

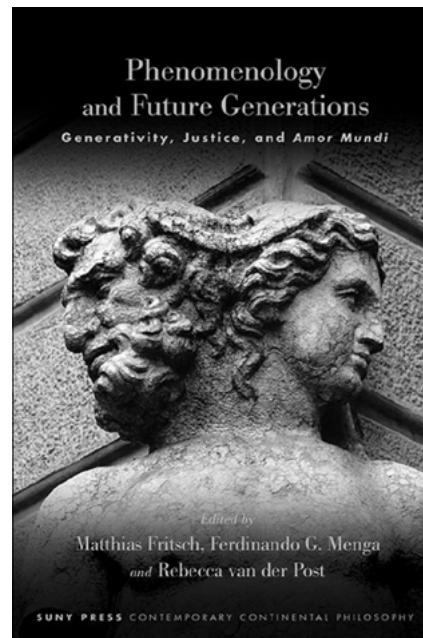
# Matthias Fritsch / Ferdinando G. Menga / Rebecca van der Post (eds.): Phenomenology and future generations: generativity, justice, and amor mundi

*Reviewed by Jason Adolph*

At first glance, the study of first-person consciousness and experiences seems removed from the practical demands of intergenerational environmental justice. How can phenomenology, a theoretical branch of philosophy, speak to urgent global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution? As this anthology demonstrates, phenomenology offers a distinctive lens for rethinking responsibility across time – revealing how our existence is interwoven with past and future generations of humans and other earthlings.

*Phenomenology and Future Generations*, edited by Matthias Fritsch, a professor in philosophy, Ferdinando Menga, a professor of legal philosophy and philosophy of politics, and Rebecca van der Post, PhD candidate in interdisciplinary humanities, engages with phenomenology to explore how ethical and political responsibilities towards future generations can be justified. Taking as its point of departure the climate crisis and the responsibility of handing over a healthy planet to future generations, the authors write at a time when the connection between generations seems to be disappearing. Presentism and individualism appear to dominate contemporary policymaking. Thus, the book's core aim is to examine how to reconfigure intergenerational relations through phenomenological concepts. Ten philosophy professors from Europe, Japan, and North America contribute to this discussion, which is centred on three thematic sections. The first section examines the concept of generativity to establish relations between generations that demand intergenerational sensibilities and responsibilities. The second part examines the dynamics of political responsibility across generations and how these dependencies and responsibilities can be indefinitely extended into the future without overburdening the present. The third section turns to relations between the self and the world, humans and the earth, humans and other earthlings, and how this love for the world creates a responsibility for present generations to pass on a world in which future generations can live meaningful lives.

In the opening chapter, Mario Vergani critiques Rawls and Parfit for treating generations as discrete and anonymous entities. Thus, they overlook the *inter* in intergenerational justice. He claims that generativity – the ongoing process by which life is transmitted through birth and broken by death – creates both continuity and rupture between past, present, and future generations. Thus, he also assumes that there is a plurality of generations in the present.



Vergani calls this an ethical time. The unforeseeability of future generations makes them genuinely 'being a new future' rather than 'extensions of the present'. Because individuals 'live on' in others after death, responsibility toward future others is responsibility toward the continuation of one's own existence. Vergani's concluding move is an ontological inversion: temporality stems from historicity, and historicity from generativity. Generativity is the irreducible trace that birth leaves in history, and because it always escapes totalisation, it grounds ethics open to the future.

Building on the future's unforeseeability, Bernhard Waldenfels frames responsibility to future generations in Chapter 2 as a phenomenological response to alterity. Referring to the ideas of Levinas, the future's ineliminable otherness calls us to respond – one that cannot be refused, since even

silence is a form of answering. This response is necessarily indirect or representative, because the future other is not yet present. For Waldenfels, generativity both connects and separates overlapping generations, both those alive and those currently not. This makes ethics fundamentally responsive and creative. The face of the future can neither be separated from, nor reduced to, today's living faces, since our lifeworld draws on the past and extends into the future. Thus, responsibility toward future generations is about leaving them a world in which they have the freedom to influence their own future.

Continuing with the concept of generativity, in Chapter 3, Burkhard Liebsch applies generativity to debates on intergenerational conflict, arguing that such discourse forgets the "prior generativity by virtue of which each one of us lives *on the basis of others and in relation towards others*" (80). To Liebsch generativity means a form of inter-temporal life that stems from another before one's birth and towards another after one's death. For him, present generations have a responsibility towards future generations to render the lives given in a liveable, acceptable, or affirmable way. This responsibility extends beyond the horizons of individuals who presently exist. Thus, the chapter concludes that the promise of birth extends beyond one's own time and, thus, depends for its realisation on others and on legal, institutional, social, and political conditions that themselves extend across history and generations, offering future generations leeway to explore their otherness.

In Chapter 4, turning towards responsibilities to future generations, Ferdinando Menga explores how future generations can be politically represented. He argues that representation in today's

democratic state is tied to the right to be considered human, which is denied to future people. Traditional ethical theories, he claims, sustain a “presentistic semantic” (113) that fails to motivate a morally future-oriented responsibility. For Menga, fulfilling intergenerational responsibility requires an ethico-anthropological revolution capable of bringing a new configuration of ethical subjectivity and moral motivation. Drawing on Levinas’s notion of the decentred moral subject, constituted by the command of responsibility arising from its exposure to alterity, Menga develops a future-oriented ethics. He concludes by proposing a legal-philosophical model of political representation as responsive substitution for future others, linking this to natality as the source of political renewal and continuity.

Continuing the engagement with Levinas’s the Other, Chapter 5 by Eva Buddeberg argues that the growing scope of the future demands moral considerations that transcend our immediate context. Building on Levinas, she shows how exposure to the Others in asymmetrical ethical relations universalises responsibility, extending it to all humanity, including those yet to come. We could be them, and they could be us. Yet Levinas offers no institutional answer to the incorporation of responsibility towards future generations. Buddeberg therefore turns to Apel’s and Habermas’s discourse ethics, which expand temporal horizons and embed intergenerational responsibility within democratic and legal practice. Institutions, she concludes, must remain open and adaptable to future generations’ needs.

Expanding on responsibility towards future generations, in Chapter 6, Hiroshi Abe examines Hans Jonas’s future ethics, focusing on responsibility toward the idea of ‘the human’ rather than specific future individuals. He argues that for Jonas to exercise responsibility towards future generations requires drawing on both the past and the present to preserve humanity’s continuity. This duty entails keeping the horizon of possibility open so that each generation can reshape the image of the human to their liking. Present generations thus bear a responsibility to enable the next generation’s freedom and an indirect obligation to sustain the chain of responsibility *ad infinitum* (161).

Continuing the exploration of intergenerational connectedness, Chapter 8 by Matthias Fritsch draws on critical theory to examine natal alienation – the forced separation of individuals from their social, historical and cultural context. Fritsch argues that agency is rooted in an intergenerational nexus, linking birth (natality) to past generations and death (mortality) to future ones. This non-linear temporality means the dead and unborn are “*with us and of us*” (188), challenging presentism and modern accounts of individualism. Fritsch employs critical theory to expose how presentism and natal alienation undermine agency, and to set forth a temporal ethics that reconnects individuals with their intergenerational contexts. Responsibility, he concludes, is not toward future generations as a collective but toward enabling future others to fulfil their own duties. While Fritsch offers a compelling critique of presentism, his account remains conceptual mainly, leaving open how these insights translate into institutional or political practice.

The final chapter by Kelly Oliver engages with Hannah Arendt’s *amor mundi*. It distinguishes between the earth, which is the necessity for our existence, and a world, which is the creation of our social interactions. Building on the assumption that plurality is necessary for worldliness, Oliver argues that we must enlarge this understanding to include other earthlings because they are indispensable to human existence. Because of the special bond we

share with other earthlings, she asks what happens when we consider ourselves belonging to the earth and imagine responsibility not only to humanity but also to the earth and all its creatures. Oliver proposes an earth (intergenerational) ethics based on a love of the earth, which commits us to an earthbound existence and to fellow earthlings. The responsibility is to avow our *amor mundi* so that it is in profound love of the earth that future worlds continue to be born. She, however, does not extend Levinas’s thought by examining how the alterity of non-human beings might impose moral obligations on us.

In general, the book is a valuable source not only for outlining the responsibilities that current generations have towards future generations, but also towards the planet. The anthology is technically demanding, assuming familiarity with different streams of thought from Husserl, Heidegger, Jonas, and, especially, Levinas. Non-phenomenologists might find it rather difficult to connect these different trains of thought to fully grasp the arguments.

Nonetheless, *Phenomenology and Future Generations* makes a significant contribution by reconfiguring intergenerational ethics through phenomenology’s insights into time, alterity, generativity, natality, mortality, and responsibility. Its core thesis – that generations are interwoven rather than isolated age cohorts – offers a compelling alternative to presentist politics and contractual frameworks of intergenerational justice. By grounding responsibility in the temporal structure of existence, the volume moves beyond specific obligations and argues that justice consists in enabling future Others to shape their own possibilities. Drawing on Levinas, several chapters emphasise the asymmetrical nature of this responsibility: it is not reciprocal but arises from the Other’s ethical demand, which precedes autonomy and choice. This shift from ego-centred phenomenology (cf. Husserl and Heidegger) toward an ethics of alterity is one of the book’s most original contributions.

It should not go unnoticed that the anthology’s goal of providing knowledge “capable of informing social praxis and of finding political, legal, and institutional expression into the future” (3) remains underdeveloped. While Menga and Buddeberg gesture toward institutional openness and responsive representation, these proposals are theoretical and lack engagement with existing models of intergenerational representation, such as those in Germany, Wales, Finland, Canada or Hungary. Greater attention to concrete mechanisms would enhance its practical contributions. Ultimately, the anthology adds a piece to the ethical map of moral arguments against presentism. It sparks discussions why and what responsibility present generations have toward future generations and the planet. With this the book achieved the continued relevance of the phenomenological tradition for solving modern problems. It is a relevant read for philosophers interested in how phenomenological concepts can be adapted to contemporary challenges, such as environmental justice and climate change.

*Fritsch, Matthias / Menga, Ferdinando G. / Post, Rebecca van der (eds.) (2024): Phenomenology and Future Generations. New York: State University of New York Press. 273 Pages. ISBN 9781438499499. Price: Hardcover \$99, Paperback \$35.*