

## Book review: Livia Ester Luzzatto: Intergenerational Challenges and Climate Justice - Setting the Scope of Our Obligations

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# Livia Ester Luzzatto: Intergenerational Challenges and Climate Justice: Setting the Scope of Our Obligations

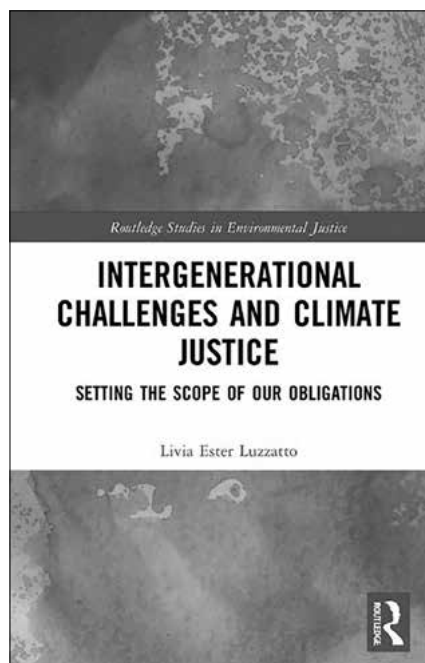
Reviewed by Zachariah Taylor

At a time when the severe impact of human actions on the Earth's climate are unmistakably taking hold, a contribution such as Livia Ester Luzzatto's to the field of intergenerational justice could not be more urgent. Luzzatto's career researching the intersection between climate change, ethics, and business challenges and working as a sustainability consultant has thus far aimed at dealing with this challenge. Entitled *Intergenerational Challenges and Climate Justice*, Luzzatto's monograph endeavours to outline the scope for a theory of climate justice. More specifically, the author considers the extent to which as well as the reason why present generations have distinct obligations to future generations, and in what ways these future oriented commitments could form the basis of an intergenerational theory of climate justice. Luzzatto's account primarily focuses on justice as opposed to beneficence, and she considers collective agents instead of individuals as duty-bearers. In adopting an action-centred methodology, Luzzatto hopes to overcome the typical objections raised against numerous theories of intergenerational justice. The proposed methodology takes into consideration not only intergenerational actions themselves and their potential outcomes, but also the presumptions underlying such actions.

The central contention advanced by Luzzatto consists of three desiderata. An account of the scope of climate justice must be able to i) accommodate uncertainties surrounding future climate change related risks and mitigating activities; ii) be able to respond to climate change as a complex problem of justice; iii) include each future person for their own sake as an end in themselves (16-18). Accordingly, the structure of the monograph follows these three key requirements.

Before getting into the details, it should be noted that the book is positioned within the literature of intergenerational justice and moral theory more broadly. As a deontological account of the scope of climate justice, Luzzatto sets the argument against universal consequentialist accounts of justice; in particular, against classical utilitarianism. This deontological stance circumvents the non-identity objection as well as the non-existence argument.

Dealing with the first desideratum, the uncertainty of climate change after setting the scene, Luzzatto highlights two conditions for an account of scope to be able to deal with uncertainty: i) it must take "each risk-imposition and its justification as the subject of moral evaluation" and (ii) these risks must be understood to give rise to obligations of climate justice if they are both "foreseeable by a reasonable agent at the time of acting, and expose others



to risks to their autonomy-relevant conditions" (25). This argument highlights the difference between our obligations to deal with uncertain risks (about which it is difficult to assign probabilities) and what she describes as 'foreseeable' risks (risks with more easily calculable probabilities). To demonstrate this difference Luzzatto employs two examples, that of an asteroid collision and that of the melting of the West Antarctic ice sheet. While we have reason to believe that an asteroid could collide with Earth and cause a 'doomsday' scenario, Luzzatto writes that it is hard to assign it an exact probability, nor to calculate if our attempts to mitigate such a risk would be effective if it came to pass. In the case of the Antarctic ice sheet on the other hand, while the exact likelihood of it melting entirely remains unclear, it is clear that our actions are increasing the risk of it melting. As we have knowledge of our actions and their consequences in the latter

case, Luzzatto argues that we can assign responsibility and fault to current generations, but not for an eventual asteroid collision where there are more uncertainties.

Luzzatto makes clear and careful justifications of her analytical choices in the book when rejecting consequentialist accounts of climate change for being both over- and under-inclusive. She considers them overinclusive in that they require individuals to consider all of their actions as possibly inducing risk, meaning they cannot adequately distinguish where there is a duty of justice. On the other hand, these accounts (specifically classical utilitarianism in this case) are considered underinclusive for their inability to effectively distinguish between issues of moral relevance to future people. Luzzatto argues that in undertaking actions which contribute to foreseeable risks, the risk-imposing agent presupposes a greater importance of their interests than those of the (future) risk-exposed other. This presupposition is an issue of moral relevance. In addition to being action-centred, then, an account of the scope of an extension of a theory of justice to intergenerational climate change must also be normatively accurate in identifying morally relevant features of our actions.

The second requirement for the scope of an intergenerational theory of climate justice is its ability to acknowledge and adequately account for climate change as a complex problem of justice. In the third chapter, Luzzatto invokes the contrasting views of Dale Jamieson and Stephen Gardiner concerning morality and climate change. On the one hand, Jamieson argues that current moral values and concepts are incapable of dealing with global intergenerational problems such as climate change. Gardiner, on the other

hand, takes a more moderate view than Jamieson, stating that the problem lies not in a lack of terms, but our inability to access the relevant norms of climate ethics. Despite differences in their conclusions, both emphasise the limitations of current moral theories to respond appropriately to climate change.

Luzzatto tends to concur with Gardiner and continues a similar vein of argument. She discusses intergenerational actions (IGAs) as the empirical basis for the proposed account of scope, as well as going on to propose a requirement for coherence and a normative requirement for intergenerational obligations. These requirements both equally involve the application of present values and concepts onto future agents. The coherence requirement stipulates that, because our actions rely upon the assumption that future people are agents, we have an obligation to acknowledge them as such when considering climate justice. Adding to this, the normative requirement states that “insofar as we are committed to basic norms of justice requiring equal respect for agents and their conditions of autonomy, we must extend these entitlements to future agents presupposed by our actions” (68).

The final desideratum Luzzatto establishes for her theory is the inclusion of future people into the scope of an intergenerational climate justice for their own sake, as ends in themselves. In order to argue for this criterion she employs Samuel Scheffler’s view on the value of the concept of a ‘collective afterlife’ for *present* people as a complimentary contrast. For Scheffler, present generations are actually reliant on future generations to provide sustained meaning to their current projects. In other words, the existence of future people, and present people attending to the interests of future people, is conceived as being for the interest and benefit of current people. Whilst Luzzatto does not directly reject Scheffler’s view, the inclusion of future people in the account of scope of this monograph is justified by their entitlement to conditions of autonomy for their own sake. By emphasising “the equal moral value of future people as ends in themselves” (82), Luzzatto differs from Scheffler by being attuned to the foreseeable interests of future generations and taking stock of such interests in intergenerational activities. The overall importance of including future people within the scope of climate justice as ends in themselves cannot be overstated. Potentially unjust future scenarios can be avoided in this sense and any prevailing paternalism incurred by intergenerational concerns can be overcome.

The book concludes with the account of scope laid down according to these desiderata, addressing some counter objections and further considerations.

There are some concerns that arise from the text. Luzzatto somewhat hastily purports the ability of her account to extend both to near and remote future generations without providing much argument in support of this claim. It seems strange, moreover, to leave until the end of the book the question of which generations the account actually focuses on, given that this is a fundamental aspect of scope for any intergenerational theory.

On the issue of reasonable expectations placed upon collective agents to foresee risk, I wonder whether it would be useful to expect more than just the mere minimum from them. The collective agents discussed in Luzzatto’s analysis are typically either authorities on climate change or are in a position of power, such that they have the capacity to influence climate systems much more drastically than other agents. Many such collective agents who fall under the purview of Luzzatto’s analysis include those with vested interests in denying climate change out-right or funding research so as to sow doubt about the threat and prevent actions against

their interests. What is more, those same collective agents with interests in perpetuating actions which damage the climate have historically acted in direct opposition to the expectation of foreseeing, despite the clear threat that their actions imply. I would suggest a stronger commitment to the scope of intergenerational climate justice than simply a minimal grasp of reasonable expectations and duties.

Whilst the manner in which Luzzatto’s account can deal with future uncertainty is commendable, current projections of global heating are already foreboding. With expected warming set to exceed the ‘safe’ 1.5°C threshold, it is evident that serious mitigation strategies are needed immediately. And that foregoes any need for reasonable foresight. This is already a confirmed, manifest fact. Though somewhat uncertainty is inherent in the discussion of the future, as well as the discussion of anticipated future impacts of climate change, some things are certain. Immediate mitigative climate action is absolutely imperative.

Another query arises at the beginning of the third chapter. Perhaps Luzzatto too readily dismisses Dale Jamieson’s strong case for the inadequacy of current values and moral concepts in dealing with climate-related ethical issues. Many of the current moral perspectives on solutions to climate change are imbued with the same logic as the systems that continue to perpetuate and exacerbate the climate crisis. The underlying assumptions of neo-classical economics as well as the dominance of market-oriented and profit-driven economics, for example, only continue to perpetuate moral systems which have few qualms about the detrimental impact of human action on the environment. It seems like a self-defeating strategy to passively accept the very moral concepts and values that contributed to the current dire state of our planet’s climate. Jamieson’s suggestions amount to strong IGAs directed at positively impacting societal norms and attitudes to better deal with climate change. On the other hand, passive or uncritical acceptance of values which reflect the status quo of apathetic climate concern constitute weak IGAs. Despite her general acceptance of current moral frameworks, Luzzatto’s call to redefine moral theories of justice specifically to avoid the worst effects of climate change and attain intergenerational climate justice is praiseworthy.

Finally, it must be noted that a concluding statement in the work, which claims that the “novel methodology allows the account to overcome the intergenerational climate challenge” stands in perplexing contrast to the rest of the book, since Luzzatto at other points regularly stresses her acute awareness of the limitations of the account (126). The action-centred methodology demonstrates promise, but it remains a stretch to claim that it can singlehandedly overcome the intergenerational climate challenge. This concluding statement would make more sense if it continued in the self-aware and mediated tone of the rest of the book and instead described how an action-centred methodology allows this account of scope to begin to develop a theory of justice that could adequately address the intergenerational climate challenge.

Aside from the concerns highlighted above, this book is a thoughtful and timely contribution to the philosophical discipline of intergenerational justice.

Luzzatto’s attempt to answer the pressing question about the scope of our obligations to future generations according to a theory of climate justice is largely successful. The book is concise and accurate, defining a vital but often presumed or neglected aspect of the concerted efforts to take action towards mitigating the threats of global heating and drastic climate change.

I wonder whether the author has ambitions, now that some elements of scope have been skillfully garnered, to work towards further developing a fully-fledged theory of climate justice? The need for such a contribution is certainly pressing.

*Livia Ester Luzzatto (2022): Intergenerational Challenges and Climate Justice – Setting the Scope of Our Obligations. London/New York: Routledge. 152 Pages. ISBN: 9781032193779. Price: £104 (hardback).*