albeit somewhat redundantly, that our personal limits are already limited by external factors. It is not simply a question of transcending our limits like Agota Kristof's Claus and Lucas in *The Notebook* (2014), brothers who train by subjecting each other to all kinds of cruelty in order not to feel physical or emotional harm: in order not to suffer. What I am interested in underlining is that the substantive condition of being finite and fragile is essential to understanding how we deal with limits and responsibility.

For this reason, the idea of limits can be presented as a three-dimensional phenomenon. Firstly, there are limits as a *noun* – for example, the quantitative limits of what we can extract; a mineral such as cobalt in a certain territory has a finite yield. Secondly, we limit as a *verb* – a matter of placing and thinking about limits, especially, in this case, insofar as we are concerned about the kind of life that the next generations will have. And finally, *adjectivally*, we are limited beings. In other words: limits exist; we limit; and we are limited.

When limits are conceived in this expanded and emancipatory way, in this power to place limits while taking into account our finite nature, two further nuances can be introduced.

In this approximation, individual freedoms are fundamental – but I do not mean to advocate the neoliberal freedom to do whatever one wants. I understand this capability to situate limits not only (as Immanuel Kant pointed out) as being linked to the autonomy that emanates from freedom even if conditioned by natural laws – to self-determination in the face of external determinations – but also in the direction of a capability that cares not only about how human lives unfold and are in fact realised: it is substantively concerned with the degree of freedom to decide reasonably to live within limits. It is closer to Aristotle's *dynamis* than to an idea of freedom conceived through the prism of radical libertarianism. It has more to do with what Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum call *capabilities* than with a concept of freedom and constraint akin to a wild neoliberalism of preferences and 'anything goes'.

At the same time, I do not argue that we are not experiencing an unprecedented climate and ecological crisis and that we do not have supply problems: I consider these facts to be objective, as science continues to affirm with admirable stamina in the face of a damaging trend of denial. But I do understand that limits are relational; they do not exist except in relation to our desires, our needs, our imaginaries and our values; and furthermore, in relation to the other, to others, and to the otherness through which we construct ourselves.

For practical purposes, the objective of limiting global warming to below two degrees Celsius by 2100 – in comparison with pre-industrialisation levels – is a limit set by scientists, by climate experts. Since civilisation cannot exist in uninhabitable territories, we have to set a threshold above which there could be a collapse of civilisation (i.e., the loss of the ability as a society to maintain governance functions, and to meet basic needs such as food and water, and to secure human freedoms and capabilities).

Ultimately, this analysis is relevant because, at least in principle, we care about the kind of life we can lead in the immediate future, as well as the value and dignity of the lives of our descendants and future generations – from the point of view of the grave ecological crisis, insofar as we are concerned about the extreme adverse effects on human well-being and life on earth that climate change is bringing about (Steel *et al.*, 2022).

The most powerful retort to the idea of limits is that we cannot all limit ourselves in the same proportion. 'The ability to self-limit, in a society that pushes us to proceed without limit to fall into a condition of limits that are not the result of our choice, is a *privilege*' (Kallis, 2021, p. 162). The crucial

character of this possible objection, which I believe does not end up exempting us from deliberating on our own limits as a society, leads us irremediably to the questions of social and political economic structures, that is, the institutional framework – to how institutions are designed to meet the challenge of responsibility – but also, to how historical and global injustices affect the degree of autonomy and capacity that people have to question and decide on limits. This has obvious ethical and intergenerational implications.

Our aim is to consider the question of limits in relation to intergenerational justice, in the hope of providing us with some traversable paths that are at least worthy of discussion.

II.

Intergenerational justice begins from the difficult question of why we should care about the future: what the reasons are and how can we be held accountable. A theory of intergenerational justice should answer the question of how far obligations extend (a temporal requirement), where these obligations emerge from (justification or legitimacy) and what their properties are (political and moral requirements).³

Intergenerational justice is not merely an extension of justice between contemporaries, because from the fact that we do not live with the people of the future arises a new set of challenges. We have to reckon with the variable of uncertainty and also with the variable of power, *i.e.*, we have a power to influence the lives of the people of the future that also requires moral and political responsibility. Because our relationships are neither reciprocal nor synchronous, it is difficult to motivate action. The common sensibility is that *we in the present do not benefit from the future*.

Landing squarely on the axis of limits and intergenerational justice: what do we owe to the people of the future and what do we have to do in terms of responsibility? Or, what rights do the people who will live in the future have and how can we respect those rights?

Let's start from the assumption that we want to own cars, travel by plane and eat meat prolifically. We need a certain amount of goods and fossil fuels to be able to live such a lifestyle. If we limit ourselves to foreseeing just the next generation, considering the carbon footprint, we could decide to reduce the production and use of motor vehicles and/or limit air travel and/or transition to a meat-free diet. The hope is that the second generation can continue this responsibility and pass it on to the third generation. However, that second generation might instead decide to return to intensive livestock farming and remove all restrictions on the use of polluting motor vehicles, thereby failing to do their part. In addition to all this, there would be the question of what we have inherited, whether or not previous generations have fulfilled their duties of justice.

What emerges from this illustration is that we must leave to the next generation the institutional framework, the technology and the means, so that they can maintain a way of life and pass it on to future generations, something already brilliantly intuited by John Rawls in his *Theory of Justice* (1971). But also, he would add, we need practices of critique and deliberation on values that are not built overnight and that imply an investment over time.

Important implications arise in this regard: where do we set limits, for example on motor vehicles and their use, and can this be done on a national basis? Moreover – and this is a fundamental

³ I have dealt with this issue in depth in the volume 'Gómez, Irene. Deudas pendientes. La justicia entre generaciones. Madrid: Plaza y Valdés – CSIC, 2020.

aspect – the distribution of costs and benefits is anchored in a structural system that is already unfair and unequal. Should we urge vulnerable and poor countries to reduce pollution to the same extent as wealthy countries? Or to eat a certain kind of sustainable diet, to use public transport or to cycle, because rich countries decide to do that? It seems to be a rather westernised and privileged perspective. Even, provocatively, the very demand to take the time to question limits depends on where we are.

III.

We have become ‘responsible for everything and everyone’, as Paul Ricoeur says (1999, p. 50-51), to the point that the contours of responsibility have become blurred. This is probably because responsibility is a concept that has been well established in the legal framework since the 19th century, which began to be distinguished from other concepts in ethics in the second half of the 20th century and in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust.

Instead, Ricoeur opts for a prospective direction of this responsibility, which I find quite promising, and conceives it, as is not surprising in the philosopher’s work, from its etymological root to *respond*. To respond would be to answer an obligation, to ensure that something is going to be fulfilled.⁴

Responsibility is understood as a response to the fragility we have created by our actions in a scenario that is unprecedented and goes beyond the vulnerability of life as natural beings. This fragility is no longer limited to the natural course of biological systems, of living and dying beings; it is a state that we have brought about with the use of technoscience. Now, the other, the fragile, is the priority and what calls us to take responsibility. ‘Where human intervention creates power, it also creates new forms of fragility and, consequently, of responsibility’ (Ricoeur, 1997, p. 75).

This is not the legal sense in which the agent acts, commits damage and is guilty. Rather, in this prospective sense of responsibility it is possible to be responsible without being morally guilty, and therefore without having had the intention to cause harm (as opposed to imputability in the legal and juridical sense).

Responsibility acquires a *raison d’être* when faced with the call of the fragile. However, it is not that the original sense of finitude of the human being is abandoned for something fragile that is different from it, but rather that responsibility appears as a new category in light of the impact of the contemporary structure of human activity on a planetary level.

Fragility holds us responsible with this visage; the fragile obliges.

IV.

Let us return to the original purpose of this text and outline a proposal rooted in a responsibility that deals with limits from four directions.

The first stop corresponds to the question: to whom do we attribute responsibility? I understand this responsibility as a shared one (Young, 2011) that requires collective organisation. It means, as I pointed out previously, that we need first-rate institutions that look after the interests and capabilities of all. The random part of life (what Dworkin called ‘chosen or optional luck’) has to be thought through ethically and politically. This is so because it is not a matter of simple misfortune, but because there are unjust social structures that have to do with how we relate to each other and with the institutional

⁴ Note that the word ‘responsibility’ comes from the Latin ‘*responsum*’, the Latin form of the verb ‘to respond’. This is why I understand ‘responsibility’ as ‘the ability to respond’.

framework – the kind of life that we can conduct. Let us consider that institutional responsibility ends up being shared and that coordinated, collective and international action is necessary.⁵

At the individual level, responsibility is important, but a lack of motivation can appear when these obligations are almost asymptotic in nature, without precise limits or a determined course. I am therefore inclined to think that those who have more power must take more responsibility. We need only realise that, in addition, we are quite limited when it comes to setting limits for ourselves, and perhaps this is where we need to work collectively, overcoming those confines.

This leads neatly to considering a second element. Shared action and responsibility demand democratic, coordinated, international, personal and institutional commitments. They require an ethical attitude and a shared political project. This implies that it is not just public policy, but *politics*. Moving justice into this area of shared responsibility that looks to the future also appears, then, as a result of the contemporary diagnosis of depoliticisation. In this spirit, climate and ecological challenges, and reflection on limits should be democratised beyond scientism, given that they are facts that have profound ethical and political consequences, and are therefore not simply objective and neutral data. Collective reflection on limits should go beyond the small groups of experts and instead be situated, *à la* Hannah Arendt, in the public forum: in politics. This will certainly require the involvement and participation of citizens, education and deep democracy – government by discussion, as John Stuart Mill understood it, or the public reason of which John Rawls spoke.

The third stage of the proposal would be that, as responsibility is spatial and temporal, there are limits that are the result of compromises made by previous generations.⁶ Such agreements and covenants can and should be subject to revision, but when it comes to eliminating old agreements or implementing new ones, a good yardstick for distinguishing legitimate demands from non-legitimate ones would be to discern whether they come from powerful, dominant groups and whether they go against the common good. However, we must also consider that we need to think long-term via political imagination, because the effects of our actions have an impact that is not limited to the passing of the baton to contiguous generations.

If we change environmental policies every five or ten years, we may find that in the long run we have fewer options and capabilities to lead dignified lives. For example, if we too frequently revisit and potentially reverse decisions on aspects such as natural parks, species conservation or levels of contamination, it will be difficult to maintain our goals across generations.

The fourth aspect of this proposal is that this ethics of limits is also an ethics of care. Intergenerational care is an exercise in democracy, but also in freedom; in a caring democracy that is based on a personal and public duty, understanding that care is a part of justice:

Making care a political objective means attacking the vices that weigh down public service and make administrations unfit to fulfil their most important mission, that of caring for and helping the neediest citizens. It means designing structures to redistribute the obligations of caring for each other. It also means taking the so-called 'ecological transition' seriously and making care for the 'common home' a sustained and prioritised concern (Camps, 2021, p. 14).

⁵ Therein lies the challenge: the idea that we do not have an international social contract, thus rendering transnational justice impossible, abounds in the literature.

⁶ For more about historical injustices, see the work of Janna Thompson, *Taking Responsibility for the Past. Reparation and Historical Injustice*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.

V.

In conclusion, through these questions and their possible answers I have tried to articulate a productive axis between the idea of limits and intergenerational justice.

The idea of limits raises fundamental ethical and political questions for us in thinking about what is essential in the lives of individuals and how to build a responsibility that cares for the well-being of present and future generations.

Asking ourselves where we set the limits is a crucial task for our common project of intergenerational care.

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