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Responsibility for future generations as interpreted by Dieter Birnbacher and Robert Spaemann

*Now the possibility to interfere
in the life of future generations is increasing.¹*

Introduction

Responsibility for future generations, given, for example, parents' everlasting concern about the fate of their children, is not a new phenomenon.² However, this issue has never been as dramatic as it is today, when for the first time in history the future existence of humans is being called into question.³ Responsibility for future generations is being discussed in the light of various issues of an ecological, bioethical and demographic nature. Globally, the first two dimensions are of special relevance, namely issues related to the ecological crisis and bioethics.

In Europe, the weight of responsibility for future generations is defined by its demographics, which gives this issue far more importance and relevance than three or four decades ago.⁴ In contrast with the generations of today, the future ones will face a much heavier burden due to a substantially decreasing number of children.

Within this context, it becomes interesting to know how the issue of responsibility for future generations is perceived by two modern, distinguished

¹ This is a paraphrase of Birnbacher's thesis. Cf. D.D. Birnbacher, *Odpowiedzialność za przyszłe pokolenia*, transl. B. Andrzejewski, P. Jackowski, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 1999, p. 254.

² B. Chyrowicz, *Argumentacja we współczesnych debatach bioetycznych*, „Diametros” 2009, no. 19, 20.

³ Both Birnbacher and Spaemann endorse this point of view. According to Spaemann, mankind is heading towards self-annihilation. Cf. R. Spaemann, *Die Aktualität des Naturrechts*, [in:] *idem*, *Philosophische Essays*, Reclam, Universal – Bibliothek, Stuttgart 2007, p. 76. Cf. D. Birnbacher, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

⁴ In his considerations, Birnbacher, just like Spaemann, does not address the demographical crisis in Europe. The former author believes that a demographic disaster will cause mutual bonds between generations to be destroyed, so the question of babies being born must not be treated as private (from the Author's conversation with Spaemann held in July of 2016).

German thinkers in their numerous praised publications: Dieter Birnbacher and Robert Spaemann. Are they in full agreement about this issue or do they differ in their views? Where do the differences stem from and what do they concern? How is their perception of the issue affected by the context within which the scholars see it, namely the ecological and bioethical aspects?

The presented article provides answers to these questions as well as to two other issues: Does the issue of responsibility appear nowadays as dramatic? If so, why? What remedies are proposed by both authors to eliminate major threats to the existence of future generations? Importantly, they formulate their theses not only from the angle of their own philosophical orientation (Birnbacher's benefit utilitarianism, and the classical thought of Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Kant's personalism in the case of Spaemann) but also empirical data. Their views are markedly different due to their disparate ontological (metaphysical), anthropological and methodological assumptions. The controversial nature of philosophy implies a discourse of such character – the discourse is inherent in it. Characteristically, Greek philosophers took into consideration the most radical but opposing attitudes in their deliberations. A discussion revolving around the question what we think when we call something real was likened to a war by Plato himself.⁵

Birnbacher's position

The article does not provide a comprehensive treatment of the issue of responsibility for future generations as interpreted by Birnbacher. It highlights certain elements of his conception that appear as significant, such as the uniqueness of his view of the issue at stake in modern times as well as his perception of the ecological crisis. The article also addresses the controversial issue of eugenics as considered by the German ethicist in the context of responsibility for future generations. Birnbacher revealed the theoretical foundations of his considerations in his analysis of moral norms.

The question of ethical norms

In Birnbacher's opinion, ethical norms immanently point towards the future. The word "should" always refers to what is going to happen. It is essential of moral norms that they are directed towards all people who act, and they are equally applicable to all of them. Not only do moral norms consolidate the human community but also they do so on behalf of this community. The scope of their application extends over all humanity: people living today and those who will in the future. They do not target narrow social groups but all humanity. They also include timeless notions (e.g. "human," "animals," "plant") for which the passage

⁵ R. Spaemann, *Philosophische Essays*, Philipp Reclam jun., Stuttgart 2007, p. 108.

of time is of no consequence. However, there are notions that are restricted in this sense and concerning the time continuum, e.g. “children,” “grandchildren,” “people of the next century.”

In his defence of future generations and using ideal norms as the starting point, Birnbacher formulated a catalogue of practical norms. Practical norms are rules of conduct whereas the ideal ones seem to be abstract norms and generic ethical models which are always applicable, regardless of time, place and situation. The latter constitute the basis for practical norms. Without them practical norms would be “suspended in the air.”⁶ Birnbacher claims that the relation between practical norms and ideal ones is the same as that holding between ordinary rights and provisions of the constitution.

While the role of rights in a particular legal community is to substantiate constitutional norms and give them a practical application, the role of practical norms is an operationalisation of abstract moral norms in a specific society.⁷

The catalogue of practical norms that are formulated by Birnbacher to defend future generations is more likely to contain those of a negative nature.⁸ They require not only that certain actions be relinquished but action be taken to obviate threats and safeguard against them. However, their significance is meaningful.⁹

If we could be sure, as Birnbacher emphasised, that practical norms would be applied, we would not be a hundred per cent sure but with some degree of certainty we would conclude that the greatest losses which could have been prevented earlier have indeed been prevented.¹⁰

The two key issues are at stake: the survival of the human race and the quality of its existence. Birnbacher stressed the importance of two practical norms, which he rightly regarded as self-explanatory. As per the first (quantitative) one, the threat of extermination of mankind must be prevented by averting or precluding the danger of massive nuclear wars, conventional ones or others whose risk of escalation is considerable. Given this imperative, Birnbacher correctly noted that in fact no actions should be taken to threaten the further existence of the human race. He strongly opposes Nietzsche who stated: „So many animal species have become extinct. Considering that man could too disappear, the world would not miss out on anything.”¹¹ In reality, the annihilation of mankind would be an ultimate, tremendous evil and a moral disaster. This sort of danger must never be ignored.

⁶ D. Birnbacher, *op. cit.*, p. 82. Birnbacher provides no examples of ideal norms, nor does he specify or formulate them. It seems then that in his thinking ideal norms appear like Kant’s categorical imperative.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

⁸ This matter is interpreted in much the same manner by Barbara Chyrowicz. Cf. B. Chyrowicz, *Problem argumentacji z odpowiedzialności za przyszłe pokolenia*, „Diametros” 2006, no. 9, 9.

⁹ D. Birnbacher, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ F. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, 15 Bde, hrsg. von G. Colli und M. Montinari, de Gruyter, München 1980, p. 50.

As the German ethicist emphasised, the other practical rule must provide for a dignified, that is of sufficient quality, existence of future generations. With the generations of today the rule entails the necessity to avoid all threats to the natural living conditions of humans. This calls for frugal handling of raw materials and energy resources, maintenance of farmland, concern for the cleanliness of air and water, protection of the biosphere from the long-term impact of combined types of contamination. The natural implication of this practical rule is concern about and the consolidation of the world peace, protection of future generations from irreversible damage and risks (e.g. as the effects of improper use of nuclear energy), preparation for a transition, perhaps necessary, from fossil fuels to their alternatives in order to counteract the danger of global warming.¹²

The unique character of the present generation's responsibility for future generations

According to Birnbacher, responsibility for next generations has been relevant since time immemorial. It did not stem from the special ethics of responsibility for the future,¹³ but it was thought to be an integral part of traditional responsibility. Why then has it become the central concept of political ethics today? Why should this issue be seen in a different light than before?

Its origins lie in specific circumstances, as Birnbacher stressed. Some of them were mentioned by Hans Jonas in his seminal book *The principle of responsibility*, such as the possibility to influence the fate of human beings and nature – enhanced by modern technology – by acting or choosing not to act. It is only these days that destiny is gradually coming under human control. What circumstance, Birnbacher asks, has a particularly determining impact on the unique character of our generation's responsibility? He noted that the lion share of the burden that will be passed on to future generations is the excessive exploitation of the foundations of human existence – natural resources. The quickly escalating degree of human exploitation of nature has a catastrophic impact on the environment (soil, water, natural resources), which in effect is being transformed into a landfill and contaminated (water, air) with pollutants as well as greenhouse gases that are changing Earth's climate. This state of affairs is rightly blamed by Birnbacher mainly on the small part of the global population which, in his view, has been rash enough to intensify the processes of exchange in the area of production and consumption while disregarding the natural limitations of the „blue planet.”¹⁴ The increased, dangerous exploitation of the natural environment (the use of its resources) is taking place not only in Europe but also in the developing countries

¹² D. Birnbacher, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-214. Cf. B. Chyrowicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

¹³ D. Birnbacher, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁴ D. Birnbacher, *Odpowiedzialność za przyszłe pokolenia – zakres i granice*, transl. K. Blacharska, „Studia Ecologiae et Bioethicae” 2009, vol. 7, no. 1, p. 94.

of Central America and Africa. This is a wrong way to pursue the economic policy as it leads to the destruction of the foundations of existence. One must not use up and process all resources which are expected to be part of the natural living conditions for generations to come. It is important to realise that in a situation when the global population is dramatically on the rise the destruction of the natural foundations of existence will have a far more radical impact than today.¹⁵ Sensible and frugal use of natural resources is required as their quantity is limited. Further, as Birnbacher rightly points out, the natural environment (and especially its vital elements) must be not only protected from damage and wear and tear; also, the „wounds” inflicted by three previous generations should be healed. Nature must be protected, shaped, and developed for future generations. This is why Birnbacher suggested that perhaps not St. Francis but St. Benedict of Nursia should become the symbol of nature conservation, because land work and conservation better fit the mental model of nature conservation rather than the contemplative or perhaps quietist „profound respect for life.”¹⁶

The weight of ecological treatment

From the considerations presented so far it appears that the question of responsibility for future generations is tightly connected with Birnbacher's ecology. Global, long-term effects of activities that have been done or abandoned for many generations of the modern era are not the invention of ecological fanatics but rather they stem from an assessment of reality, the German philosopher concludes. To a large extent, the fate of developing countries, the future of Earth's climate or the survival of species depend on the policy of the leading, industrialised countries as well as their financial, economic, agricultural and ecological policy.¹⁷ Equally important is the awareness that the quality of our life, including our health, depends on the condition of the natural environment. It urges us to undertake actions in the name of nature. Numerous sociological studies in sources of motivation suggest that people will be encouraged to get involved in nature conservation if they are well informed and deeply convinced about the importance of such issues as: the continuation of life on Earth, preservation of natural conditions for future generations to survive, and the desire to live in a healthy environment.¹⁸

Apart from ideas connected with the exploitation of natural resources, it is interesting to note Birnbacher's other accurate analyses of nuclear energy, global warming (he believes this is not a purely theoretical issue, contrary to claims of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-193.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 207-208. These two references to nature should not be at odds, however. The two are perfectly reconcilable.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁸ H. Schudy, *Wywiad z prof. Dieterem Birnbacherem, Heinrich Heine Universität Düsseldorf*, „Edukacja Etyczna” 2012, no. 4, p. 5.

many scholars and politicians), as well as the protection and preservation of the extensive biodiversity of natural resources (including various species).¹⁹

Nuclear energy: disposal of radioactive waste

Birnbacher attempted to thoroughly elucidate the very complex and controversial issue of radioactive waste disposal. He addressed two radically different views of this issue. One position assumes that the hazard associated with nuclear waste disposal is negligible and does not pose threat to public safety. Its supporters claim that we need not be afraid of the harmful effect of the stored waste if there is no guarantee that it will be controlled and handled (if necessary) by future generations. The supporters of the latter view claim there is no certainty that nuclear waste disposal does not entail any irreversible risk, therefore one cannot exclude its detrimental effect on the next generations. Birnbacher puts forward an interesting and important proposition that the risk connected with radioactive waste disposal must not be disregarded.²⁰ He stressed:

Neither currently available experience nor currently available theoretical knowledge is sufficient to regard the list of foreseeable hazards as complete. The consideration of potential threats is still a formidable task before a final opinion is issued. Each year new hazards are discovered, calling into question the overconfident expert opinions of the previous year.²¹

The issue of genetic manipulation and selection

Assuming responsibility for future generations, according to Birnbacher, also implies an elimination of genetically conditioned dysfunctions which bring about serious physical and mental suffering or making life satisfactory.²² The condition of retaining and improvement of inherited goods justifies the use of negative eugenics. Birnbacher called on parents to have abortions on children with genetic defects for the reasons explained above and to take responsibility for future generations.²³ We find it hard to accept the ethicist's proposition as lacking respect for human nature which has a personal character from the moment of conception (also in Kant's philosophy).²⁴ In recent years, Jürgen Habermas addressed life

¹⁹ D. Birnbacher, *Odpowiedzialność za przyszłe pokolenia...*, p. 188-225.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 197-200.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 213.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 213-214.

²⁴ Human nature (humanity) reveals itself chiefly in what is the profoundest structure of man – in the person. Human nature is such a being from its conception to the end of its existence.

with respect (for example, in his book *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur*.²⁵ This distinguished representative of the Frankfurt school expressed his concern about prenatal diagnostics and people's usurping the right to judge which life is valuable and which is worthless — leading to indifference and a distorted view of human nature.²⁶ Apparently, Birnbacher's thesis does not correlate significantly with responsibility for future generations, but rather concerns our responsibility for actions that infringe upon the life of others. Man has no right to use such means since they bring death upon the innocent. Conversely, if it is permissible to destroy conceived babies in their mothers' wombs using Birnbacher's argument that their life will not turn out to be joyful and satisfying, one can ask whether people who do not experience any existential joy should not be deprived of their life. Such an interpretation of responsibility cannot be accepted by any measure. In his conception, like in consequentialism, people would be responsible for everything or at least for what they can predict.²⁷ However, there is no unlimited responsibility — they are affected by its many limitations and they realise that it has an end. The idea of unlimited responsibility would put people on a par with God, Who is the One to take responsibility for everything. Hence, the word „responsibility” as interpreted by Birnbacher and consequentialists can be properly related only to God. Actually, only Birnbacher's unequivocal voice in favour of selection can be heard, in accordance with his claim that all human beings who do not fulfil the criteria of normal development can and should be deprived of life.

Another dimension of the vision mentioned above is his acceptance of technological interference in human nature, namely genetic manipulations. Such activities are two aspects of the same conception: the first one is about killing people who do not conform to the adopted standard, while the other is associated with a change (improvement) introduced using modern technology, a change which did not take place naturally. The idea is to manipulate or otherwise interfere with the human genome — something which was granted to man naturally and calls for concern and respect from him (also in conformity with Habermas' viewpoint).²⁸

²⁵ Jürgen Habermas gained Spaemann's recognition as he concluded that human nature is the only instance with regard to which respect for a human being is realised. He allowed only such interventions in human nature for which the consent of the affected individuals could be assumed. This applies to therapeutic interventions. Cf. R. Spaemann, *Schritte über uns hinaus, Gesammelte Reden und Aufsätze I*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2010, p. 249.

²⁶ J. Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur, Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik*, Surkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2001, p. 118.

²⁷ R. Spaemann, *Kto i za co jest odpowiedzialny*, [in:] *id., Granice. O etycznym wymiarze działania*, transl. J. Merecki, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2006, p. 397.

²⁸ J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

Spaemann's position²⁹

Spaemann shares Birnbacher's view that green issues, such as the radical increase in people's use of the environment or its rapidly increasing exploitation are closely related to the question of responsibility for future generations. Spaemann agrees with his other views, for example those concerning the following: nuclear energy, causes of global warming (not offering ultimate views but not excluding the impact of technology and fossil energy sources at the same time), the necessity for frugal management of natural resources, and a possible gradual departure from fossil fuels if they were responsible for the pollution of the air and increased sea level.³⁰ But, in the thinker's view, responsibility for future generations involves two issues. The first is related to the lack of respect for natural law, the effect of which can be seen in genetic manipulations and gender ideology, *in vitro* fertilisation, abortion and euthanasia as well as in homosexuality. The other issue relates to the production of nuclear energy, especially radioactive waste disposal. These activities are at the greatest conflict with responsibility for future generations.

Norms of natural law as the foundation of responsibility

According to Spaemann, responsibility for future generations has undoubtedly its underpinnings in activities rooted in natural law – in its classic version. He refers to the thought of Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, as well as Enlightenment thinkers (Kant especially), since most of them saw natural law in the light of the Aristotelian-Thomistic interpretations.³¹ It is not positive law (the first rule of conduct). However, it appears as a measure whereby rights, entitlements (statutes), and rules of human interaction are established. Natural law is a law based on reason, which implies that its content is determined by all natural inclinations that comply with reason.³² If tendencies which are against nature emerge (in the words of St. Thomas Aquinas: sins of nature), for example homosexual inclinations, they cannot determine adequate points of reference. Using the power of reason, man is capable of controlling defects of nature.

²⁹ The Author of this article drew on Spaemann's work. Additionally, he consulted the German thinker to gain absolute certainty that his considerations follow Spaemann's line of reasoning. The content of the conversations, tape-recorded and saved in a computer memory, are in the Author's possession.

³⁰ Based on an interview with Robert Spaemann held by the Author in July, 2016.

³¹ Spaemann believes that the whole canon of our sexual morality draws on Kantian ethics, whereby man should be affirmed as a person from the moment of conception. Therefore supporters of *in vitro* fertilisation, abortion and euthanasia will not find any confirmation of their position in Enlightenment ethics. Cf. also: J. Kozuchowski, O człowieku i moralności w filozofii Roberta *Spaemanna*, Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, Lublin 2013, p. 310.

³² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Suma teologiczna* 13: *Prawo*, q. 97, Art. 3, translated and annotated by P. Belch, Veritas, London 1965, p. 95.

Genetic manipulations and activities that go against natural law and their consequences

In Speamann's opinion, the most dangerous consequences of natural law violations in respect of responsibility for future generations are genetic manipulations and tendencies for emancipation in relation to human nature, the phrase he used for *gender*, extra-systemic fertilisation (*in vitro*), euthanasia, as well as abortion, homosexuality and all other attitudes contravening natural law, that is against reason. In the future, a society which does not respect this law will be condemned to extinction in its entirety.

The German philosopher has been deeply concerned about the progress of genetic manipulations. He dwells on those aiming to design the model of a future human which would satisfy the expectations of society. He stresses, though, that considering the two hundred thousand years of human development, a conviction that technological interventions are supposed to improve human nature is a sign of arrogance.³³ Only human works would be indicators of such an improvement. Such conduct must not be imposed on future generations by violating their liberty and dignity. This is why Habermas endorsed only such types of interference in nature to which the consent of those manipulated can be taken as given.³⁴ Spaeman believes that a human being who is made to design cannot be the object of people's desires and actions for they have no criteria for such improvements. Then, what would this desired human be like? Should he be more intelligent or perhaps happier, more resistant or more sensitive? The content of such questions demonstrates the absurdity of melioristic ideas, Spaeman stresses.³⁵ The fact that people owe what they are to random preferences of their forefathers would suggest their ancestors' irresponsibility and, in a sense, dominance of the dead over the living.³⁶ Man can only establish the criteria which farm animals should fulfil as a source of food.³⁷ Transformation of human nature (e.g. in order to better arrange future space journeys) would entail a reduction of future generations to objects – a means to realise the goals or ideas of today's manipulators. In this way one group of people would become totally dependent on another because their nature and characteristics would derive from the work of their "designer." Their mutual relationship would become a relationship between a manipulator and the manipulated one. This would constitute a violation of fundamental equality among people. The personal dignity

³³ R. Spaemann, *Osoby*, transl. J. Merecki, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2001, p. 294-295.

³⁴ R. Spaemann, *Schritte über uns hinaus*, p. 244.

³⁵ Man cannot shape himself according to a fixed formula, but anthropology cannot determine what his should be like. The New Testament says "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). See: R. Spaemann, *O pojęciu natury ludzkiej*, [in:] *Człowiek w nauce współczesnej*, ed. K. Michalski, Éditions du Dialogue, Paris 1988, pp. 143-144.

³⁶ R. Spaemann, *Technische Eingriffe in die Natur*, [in:] *Ecologiae und Ethik*, hrsg. von D. Birnbacher, Philipp Reclam jun., Stuttgart 1980, pp. 200-202.

³⁷ Man has a right to do so as animals are useful goods (they function in not only utilitarian).

of a human being is inseparably linked to respect for his or her nature, which – despite appearing as incidental – cannot be transformed.³⁸

Spaemann is concerned about a danger associated with a different kind of genetic manipulations which negatively affect the essence of man and his nature. He reminds us of the possibility of crossing human genes with those of animals (pigs). In this case, alarm must be raised as such activities must be categorically opposed, Spaemann says. As a result of such genetic manipulations people will be deprived of the capacity to notice such blatant violations and mutilation of their dignity. Irreversible changes in their nature will take place. Man will in fact be no man. It will not be possible to apply the rules of moral law to individuals subject to such experiments. The vision is so horrific that its realisation is difficult to imagine. Plans of genetic manipulation, which as we learn are made in England, are intentions of a criminal character – the outstanding thinker concludes, full of concern and anxiety.³⁹

By no means can responsibility for future generations be reconciled with the promotion of *gender* ideology, which seems entirely incompatible with human nature. It denies acceptance of the normative character of this nature and the inherited, natural sexuality because it permits the kind of sexuality to be decided and grants people a right to choose a same-sex partner. *Gender* ideology, as Spaemann emphasises, is intended to remove from people's minds the natural aptitude to distinguish men from women and the awareness of mutual sexual attraction between the sexes, something that has been obvious to them for millennia as the foundation of human existence, especially in the future.⁴⁰

Responsibility for the global effects of nuclear energy use

As said before, the Munich philosopher believes that the question of responsibility for future generations is tightly connected with the controversial and dramatic issue of nuclear energy use. Spaemann sees a great value in research in this energy, thanks to which making spectacular scientific discoveries becomes possible. Simultaneously, for over fifty years of his thorough studies he consistently explained why its use must be regarded as extremely irresponsible. In the book *Nach uns die Kernschmelze* he puts forward (and proves) a hypothesis, which reflects his genuine concern, that as a result of nuclear energy use only melted atoms will remain as a remainder of humans. The question arises which processes could cause such a catastrophe, envisaged also by physicists. They speak of probability of chain reactions occurring on the face of Earth, which – if long enough – will cause the effect in question. The following regularity seems relevant in this context:

³⁸ R. Spaemann, *Glück und Wohlwollen*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1989, p. 221.

³⁹ Based on an interview with Robert Spaemann held by the Author in July, 2016.

⁴⁰ R. Spaemann, *Wprowadzenie*, [in:] G. Kuby, *Globalna rewolucja seksualna*, Wydawnictwo Homo Dei, Kraków 2012, p. 7.

what can happen when it happens.⁴¹ Recent nuclear failures have demonstrated the dire consequences of using nuclear energy, for example, contamination of the face of planet Earth, its atmosphere, food products, or death and serious disease (e.g. thyroid gland cancer) of thousands of people. A failure of a nuclear reactor can occur at any time, and its unavoidable consequences would cover a huge area, because – as physicists claim – the world is full of synergetic phenomena.

There is also a risk of explosion in nuclear waste dumps. In Spaemann's opinion, this would be a much greater disaster than an accident at a nuclear power station.⁴² This is another argument in favour of abandonment of nuclear energy. The arguments of its supporters seem insufficient, who claim that it is cheaper and has a lesser carbon footprint on the environment. However, given the dynamic progress of alternative sources of energy (which ensure nature conservation) and the increasing political involvement in this area (Germany at the fore, Scandinavian countries, USA, Japan, Austria, and recently China), this argumentation sounds obsolete. It is perceived as a manifestation of an outdated energy policy, which cannot be regarded as fully responsible since its purpose is not the common good of all people.⁴³ The idea of responsibility for future generations implies a today's lifestyle based on an economic use of natural resources and development that is adequate for people's needs. This lifestyle, however, cannot put the opportunities of future generations at risk, destroy their perspective for the fulfilment of their needs, or oppose them in their choice of *modus vivendi*.⁴⁴ In the current situation, the survival of mankind is conditional upon our concern about the whole humanity, not only our own community or nation. Short-sighted and selfish attitude may lead to a disaster.⁴⁵ Undoubtedly, in Spaemann's opinion, an attitude encouraging responsibility for the next generations is at odds with a project for the construction of a nuclear power station and an idea of generating electric power out of nuclear energy, since the latter constitute extreme threats to the safety of Earth's population. Unlike other kinds of technological interference, this subjects humanity and the whole planet to irreversible damage and destruction. (Radiation at a nuclear waste storage site may persist for up to ten thousand years). Present generations have no right to condemn countless future generations to the dreadful consequences of their current decisions. Responsibility in this respect that rests on people has not a positive character, as this is beyond their capabilities, but a negative one

⁴¹ R. Spaemann, *Die Vernunft, das Atom und der Glaube*, [in:] *id.*, Nach uns die Kernschmelze: Hybris im atomaren Zeitalter, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2011, p. 101.

⁴² Based on an interview with Robert Spaemann held by the Author in July, 2016.

⁴³ K. Riegler-Picker, „Geht/s der Umwelt gut, geht/s uns allen gut...“ Oder „in schlechten wie in guten Tagen...“, „Gesellschaft Politik“ 2013, III, 49, p. 57.

⁴⁴ The Holy See has an identical position in this regard. Cf. P. Turkson, *Soziale und ökologische Bedingungen von Entwicklung*, „Zur Debatte“, Katholische Akademie in Bayern 2014, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Der Dalai Lama, *Die Menschen und die Menschenrechte*, [in:] Ein Ethos für eine Welt. Globalisierung als ethische Herausforderung, K.-J. Kuschel, A. Pinzani, M. Zillinger?, hrsg. K. J. Keuschel, Frankfurt am Main 1999, p. 25.

– in other words, it commands them what not to do. Spaemann claims that this responsibility is related to three issues associated with the production of nuclear energy: acquisition from uranium, production in power plants, and importantly storage of nuclear waste. The world has already seen the horror of giant disasters and this is why man has no right to expand the scale of potential hazards. Tragedies caused by volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and many other cataclysms have not been triggered by human activity, so we are not to blame. However, other sources of distress must not be added to those.⁴⁶

Storage of radioactive waste and responsibility

Spaemann believes that the idea of responsibility for future generations is the most incompatible with nuclear waste disposal, i.e. storage of spent radioactive fuel.⁴⁷ The problem remains unsolved although nuclear power stations have been in operation for several decades (the first one was erected in 1954 in Obinsk, USSR⁴⁸). The perspective of accelerated progress of civilisation, science and technology, or at least maintaining the current rate, forces us to create – in areas of nuclear waste storage – zones with access forbidden for thousands of years (during the radioactive period).

The question of radioactive waste storage should have been regulated before nuclear energy acquisition commenced. Regrettably, this was not done. Most probably, the process was started with the intention to set up a suitable radioactive cemetery. Such a solution, as Spaemann correctly observes, is ill-conceived and absolutely unacceptable because one cannot predict whether a suitable storage area can be found to hold the waste safely for a sufficient period of time (many thousands of years).⁴⁹ Standards that such a location must conform to are extremely high – the place must not be accessible and must be able to withstand natural hazards, such as flooding, geological changes, *etc.*)

Naturally, people do not lose hope despite the ever existing hazard. They do not wish to bear the risk on their own if they leave the problem of nuclear waste disposal unresolved. They are inclined to transfer some of the risk to their descendants. This is unfortunately a feature of modern civilisation.

Triggering the generation of nuclear energy but having not devised a definitive method of storing the waste produced by this process is thoroughly irresponsible, even if a solution is found after some time, Spaemann goes on. By assuming this attitude, decision-makers demonstrate appalling recklessness.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ R. Spaemann, *Ich plädiere für die Rückkehr zu einem Fortschritt im Plural*, [in:] id., *Nach uns die Kernschmelze...*, p. 73.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁸ *Encyklopedia PWN w trzech tomach*, vol. 1, [chief ed.] D. Kalisiewicz, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 1999, p. 567.

⁴⁹ R. Spaemann, *Die Vernunft das Atom...*, p. 104.

⁵⁰ R. Spaemann, *Nach uns die Kernschmelze...*, pp. 86-89.

The problem which they are now downplaying will rebound painfully in the future. They accord themselves the right to extend responsibility to future generations and thus to force them to cope with the enormous threat to health or life (or self-annihilation of civilisation), which may eventually exceed their coping capabilities).⁵¹ Subsequent generations are being faced with the necessity to cope with insurmountable obstacles. In this way, their freedom is restricted as their sovereign and alternative choices are hindered.⁵² Considering these issues, Spaemann notes: "... future generations will treat the discovery of the method to release nuclear radiation not only as unproductive but also terrifying."⁵³

The certainty that a suitable solution to the problem of nuclear waste storage will be found relies on, as Spaemann stresses, a quasi-religious conviction of the existence of a mythological, pre-established harmony, that is a correlation between the needs of man and the readiness of universe to meet them. The word "I need" has been used since the 1960s by people who deny their adulthood. This is an irreducible slogan and an unjustified claim against the society, while the conviction that the course of the future events will meet their expectations is childish.

The answer to the question whether it is really possible to find a safe location for radioactive waste will be known only when this happens. However, nothing justifies this expectation. Rather, it is to be regarded as very unlikely.

Civilisation based on science and technology, which is a unique phenomenon on a global scale, is volatile and its continuation is doubtful. For this reason, in the absence of a zone intended only for radioactive waste which would remain inaccessible for nearly ten thousand years the installation of nuclear power stations is deeply irrational and extremely irresponsible.⁵⁴

Spaemann and Birnbacher on the future of mankind

According to Birnbacher, the idea that in a billion years no human being or a reasoning animal will live on Earth must be regarded as virtually certain given today's best research in astrophysics.⁵⁵ Spaemann believes that the horizon of humanity is no longer than a million years. No changes in human nature are possible which would guarantee longer life. While man who is driven by his pride tries to reverse the order of things, he has been powerless so far. It is highly tempting, however, to make further life subject to planning. But planning may not replace

⁵¹ It is stressed that the management of waste material is a big problem, both physically and ideologically. Cf. Z. Miłkowska, J. Jaśkowski, *Międzynarodowa Agencja Energii Atomowej – 35 lat promowania energii nuklearnej*, „V Bałtyckie Forum Ekologiczne” (XI 1992), Gdańsk 1993, p. 68.

⁵² R. Spaemann, *Technische Eingriffe in...*, pp. 200-202.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁵⁴ R. Spaemann, *Nach uns die Kernschmelze...*, pp. 86-87.

⁵⁵ D. Birnbacher, *Odpowiedzialność za przyszłe pokolenia*, p. 153.

the process of human nature formation that has taken millions of years to make man. Therefore he is not able to discover rules which would guarantee existence tailored to his day-to-day needs.⁵⁶

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Responsibility for Future Generations as Interpreted by Dieter Birnbacher and Robert Spaemann

Abstract

The problem of responsibility for future generations is considered by the two distinguished philosophers, Birnbacher and Spaemann, basically on the basis of two issues, namely ecological and bioethical threats. Both authors demonstrate very similar views on the first issue in question, for example in terms of nuclear energy use and exploitation of natural resources – the foundation of our existence. Birnbacher attaches great significance to the use of natural resources in the context of responsibility for future generations, devoting to it much attention in his accurate analyses. A radical difference in their investigations is apparent in their treatment of the other, bioethical issue. Spaemann demonstrates how dangerous the possibility of genetic manipulations is to the identity of human nature of future generations, whereas Birnbacher seems to accept them, however not openly. In his opinion, a “qualitative improvement” of man is necessary in the name of the future, which justifies the use of negative eugenics and selection of conceived human lives. There exists a common, based on empirical data, yet different and dependent on the philosophical orientation, basis for theoretical solutions proposed by both philosophers. For Spaemann, whose originality prevents him from being assigned to any specific trend, this would be natural law in the classic version proposed by Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Kant, whereas Birnbacher, who represents utilitarianism of the sum of benefits, this basis is delineated by moral, practical norms that are extracted from ideal norms.

Keywords: responsibility, future generations, philosophy, ecology, bioethics, Robert Spaemann, Dieter Birnbacher.

⁵⁶ Based on an interview with Robert Spaemann held by the Author in July, 2016.