

## COMMENTS ON 'FAMILY CONCERNS AND INTER-GENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY'

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I am very honoured and grateful to President Glendon and Prof. Archer for their invitation to comment on Prof. Archer's important paper on *Family Concerns and Inter-Generational Solidarity*. However, I suspect that this invitation was extended out of kindness and feel that it rather overestimates my capabilities, especially in sociology.

This paper has many merits, above all the choice of the generational approach to understanding complex human phenomena. The notion of 'generation' is very well described. This non-static approach shows us that today several generations coexist and that the relations that are established among them, according to the different conditions of each age group, go to make up the dynamic realities of solidarity or indifference, which at every moment constitute the reality of our lives as humans. As modern thought has emphasised (Dilthey, Heidegger, Ortega y Gasset, Jonas), human life develops through time. The notion of a 'generation', converted into a method of sociological investigation, rightly consists, in a certain sense, in projecting the structure of human life onto the present, the past and the future. The advantage of this approach is that it can allow us to discover the most authentic realities of human life in every field. Perhaps we can say that the generational approach enables us to see these realities of human life not from the outside but from within, with reference to their dynamics and actualities.

The phenomenon of globalisation has increasingly led us all to feel that we are contemporaries. We live at the same time and in the same habitat, even though we act to shape it in different ways. Although we are all contemporaries, not all of us are coetaneous. Within the same chronological time span at least three different life timeframes coexist which are coetaneous and which we term 'generations'. More subjectively, a generation is a

group of people who are coetaneous in a circle whose members coexist together and are capable of intervening in a significant way upon society. From this point of view, the concept of 'generation' does not entail more than two essential features: belonging to the same age band and having social contacts that can influence society, as is expressed in the statement that such collectively shared subjectivity permits a 'generation to intervene significantly in social change'. Another notion of 'generation', and a more objective one, is that linked to genealogy, or rather to the biological series of children, parents and grandparents. The Gospel according to St Matthew begins: 'Roll of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham: Abraham fathered Isaac, Isaac fathered Jacob, Jacob fathered Judah and his brothers, etc'. In seeking to identify the social determinants of solidarity, Prof. Archer uses a notion of generation that draws upon the objective and the subjective. At an objective level, 'generations' represent positions within a continuum of descent (p. 123). The subjective component consists in allowing respondents themselves to define who constitutes members of their families (p. 123). 'Inter-generational solidarity' can be conceptualised in different ways and at different levels and can refer to completely different types of agents and actions. At the micro-level, which Prof. Archer focuses on, 'attention would shift to inter-personal relations and to the multifarious ways in which a given generation may or may not be supportive of older or younger ones' (p. 124).

Following these criteria, the study of social determinants among generations is also very well done. In general, I would say that the paper is very convincing when it deals with 'Traditional Conceptions of Social Conditioning and of Personal Motivation in Relation to the Family', and above all when it criticises the deterministic trend in sociology which does not take into account what Prof. Archer very appropriately calls the 'ultimate concerns' of people, 'which are expressive of their identities and therefore are *not* a means to some further end' (p. 133). Prof. Archer explains that:

Commitments are a way of life 'in the round' which affect means as well as ends. We will not understand the precise means selected unless we comprehend the *relationship* which a person sees between their goals and means, and this is something which can only be understood in expressive and not calculative terms (p. 134).

Here we can add further 'ultimate concerns' (employing the terminology of Paul Tillich), which also arise in the centre of the heart of man and which refer to truly ultimate horizons: where we come from, where we are going, and the ultimate meaning of life and of solidarity. Here we are at the

summit of the life of the spirit, within the religious spectrum of man, from which spring continuous questions in relation to which that form of sociology that only searches for 'instrumental rationality' (so well described by Prof. Archer) can say very little or nothing. From this high horizon of the ultimate religious concerns, the human agent can inspire and shine forth all the expressions of life and culture. However, since their origin is different from culture they cannot take the place of culture or social structures. Indeed, one should not underestimate the role that religion plays in culture and in the social effects of the human agent. Religion plays a role, in the main, as a unifying element, as a soul, by offering a framework or scale of values. There are cultures which clearly have a religious basis, such as those of the areas of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shinto, and the religions of Africa. Some cultures exclude or marginalise the religious component, such as neo-positivism, Marxism, or Confucianism or other lineages of the Chinese inheritance, but here religion returns surreptitiously in the form of elements or visions that are almost religious in character, such as progress or perfect justice in secular or socialist societies or the social harmony of the Confucian tradition.

In the Christian experience faith has deeply shaped culture. For example, as Francis Fukuyama observed, 'religion played a big role in the renorming process in Britain and the United States during the late nineteenth century'. Given that the Christian message is not bound 'exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, any particular way of life or any customary way of life recent or ancient',<sup>1</sup> it has the capacity to enter and to become an internal form of all those cultures that do not exclude it *a priori*. The social order and interpersonal relationships, which have as their basic unit the family, are through it elevated to sacraments of the communication of salvific grace, without changing their own ends of love, solidarity and procreation, which, indeed, are thereby strengthened.

With regard to these 'ultimate concerns', rather than ignoring them or avoiding them within controversies in line with the idea of tolerance that concluded the wars of religion in the Christian West (in the sense of a *modus vivendi* along the lines of Hobbes: 'if we do not want to kill each other then let us tolerate each other'), John Rawls proposed, in his final major work, *The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus*.<sup>2</sup> He argues that it is now necessary to

<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, § 58 c.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,' *Oxford Journal for Legal Studies* (Spring 1987), 7(1):1-25.

engage in a further step forward, that is to say to recognise that the rival 'metaphysical' ideas that have lain behind and still animate the strong beliefs of citizens of the Western democracies can underpin a minimum corpus of beliefs that can help in a positive sense to create a 'reflective equilibrium'. He is referring here to certain 'comprehensive' theories, of a moral, philosophical or religious kind, which can, despite their mutual opposition, work together through their overlapping to achieve the joint establishment of the specific values of a democracy that can survive in a historical and sociological context characterised by the 'fact of pluralism'. We touch here upon a central point of some extreme forms of liberalism, namely the tendency to exaggerate the fracture effected by modernity and to uphold secularisation not only as fact but as a value, to the point of excluding from the field of discussion – either tacitly or openly – anyone who does not accept *a priori* the Nietzschean profession of the 'death of God'. Such is not the case, for example, in that tradition of classical German thought which, together with Hegel and in opposition to Nietzsche, sees the message of Christ as the only true bearer of freedom in history.<sup>3</sup>

When reading the second part of the paper by Prof. Archer a non-specialist in sociology (and one who has the occupational deformation of a philosophical background) might be led to reflect on how much opposition there is between the principle of responsibility and the principle of solidarity in her discussion of the effects of university education on young people. Of course, if by inter-generational solidarity at the micro-level we mean that actions linked to personal contact with family members constitute the primary form of solidarity, this statement is fully convincing. However, one might raise the question of whether this might not understate an important dimension, namely that there can be frequent inter-generational contacts that are not necessarily characterised by solidarity.

<sup>3</sup>'No Idea is so generally recognized as indefinite, ambiguous, and open to the greatest misconceptions (to which therefore it actually falls a victim) as the idea of Liberty... Whole continents, Africa and the East, have never had this Idea, and are without it still. The Greeks and Romans, Plato and Aristotle, even the Stoics, did not have it. On the contrary, they saw that it is only by birth (as, for example, an Athenian or Spartan citizen), or by strength of character, education, or philosophy (the sage is free even as a slave and in chains) that the human being is actually free. It was through Christianity that this Idea came into the world. According to Christianity, the individual *as such* has an infinite value as the object and aim of divine love, destined as mind to live in absolute relationship with God himself, and have God's mind dwelling in him: i.e. man is implicitly destined to supreme freedom'. (Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, § 482).

Every day we see that people who live together end up by fighting each other or co-existing only with difficulty. On the other hand, we can also envisage inter-generational relationships that contribute to solidarity but do not revolve round daily contact.

In my opinion, if we think of inter-generational solidarity as a form of friendship, we can quote Aristotle, who says, precisely with reference to the ethical plane, that friendship is not of one kind only. Indeed, this is an essential equivocal notion that one can clarify only by asking about the sort of things that give rise to it – its 'objects,' its *phileta*. Thus, we must (following Aristotle) distinguish three types of friendship: that which involves 'good', that which involves 'utility', and that which involves 'pleasure'.<sup>4</sup> From the point of view of the famous question of 'self-love' the distinction between these three 'objects' is essential. The fact that good is an 'object' of self-love is the reason why *philautia* – which makes each person his or her own friend – is seen by Aristotle as a virtue. What is important here is the orientation towards good. Naturally, friendship as solidarity presents itself from the outset as a mutual relationship. Reciprocity forms by definition a part of friendship and this reciprocity extends all the way to the commonality of 'living together' (*suzen*), and thus includes interpersonal contacts. According to this idea of mutuality, each subject loves another subject *as he is*.<sup>5</sup> This is not the case in friendship based on utility, where a subject loves another for the sake of some expected advantage, and even less is it the case in friendship based on pleasure. We thus see reciprocity already established on the ethical plane (in true friendship there is the object of good). Indeed, when violence arises, for example, there must be respect both for the other subject and for myself. Thus it is that this 'as he is' avoids any selfish approach because it is the foundation of mutuality. This, in turn, cannot be conceived of without reference to good in love for oneself and for one's friend, in friendship and in solidarity. Thus the referring to oneself is not abolished but is, as it were, extended, by mutuality and by solidarity, by the effect of the predicate 'good', which is applied to agents as well as to actions.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> 'It seems that not everything is loved, but only what is lovable [*phileton*], and that this is either what is good [*agaton*], or pleasant, or useful' (*Ethic. Nic.*, VIII, 3, 1155 b 18 f.).

<sup>5</sup> *Ib.*, VIII, 3, 1156 a 18 f.

<sup>6</sup> 'Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue; for these wish well alike to each other qua good, and they are good in themselves [*kath'hautous*]', (*Ib.*, VIII, 3, 1156 b 7-9); and later: 'And in loving a friend men love what is good for themselves [*hautois*]; for the good man in becoming a friend becomes a good to his friend' (*Ib.*, VIII, 5, 1157 b 33 f.).

If, therefore, we see solidarity as an expression of friendship, what matters is the ethical relationship with good: being together in good for reciprocal good. I thus raise the question of the qualitative character of interpersonal relationships. In this sense, inter-generational solidarity between family relatives, or their modern version, must be informed by an orientation towards good. Solidarity of this kind cannot be based solely on utility or pleasure.

What can we say about those undergraduates referred to by Prof. Archer in her empirical study on Coventry? According to this study, they prefer to go to a university of standing rather than remain near to their parents. In addition, the students in Coventry give far less value to the family than their counterparts of the same age in the same city. Prof. Archer concludes that 'the family ... matters more for young people in the general population ... than it does for our University entrants' (p. 141) and argues that this is in line with a previous study of hers which reveals that university for the majority of students 'entails a major and often irreparable caesura with the 'solidary' and geo-local family' (p. 141). Prof. Archer goes on to observe that in the future these university graduates will tend more towards organising care by others for their parents rather than being personally close to them in a 'solidary' geo-local sense – such will be the form of inter-generational solidarity that they will express.

This, of course, involves a very profound point about solidarity: whether inter-generational relationships move simply from 'me' to 'you' in the sense of from father to son and so on, what we might call 'genealogical' or 'biological' generations, or whether such relationships also move from 'me' to others with whom I do not have a direct personal link. Of course, one cannot confine inter-generational relationships to the family or a circle of friends and acquaintances: they must extend to all those that I do not know face to face. They include both people who are my contemporaries and those of my age band, and the people who are still to come. Hence, solidarity also expresses itself through just institutions. So, a student who wants to study to improve society and sacrifices his or her immediate relationships of solidarity can also construct inter-generational solidarity, not in the sense of mere genealogical solidarity but in the wider sense of solidarity towards others in existing society and the society to come. This is the point that Hans Jonas discusses when he refers to the new categorical imperative of the ethics of responsibility towards future generations.<sup>7</sup> He

<sup>7</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1979), The University of Chicago Press, (Chicago, 1994).

rightly interpolates in some way the human tie of filiation among each agent and its distant effects. Therefore, there is the need for a new imperative that forces us to act in such a way as to ensure that there will still be a genuine human life after us.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the Kantian imperative, which implies some contemporaneousness between the agent and he who stands before him, Jonas's imperative considers duration over time. However, we can ask what the idea of solidarity becomes when it is spread over space and the duration of time. This is where we reach the core of the idea of capability, that is, the power-to-do, what Prof. Archer terms 'agency'. Unfortunately, the philosophical lexicon is not very rich in this area. Aristotle, who was the first to describe 'choice' (*proairesis*) and 'deliberation' (*boulesis*) in detail does not have a specific concept of human action that distinguishes the immediate power of doing from causality extended over space and time. He says that actions that 'depend on us'<sup>9</sup> are, for their agent, what children are for their parents,<sup>10</sup> or as instruments, limbs, or slaves are for their owners. Starting from Locke, the moderns added a new metaphor, as we can see in Strawson's theory of 'ascription', where he states that the physical and psychic predicates of the person 'belong to that person completely, that person owns them, they are that person's'. This 'being mine' of the power to act seems to designate a 'primitive fact'.<sup>11</sup> This gives rise to phenomena such as 'initiative' and 'intervention', where the 'immixtion' or interference of the agent of the action in the course of events and facts can be seen. Thus, this interference (or agency) does, actually, cause changes in the world. The fact that we can represent this initiative or intervention of the human agent on things in the course of events and facts as a connection among various kinds of causality must be acknowledged. We must recognise the structure of the action as initiative, that is to say, as the beginning of a series of effects in the course of events and facts that passes between generations, intervening significantly in social change. We have the empirical evidence that we are able to do something every time that we ensure that an action in our power coincides with the opportunity to intervene offered by any course of action that can be extended to future generations.

<sup>8</sup> 'Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life'. (*Ib.*, cit. p. 55).

<sup>9</sup> *Ta eph'hemin* (*Ethic. Nic.*, III, 5 1112 a 30-34).

<sup>10</sup> 'Or else we must contradict what we just now asserted, and say that man is not the originator and begetter of his actions as he is of his children'. (*Ib.*, III, 7, 1113 b 16 f.).

<sup>11</sup> P. Strawson, *Individuals*, Methuen and Co. (London 1959), pp. 125-180.

If Coventry undergraduates through their university studies should find something essential for the good of mankind or at least avoid causing irreparable damage to the integrity of human beings and their habitat, i.e. the environment, one could well say that they will have contributed to achieving (or not achieving) inter-generational solidarity in a 'historical' sense and indirectly to inter-generational solidarity in a family sense.