

# FUTURE GENERATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL THEORY

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There exists today in philosophy a question of our ethical obligations to future generations. Several different aspects of this question render it philosophically unusual. For one thing the substantive answer to the question is not in dispute. Were someone to suggest seriously that we have no ethical obligations to future generations and mean by this that we need take no care for what living conditions on the planet will be in a hundred years – that whether there would exist then, say, a lethal level of radioactivity in the atmosphere, it would be no concern of ours – we should regard that individual as lacking one of the most basic of human ethical sensibilities. Of course we have some serious responsibility for the future, though this does not commit us to the more particular position that we have ethical obligations to future generations.

The question does not, thus, require an answer at the general level, nor am I prepared here to demarcate specifically the content of our responsibility for the future, though I shall treat of others' attempts to do so. I am interested rather in why this question should seem so mysterious at this time as to generate a dispute or issue within the philosophical community. Thus my focus will be interior to philosophy. I hope to show how the assumptions involved in raising this question in this way make it difficult for us to address the new realities with which the question is concerned.

Why is this question a current one in philosophy? From a somewhat sociological perspective it is significant that John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, perhaps the most influential ethical treatise of the seventies, is the first person who seems to have dealt with the question in its current form.<sup>1</sup>

I shall examine Rawls' position in detail later, but basically he treats justice among generations as involving each generation's passing on to the next a suitable accumulation of intellectual, economic, and educational "capital" so that the next can have the wherewithal to continue or to establish just institutions, as well as support a reasonable standard of living.<sup>2</sup> While the immense philosophical popularity of *A Theory of Justice*

brought the current question to the attention of the philosophical community, most philosophers writing of the issue of ethical obligation to future generations since Rawls have seen the problem in an environmental rather than an economic context.<sup>3</sup> It is clear that our relatively new capacity for possibly permanent devastation of the environment has created a new ethical situation which requires a reassessment of our responsibility to the future.

Environmental pollution itself is nothing new. I am sitting a quarter of a mile from a river which has contained no life for about 80 years due to pollution from mine acid waste. In my county virtually every marketable tree was cut down between 1895 and 1915. But until now there just have not been enough people nor an advanced enough technology to threaten a large environment with permanent destruction or impairment. Trees grow back and mine acid waste pollution can be stopped, though it is expensive to do so. But we simply do not know how to render radioactive waste from power plants nonradioactive, or to replace the ozone layer in the atmosphere should this become depleted, or to develop an effective, economical replacement for iron. It is quite simple. We did not have the responsibility for the future that we do now before we had the capacity to destroy it.

As I said earlier, our responsibility for the future in a broad sense is well recognized. What is not understood is how this responsibility is to be rationally grounded in an ethical theory. But it is becoming clear to ethicists that the question of our obligations to the future can be seen as a litmus test for an ethical theory. No theory can really be adequate to the contemporary situation which cannot found such obligations on its own principles. The problem is that each of the major, current ethical theories has difficulty doing this. I shall examine briefly the deontological theory and at more length the utilitarian and contractarian theories to illustrate why this is so.

Several of the basic strengths and weaknesses of deontological ethics become involved in a discussion of the theory's applicability to the question of justice among generations. One of the strengths of Kant's position is that it insists that good is absolute and independent of time of circumstances. Since the basic statements of ethics are deduced from the very nature of the rational will, good is founded on impermeable and permanent bedrock.

It can be seen, then, that the categorical imperative can be made to cover concern for future generations with no especial difficulty. Since we are to act so that the maxim behind our action would be appropriate as a basis for a universal law of morality, and since any law applies over time (i.e., is not limited to the present generation only), Kant's theory allows us to conclude at least that we have a duty of justice to future generations. On the other

hand, the theory seems to provide us with no specific content to this duty and, just as important, no method for settling rival claims between generations.

Ross' formulation of the deontological position seems no stronger or weaker in this matter than Kant's. To say that we have a prima facie duty to future generations unless this contradicts a more basic prima facie duty, for instance to our own generation, gives us no way of deciding which is the actual duty and which only the prima facie. Nor is an appeal to intuition here any more helpful. Either it begs the question (which was, after all, how such an intuition is to be grounded) or it is useless (since it claims the intuition is ultimate). And, of course, it no more than Kant's position is of any assistance when different individuals, while recognizing the general law, claim differing intuitions as to what it entails.

The deontological position, then, has no basic theoretical problem in considering justice among generations, but it is open to criticism here as elsewhere that it achieves universal applicability by a retreat into generality and intuition. This position is, after all, quite an old one and was developed when eternal verities as a basis for ethics seemed much more reasonable than they do now. While certain aspects of the deontological perspective make it seem somewhat promising as a model for dealing with intergenerational matters, it is unlikely that we shall be able to dispose of our problem, which is after all new wine, in a wineskin of so ancient vintage.

Utilitarianism presents us with a different set of advantages and disadvantages in dealing with future generations. On the plus side, utilitarianism is structured around a method for adjudicating disputes, the utilitarian calculus, which would appear applicable no matter what new realities emerge in the future. But with regard to our issue, a severe and basic difficulty faces the utilitarian; in this case it is a matter of dispute just how much the well-being of future persons is to count in the utilitarian calculus, and thus an accurate calculation seems impossible. If, for instance, we calculate the probable number of all future persons and compare this with the number of current persons, the former outnumber the latter by a wide margin. Thus it seems that the current generation according to utilitarianism would always be "starved" in favor of its progeny.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, since future people do not now exist, it could be argued that their interests, strictly speaking, should not be included in the utilitarian calculation at all.<sup>5</sup> Or it should be claimed that we have obligations to future generations that are proportional to our distance from them in time, with our owing least to the very remote.<sup>6</sup> Should this latter position be accepted we would need to estimate the size of each generation and factor this together with the generation's time distance from us into our calculations to determine our obligation to it – clearly a cumbersome and unworkable process.

Some utilitarians argue that what is to be maximized according to utilitarianism is not total utility, but *average* utility. Jere Paul Surber, writing on the future generations problem, states that this is the traditional position of utilitarianism,<sup>7</sup> which is, I think, mistaken. Surber defines average utility as, “ $U_{av} = G/N$ ,” where  $N$  is the number of people and  $G$  the total good produced by an action. Surber goes on to argue that this formula provides no help to the utilitarian in the case of the problem of future generations, which is correct. The position of such a utilitarian is even worse than Surber allows, however. If  $U_{av} = G/N$  were to be taken strictly, one could always increase  $U_{av}$  by reducing  $N$  as well as by increasing  $G$ . It would seem that a utilitarian holding to such a formula would be obligated to advocate as small a population as possible in order to up the average. Let us suppose a universe of only two people who are listening to a recording of a symphony. Suddenly God decides to create another couple, and they appear miraculously in the room with the others. According to the formula, the value of  $U_{av}$  has not gone up by the creation of these new appreciators; it has decreased by a factor of two.

Jan Narveson makes more sense on this matter. In an examination of whether utilitarians are bound to create the largest possible population in order to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number, Narveson denies any utilitarian obligation of the sort, nor need any concept of average utility be fabricated to show this. It is enough to point out that logically the utilitarian maxim equates with, “Everyone should be as happy as possible,” which equates with, “If  $x$  is a person then  $x$  should be as happy as possible.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, concludes Narveson, utilitarianism is indifferent as to what the population of future generations should be; it only insists that those existent, whoever they be and however many, have the right to the maximum feasible amount of happiness.

Nor can the utilitarian position be given greater cogency with regard to this issue by shifting to rule utilitarianism. Since in the formulation of these rules the same calculus as in act utilitarianism must be employed, the same difficulties remain; we just do not know how to count future generations in such a calculation. Concerning the question of justice to future generations, then, utilitarianism seems to have little utility.

John Rawls’ basic contribution to this issue was mentioned briefly above. Rawls is certain that we have a responsibility to future persons, and he formulates a rule, the just savings principle, which he hopes will specify at least in outline the content of this obligation. Rawls’ insights are certainly important, but I feel he is hampered in dealing with this issue by having to treat it in terms of his economically modeled theory of justice. According to Rawls, each generation is entitled to sufficient “capital” from the preceding one so that it can finance the necessities of a just society. Rawls writes:

It should be kept in mind here that capital is not only factories and machines, and so on, but also the knowledge and culture, as well as the techniques and skills, that make possible just institutions and the fair value of liberty.<sup>9</sup>

The idea that each generation's obligation to the future can be met by savings – by salting away a certain amount of “capital” – oversimplifies this obligation through failing to take account accurately of the diverse ways that a particular generation can injure later ones. No type of savings, for instance, could account for a particular generation's obligation to the future with regard to nuclear war and overpopulation. These have nothing to do with wise utilization of capital, yet they are certainly two of the major threats to the well-being of future generations.

There are other problems with this model. In many instances the costs of the creation of certain pollutants cannot be at all accurately calculated. We do not know what the effects of continuing to use fluorocarbons in spray cans would be. Moreover, in this case as in others a polluting activity might have no effect on several subsequent generations and then a devastating effect on a particular later generation. This would leave one or two generations to pay for the practices of many. Perhaps this could be handled by some kind of an escrow account, but we would not know how much to pay into it.

In other instances it may well be that no capital could be passed on to a subsequent generation that would justify a prior generation's environmental action. It seems a sort of assumption of Rawls' economic treatment here that justice can always be purchased. But what would be the proper capital to future generations that would rectify our saddling them with tons upon tons of power plant radioactive waste which will constitute a very real, if difficult to calculate, threat for thousands of years?<sup>10</sup>

A more theoretical objection to Rawls is that even in an economic model, savings is here too narrow a concept. It would certainly be unjust for one generation to befoul the air to dangerous levels and then leave the next generation with a sufficient bequest of money and knowledge to deal with the problem. The earlier generation either should not have polluted the air, or, if it knew how to clean it, it should have done so rather than pass the problem to its children. Here, rather than savings, the economic notion of meeting total expenditure seems to fit the situation. Each generation should, whenever possible, pay the real expenses of its activities. It is not enough to defer these to the next, even if included with these is sufficient capital to meet the expense.

It is inappropriate in this matter to be overly critical of Rawls. It is not the case that he dealt with the question of justice to future generations poorly. Rawls introduced the problem, and that is a great deal indeed. The problem, however, is now seen in an expanded context, that of

environmental damage, which cannot be adequately treated in his economic framework.

The difficulty of treating our responsibilities to future generations through either a utilitarian or contractarian theory stems, it seems to me, from a basic assumption that both theories share. In both theories, individuals are discrete entities, and generations are discrete units of these. Both theories conceive that justice or morality is a matter of resolving rival claims of such discrete substantial beings, and in each case fairness and equality of individuals are the watchwords in resolving such claims. As Rawls writes, "Somehow we must nullify the effects of special contingencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural circumstances to their own advantage."<sup>11</sup> This assumption of discreteness causes problems for both theories when they are applied to future generations or persons. In the case of utilitarianism this is due to our ignorance of the number of these new persons, as well as our uncertainty that they will exist at all. Rawls' difficulty can be seen from a special modification of his theory that he feels necessary to insure justice between generations. Rawls' theory does solve a problem that contractarian theories have had with regard to generations subsequent to the contract, namely how the contract can be seen as covering these, since they have made no formal ratification of it. Since, on Rawls' account, justice is whatever would be agreed to by a group of egoistic, rational individuals analyzing the situation from behind a certain veil of ignorance which hides from them facts they would need to know to render their judgment self-serving, and since one of these facts is the generation to which these contractors belong, each generation has virtual representation. But Rawls feels, for somewhat obscure reasons, that all of these contractors should be considered members of a common generation. This causes Rawls to modify the otherwise egoistic motivation of the contractors in order to endow them with an interest in the welfare of the future. As Rawls puts it, "The parties are regarded as representing family lines, say, with ties of sentiment between successive generations."<sup>12</sup> This motivational alteration is to foreclose the possibility of their refusing to sacrifice themselves at all for their progeny.<sup>13</sup>

It is significant to note, then, apart from the other inadequacies of his economic model, that Rawls recognizes a definite demarcation between generations, a discreteness, and that the principles which can account for justice within a generation are not sufficient to do so across a generational gap.

In the remainder of this paper I would like to deal with the question of our responsibilities to future generations not by trying to specify what these responsibilities are, but by suggesting parameters of assumptions within which the question at least presents us with no special problems.

First, there are a number of cultures and systems which, because of their basic structure, have no difficulty in handling responsibility to the future. Were we to ask, for instance, the citizens of a Greek polis whether and on what basis they felt an obligation to the succeeding generations of their citizens, they would have no difficulty in answering. The polis was clearly seen by its members as a historical entity. Thus, part of what it meant to be a citizen was to accept obligations to future citizens as well as to those of the past.

In the case of classical Hinduism and Buddhism, obligations to future persons would be as easily recognized as those to contemporaneous individuals, but here these obligations take on a special Indian flavor. In Hinduism, time itself is a function of *maya*, which makes us see reality as composed of independent beings. Since all normal obligations occur in time, they fall under the realm of *maya*. Within this realm of time, then, each individual has his own duty, or *dharma*, based on his particular karmic situation; he must provide for his parents, support his children, pay taxes, help feed the poor, run his business successfully, etc. At this level, Hinduism recognizes a whole host of social obligations designed to keep society functioning, which certainly include a responsibility to future generations.

There is another relations to future generations which pertains to the being who has already attained enlightenment. In Mahayana Buddhism, a bodhisattva is an individual who has overcome every obstacle between himself and nirvana, yet he chooses to remain in time, just this side of merging himself with all-being. The bodhisattva does this because, by so doing, he remains within the realm of karma and thus radiates his positive karmic qualities throughout all creation.<sup>14</sup> The bodhisattva's concern with the future as well as the present can be seen from his vow not to enter nirvana until even the grass is enlightened.

Marxism provides another example of a system in which obligation to future generations is a central doctrine. The very concepts of good and evil are defined in terms of a future event, the revolution. The commitment of the Marxist is to bring about on earth a perfect society, but a contemporary Marxist realizes it is very doubtful that he will live to see the new promised land. One of the factors which has given the Marxist movement its powerful tone of idealism is its requirement to sacrifice for the future.

There is a common element shared by the theories of the polis, Eastern philosophy, and Marxism, which must be present for the future to be given the importance it is in these diverse structures. For all of these, time does not represent an absolute barrier to existence; it is not proper, that is, to say of the future with Parmenides that it is not. In each of these positions there is some four-dimensional entity (the polis itself, Atman-Brahman, the class struggle) without contact with which the individual human being

is not possessed of complete reality. This contrasts sharply with the position of a strict contractarian such as Henry David Thoreau, who, in a tax dispute over support of the church which he did not attend, expressed his willingness to sign off from all organizations which he had never joined in the first place, except that he did not know where to find a complete list.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear that utilitarianism and Rawlsian contractarianism share Thoreau's "metaphysical" assumptions rather than those of the four-dimensional positions mentioned above. The weakness of our contemporary theories in dealing with the future stem from their perception of right conduct or justice in the present as involving relations among existing, discrete, independent entities; since the future is not composed of such entities, it simply fits these theories awkwardly.

To deal adequately with the question of our responsibility to the future in the very harsh light of our newfound ability to render the future stillborn, we must first provide a convincing answer to the old questions of philosophical psychology, given new urgency by the contemporary situation. The question of the nature of humankind is not one to which contemporary philosophers have been attracted, yet it is clear that an assumption by Rawls and the utilitarians on this matter underlies their uncertainty in dealing with the future. For they have assumed that we are substances in the classic sense of that term, and we are not. The metaphysical category of substance, of course, has been discredited pretty much since Hume, yet it has lingered in of all places our conception of ourselves. Involved in the very definition of substance is the idea of its independence; a substance is a being cut off from all others, and this is a view of ourselves and our generation we cannot afford to take in the late twentieth century.

I am not advocating that we should adjourn to rural poleis, or that we should accept Eastern mysticism or Marxism. One does not have to drink the bathwater to avoid throwing out the baby. I do wish to assert that the question, "What, then, are we?" must be investigated seriously by contemporary philosophers in the light of our new biological power with its concomitant responsibility. And whatever form the late twentieth century answer to this question may take, it will have to show that concern for future generations is every bit as basic to our own being as is concern for our own.

#### NOTES

1. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 284-93.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 285-86.



3. See H. Jones, "Genetic Endowment and Obligations to Future Generations," *Social Theory and Practice* 4 (Fall 1976):29–46; E. Delattre, "Rights, Responsibilities, and Future Persons," *Ethics* 82 (April 1972):254–58; M.P. Golding, "Obligations to Future Generations," *Monist* 56 (October 1972):612–25; C.E. Braaten, "Caring for the Future," *Zygon* 9 (December 1974): 311–22.
4. This is a criticism presented by Rawls, p. 287.
5. See Delattre, p. 257.
6. See Golding, p. 96.
7. "Obligations to Future Generations," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (Fall 1976):108.
8. "Utilitarianism and New Generations," *Mind* 76 (1967):67.
9. Rawls, p. 288.
10. See V. and R. Routley, "Nuclear Energy and Obligations to Future Generations," *Inquiry* 21 (Summer 1978):133–79.
11. Rawls, p. 136.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 292.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
14. Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), p. 535.
15. "Civil Disobedience," in *Thoreau's Vision: The Major Essays*, ed. Charles R. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 206.