

ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF FUTURE ETHICS

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1. Introduction

Current environmental degradation and different long-term environmental risks gave rise to concerns that human well-being might, on the average, decline in the future. Members of future generations probably will have to cope with a future world being full of scarcities, hazards and disadvantages, especially in environmental matters (climate change, radioactive waste, pollution, loss of biodiversity, soil degradation, etc). By intuition, such a diminished bequest package of natural resources will be perceived by many of us as being “unfair” to future generations. Since the problem of a fair overall

bequest package is of paramount importance in the debate between the competing concepts of “weak” and “strong” sustainability, the concept of sustainable development implicitly rests on basic assumptions about intergenerational equity. On reflection, however, matters about posterity are far from clear. As Partridge (1990, p. 40) has noted, a “future ethics” (defined as an ethically justified doctrine whose principles, criteria and standards should govern contemporary courses of actions in regard to posterity) is full of paradoxes, puzzles and perplexities. The peculiar conjunction of moral emphasis and sophisticated puzzles requires a close analysis of the most decisive philosophical problems which are entailed in the idea of future ethics. Those puzzles are due to the non-actuality of posterity which might give some support to several so-called “non-obligation-arguments”. Beside some preliminary definitions (section 1), any future ethics should be organized around the following topics:

- Are there any obligations to future generations at all (section 3)?
- Which ethical theory should govern assessments of future events (section 4)?
- Should the ethical approach toward future generations be egalitarian (section 5)?
- How should risk and uncertainty be addressed (section 6)?
- Are we permitted to discount future states of affair, and if so, can a “reasonable” rate of discounting be specified? (See *Perspectives on Discounting the Future*).
- What kind of and which amount of goods belongs to a fair intergenerational bequest package? (This question will be about the “constant natural capital rule” in the debates about sustainability. It will not be adressed here.)

2. Terminology

The term “posterity” is ontological. It is related to states of affairs which have not yet happened. Such states of affairs can be predicted with more or less confidence but in the end the future remains uncertain in many respects. Logically speaking, predictions lack any truth-value. In environmental matters, predictions are intertwined with scenarios. Scenarios are “scripts” relying on expectations about human behaviour which can be modified. Posterity is something we bring about by our current behaviour which affects others for better or worse. This “bringing about” is to be understood as a “modal transformation” by which possibilities, probabilities, tendencies and potencies are (not) transformed into actual existence. Humans cannot avoid performing such a transformation because they are agents of change. Thus, there is some responsibility towards posterity. Such general responsibility must be specified according to moral principles and criteria.

The term “generation” should be defined as a certain age group. Human age groups have no clear-cut borderlines and, thus, the term “generation” will remain necessarily fuzzy. Generations are not distinct entities in populations. The term “a single future generation” is to be defined as an age group which shall live in posterity. This term can be specified according to social groups. The term “future generations” is highly general and, by itself, without any limits. It encompasses the remote future entirely as far as human beings might exist. It can be specified according to certain periods, for instance, “the next five generations”. It seems impossible to determine the number of future generations scientifically but it makes good pragmatic sense to limit concerns to, say, the next seven or ten generations. We should not focus on the remote consequences of

our current actions but should better focus on principles of a comprehensive future ethics which should become an element of a moral tradition—but this is not a definitional but an ethical remark.

Future people are a certain subclass of possible people. According to Norton's (1982) definitions, future people are those "who will, in fact, exist at some subsequent time". The term "a future person" is to be defined as a (human) being who lives in posterity and owns features which are (or will be) constitutive of personhood. For simplicity, it will be assumed that present persons are to be perceived as bearers of some basic human rights and that the concept of personhood will remain stable at its core in times to come. It might be inferred that future persons will have some rights in the future (see *next section*). The term "a future individual" might be defined as a particular person who will live in posterity. Since future individuals are results of present (and past) contingencies they cannot be identified yet. We cannot know which individuals will live in posterity. The distinction between persons and individuals is of paramount importance in the analysis of the "future individual paradox" (*next section*).

According to some definitions, a baby who will be borne tomorrow will be a future person now. But debating future ethics we normally do not adopt this definition. Other authors define future persons as humans whose lifespan has no overlap with the lifespan of any living human being. This definition implies posterity begins roughly 100 years from now. This definition does not take into account the matter of fact that human beings live in an overlapping chain of generations. The search for a "perfect" definition of future individuals will be in vain since any definition has to make a deep but arbitrary cut in the course of time. Any definition will be either too close to the present or too far away from it. However one might wish to define, one point seems clear: existing children are not to be viewed as future persons. It would be strange to define living children as members of future generations. Moral obligations towards children are beyond serious moral doubt. Thus, obligations to secure the welfare of today's children should take into account all states of affairs which fall in their life-span. Chain-of-obligation-arguments might be implied in this pattern of argument since one might wish to argue that we are obliged to do our best to enable our descendants to fulfil their duties to their descendants. One should keep in mind that in any future ethics, questions of definition are never completely neutral in regard to moral problems.

For simplicity, no reference is made in this article to thought experiments about possible future persons who are not humans (artificial and extra-terrestrial intelligence, transport of human intelligence onto animals, evolution of another intelligent non-human species). The moral status of existing human beings who are not yet persons (fetuses, newborn babies) is contested in bioethics. If newborn babies and fetuses are viewed as human beings which have a strong potential ("potency") to become persons, and if this potential is neither to be identified with logical possibility nor with statistical probability but is of an onto-teleological nature, then babies and fetuses are to be regarded as being already members of the moral community. If so, it might be strange to emphasize both obligations to future generations *and* the right of women to abort since the potency of living fetuses to become persons seems stronger than the possibility of merely future people (*next section*).

3. No-Obligation Arguments

3.1. Obligations to Posterity

It has been argued that humans have a strong but diminishing concern for the future. Actual behavior indicates that most humans are, on average, deeply concerned about their own future and about the well-being of their offspring. But there is also much evidence that such concerns rapidly fade away beyond family lines. Most humans seem to ignore the far remote future almost completely. One might wish to explain such factual human behavior including ordinary myopia. Explanations would take into account evolutionary theory, especially the overall conditions for human survival. Humans, then, are not “wired” to consider far remote events since immediate dangers have been more urgent during the evolution of mankind. Considerations about posterity hadn’t had any evolutionary advantage for our far remote ancestors. Even if such explanations might be helpful in understanding human behaviour, they cannot replace ethical considerations of whether such behaviour can be justified in our age in which humans have become agents of global change. No denial of obligations to future generations can be derived from any analysis of factual behavior by means of logic.

There are other so-called “no-obligation” arguments (NOA) which should be taken more seriously (an overview is found in Partridge 1990). We wish to concentrate on the most important ones:

- Future-individual-paradox
- Ignorance-argument
- No-claim-argument
- Paradox-of-procreation-argument

3.2. Future-individual-paradox

The famous “Future-individual-paradox” (FIP, Schwartz 1978, Parfit 1983) rests on the basic distinction that obligations to future generations must rely either on *person-dependent* or on *person-independent* moral principles. The maximizing-utility-principle is taken as paradigmatic for person-independent principles. According to Parfit, this principle implies a repugnant conclusion since it would be morally right to enhance the human population as long as the overall utility can be maximized by adding more people. To environmentalists and especially to deep ecologists any such obligation to enlarge the world’s human population will be unacceptable. Since Parfit has been (rightly) unwilling to accept this repugnant conclusion he relies on *person-dependent principles*. Those principles imply, as Parfit believes, that a course of action can be morally wrong *only if a particular* person will be wronged. “Wrongs require victims. Our choice cannot be wrong if we know that it will be worse for no one” (Parfit 1983, p. 169). Particular persons are those who can be identified as individuals. Future individuals can, in principle, not be identified since their individuality will be determined by our courses of action. Norton (1982) wrote “All interests and rights must be assignable to an individual, and all individuals must be identifiable”. If there are no identifiable individuals there are no victims. This seems to be the first crucial aspect of the FIP.

Moreover, if future individuals cannot be victimized by any circumstances which had been necessary conditions for their existence, and if all of our courses of action bring about circumstances which influence the composition of future generations in regard to the particular identity (individuality) of its members, it will be hard for future individuals to complain about environmental conditions they have to cope with. This is the second crucial aspect of the FIP.

Both Schwartz and Parfit conclude that it seems almost impossible to victimize future individuals by contemporary actions as long as future living conditions remain minimally decent. If we respect this very modest constraint the living are free to act as we please. By his own intuitions, Parfit was uneasy with the result of his argument. He even considered suppressing the FIP for practical and political purposes:

“It shall therefore end with a practical question. When we are discussing social policies, should we ignore the point about personal identity? (...) If you share my intuitions, this seems permissible. We can then use such claims (of future generations – KO) as a convenient form of short-hand. Though the claims are false, we believe that this makes no moral difference. So the claims are not seriously misleading. Suppose instead that you do not share my intuitions. (...) It would be dishonest to conceal the point about identity. But this is what, with your intuitions, I would be tempted to do. I do not *want* people to conclude that we can be less concerned about the more remote effects of our social policies. So I would be tempted to suppress the argument for this conclusion.” (1983, p.- 175f).

But this solution clearly is *ad-hoc*. Normally we believe that in morals false claims make some difference. Furthermore, why should one suppress an argument which she has found convincing? Thus, the point about personal identity should not be suppressed but we should analyse the two aspects of FIP mentioned above. It often has been assumed that there must be some hidden ambiguities which turn the paradox into a NOA. We see a fallacy of ambiguity in each of both crucial aspects.

Is it true that neither existent nor future individuals will be able to complain reasonably about circumstances which are necessary conditions for their own existence? Baier (1990) has argued that in regard of the past we are free to reject states of affairs *morally* which had been necessary conditions for our existence as individuals. (If not, children and grandchildren of Jewish emigrants who met in exile by coincidence would have been grateful to the Nazis. This consequence is hard to accept). Thus, a moral person consistently might reject necessary conditions of his/her individual existence on moral grounds. (Imagine a person who has been conceived by rape. Must this person hold that rape is a good thing to do?) The distinction between a moral person (a person being able to judge from the moral point of view) and a particular individual seems perfectly reasonable. If so, future persons will, in principle, be entitled to complain consistently to have been victimized by previous courses of actions even if they would not exist as individuals if such actions would not have been performed. If so, this aspect of the paradox has been resolved.

The interpretation of person-dependent-principles in terms of future individuals (Parfit: “particular persons”) also seems ambiguous. The distinction between *singularity* and

individuality seems to resolve this ambiguity. Most deontological approaches argue rightly that moral obligations are person-dependent-principles which are directed to *single* members of the moral community irrespectively of their individual features. An answer to the FIP argues that single persons are the primary objects of moral concern (even if individuals as such might be secondary objects in some cases). Partridge (1990, 2002) and Grey (1996) have argued on similar lines of reasoning. Additionally, Grey has argued that the FIP confuses distinctive time-perspectives and rests on some peculiar ontological assumptions. In the end, we should accept the matter of fact that individuals emerge as results of coincidences. But moral obligations rely on our respect for single persons regardless of their individuality. This leads us to agree to Partridge:

“Because of the aforementioned radical indeterminacy of future populations (containing a finite number of the infinitude of unrealised ‘possibles’), we are today in no position to identify and to select among the individuals who will live in the future. Instead, we have a forced choice of better or worse living conditions for whomever may live in the future” (2002, p. 81).

If so, the FIP is a paradox but by no means a convincing NOA.

3.3. “Ignorance” argument

The “Ignorance” argument states that we do not know enough about future preferences to be able to care for them. It is presupposed, *first*, that a certain level of knowledge in regard to “what future persons will probably prefer” is a necessary presupposition of obligations to future persons and, *second*, that we cannot reach this level of knowledge since posterity is, by definition, uncertain. The ignorance-argument encompasses several aspects.

Sometimes it might be argued that patterns of preferences will adapt to future living conditions. It is suggested that highly artificial and ecologically devastated environments go together well with new preferences to accept virtual realities. If nature will have been lost, a preference for unspoiled nature will be irrational—comparable to a today’s preference to see a living dinosaur. But if preferences will accommodate to any future world they will accommodate to a more “green” world with lesser consumption as well as to a highly artificial world in which unspoiled nature will have been lost. If preference will adapt anyway there is no argument that more human preferences will be fulfilled in an artificial than in a “green” world.

Uncertainty about future preferences does not imply logically that future preferences will be completely different from contemporary ones. It could turn out to be the case that future preferences could be quite similar to ours. No “argumentum ad ignorantiam” can rule out this possibility (Shrader-Frechette 1991). One should not confuse the two distinct claims that a) we do not yet know future preferences, and b) that future preferences shall be completely different. If some modest anthropological assumptions are to be accepted, it might be presumed that a certain class of preferences (basic needs) will remain unchanged. If one gives some credit to the biophilia-hypothesis which is entertained by E.O. Wilson and other anthropologists, there is high probability that a lot of future preferences will be “biophilic”. Some basic goods (health care, education,

decent environment, income) are general enabling conditions for the realization of many other preferences. Martha Nussbaum has conceived a broad and well-balanced list of types of preferences which must be fulfilled to some extent if a human life shall be a “good” one. These arguments entail a burden of proof which seems to be fair.

One might also favor a kind of “soft paternalism” saying that contemporaries are permitted or even entitled to teach the next one or two generations which preferences are “better”. Norton (2002, p. 43) wrote: “Environmentalists hope to save the wonders of nature, but they also accept a responsibility to perpetuate a love and respect for the nature they have loved enough to protect.” There seems nothing wrong in that. We are entitled to convince future generations by argument that our projects of nature conservation are worthy of being maintained and, if possible, enhanced. This is to say that we are entitled to do our best to transform the best arguments in environmental ethics into a moral tradition.

Viewing the counter-arguments in conjunction, the “ignorance” argument loses much of its force.

3.4. No-claim-argument

It has been argued that future persons can make *no moral claim* upon the living since they have no rights yet. The position that future persons have no right has been, among others, defended by Steiner (1994, p. 261). If one assumes, *first*, that future persons have no rights yet, and, *second*, that any obligations must ground in some rights of others, one may conclude that we have no obligations to future persons. But the premises might be rejected. One can reasonably argue that future persons *will* have rights in the future. They will have rights if they exist at all (what might be taken for granted) and if the concept of human rights will become a strong moral tradition (what one may wish dearly). The concept of human rights belongs intrinsically to the richness of non-material cultural thought that future generations should recognize as their moral heritage. The argument, that all human rights could have been abandoned by a future global dictatorship is as unsound as the argument that we should not care about future generations because the human species might go extinct through a nuclear war. Both arguments are unsound because we cannot refuse moral obligations by imagining a moral catastrophe which will make any moral behaviour pointless. Thus, we should assume that future persons will hold rights which they will wish to perform. Such future rights imply today’s obligations. If so, this “No-claim” argument also fails.

3.5. Paradox-of-procreation-argument

It has been argued that obligations to future generations in regard to environmental affairs suppose obligations to procreate which are stronger than obligations to preserve, say, the full amount of today’s biodiversity. The most pressing obligation will be an obligation to bring future persons into existence. All other obligations are minor ones. This NOA is ranking our obligations to future generations in a hierarchical manner. It is a “first-things-first”-argument. The NOA now runs as follows: If the strongest obligations will be denied, minor obligations also must be denied. Since a huge majority of persons denies an obligation to procreate, they are not entitled any more to make any

other moral claims about future ethics. If they do, they will be accused of being hypocrites. This NOA does not take into full account that future persons will exist not out of a sense of moral obligation but out of love (at best) or as side-effects of sexual intercourse. The argument does not take into account that an unconstrained individual obligation to procreate would be without end, and thus lead to highly strange consequences. One can also argue that this pattern of argument is of no practical significance in a world whose human population will rise up to (an estimated) 10 to 11 billion people. Leaving aside pragmatic counter-arguments, the crucial premise in this NOA is the hierarchical ranking of obligations. Different rankings shatter this NOA.

Normally, we do not believe that parents who neglect their children are less blameworthy if they conceive other children. By intuition, we are not convinced that a couple who decided to have no children must be *therefore* completely silent on matters of future ethics. Is a person to be blamed for hypocrisy who says: “I really don’t wish to have children but society should reduce greenhouse-gas-emissions in order to prevent dramatic climate change”? The author wishes to answer this question No by the following reason. Our choice of (not) having children is a private one but our concerns about posterity are often political ones. Private choices should not determine one’s political reasoning even if we might wish for some coherency between the private and the public. This modest condition of coherency can be met by persons who engage themselves for future generation without having children. If so, this NOA fails.

3.6. The “no-obligation” arguments remain unproven

If the analysis has been fair, none of the “no-obligation” arguments seems to deserve much ethical credit. They all have more or less shortcomings. The weakness of “no-obligation” arguments does not establish that there *must* be obligations to future persons since the very possibility of a highly convincing “no-obligation” argument cannot be ruled out at the moment. But there are no strong reasons to reject obligations to future persons on grounds of the “no-obligation” arguments we know of. For the time being, we are entitled to sustain our belief that there are obligations to future generations. Supporting arguments can be derived from different ethical theories, to which we now turn.

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