

## How to relate ourselves to future people: justice or love?

**By Rupert Read**

*Love sees what is invisible.* Simone Weil.

*When love is gone, there's always justice.*

*And when justice is gone, there's always force...* Laurie Anderson, "O Superman".

*At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality...* Che Guevara.

*Green House* aims to stand with the oppressed of the world, against the system that oppresses them, with the dispossessed, with the victims of colonialism, with the new slaves, with all those whose suffering and dispossession are the faces of disaster triumphant upon the surface of this Earth.

For the most dispossessed of all are the ones who have not even arrived yet on our Earth. And the worst colonialism of all, arguably, is the present-day-human total-colonisation of the bio-world. We are enslaving non-human animals.<sup>1</sup> We are, in effect, enslaving future generations.

In other words: isn't it those who we don't see at all who are the most oppressed? Who are even more invisible to we members of the privileged world even than are the masses in Bangladesh, or the Palestinians, or the *maquiladora* workers, or the world's slumdweller, the wretched of the Earth who we do and must seek to defend and to stand beside?

I am referring in particular to those who I call *future people*. The people, whoever they are, who will exist but don't yet. They are kept separate from us by a barrier more formidable than any fence: time. They are more utterly dependent upon us even than the world's most desperate refugees.

And we are treating them even worse than we are treating the multitudes, right now. Many billions of future people, unless we restore this world and stabilise its climate, are going to have lives so nasty, brutish and short that current conditions will look comparatively rosy. And, of course: many children who could be born <sup>ii</sup> will never exist at all, unless the course of our civilisation changes. They will *en masse* face the ultimate deprivation: being deprived, completely, of life itself.

How ought we to think of our relationship to - our responsibility for - future people? Is this pressing question (a question pressing all the harder in the wake of the recent failure to adequately safeguard those future people, at Copenhagen and since) essentially a question of *justice*, in turn conceived of (as it is, under liberalism and neoliberalism) as *fairness*?<sup>iii</sup> The key rallying cry at Copenhagen and Cancun and Durban was, "What we do we want? Climate justice! When do we want it? Now!" But; What if it's *not enough* to call for justice?

Let me explain...

I am not one of those who believes that it makes sense to say that the Earth has rights. Frankly, to virtually everyone who isn't already signed up to our agenda to the teeth, it just sounds silly. It is one thing to talk about animals having rights. That almost

works. But to talk about trees having rights, or rocks - it just turns people off. It makes one sound like a New Age nut.

Because it doesn't make sense to talk about the Earth being *oppressed*. You can't oppress a rock. You can't even oppress a rock that has plants growing on it, nor oppress the plants. I said in my opening paragraph that the problem was the excessive, unsustainable extent to which humans are colonising the planetary life-world. But this isn't a problem because it '*oppresses*' the ecosphere. It is a problem because it degrades and destabilises it. And that in turn is a problem because the sentient beings that utterly depend upon it being resilient and rich are thereby imperilled.<sup>iv</sup> We are imperilled. Our non-human brethren are imperilled. And future people are imperilled. And the shame of it is that the latter two categories of beings don't even have a say in the matter.

Rights-talk and justice-talk are best suited to beings that can *claim* those rights, that can fight a case in a court of law or such-like. The great irony of them is, then: that those most in need of the kind of protection that rights or justice offer are least well-placed to be able to claim those protections. The more one needs protecting, the less one is the kind of autonomous being that/who is well-placed to claim a right or call for justice.

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<sup>i</sup> I am not going to address the case of non-human animals in this Gas, though it is a very serious one and one that parallels the case of future people. I address / lay out the parallel (in some detail) in my *A new covenant with all beings*, forthcoming.

<sup>ii</sup> This does *not* imply that any time there is an individual potential child that it is better that it be born than not. I mean to imply, rather, only that it is an utterly grave crime, a wildly expanded version of genocide, to prevent the future existence of human beings altogether. It is a fallacy of composition to think that the terribleness of species-suicide / of multiple-genocide / of complete ecocide can be resolved down into individual decisions not to bear children or to have abortions, etc. . For those decisions are made *in the context of human life going on*. The very context that is (would be) removed by a general failure to save the future.

<sup>iii</sup> See n.v, below.

<sup>iv</sup> Anne Chapman (*Environmental Values*, vol.16, no. 4, Nov 2007; pp. 433-445) suggests that what we really, foundationally love or care about is 'the world', a human version of nature. But I think that such care/love must devolve onto sentient beings: basically, onto non-human animals and ourselves, present and future. When people talk of 'making the world a better place' it is ultimately these that they have in mind, I would suggest.

This implies that, as one moves away from social movements that are made up of the oppressed, in the direction of the truly voiceless (e.g. future people, perhaps non-human animals, perhaps nature itself), one moves away from a field wherein rights-talk or justice-talk naturally fits.

The line of thinking that I am pursuing here is three-fold. It is: (1) That we have an absolute responsibility to other beings (I mean sentient beings), PRESENT AND FUTURE; we owe them our all; (2) That our relation to these beings needs to be primarily one of love and care, not of 'rights' or 'justice', which are concepts that only really fully apply among potential equals who can make claims against each other; and (3) That just genuinely loving future people (and present and future animals) would be enough to save the whole ecosystem - because we creatures are utterly dependent on that ecosystem being functional and relatively intact.

Many readers of this thinkpiece may well grant me (3). It is (1) that needs underlining (as I seek to do below), and emotionally realising. And it is (2) that people tend to need *convincing* of. In the remainder of this piece, I will try further to convince you of it.

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Future generations – future people - are collectively our children. We give birth to them. They are even more powerless than the newest new-born baby. They cannot entreat, nor even scream, let alone return the gaze. They are dependent upon us for every aspect of their life-chances: For we cause them of course to come into being,

but moreover, and ever-increasingly, in this ‘anthropocene’ age, we cause their *conditions* to be what they are, too.

What is fair is decided in a negotiation, or in something like a court. In the course of the negotiation or the case, one deploys principles to make one’s case. These principles, ideally, secure a reasonable agreement

Similarly; there is no fairness, no genuine equity, even within the present, between two utter unequals. Treating one’s baby merely ‘fairly’ is abominable. Yes, technically, babies are already our competitors for certain resources; but to think of them primarily under this sign is an outrageous defilement, an abject failure. Dividing food or warmth or shelter or whatever it might be ‘fairly’, in such a circumstance: this ought to be a matter of profound shame. Any parent who is merely ‘fair’ to their newborns ought to have the baby removed from them. Such ‘fairness’ is an invitation to bad faith; because there is no actual ‘contract’ here, no agreement, no negotiation: just whatever you decide ‘is’ fair. But it is hardly fair for fairness to be a matter of the utterly powerful dictating to the utterly powerless: that is, as I say, an invitation to bad faith, a desperately and dangerously strong temptation. It is the rankest idealism to pretend otherwise; to pretend that one is likely to be fair, when one is indelibly more powerful than the other.

So: Fairness is not what is most to the point, here. *We need to rely on something stronger than fairness. Justice is not enough.*<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>v</sup> I am more or less equating justice and fairness, because the paradigm I have in mind in relation to justice is John Rawls’s theory of ‘justice as fairness’. I think it is legitimate to take this as a paradigm, because it remains the dominant force within broadly ‘liberal’ political philosophy, which is (sadly) the dominant paradigm within contemporary politics. In my *A new covenant with all beings*, I will explicate justice more fully, drawing for instance on Rai Gaita to show how justice actually goes beyond Rawls, beyond fairness, to include (for instance) the need for genuine respect. But even that, I will argue there, does not go far enough: does not go as far as love and care do.

What is stronger than fairness, deeper than justice?

Well; One must *love* one's newborn child. It must be second-nature – first-nature – to treat it as generously as one can. Or indeed to treat it as not separate from oneself at all.

The same is true of future people. The very same. The analogy is so direct, it is barely even worth calling an analogy: future generations *are* our children.<sup>vi</sup> The case is in fact even stronger: if it is true that we must love our new-borns, then *a fortiori* we must love our descendants, the future ones, the next generations. Because, as one might put it: they are still more profoundly our dependents (our children) than our own dependents (our children) are: for they are *nothing* without our love and care. Without that care, they will in many many cases not even get the chance to exist...

Part (though only one part) of my point here is that gradually all future generations tend literally to become our descendants. The wonderful thing about family trees as they move forward in time is that they become ever larger. The further you go into the future, the closer you are to being related to – *kin* to - everyone who is alive. And here we can run a kind of argument by mathematical induction. Do you care as much for your children's children as for your children? (In fact, of course, we may note in passing and with a wry smile that many grand-parents find that they love their

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<sup>vi</sup> An important difference: The love in the case of future generations is all one-way, not (yet) reciprocated. But this hardly rules it out: One can (in our ordinary language) love a place; one can certainly love a kitten or a tortoise; one can, as many of us know, love someone who does not return one's love; one can love God even if one hears nothing back from Her.

grandchildren *more* than their own children!) It would be strange and shameful not to. Press onto their children in turn, and so in ad infinitum.

But of course, the future generations in question don't need to be one's own children at all. The new-born child presses a claim for care upon anyone and everyone, no matter what their filial relation or otherwise might be or whether indeed one has any children 'of one's own' at all. (This is the point made by the powerful film, *Children of Men*, about a dystopian future in which there are no children being born at all: the meaning of the film's superficially odd title is that any children born are children of all of us, of men as well as women. The film charts the journey of its central protagonist from a situation of cynicism to a situation of total care for a unique new-born child that is not 'his'.)

To speak a little poetically, and aware of the importance of being clear then that what I am about to say, if taken literalistically, would be false:<sup>vii</sup> Future generations are crying out, soundlessly and out of sight, for as complete care on our part as we can render them...

The point I am making can be put in this way, and put in this way I think it almost certainly true, and profoundly so: There is no chance, *no* real chance, of our descendants inheriting a planet habitable for civilisation, unless we love them. It is not *enough* to seek to be fair/just. We are going to have to open our hearts to the people of the future as we open our hearts to a new-born. We are going to actually have to care about them enough, for instance, to be genuinely willing to sacrifice the fripperies and baubles that decorate our dwellings, our lives, etc., and which are being produced at

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<sup>vii</sup> It is important to be clear about this, because otherwise one will start to forget that, for the precise reason I have argued, *we* have to do all the work, with regard to future people, *they* being entirely powerless...

the cost of the future. It would be truly terrible, not to do this, as (on a business-as-usual model) seems likely to be the case.

It may be very demanding, to demand love. It may leave us with little hope that we can do enough, that we can save them. But it is better to try to do something that would be enough, than not even to try (to do enough).

At this point I should consider a possible objection. It might be said against me that one's ethical commitment to the oppressed, to drought victims, to panda bears and to unborn future children is instead need not be an expression of *love*. We might imagine such an objector continuing: "Mine is a less passionate relationship. I care about all of these simply because not to do so would be ethically inconsistent. For me, as soon as one entertains the idea that one has some moral obligations to strangers, one needs to apply this to *all* strangers, including unborn ones. Similarly, if one determines that nature has some sort of ethical value, one needs to be consistent in how one applies this principle in *all* one's actions. But this isn't love. I do not love the beneficiaries of aid programmes in Palestine, nor flood victims in the Philippines, in the same way as I do/would love my child. Nor do I love voles or coral. And nor do I love unborn future generations."

For sure: not in just the same way as you do (or would) love your child. But: in a way, I want to suggest, that is *family-related*<sup>viii</sup> to that way... Different kinds of love are still love...

Or, if it is the word "love" that is leading you astray here -- leading you to think that you disagree with me -- then drop it: substitute (say) the word "care".

I put it to you that you DO care about and for voles, and coral-reefs, and about/for future people. I think that we tend to shy away from acknowledging such

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<sup>viii</sup> In Wittgenstein's sense: see 65-7 of his *Philosophical Investigations*.



care (such love), because it makes us (feel) vulnerable. It doesn't fit in well with our society's ultimate aspiration: to be 'cool' (A truly terrible aspiration: when what we should aspire to is: *warmth*. The appeal of 'cool' is related, I want to claim, to ours being an individualist capitalist society where the rule of law and the politico-cultural pre-eminence of justice trumps and occludes the warmth of human relations.).

As my epigraph from Che has it: it is love that lies at the root. Justice will not bear the burden: it doesn't explain why it *matters* to us to be just, or fair. Ultimately, we want to be just because we care about the other. Putting all the emphasis on justice risks letting the undergirding care/love fade away. That is what is happening in our 'liberal' polities. It will be fatal to the future, if we let the process go on.

This is a critically-important point. Seeking justice for the future ones doesn't do the trick, because, if justice is cold and merely 'fair', it won't be enough. We need to ask, as I just have, where a feeling or belief of responsibility, or the *will* to justice, *come from*. My submission is that they come ultimately from care/love; and that only if they do so will they stretch far enough beyond the kind of 'rational' fair-shares discourse that I critiqued in and through my example of how parents feel for their children, above, to do what is needful. Something exceptional, not just business-as-usual with some added green bells and whistles. Justice is a chilly virtue; future people need something warmer, richer, deeper.

I do not, then, see what I am writing as unwisely utopian: on the contrary, it is the standard pro-justice/fairness agendas that are utopian, inasmuch as they pretend that fairness is maybe going to be enough. (And here, I am echoing the philosopher Rai Gaita: "[P]lacing the weight that I do on our humanity and on love rather than on, say,

the obligated acknowledgement of rights, is more hardheaded than the longing to make secure to reason what reason cannot secure, all the while whistling in the dark.”<sup>ix</sup>) There is no real chance, I believe, of our taking significant enough action fast enough to save the future, if we do not love the future ones with all our hearts, as we love our loved ones (starting, but *not* ending, with our babies) now. For without such caring love, we will simply take much of what they need from them, as we are currently doing. We will rape their world, and ‘sell’ such rape as being simply us taking what we deserve, a fair share. We ought rather to be in awe of our wondrous power over them, and therefore utterly respectful of their vulnerability and beauty. We ought to give our all for them. For us not to be myopic, *they* need to be *real* to us (This will require for and of many people a great work of empathy, imagination, probably through art, and deep ecological practices such as those taught by Joanna Macy, etc.). As my epigraph from Weil would have it: we have to find ways of making them *visible* to us.

In short: We must love them. (For any readers still sceptical of the claim that love can have any place in our civic culture, or of the thought that we are really asked by our society to love collectively our children (and thus, ‘by extension’ (though it isn’t really an *extension*), I am suggesting, the next generation) consider the road-sign-slogan, common in accident-blackspots near schools etc. in France, with beside it a picture of a child: “Aimez les enfants”.<sup>x</sup>) To overcome the utter apartheid of time, we need to place our most powerful emotion of all at their disposal. We must follow in the great tradition of revolutionary love, the tradition of Jesus, of Gandhi, of Che Guevara, and more. And we must make that tradition contemporary: by extending it radically and completely to encompass the future ones.

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<sup>ix</sup> P.xxi of his *A common humanity* (Routledge, 2000); cf. also the closing chapters of that work.

<sup>x</sup> See also this new style of bollard in England: <http://tinyurl.com/yzard3s> .

That is the answer to the question which forms my title. It is not enough to try to do right by future people merely by trying to do them justice; it is completely hopeless to try to do right by them if that means merely to be ‘fair’ to them. We should give up, and admit that we do not love and do not really care, and consign them to their terrible fate – OR we should love them.<sup>xi</sup>

I recommend the latter course.<sup>xii</sup>

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<sup>xi</sup> Actually, as implied by my response to the ‘objector’ imagined above, my belief is that in an important sense we DO already love them – but to go further into that would be a story for another occasion.

<sup>xii</sup> Many thanks for great comments to George Graham, Anne Chapman, Molly Scott Cato, and Andy Dobson, all of Green House. (Thanks also to Tom Greaves, Cathy Rowett and to Anna Smajdor, for conversations.)